

ARTICLE

Petites Affaires: Pacotille Commerce and the Intimate Networks of Free Women of Colour in the Eighteenth-Century French Caribbean

Annika Raapke 

University of Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany
Email: annika.raapke@uni-goettingen.de

Abstract

This article looks at the specific early modern trade practice of the *pacotille* and at *pacotille* commercial networks, particularly of free women of colour, as a means of approaching female trade knowledge and intimate networks in the *ancien régime* Caribbean colonies. Surviving documentation of this flexible commerce allows us to approach women of highly different backgrounds as knowledgeable and skilled agents within the socioeconomic framework of eighteenth-century global trade, who combined their knowledge of the male-dominated trading spheres with their own intimate networks in highly profitable ways. This essay explores not only what these women knew about long-distance trade, but also how they used their local expertise (e.g., of time regimes, landscape, and people) as well as their intimate networks for personal gain in the eighteenth-century French colonial worlds.

Keywords: colonial history; Caribbean; women of colour; trade; slavery

In July 1769, a little boar-leather-covered suitcase with one lock suddenly became the centre of a trans-colonial affair. It contained mostly textiles, especially skirts, petticoats, shirts, and handkerchiefs made from *indiennes* (specific kinds of Indian or faux-Indian cotton fabrics) and other cotton fabrics, and sat peacefully in a small house by the water in Carénage, St. Lucia—until its owner, a woman of colour by the name of Ursule, died. All of a sudden, the little suitcase became the protagonist in a judicial process, and a group of important local administrators opened it, rummaged through its contents, listed them carefully, and then entrusted its key to one of the colony's *procureurs* (legal agents). This was done because most, or even all, of the objects in the suitcase had not belonged to Ursule, but to other persons who now had to be identified by the colonial administration and detailed in a protocol, which informs this article.¹ Ursule had been a *pacotilleuse*, a woman who made her living selling off other people's *pacotilles* (in this case: consignment goods). Frequently misunderstood as the sole prerogative of sailors, *pacotilles* could also be a purely non-maritime affair. Colonial travellers or settlers without any prospective income would fill boxes and bags with attractive European goods

¹ Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer [hereafter ANOM], IREL [online research tools], COL E 382, Ursule, mulâtresse libre de Sainte-Lucie, sa succession 1769.

before their departure, the sale of which was supposed to tide them over until they found another way of supporting themselves. Many others, who did not travel themselves, used pacotilles in the context of a non-merchant consignment trade, for example via faraway family members or friends. The most common arrangement, however, seems to have relied on persons like Ursule, who would earn their living by selling other people's pacotilles for a share of the profit. A competent vendor could make this trade profitable, and historical documents show that pacotilleurs were an important part of the small-trade landscape in the French colonial Caribbean. This article introduces the pacotille as a practice of long-distance trade which allowed otherwise "private" individuals, especially women who neither ran a merchant house nor a shop, to participate in the expanding global economies of the eighteenth century. These criteria apply for example to female entrepreneurs of colour in the Caribbean colonies, who seem to have been rather active in pacotille commerce, as the historical record suggests. Historical records like those of Ursule provide insight into pacotille-based or -related trading practices which relied heavily on intimate networks. The term "intimate networks" here refers to the concept outlined in the introduction to this issue, especially the notion that economic agencies and various types of economic activity were rendered possible by strong relationships among women beyond or outside the ties of kinship or family. Despite ground-breaking work in the field by Dominique Rogers, Abel Alexis Louis, Susan Socolow, Lisa Ze Winters, and Jessica Marie Johnson, we still know far too little about the various ways in which free women of colour in the French Caribbean colonies made their living on an everyday basis, about the opportunities they forged and explored, and about the practices they shaped.² This essay is a small contribution to this growing field of research. Methodologically, this study is based on two separate sets of records, each of which addresses one specific historical case. They will be used here as a means to demonstrate the potential of pacotille-based research for the study of the economic lives, intimate networks, and agencies of women in the colonial Caribbean. At this point, however, it is not yet possible to gauge how representative these records are. They must therefore be treated as examples of what is possible until further results have been gathered.

While men from all parts of ancien régime colonial societies also engaged in the pacotille trade, this article is mostly interested in women's pacotilles, because—so goes the underlying argument—there was a close interplay between pacotille practices and the trading practices of merchants and merchant companies, suggesting that the people who carried out pacotille practices very likely had solid knowledge of how the "male professional" global trade of the period actually worked. Historical pacotille documentations indicate that their "owners" were very flexible in piggybacking on existing structures. There is, for example, evidence that French women and men from non-elite contexts used their connections to the crews of slave ships to include enslaved

² Abel Alexis Louis, *Les Libres de couleur en Martinique, Tome 1, Des origines à la veille de la Révolution Française 1635-1788* (Paris, Fort de France: L'Harmattan, 2012); Abel Alexis Louis, *Marchands et négociants de couleur à Saint-Pierre (1777-1830). Milieux socioprofessionnels, fortune et mode de vie* (Paris, Fort de France: L'Harmattan, 2015); Dominique Rogers, *Les libres de couleur dans les capitales de Saint-Domingue : fortune, mentalités et intégration à la fin de l'Ancien Régime (1776-1789)* (PhD diss., University of Bordeaux, 1999); Dominique Rogers and Stewart King, "Housekeepers, Merchants, Rentières: Free Women of Colour in the Port Cities of Colonial Saint-Domingue, 1750-1790," in *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economics and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities*, ed. Douglas Catterall and Jodi Campbell (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 357-97; Susan Socolow, "Economic Roles of the Free Women of Color of Cap Français," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 279-97. See as well Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Lisa Ze Winter, *The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Transatlantic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016).

people in their *pacotilles*, suggesting that there was a lot of “private” trade in enslaved persons which circumvented the companies and—with historical hindsight—involves the broader middling European population very directly and immediately in the Atlantic slave trade.

Apart from this aspect, with its political and memory-cultural implications³, the study of women’s *pacotille* trade and *pacotille* trading networks allows us to approach women of highly different backgrounds as knowledgeable and skilled agents within the socio-economic framework of eighteenth-century global trade, who combined their knowledge of the male-dominated trading spheres with their own intimate networks in profitable ways. At this point, it is not yet possible to estimate the economic relevance of the women’s activities or the scale of the goods they traded, but this will hopefully become clearer in the course of my research. For now, this article wants to look at the *pacotille* commerce and commercial networks, particularly of free women of colour, as a means of approaching female economic and trade knowledge and intimate networks in the ancien régime Caribbean colonies by exploring what these women knew about long-distance trade, and how they used their knowledge of trade practices, of communities, and even of the landscape, as well as their intimate network, for personal gain in the eighteenth-century French colonial world.

In the following, I will briefly explain the term *pacotille* and the historiographic engagements it has known up to this point. This will be followed by two small case studies. The case of Ursule, which has already been introduced, will be explored in greater detail, the focus being on the commercial connections and networks between the women involved. The second case deals with a group of free women of colour in Saint-Domingue, and with the intimate networks *pacotille* trade allows us to trace today. The conclusion will widen the article’s overall perspective, look at the spread of *pacotille* practices across the commercial spectrum, and ask which benefits and advantages this specific form of trade might have had that made it so attractive to contemporaries, and how its study might benefit our understanding of both eighteenth-century colonial trade and the actors who engaged in it.

Boxes, Bundles, Suitcases: *Pacotille* Trade

Research has dealt with *pacotilles* relatively sparsely and selectively, both with regard to the actors involved and the commodities traded as part of a *pacotille*. As far as actors are concerned, the focus has, as briefly mentioned above, for the most part been on men, especially on mariners: seafarers in the service of trading companies who were allowed their “private” portion.⁴ Indeed, contemporary definitions suggest that this was the

³ While the museal landscape in France’s former slave-trading ports is working to address the French history of enslaving people from various African countries, the question of how the subject is anchored in public history, general education and memory culture is still problematic (similar to the UK), and the role which “normal”, non-elite Europeans played does not receive a lot of public attention. Political efforts have been ambivalent as well. While France officially condemned its own, very strong role in the slave trade and in enslavement-based colonialism in 2001, national historiographic narratives and memory practices tend to collide - for example, Emmanuel Macron publicly honoured Napoleon Bonaparte in May 2021. This was criticised sharply by researchers and institutions focusing on France’s role in the Atlantic Slave Trade, since Napoleon famously reinstated slavery after it had been abolished. Regarding education and public knowledge, see Marie-Albane de Suremain, Éric Mesnard, *Enseigner les traites, les esclavages, les abolitions et leurs héritages*, Paris 2021. Regarding Macrons honouring of Napoleon, see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/05/napoleon-is-part-of-us-macron-tells-france-after-row-over-anniversary>.

⁴ See for example the contributions by Meike van Brescius, Felicia Gottmann, Hanna Hodacs, and Leos Müller in *Goods from the East 1600-1800: Trading Eurasia*, ed. Maxine Berg et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2015); Eugénie Margoline-Plot, “Les circuits parallèles des toiles de l’océan Indien, L’Orient au XVIIIe siècle,” *Histoire Urbaine*

official understanding of what a *pacotille* was. In 1765, the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Arts, des Sciences et des Métiers* defined *pacotilles* as “a certain weight, volume, or amount of goods [. . .] which officers, mariners and crew members are allowed to take on board in order to trade them on their own account.”⁵ This focus on mariners is echoed in other contemporary encyclopaedias, like the German-language *Krünitz*.⁶ With definitions like these at hand, and lots of *pacotilles* turning up in maritime-related sources, this mariner focus is hardly surprising, and studies like those of Eugénie Margoline-Plot have yielded important insights into the “parallel” trading circuits of mariners. But the *pacotilleuse* Ursule was no man, nor were all the other women who traded in *pacotilles*, and many of the men who traded with *pacotilles* weren’t mariners. According to René Valin, an expert in eighteenth-century French admiralty law, *pacotille* trade could be an entirely non-maritime business. Valin defined such *pacotilles* as a transaction between two parties which consisted of one party, the *donneur à pacotille*, compiling the goods for the *pacotille* and proving their joint value by means of accounts, then handing the *pacotille* over to the *preneur*, who would promise to sell those goods as advantageously as possible and return the profits of the sale either in cash or in the form of other commodities which would then be sold. Either way, the profits would be shared between the *donneur* and the *preneur* “à moitié,” which means that the *donneur*, who carried most of the risk, would receive the lion’s share of the profit.⁷ The difference between mariner’s *pacotilles* and, as Valin put it, “civil” *pacotilles* was that the former fell under the jurisdiction of the admiralty, whereas the latter could be enforced in civil courts, therefore limiting the *donneur*’s risk to some degree. *Pacotilles* were, thus, perfectly legal yet very low-key ways of generating extra income for anyone who either had the means to invest in a few saleable commodities, or the ability to sell them profitably for someone else.

Evidence from the French colonial Caribbean indicates that the trade in *pacotilles* was thriving, and a highly popular way of earning one’s living. In 1765, for example, the capital of the colony of Martinique had to enlarge the market space for the *pacotilleurs*, since their previous premises could not contain either them or their numerous clientele.⁸ There were *pacotille* traders practically everywhere, showing up in petitions, *ordonnances*, and as

30:1 (2018): 109–25; Gilbert Buti, “Du rouge pour le noir: Du Corail méditerranéen pour la traite négrière au XVIIIe siècle,” *Rives Méditerranéennes* 57 (2018): 109–27; Philippe Haudrère, “Heurs et Malheurs des voyages maritimes sur la route des Indes Orientales au XVIIIe siècle,” *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l’Ouest* 121:3 (2014): 165–75. On mariners’ trade, see also Beverly Lemire, “Men of the World: British Mariners, Consumer Practice, and Material Culture in an Era of Global Trade, c. 1660–1800,” *Journal of British Studies* 54 (2015): 288–319; also Emily Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The English East India Company 1600–1757* (Princeton: Yale University Press, 2014); and on private individuals exploring unofficial routes of trade see Hanna Hodacs, “Keeping It in the Family: The Swedish East India Company and the Irvine Family, 1731–1770,” *Journal of World History* 31:3 (2020): 567–95.

⁵ *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, Bd. XI (Paris, 1765), 738: “*Pacotille*/Paquotille, terme de commerce de mer qui signifie un certain poids, volume ou quantité de marchandises qu’il est permis aux officiers, matelots et gens d’équipage d’embarquer pour en faire commerce pour leur compte.”

⁶ Johann Georg Krünitz, *Oeconomische Encyclopädie, oder allgemeines System der Staats- Stadt—Haus—u. Landwirthschaft, in alphabetischer Ordnung, Fünfzehenter Theil, von Fre bis Gam* (Berlin, 1778): “Führung: Führung, oder Beylast, Fr. *Pacotille*, Paquotille [. . .] nennt man in der Seefahrt diejenige Fracht oder Last, welche jedem Schiffsbedienten für sich auf dem Schiffe mitzunehmen erlaubt ist; oder die Erlaubniß, vermöge welcher die so genannten SchiffsKinder eine gewisse Anzahl Waaren [. . .] in das Schiff laden und zu ihrem Privatvortheil überführen können.”

⁷ René-Josué Valin, *Nouveau Commentaire sur l’ordonnance de la marine*, Tome 1 (Paris, 1760), 649.

⁸ Archives Départementales de la Martinique, Code de la Martinique, Ordonnance de MM les Général et Intendant, 28 December 1765.

witnesses in court cases. There is evidence of people who would usually make their living in rather different ways engaging in a bit of pacotille trade on the side—such as a monk who sold off a very profitable pacotille containing nothing but syphilis medication in Martinique in 1763.⁹ Another example is that of a Paris goldsmith who sent a pacotille consisting entirely of diamond jewellery and worth over 6,000 livres to be sold in Saint-Domingue by a surgeon who then died under mysterious circumstances.¹⁰ Pacotilles were indeed a business for everything and everyone. They were a highly flexible form of trade which could be adapted to the requirements of changing circumstances. In their various forms, pacotilles mingled elements of different practices of trade, consumption, logistics, and law. There were contract-based consignment pacotilles,¹¹ but also pacotilles which relied on private credit, with the personal relationship providing the sole security. There were pacotilles which people carried with them and pacotilles which were sent as cargo and protected by a bill of lading; there were made-to-order pacotilles and pacotilles which were not sold at all, but exchanged for other goods which were then sent back to the originator, who would then sell them. Men and women from various parts of ancien régime societies thus participated in the establishment and maintenance of flows of goods and consumer worlds between France, Canada, West Africa, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean.¹²

A Suitcase Full of Textiles: Ursule, Marie, and Rose

One of these women was Ursule, the pacotilleuse. On 23 July 1769, she died. At 10 o'clock the next day, her place was visited by several representatives of the colonial administration: Jean Baptiste Lélou Conseiller Du Roy juge Royal Civil et Criminel de L'Isle Ste Lucie, accompanied by the Substitut Du Procureur Du Roy (because of the absence of the Procureur des Biens), and assisted by the Commis Greffier.¹³ The men came to the house at the request of another free woman of colour to whom they did not accord a last name in their protocol: Rose, who had apparently lived with Ursule. The house which Ursule and Rose had occupied together was rented by a man named Amiel; the document does not explain why or under which conditions the two women came to live in it. In any case, Rose had informed the authorities of Ursule's death, and on 24 July, as well as at least one later date, they came to the house

[in order to] place our seals on a trunk which encloses a part of the merchandise and effects depending on [Ursule's] succession and to make a summary description of

⁹ ANOM, IREL, COL C8 A 65 F° 311, Lettre Le Mercier de La Rivière (Pierre Paul), intendant des Iles du Vent, 29 October 1763.

¹⁰ ANOM, IREL, COL E 206, Girard, Pierre, lapidaire, diamantaire, joaillier à Paris, pacotille de diamant donné par lui à François Dufresne chirurgien à Saint-Domingue 1743/1744.

¹¹ The National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA], High Court of Admiralty Collection [hereafter HCA] 32/103/13, 176, the pacotille sent by Françoise Cadou.

¹² Neil McKendrick et al., ed., *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008).

See the various contributions in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1994); Linda Levy Peck, *Consuming Splendor: Society and Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (London: Palgrave, 2002); Beverly Lemire, *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018); Marina Bianchi, "Introduction," in *The Active Consumer: Novelty and Surprise in Consumer Choice*, ed. Marina Bianchi (New York: Abindgon, 1998), 1–18.

¹³ ANOM, IREL, Ursule.

that which is found in evidence at the preservation of the rights of whoever owns them, the whole has been presented to us by the said Rose mulatresse libre who occupies the said portion of the house rented by the said sieur Amiel after an oath made by her that she has not purloined, hidden nor abstracted anything that may depend on the said succession, and that she will bring to [our] understanding in our interrogation all that she knows.¹⁴

During at least two visits, Rose and the administrators then set out to discover what had been in Ursule's possessions when she died. They found a large number of textiles, as mentioned above. Those included two indienne skirts and one indienne petticoat, another petticoat of white cloth, a muslin skirt and two muslin petticoats, over fifty handkerchiefs in different colours, fabrics, and patterns (such as blue flowers or stripes), and little samples as well as larger cuts of various French fabrics, plus five chemises which Rose had picked up from the bleachers and which might have been Ursule's own clothes. Among the other effects there was also a sack of cocoa, various kinds of sewing thread, Ursule's papers, and—wrapped in a bundle of chiffon—a pair of gold earrings with jet stones. Apart from these goods, the men found a little money; some more cash was recovered by Rose, who took it upon herself to collect it from Ursule's debtors—some of them may have been friends or relatives, like "Jacques mulatre libre" who settled a debt of nine piasters. The documents also included invoices Ursule had written and proof of debts other people owed her. One document, which must have been a bill of exchange or functioned like one, instructed the Sieur Cornibert to pay out 63 livres and 15 sols to Ursule for the Sieur Montplaisir, and was dated 4th June 1769.

When the explorations were thus finished, the men left. The suitcase stayed behind with Rose, who had promised to take responsibility for the goods until their owner or owners were found, and had signed a statement to that effect (or rather, for whom the administrators had signed a statement, since she had declared that she could neither write nor sign her name).¹⁵ Soon afterwards another woman came forward, claiming the right to Ursule's inheritance: Marie Rose Michel, widow of the tailormaster Pierre Rivière from St. Pierre, capital of neighbouring Martinique. She contacted the administration through her local procureur and swore that the goods were hers. According to Marie, Ursule had taken over a *pacotille* for her which was worth a total sum of 1,963 livres, 10 sols, and 10 deniers. Ursule had signed for it on 27 May 1769. Now Marie demanded the goods back in so far as they were still "existing in nature," as well as the price Ursule had received for such goods as she had already sold.

The records of the St. Lucian administration, carefully composed by men, show us three apparently very competent women involved in a *pacotille* business with European goods that stretched over two Caribbean islands. Two of these women, Rose and Ursule, clearly were part of each other's intimate networks. They lived together and Rose was able—apparently without difficulty—to complete Ursule's unfinished business transactions, indicating that she was familiar both with Ursule's practices and with her business partners. Just how intimately connected Ursule had been with Marie is something which the surviving documents don't reveal. It is clear that Marie had somehow procured the goods from France, then contacted Ursule and "booked" her services for the sale—just how the women knew each other we cannot say. We only know that they joined forces in a *pacotille* enterprise. Apparently, Marie knew which goods were popular with the clientele and

¹⁴ ANOM, IREL, Ursule.

¹⁵ ANOM, IREL, Ursule, "Nous avons laissé tout à la garde et possession de lad Rose qui s'en est chargé comme dépositaire du Bien de Justice et a Promis de Représenter le tout quand elle en sera Requise, et avons signé avec Le substitut et le Commis greffier et à l'égard de lad Rose elle a déclaré ne savoir écrire ny signer."

who would be able to sell them under favourable conditions, and how to make the necessary arrangements in writing. Ursule, the professional, very likely knew how to sell, how to set profitable prices (a key skill),¹⁶ how to keep accounts documenting her commercial activities, write invoices, and keep track of her debtors. After Ursule's death, the business connection was essentially inherited by Rose, who had not been part of the original transaction but was still able to deal competently with both the administration and the open parts of Ursule's business, settling her debts and taking care of her effects, despite her illiteracy. The ongoing enterprise set up between these two (and de facto, three) women had functioned in a space removed from the male-dominated mercantile sphere. It adopted some of that sphere's practices—like keeping accounts, writing invoices, and documenting consignments on paper—and combined them with the practices of the less official trades in which women frequently engaged, such as the person-to-person sales known from second-hand commerce or trade with itinerant peddlers,¹⁷ and with the immense flexibility and the transatlantic, if not global, qualities that were characteristics both of the pacotille trade and of women's intimate economic networks.

Pacotille Trouble: Marie, Blaize, Françoise, Roze, and Anriette

Ursule and Rose were clearly not only well organised, but scrupulous in their dealings both commercially and regarding the law. The next example, however, shows how a specific kind of pacotille trade provided women of colour with the opportunity to use their knowledge and intimate networks to work *around* particularly brutal colonial legislation.

In the last days of April 1777, a group of ship's masters who were moored in the port of Cap Français in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue suffered a bit of a commercial setback. Selling off their cargo, which consisted for the most part in pacotille shipments they had taken with them on consignment, they had all sold goods on credit to various clients from the town and its surroundings, including a group of free black women and women of colour. We know this because surviving account books as well as accompanying letters made a point of ascribing racial and legal markers to all clients who were not white, describing for example a man named Pierre Castra as "*nègre libre*."¹⁸ The ladies who had thus been identified with their full names, racial labels, addresses, and sometimes the names of their husbands too, had purchased indiennes, salted beef, and green peas.

Then something happened which went against the rules that governed credit-based trade: instead of paying their debts, the ladies simply took their indiennes, their peas, and their beef and made off with them, ran away to the back country. The few women who remained in the town suddenly claimed an unfortunate insolvency which prevented them from paying up. According to master Marc Moreau of the ship *Fidélité*, the women had similarly dealt with up to thirty ship's masters moored in the harbour, who could do nothing but shrug and try to justify the losses to the owners of the purloined cargo. The surviving documentation in Moreau's letter book indicates that, four months after

¹⁶ Laurence Fontaine, "Bemerkungen zum Kaufen als soziale Praxis. Feilschen, Preise festlegen und Güter ersteigern im frühneuzeitlichen Europa," *Historische Anthropologie* 14:3 (2019).

¹⁷ Laurence Fontaine, "The Exchange of Second-Hand Goods between Survival Strategies and 'Business' in Eighteenth-Century Paris," in *Alternative Exchanges* (e-book), ed. Laurence Fontaine (New York: Berghahn, 2008), 97–114; see also the contributions by Valérie Pietri and Harald Deceulaer in the same volume; Laurence Fontaine, *The History of Pedlars in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press 1996); Laurence Fontaine, "The Circulation of Luxury Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris: Social Redistribution and an Alternative Currency," in M. Berg and E. Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, 89–102; Lemire, *Global Trade*.

¹⁸ TNA, HCA 32/331/1, Accounts of the ship *La Fidélité*.

the incident, the situation was still unchanged.¹⁹ This incident would be historiographically fascinating in itself, but the record suggests that it may not have been a singular event. The private collection of the Comte d'Estaing contains an unsigned draft of a petition created sometime between 1764 and 1766. If its contents are to be trusted, it was drawn up by a group of *marchands de détail* (retail merchants) in Port-au-Prince as a written complaint.²⁰ In it, the traders, who would also source their commodities from pacotille-carrying ships, explained that women of colour were their strongest competitors in the *détail* market, and out-earned them considerably. The male merchants felt extremely threatened by the women of colour, whose success the men not only attributed to their supposed lower cost of living and better trading connections, but also because they would regularly seduce or trick ship's captains into letting them leave with cargo "for nothing [. . .] if a captain is [. . .] without passions, if he arms against them the forces of law and the authorities, they go into [. . .] the mountains to breath a free and healthy air, and they do not come back until after the ship has departed and the thunderstorm has passed."²¹ Both the complaint and the documents left by Marc Moreau have to be read extremely carefully, and with rather more than just a pinch of salt, given that they were all written by white men wanting to justify their own professional shortcomings within the highly racist parameters of Saint-Domingue's colonial culture.²² However, they also point to the possibility that the loose, purposefully unregulated organisation of pacotille trade allowed free women of colour to combine their knowledge of global goods and their local values, of trading practices and credit, local infrastructure, landscape, people, and time regimes (e.g., how long a ship would stay, how long it would take for the "thunderstorm" of indignation and possible legal action to pass) to outwit "the system." In the case of Marc Moreau, the names of such a band of ladies—all free black women, according to the racial markers made by Moreau—have survived: Marie La Goux, Blaize du Chainé, Françoise Minerve, Roze de Chems, and Anriette Autrusseaux came to the *Fidélité* on 30 April 1777, bought goods on credit, and then disappeared. Two other free black ladies, Andrée Boucanier and Marie Josephe Charles, made their purchases alongside this group, but paid their debts later on. It is highly likely that these women knew a lot about pacotille trade, and had a strong intimate network both amongst each other and in the town and its rural surroundings. They very likely knew that the ships' captains and crews moored in the harbour would take care of the retail side themselves, and that they had to strike their bargains before the captains could hand the goods over to a professional merchant, or even a *marchand pacotilleur* or a *pacotilleuse* like Ursule, with a permanent residence in town. The ladies who made their "purchases" with Marc Moreau all showed up on the third day of the *Fidélité's* months-long sales period – Moreau was going to stay at the Cap at least until the fall of 1777. They were probably aware of, and able to calculate with, the specific temporalities of a ship-based pacotille trade of this kind: having sold off the cargo, the ships and their crews would invariably leave again, no matter how many peas and fabrics had not yet been paid for. The women also, and crucially, had to be able to rely on the protection of their social network, both in the hinterland communities they fled to and in Cap Français. One aspect of interest here is that, in at least one case, some kind of obfuscation or impersonation apparently happened—"Blaize du Chêne" was listed by Moreau as a free

¹⁹ TNA, HCA 32/331/1, Accounts of the ship La Fidélité.

²⁰ I am extremely grateful to Camille Cordier for providing me with this document and her insights on the trading infrastructures of Cap Français: Archives Nationales de France, AN 562 AP 33, Fonds privé du Comte d'Estaing. Complaint made by the *marchands de détail* of Port-au-Prince, 1764–1766.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² The complaint, for example, explicitly and verbosely demands that only white persons should be allowed to do *détail* commerce due to their "superiority."

black woman, however, the Cap Français parish records show on multiple occasions that Blaize du Chêne was, in fact, a free black man who stood godfather to various children.²³

Another important and related aspect is one that Nathan Perl Rosenthal has discussed in connection with small trade: that of mobile and colliding legal spaces.²⁴ It is interesting that neither Moreau nor the small-retail merchants of Port-au-Prince ever called the women's activities "theft" or "fraud," despite calling on the authorities for help and clearly considering the women's alleged ways of procuring goods to be deviant in some way. Yet their position was legally ambiguous—after all, while a debt was open, it could always be paid, clearing the debtors name (which could never be the case after an actual theft or fraud). It is worth considering that the women knew how to navigate various legal spaces: They likely were familiar both with the specific notions of legality that governed the mariner-driven small-scale trade, which Nathan Perl Rosenthal, Richard Blakemore, Beverly Lemire, and others have shown,²⁵ and with the regime underlying merchant-driven credit commerce, and they were able to use that knowledge to their benefit. All in all, the historical record and historiography suggest that these specific purchasing practices were carried out by well-connected women with strong intimate networks who were able to calculate and handle the risks they ran. Their knowledge and networks allowed them to obtain tradeable goods for no cost, which (so the merchants of Port-au-Prince inform us) they would later sell themselves, thus becoming *de facto* *pacotilleuses* through the back door. Then, their knowledge, their connections, and the unofficial structure of *pacotille* trade would serve them once more in turning the stolen goods into profit.

A Business for Everybody?

The cases presented here show how varied *pacotille* activities were, and how flexibly, creatively, and competently they were handled by a historiographically still-elusive group among the various agents in the field of colonial commerce: free black women and women of colour. At this point in the ongoing research underlying this brief essay, it seems as if almost anything was possible in the world of *pacotille* trade, as long as one had the necessary knowledge and the necessary network to stabilise and protect one's activities, which the women introduced above certainly had. Ursule and Rose in St. Lucia and Martinique managed to successfully negotiate relations of trust and credit both with their business partners, with each other, and with the various colonial authorities they encountered. Marie, Blaize, Françoise, Roze, and Anriette managed to successfully outwit and overturn existing practices of credit and trust in one socio-commercial context, while undoubtedly honouring and maintaining them in others, which allowed them to get away with their *pacotille* heist. All of these women were *pacotille* experts. And yet, as shown in the introduction, *pacotille* trade was far from their prerogative in the colonial worlds they inhabited. It is clear that eighteenth-century French colonial *pacotilles* were traded by practically everybody, in all kinds of formats, and that they could contain every imaginable commodity and even enslaved persons. Furthermore, the historical evidence suggests that, at least by the second half of the eighteenth century, *pacotille* trade was something adopted by people who were "professional" merchants as

²³ ANOM, IREL, État civile, Paroisse Cap Français, Toutes Actes. 1777, 1778.

²⁴ Nathan Perl Rosenthal, "On Mobile Legal Spaces and Maritime Empires: The Pillage of the East Indian *Osterley* (1779)," *Itinerario* 42:2 (2018): 183–201. Many thanks to Nathan Perl Rosenthal for discussing this with me.

²⁵ Perl Rosenthal, "On Mobile Legal Spaces"; Lemire, "Men of the World"; Richard Blakemore, "Pieces of Eight, Pieces of Eight: Seamen's Earnings and the Venture Economy of Early Modern Seafaring," *Economic History Review* 70:4 (2017): 1153–184.

well, and pacotilles of varying sizes could be a dominant form of ship's cargo, and owned by people who made their living as colonial merchants in port cities. Therefore, this introductory essay will finish, not with answers, but rather with more questions regarding the history of colonial pacotille trade; questions which I will hopefully be able to answer in time: Beyond the flexibility and openness combined with a modicum of legal security, what were the benefits of pacotille trade? Did pacotille practices lend themselves especially to being adopted and modified by people for whom the more "official" trading spheres were severely limited, like women of colour? How big were the risks compared to other forms of trade—and in view of activities like that of the Saint-Domingue ladies' gang?

Whatever the advantages and potentials of the pacotille trade were, it is already clear that women from various strata of Caribbean, European, and other contemporary societies saw them early, made full use of them, and probably advanced them further. Pacotille commerce opens up spheres of female knowledge, connection, agency, and sometimes surprising and creative activity in the realm of global colonial trade, and its study promises to change our understanding of it—and them.

Funding statement. The research underlying this article was funded by the German Research Association (DFG).

Annika Raapke is DFG Walter Benjamin Postdoc at the University of Göttingen, Germany. She specialises in the history of the 18th century French Caribbean. Her first monograph is the German translation of her English-language PhD-Thesis on bodies in the French Caribbean titled *'Dieses verfluchte Land'. Europäische Körper in Brief Erzählungen aus der Karibik, 1744-1826* (Transcript, 2019). Her publications address questions of gender, emotions and family, food, health and illness in the colonial Caribbean context, as well as methodological considerations such as practice theory.

Cite this article: Raapke A (2022). *Petites Affaires: Pacotille Commerce and the Intimate Networks of Free Women of Colour in the Eighteenth-Century French Caribbean*. *Itinerario* 46, 371–380. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115322000286>