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Duché, Elodie (2017) 'Captives in plantations: British prisoners of war and visions of slavery in Napoleonic France and Mauritius'. French History and Civilization, 7. pp. 108-124.

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Captives in Plantations: British Prisoners of War and Visions of Slavery in Napoleonic France and Mauritius

Elodie Duché

In 1811, a group of British prisoners of war in Longwy wrote a petition to William Wilberforce, asking him to consider their captivity in France as a distress "worse" than slavery. In their attempt to convince the abolitionist movement, which had recently outlawed the British slave trade, the captives claimed that:

> It is true we are not slaves; yet, all things considered, our case is worse. May we entreat you, worthy Sir, to use any means which may appear to you consistent with prudence, to complete our joint wishes …; and if successful, you will render the greatest service to your countrymen, who are languishing in misery, almost without hope.[1]

These "joint wishes" were those of alleviating "the distressed" and ending forms of coerced mobility, which were not equated in the plea of prisoners. Rather, slavery and war captivity in France were placed in competition: contending miseries at a time when perceptions of the validity of the slave trade had upended across the Channel. Indeed, the Act of 1807 was concomitant with Napoleon's decision to reinstate chattel slavery in the French empire.

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The author wishes to acknowledge the generous support of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) for awarding her an Early Career Research Fellowship, which assisted in the preparation of this article at the University of Western Sydney. The author also wishes to thank Simon Burrows, Julie Kalman, as well as the two anonymous reviewers, for their support and helpful suggestions.

[1] The petition to Wilberforce was mediated by a civilian prisoner named Greenaway in Verdun. See Story, *A Journal Kept in France,* 98-9.

British prisoners therefore located themselves within shifting imperial ideologies, redefining the contours of citizenship, liberty and race in both France and Britain.[2]

The hierarchy of distress claimed by these British detainees makes the twenty-first-century reader recoil, by both conflating different systems of coercion and demeaning the horrific cruelty exercised against African slaves during the period. Yet, as the recent work of Svrividhya Swaminathan and Adam Beach has shown, these seemingly toxic amalgamations raise interesting questions about the meanings of slavery for eighteenth-century observers, writers and readers, the complexities of which remain to be fully disentangled.[3] How did Napoleonic war captives conceptualize slavery? What was the purpose of associating their plight to that of a race-based system? Were these views forged in contact with the French, their plantations and libraries; or was it an affective trope to elicit charitable aid in Britain? Were captives and their readers conscious of these influences? And to what extent did imaginings of slavery frame their experience: in other words, was slavery a mere literary metaphor or a broader cultural prism though which prisoners constructed their seclusion in France?

In Britain, Wilberforce's response to the petition penned in Longwy did not echo the prisoners' language, and realigned captivity with its traditional diplomatic discourse, suggesting a potential "cartel for the exchange of prisoners" to be discussed in the House of Commons.[4] Yet, amongst the sixteen thousand British prisoners detained in France, a significant portion had narrated, and continued to narrate their experience in relation to slavery and French colonialism. In this paper, I would like to explore this phenomenon further, by first looking at the prisoners' references to slavery in letters, memoirs, plays and poems to explore the role of such analogies and assess whether captivity in France altered their views on the trade, particularly as they were lacking familiar means of information, primarily British newspapers.[5] These references have something to tell us about the global nature of their experience in mainland France, as much as their encounters with French colonial systems in outposts such as Mauritius (then known as *Île de France*). This island will provide a case study to then investigate the transnational contacts that led these imaginations to flourish in French "prison depots," where British captives witnessed French imperialism in various forms, from afar or from within, between 1803 and 1814. The last section will consider how French authors reflected on the place of prisoners of war in French society, and their efforts to compare the rights and duties of slaves, with those of war captives. The paper will conclude on a comparative note, by evoking the dilemma French prisoners of war met in portraying their conditions as being equally akin to slavery during the conflict.

Rethinking 'Coerced Mobility' during the Napoleonic Wars

[2] Recent studies have explored the ambivalent restoration of slavery during the First French Empire, and the limitations of its suspension during the Revolution in the Atlantic and Indian oceans. See, amongst others, Branda and Lentz, *Napoléon, l'esclavage et les colonies*. Regent, *Esclavage, métissage, liberté*. Serna, "République des droits naturels selon 'Théophile Mandar'," 135-160. Crouin, "Fêtes en faveur de l'abolition de l'esclavage en France," 55-77. Girard, *The Slaves who Defeated Napoléon*. Gainot, "Elzéar Morénas en Inde," 89-113.

[3] Swaminathan and Beach (eds), *Invoking slavery*.

[4] Story, *A Journal Kept in France*, 99.

[5] British prisoners in France did follow the debates about the abolition through French newspapers, and formed an opinion on the subject in detention, as evidenced by the manuscript diaries of a civilian captive named Revd. Maude in Verdun, who wrote on 26 June 1806: "The new Administration it appears are resolved to abolish the African slave trade, and Mr Fox will bring a bill into Parliament next session to that effect. This will affect great luster and credit on the new ministry and on the country, it will be a striking act of justice and of humanity – but it is in my opinion very problematical, if it will turn out a political measure – time will prove it – but I think our colonies will suffer." Queen's College Library, Oxford, GB/NNAF/P144289, John Barnabas Maude, 'Journal', 1802-14, IV, Journal to December 1807.

Slavery permeated the world and the words of war captives during the Napoleonic conflicts. It was not conceived as a coherent reality, or a colonial plight from afar. Rather, British prisoners in France placed themselves at the epicentre of mutifaceted slave systems—particularly the transatlantic slave trade, but also Ottoman and Roman practices of enslavement. This made their experience both transnational and global in nature, a phenomenon that has so far been overlooked by historians of the conflict. Indeed, several scholars of military history, including maritime historian Michael Lewis in the 1960s, have taken the discourse of these prisoners at face value and uncritically validated the claim that "prisoner of war equals slave."[6] This has fed into a partisan joust across the Channel, aiming at establishing which prisoners had been treated the worst, the French or the British, during these wars.[7] This binary approach is problematic, and does not allow us to appreciate how the empire, colonial readings, and the global voyages these prisoners embarked upon framed their experience and their narrations of reclusion.

Why is this a significant point to make? First of all, it is important to stress that war captives are the subject of new scholarly interest.[8] Conducted on a variety of conceptual fronts, these emerging POW studies are, however, often fettered to the twentieth century, and very rarely consider the intersection of various modes of coercion: the contacts war prisoners might have had with slaves, convicts, coolies and colonised Others. Some historians, such as Linda Colley, have nevertheless paved the way for such perspective in the eighteenth century. Her book *Captives* has shown that British settlers experienced various forms of captivity, in Northern Africa and India, and how this crystallised their perceptions of non-Christian populations.[9] Yet, she often reduces war captivity to what Nabil Matar terms "*corpus captivitus*:" as merely illustrative of domestic trends transposed, adjusted and revived abroad, or as a lens through which historians can capture perceptions of the Other.[10] In this paper, I would like to offer a different reading, and explore what post-colonial theorists term the "contact zone" of captivity.[11] Prisoners of the Napoleonic conflicts not only reflected but actively shaped transimperial links, movements and ideas during the period as they entered in contacts with captors, slave merchants, slave-owners, slaves, and free people of colour—in person and in writing. By highlighting the colonial nature of their experience, I am not suggesting that British prisoners in France were "white slaves."[12] Rather, I want to

[6] "Le prisonnier est toujours "esclave" de son vainqueur, et doit subir sa loi." Houmeau, "Les Prisonniers Britanniques de Napoléon 1er, 1803-1814," 40-2, 56, 163.

[7] Partisan perspectives have strongly colored debates about late eighteenth-century detention. Charles Ruellan insisted that "prisoners of war have always been well-treated in France," whilst Didier Houmeau has contrasted captivity in Napoleonic France with the xenophobic mistreatments perpetrated against the French in Britain during the Revolution. Dual narratives between sufferers and perpetrators of imprisonment led many historians to embody nations competing for the most humanitarian gestures. Such partisan discourses are, however, not specific to the Napoleonic conflicts. Heather Jones noted the same tensions in her study of captivity during WW1. See Ruellan, "Prisonniers de Guerre Français et Anglais au XVIIIe Siècle," 646. Houmeau, "Les Prisonniers Britanniques de Napoléon 1er," 13. Lewis, *Napoleon's British captives*, 15, 18, 202-54. See also Chamberlain, *Hell Upon Water*. Fraser, *Napoleon the Gaoler*. Goldworth Alger, *Napoleon's British Visitors and Captives.*

[8] They form a flourishing field of study, often referred to as the Prisoner of War (POW) studies: an interdisciplinary field that Grace Huxford and I have been trying to capture through the creation of the POW Network, which now gathers around sixty scholars in Europe, North America, Australia and South Africa. For more information, see the POW Network website at: https://powstudiesnetwork.wordpress.com/

[9] Colley, "The Captivity Narrative," 199-217. Colley, "Going Native, Telling Tales," 170-93. Colley, *Captives*.

[10] Matar, "England and Mediterranean Captivity," 1-52. See also Guasco, *Slaves and Englishmen*.

[11] See Clifford, *Routes*, 7; Friedman, "From Roots to Routes," 21-36.

[12] Numerous historians and literary scholars have studied the emergence of a "white slavery" discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and its relationship with the anti-slavery movement and other forms of reform movements led and supported by working classes. See, amongst others, Beckles, "The Concept of 'White Slavery'," 572-83. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters*.

investigate how war captivity formed a liminal transimperial nexus, where French and British colonial systems intersected, and where attitudes to slavery and the slave trade were negotiated and reimagined.

This perspective also aims to relocate coercion within the complex movements generated by the Napoleonic conflicts. As recent studies in carceral geography have shown, the "mobilities turn," which gained momentum in the 1990s, "has tended to draw a connection between mobility, autonomy, and freedom, and in so doing has inadequately explored and theorized coerced mobility."[13] Geographers have suggested a reappraisal of the diverse constraints underpinning migration. As Dominique Moran argues, not only access to mobility, but exclusion from it, and mobility itself are to be considered as instruments of discipline. According to her, "coerced mobility" can become a useful analytical tool to study power dynamics, when defined broadly as 'forced' movements modulated by "the production of subjects with a greater or lesser degree of coercion or agency."[14] By rethinking this concept as a spectrum, her work has greatly complicated common visions of volition expressed in transit, along with assumptions that prisons are sedentary sites. Too often, prisons are seen as the epitomy of fixity, the endpoint of previous movements. By questioning this assumption, her work has provided us with an exciting theoretical canvass that can help to highlight the connections between various forms of enforced journeys around the globe during the Napoleonic Wars. By looking at slavery metaphors in the writings of British captives and their contacts with French imperialism in plantations, this paper draws upon these theories to stress the importance of various constrained voyages in experiences of prison life during the period. Not only was captivity perceived through the lens of past travels and visions of slave trades, but journeying itself—being transferred *en masse*, or marched from *dépot* to *dépot*, from fortresses to parole prisons, from cafés to plantations—formed an essential part of the carceral system deployed by the French State to hold captured civilians and servicemen in mainland France and overseas possessions. Overall, various perceptions and encounters of coerced mobility coalesced in war captivity, which perhaps explains the emergence of a trope in prisoner of war writings, namely that of the prison "slaves."

A Multifaceted Metaphor: The Language of Prison "Slaves" in Napoleonic France

Napoleon's 16,000 British prisoners initially comprised 400 civilian tourists and merchants captured, with their family and servants, during the mass arrest of May 1803—known as the 2nd Prairial decree—which concluded the brief of Peace of Amiens, reached between the two countries after the Revolutionary Wars. These civilians were detained in a dozen outposts mainly in northern and eastern France, but also in colonies, where they were rapidly joined by a surge of naval servicemen. The conditions and spaces of their seclusion varied, depending on their social and family status. Men "accompanied by their families" and officers were detained on parole—a word of honor enabling them to lodge amongst the inhabitants, work in shops and to circulate within a perimeter of two leagues. Common sailors, soldiers and later servants were relegated to fortresses such as those of Longwy, Valenciennes, Arras, Givet, Besançon or Metz, and confined within military barracks—a sternness only assuaged by the permission to trade with the locals outside the walls on market days.[15] Tentative absconders were sequestered temporarily and more severely in the basement of the Bitche citadel, with limited access to natural light and a bed of straw. This classification is nevertheless reductive, as captives were always in transit. Prison "depots"

[13] Moran, Piacentini and Pallot, "Disciplined Mobility and Carceral Geography," 446-460.
[14] See also Turner and Peters (eds), *Carceral Mobilities*.
[15] Amongst the common sailors and soldiers confined in fortresses such as Longwy or Givet, some received the permission to reside on parole in the vicinity of the depot. Local administrators delivered such favors on an individual basis. See, for instance, Gabrielson, "The British Prisoner of War School of Navigation," 7-41.

were successively opened or closed, owing to the endless motion of conscripted troops, goods and frontiers. British prisoners partook in this flux, by petitioning the local administrator or the French State to visit other depots to remit charitable aid, or request the transfer of a ship's crew to one same depot to safeguard their career prospects.[16] This rather *ad hoc* and flexible form of detention hardly resembled the rigid panoptic model formulated by Foucault: a sealed penitentiary site where inmates were to be confined and observed by the all-seeing eye of the watch tower.[17] In fact, Napoleon himself reconsidered the "treatment" of these detainees many times: first by contemplating using them as labour forces on farms and in textile manufactures, then attempting to enroll them in his legions, and revising the status of civilian captives from "*détenus"* to "hostages" before claiming them as "lawfully taken war captives" after 1805.[18]

Overall, these prisoners formed a minority in comparison to the 130,000 French prisoners detained more severely in hulks, prison and camps in Britain.[19] Their detention hardly compared to slavery—their experience was not conditioned by the racial tenets of the trade, they were not born into war captivity, or indeed systematically forced to labour whilst in detention. They were not the property of merchants as such; their lives were only commodified as means of diplomatic and economic pressure.[20] Regardless of this, British captives in France narrated their experiences through the prism of colonial servitude: they invoked slavery to reflect on their chains and those of other captives of Napoleon's ambitions. In 1805, naval prisoner William Story described, in his log book, the state of a prison in Bayonne, where he and the rest of his crew were stationed on the way to Northern France, as:

> horrid and filthy … suffocating stench … prevailed in every part. There were here, amongst others, some hundreds … prisoners, who had been condemned to slavery, and were taken out every day to labour at the public works, dragging after them a long chain with a large shot at the end of it; in the evening they returned, and were locked up in their loathsome abode.[21]

The forced "labour," the "stench," the "chain"—in other words the working and living conditions of a subjugated group—are the connecting points used by Story to interlock captivity with slavery and a criminal sentence, something to be "condemned to." The triple

[16] For further information on this, see Duché, "Charitable Connections," 74-117.

[17] Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, which inspired Foucault's theory of discipline, nevertheless influenced the spatial arrangements of some POW depots, such as Dartmoor prison, in Britain during the Napoleonic Wars.

[18] Archives départementales des Ardennes, 5 H1, Cellule du préfet des Ardennes aux maires du ressort, le 5 Frimaire An 14 (26 November 1804): "Les événements de la guerre ont mis à disposition du gouvernement un nombre considérable de prisonniers de guerre…. L'intention de Sa Majesté impériale est que les bras de ces prisonniers soient employés aux travaux de l'État et des particuliers." In addition to this, the *Article 7 du règlement du 12 Brumaire an 14* (3 novembre 1805) stipulated that: "Les particuliers qui désirent bénéficier des prisonniers de guerre aux travaux de l'agriculture ou des manufactures, adresseront au maire de leur commune une demande indicative." Margaret Audin's study has shown that the French State saw the presence of British craftsmen in France in 1803 as potentially profitable for the French textile industry. Audin, "British Hostages in Napoleonic France."

[19] A plethora of works have been produced on French POWs in Britain in the long eighteenth century. In addition to the studies mentioned above, see Daily, "Napoleon's Lost Legions,"361-80. Lloyd, *A History of Napoleonic and American Prisoners of War*. A more refreshing perspective on their experience can be found in Morieux, "French Prisoners of War, Conflicts of Honour," 55-88.

[20] On the end of exchanges of prisoners during the First French Empire, see Crimmin, "Prisoners of War and British Port Communities, 1793-1815,"17-27.

[21] Story, *A Journal Kept in France*, 13, 61.

comparison made by this British war prisoner nicely maps onto Claude Meissailoux's anthopological study of the "de-socialisation" at play in captivity. His work has shown that captives can see themselves as experiencing the "state" or "condition" of slavery "defined by their employment;" yet, these differ from the "status" of slavery, which "is original and thus permanent," a never-ending raced-based stigma to be transmitted through birth.[22] This distinction underpins the claim made in the aforementioned Longwy petition that "it is true we are not slaves; yet, all things considered, our case is worse."

This interlocking of the "state" and "condition" of slaves with those of captives expanded to other groups of people: Spanish prisoners of war working on construction sites, but also convicts of a particular kind. Elsewhere in his log book, Story noted that French soldiers, having deserted Napoleon's army were inflicted similar treatment. Temporarily sharing a cell with one of them, he noted:

> I was amused with a French soldier, who had deserted, after serving in many campaigns with the emperor. He became weary of the service at *Bologne* [sic.], where Napoleon frequently marched his army into the sea, above their middle, to practise them for invading England. This brave looking fellow quitted him, and preferred a prison, or slavery, to serving him in his wild schemes any longer.[23]

Such descriptions suggest that, for this war captive, the walls of the prison were permeable: they encompassed prisoner of war depots but also civil prisons where French absconders were secluded. Slavery, in his analogies, was a metaphorical tool to verbally protest against military subjugation, in any form, inflicted by the post-revolutionary French State personified in Napoleon to their foreign captives and their own deserting soldiers, the wretched or conscripted local peasants. It was a critique of a military form of French imperialism and its "wild schemes," rather than an informed comparison of various forms of coercion.[24]

But was this the case for all captives? Story, like many of the prisoners who signed the Longwy petition to Wilberforce, was a seaman, who had been captured on the Jane bound to Canada. This naval and transatlantic background is important. As Geoff Quilley argues, there was, in the late eighteenth century, a "significant discursive overlap between slavery and seamanship that needs to be acknowledged."[25] The Atlantic Ocean formed a chaotic "many-headed Hydra:" a maritime space hosting various forms of detention, forced recruitment, mobility and labour, whose contours and contacts were difficult to control by colonial powers.[26] But, as Alessandro Stanziani has shown, the French and British empires were both heavily marked by coerced mobility beyond the space of the Atlantic: bondage linked multilateral imperial corridors in the West and the East. The Atlantic and Indian oceans were both constrictive by nature, being regularly traversed by "slaves, convicts, indentured migrants and coerced seamen" along with, I would argue, prisoners of war.[27] Far from offering a liberating force, the sea—understood broadly—was therefore a space of negotiated coercion, which perhaps explains the propensity of British naval prisoners to

[22] On the 'status' versus 'state' analogy, see Beach, "The Good-Treatment Debate" in Swaminathan and Beach, *Invoking slavery*, 27.
[23] Story, *A Journal Kept in France*, 61-2.
[24] For other examples, see Maurice Hewson, *Escape from the French, Captain Hewson's Narrative (1803-1809)* (London, 1891), 46.
[25] Quilley, "Of Sailors and Slaves," 172.
[26] Linebaugh, *Sailors, Slaves, and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century*.
[27] Stanziani, *Sailors, Slaves, and Immigrants*.

compare their plight with those of convicts or slaves.[28] After all, British naval men were already used to relating service afloat to slavery in courts-martial, and observers such as Samuel Johnson had famously likened naval ships to floating gaols.[29] In that sense, Napoleon's captive Tars merely continued an existing trope shaped by maritime forms of coercion on a global scale.

So what were the functions of such analogies? Was it a mere figure of speech, a strategy to gain charitable sympathies in Britain? Or was such association testament to a visual and literary culture of the enchained? Historians have shown that there was an eighteenth-century tradition to contrast "English liberty" to "French slavery."[30] Srividhya Swaminathan has argued there was also a proliferation of abolitionist rhetoric in the late 1790s associated to a British national discourse, contrasting French and British empires, which encouraged British people of various social backgrounds to envision their French neighbors as slaves.[31] This discourse certainly permeated the publications of civilian detainees. Whilst MP Charles Sturt pitied the heavily taxed "wretched slaves" of the country in his *Real State of France*, others, such as midshipman Seacome Elison, critiqued their enslavement to passions and "dissolute taste," also noting "that the peasantry appeared to be little better than slaves to the *gendarmerie*."[32] Comments on class tensions, taste, manners and the economic situation of foreign countries, coupled with disparaging remarks on the unfree character of the French, were a *topos* of travel writing that prisoners replicated here.

In addition to this, there was an assymetrical affinity, in writing, between narratives of slavery and narratives of war captivity that these British prisoners developed during and after detention. Indeed, in their published memoirs—which fed into a flourishing market of what Mary Louise Pratt has termed the sentimental "survival literature"[33]—they associated stories of escape with those of marooned slaves and "gangs of galley slaves" running for their lives.[34] For the former, escape was less an acquisition of liberty than a reassertion of their status as "free born Britons," hence justifying their breach of honor to their readers.[35] But, most interestingly, it was within the petition written in French to their captors that the British prisoners saw themselves akin to stories penned by Christian slaves in the Ottoman Empire. Reflecting on his petitions sent to Napoleon, MP Charles Sturt lamented: "I feel ashamed ever to have written in a style so humiliating, so becoming a wretched slave under the dominion of a Turkish government, and not in the language of a free-born Englishman."[36] Such orientalization of the French suggests a strong intertextuality between the various

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[28] Several scholars, including Robert Burrows, Peter Grindal and Andrew Lambert, have highlighted the involvement of the Royal Navy in abolishing the slave trade and the proliferation of anti-slavery rhetoric amongst sailors during the period. See, Grindal, *Opposing the Slavers*. Lambert, "Slavery, Free Trade and Naval Strategy," 65-80. Burroughs, "Sailors and Slaves," 305-323.

[29] This association gained momentum in public debates and fictions in the Victorian era, following the great reform act, see Robert Burroughs' article mentioned above.

[30] On this antagonism between "English liberty" and "French slavery," and its importance for British nation-building, see Colley, *Britons*.

[31] Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*.

[32] Sturt, *The Real State of France*, 15. Ellison, *Prison Scenes*,105, 237. See also the following dialogue between a captive and a gendarme in the play penned by former POW Lawrence, *The Englishman at Verdun*, 101-102: ''T: What chain me, chain a gentleman! / Gendarme: Ay, many a gentleman is chained here in France every day in the week."

[33] Pratt, *Imperial eyes*, 85.

[34] Lawrence, *A Picture of Verdun*, I, 50, 193. This seems to be a trope circulating through plagiarism between narratives of captivity, see the same image of "galley slaves" in Ellison, *Prison Scenes*, 213. This motif was replicated in British newspapers, see *Morning Chronicle*, 15 November 1809. *The Literary Panorama* (1810) VII, 527-528.

[35] Lawrence, *A Picture of Verdun*, II, 239-40.

[36] Sturt, *The Real State of France*, 71-72.

genres of the "low literature" of captivity studied by Linda Colley: the British prisoners in France had clearly read the narratives of slavery and captivity in Muslim countries that became so popular in the eighteenth century. These texts "furnished their minds."[37] And it perhaps did so in the act of publishing, rather than in writing.

Editing impacted the use of slavery metaphors in narratives, poems, plays and songs penned by British captives in France. A good example of this could be the two editions of Thomas Dutton's *Captive Muse*, "a collection of fugitive poems" first published in Verdun by Nicolas Pricot in 1806, then amended and published in London by Sherwood, Neely and Jones after his release in 1814.[38] Contrasting the two texts is illuminating: a whole stanza denouncing the "ill-fated Gallia" where "slaves, in abject thraldom, hug their chains!" appeared in the London edition in lieu of more "precautio[us]" lines mourning the captive's home.[39] Entire new poems on the theme, such as "Ode to Liberty," were introduced, along with more politically charged elegies for fellow prisoners "barbarously shot," "inhumanly butchered" or victims of "cruel treatment."[40] Whilst these changes resulted from Napoleonic censorship in detention, they bear witness to the fact that invocations of slavery, as a metaphor, were multifaceted and catered for different audiences: French or British readers. References were modulable in print, but also contradictory within one same text. Sturt, for instance, both saw himself as a slavish petitioner to a Turkish France and as addressing French slaves in his petitions: the captor thus becoming, in his narration, both master and slave.[41]

Acknowledging the polysemy of the slavery metaphor in these changing texts is not denying the specificity of slave systems in the eighteenth century. Rather, it is highlighting their powerful repercussions on a variety of contemporary observers, writers and readers, for whom slavery constituted a "general set of associations."[42] Indeed, Svrividhya Swaminathan and Adam Beach have highlighted that "practices of slavery" were "mutually imbricated systems of oppression that writers in Britain utilized as a popular trope to describe many states of being."[43] Servants, labourers, feminists, playwrights and novelists interlaced various practices of enslavement to defend diverse causes. This was not a British phenomenon: Olympe de Gouges famously compared women to slaves owed by men in the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791).[44] This kind of subversive invocation of slavery had been, for Pierre Serna, the colonial spark to the Revolution.[45] Slavery, understood broadly as it was in the eighteenth century, was thus a frame of reference in both France and Britain. But, I would like to go further and suggest that war captivity, by providing a contact zone between the two countries, offered a space where such discourses took new shape.

Prisoners in Plantations

[37] In response to Roger Chartier and his critics, Carolyn Steedman argues that possessing a book, displaying it one's shelf, buying it or reading it, contributed to the ways in which historical actors perceived and narrated their social milieu. Reading the book in question can therefore offer an insight into how the text might have 'furnished their mind.' Steedman, *An Everyday Life of the English Working Class*, 29-53.

[38] See Dutton, 1806. *Captive Muse*. Verdun and Dutton. 1814. *Captive Muse.* London.

[39] Dutton, *Captive Muse* (London edition), 81.

[40] The London edition omitted more Classica verses, Christmas songs and love sonnets penned in Verdun and Bitsche. The title of the collection was also changed to include a line on the "cruel treatment" inflicted upon British prisoners in France.

[41] Sturt, *Real State of France*, 90: "all the authorities who are appointed to receive petitions, have received numbers, some from myself, no doubt worded in language not pleasing to slaves, but always respectful."

[42] Swaminathan and Beach, *Invoking slavery*, 1.

[43] Swaminathan and Beach, *Invoking slavery*, 1-2.

[44] For a discussion of De Gouges's use of slavery, see Cole, "The Rights of Persons of Colour and of Blacks," 163-184.

[45] Serna, "Every Revolution Is a War of Independence," 165-182.

War captivity first provided a space where the French and British plantation system could be studied, compared and experienced in an indirect manner. Indeed, the reflections on slavery mentioned above were fueled by prisoners' subscription libraries organized with the help of French scholars. Inventories, such as the Verdun British book club formed in 1806, show that recent publications on French colonies and slavery were deemed relevant to their seclusion, such as *Mémoire pour les habitants de la Guadeloupe* (1803), *Voyage dans les deux Louisianes* (1805), *Moyens d'amélioration et de restauration proposés au gouvernement et aux habitants des colonies* (1802).[46] Equally, private book lending with locals enabled prisoners to access Froberville's and Meyeur's studies of Madagascar and the "origins of Malagasi people," and Le Vaillant's *Voyage dans l'Intérieur de l'Afrique* (1790-1795).[47]

It is difficult to trace how these books were read by prisoners: only a few inventories have survived the passing of time. Yet, certain captives used these Franco-British collections to write about the history of plantations, slavery and imperialism. Naval man James Kingston Tuckey, for instance, studied maritime geography in Verdun, which culminated in the publication of a four-volume compendium in 1816.[48] This charted, in part, the history of the trade, from Abyssinian episodes of kidnapping to the act of 1807.[49] Interestingly, there was no triumphalism about this act.[50] Rather, he denounced the "disgraceful" involvement of England and France in "regular and systematic commerce in human flesh," lamenting the failure of British abolitionists in securing a global abolition of not only the slave trade, but "all the horrors of slavery" and the entire plantation system.[51] He compiled tables contrasting the trade of slaves by English, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Danes, and "Anglo-American" colonists in the eighteenth century, and read abolitionism as a transnational movement "at the head of which was Mr. Granville Sharp, the Las Casas of the negroes: this degraded race had at the same time found powerful advocates in France, in Montesquieu, Raynal and others."[52] Tracing, in detention, the long history of abolitionist writings in France, Britain and across the Atlantic, underpinned Tuckey's claim that much remained to be done on a global scale.

But British prisoners held in mainland France were not cut from the same colonial cloth. Views on colonialism and coercion varied, depending on travelling experiences and individual interests. Contrary to Tuckey, James Lawrence, who was a wealthy civilian detainee and the son of a Jamaican planter, never questioned the slave trade. In fact, he labelled the Abolitionist campaign in Britain as abusive.[53] War captivity in France—a country where the slave trade, and indeed slavery had recently been reinforced—offered him an opportunity to assert colonial privilege amongst his peers. He saw it as an opportunity to learn about French Creole families in Tours, sympathisizing with their exile following the revolt in Saint-Domingue.[54] In his memoir, he deplored that French Creole families from

[46] Bibliothèque d'Etude de Verdun, MSS1810, "Copie manuscrite du catalogue imprimé des livres de la bibliothèque de Dom Demangeot, bénédictin, ancien bibliothécaire de la ville de Verdun (Meuse)," 1804-1814. *Catalogue of Books Belonging to the British Subscription Library.*

[47] A transcription of the manuscript dairy of Flinders, held in the State Library of South Australia, has recently been published and edited. See Brown and Dooley, *Matthew Flinders Private Journal*.

[48] Kingston Tuckey, *Maritime Geography and Statistics*. His cartographic project was informed by the reading of the works of French geographers and travellers, such as Jean-Pierre-Guillaume Catteau-Calleville, and Conrad Malte-Brun.

[49] Kingston Tuckey, *Maritime Geography*, II, 476.

[50] Ibid., II, 479.

[51] Ibid., II, 474-78, 489.

[52] Ibid., II, 493.

[53] Lawrence saw the abolitionist campaign as akin to the rigged plebiscite to make Napoleon emperor in 1804: "The mayor of Verdun was in gratitude particularly active in collecting votes, when Buonaparte had assumed the imperial purple: he went into every house to canvas. More abuse in collecting the votes for the abolition of the slave trade had never taken place in England." Lawrence, *A Picture of Verdun*, I, 70.

[54] Ibid., II, 109.

Martinique, known for their "hospitality characteristic of their native islands" had been "so reduced by the rebellions of their slaves, and the burning of their plantations, that their houses … [were] no longer open to the stranger." People of colour, born slaves in British colonies but acting as "servants" to their now captive masters, populated the prison depot of Verdun, to the great interest of Lawrence, who decried their change of status in detention. The prostitution of a "mulatto girl, born a slave in Jamaica [who] had attended her mistress to Verdun as waiting woman" was for him reprehensible on many grounds: not only had she disentagled herself from her chains, but her sexual commerce was also validated by a false "French liberty," a moral and economic corruption that permeated the whole country.[55] Overall, detention offered a colonial platform, where his success in Jamaica reflected against the loss of French Creoles and captured British masters. His purpose, when evoking slavery in a negative light, was different to Tuckey's. He used it to vilify revolutionary ideas, comparing the French post-revolutionary personnel to the "uncivilised" slave-holders of Northern Africa, and describing penitentiaries as "having less resemblance to any prison in Europe than to the *Souterrain* where the Christian slaves are confined at Morocco:" a depiction influenced by the popular narratives of captivity in Barbary mentioned above.[56]

Contacts with the French had even more complex repercussions on captives detained in French plantations, in the Mascarene Islands in particular. Such prisoners occupied a delicate position: they were placed in a liminal interstice of power, from 1803 to 1810. They were confined either in hulks in Saint-Louis, in cafés temporarily turned into prisons, in fortresses, or more liberally in the *Maison Despeaux* and on parole in sugar, cotton and coffee plantations.[57] A case study of the most famous of these captives, namely Captain Matthew Flinders, who experienced these five modes of detention, reveals how slavery preoccupied prisoners on the island, and how their immersion in French imperialism refashioned their views on the topic. [58] The surveillance of these British captives was embedded in a complex slave economy: whilst white and free black slave-owners could lodge captives on parole in their plantations, prisoners could borrow planters' slaves or keep their own slaves as "servants," whilst being looked after by black overseers for their own financial and medical welfare. Captivity thus offered an opportunity to witness how their presence, as in-betweeners, further complicated, from within, multifaceted dynamics of race and power in a French colony. Many examples of such complexities could be cited here: prisoners had to negotiate the times when the borrowing of slaves would not inconvenience their owners, yet were complicit with both, particularly when plotting an escape. In 1808, Flinders entrusted the slave Faro to act as envoy to a Prisoners Cartel in Port-Louis, whilst the Creole master Chazal, who befriended British parolees, ordered his slaves to facilitate their escapes via Tamarin.[59] Relations changed when the French governor of the island, General Decaen relaxed the color line in the island and ordered in 1809 a "regiment of 650 blacks to be raised."[60] This controversial measure meant that black communities were vested with various

[55] Ibid., I, 175-76.
[56] Ibid., II, 174.
[57] On intermingled places of coercion in Mauritius during the period, see Scarr, *Slaving and Slavery in the Indian Ocean*.
[58] In a letter to his wife, Ann, Flinders expressed how captivity in a French colony taught him "a lesson in philosophy," the realization of "a vast difference between men dependent and men in power, every man who has any share of impartiality must fear for himself." Matthew Flinders to Ann Flinders, in Brunton, *Matthew Flinders: Personal Letters*, 122. See also, Carter, *Companions in Misfortune*.
[59] Chazal was a good friend of Flinders, which is evidenced by the portrait he made of him in detention. Art Gallery of South Australia, Toussaint Antoine de Chazal. 1806-1807. *Portrait of Captain Matthew Flinders, RN*.
[60] On Napoleonic color lines, see Gainot, "The Empire Overseas," 148-149. See also, An., *Recueil des lois publiées à Maurice de 1803 à 1823*.

social functions for British prisoners as potential servants, friends, welfare providers, accomplices, diplomatic agents *and* armed opponents.

Flinders' vision of slavery was affected by these changes. He was, at first, rather defensive of the slave communities: sympathizing with a "poor frightened black" in a tavern of Port-Louis,[61] denouncing the slaves' starvation in a poem to his cat Trim, and appreciating their resourcefulness to survive cyclones by growing "maize," which Flinders considered exporting to British colonies such as Port Jackson.[62] In 1804, his sympathies extended to the work of American abolitionists in Salem, noting that "the good quakers of that place [would] not allo[w] a black man to be brought to their town."[63] He sharpened his interest in Mauritian slave communities whilst on parole in Plaines Wilhems, by visiting the free slave Jean Barrow, reading Grant's *History of Mauritius* (1810), and editing Froberville's accounts of Madagascar, which led him to interview the natives of the island.[64] In 1808, he began an anthropological study of Malagasi slave women. His encounter with a Merina woman "confirmed the horrible fact of the Hovas or Amboilambes digging deep holes in their houses which they cover over, and then inviting travelers to accept hospitality they contrive to make [them] fall in … [to later be] sold to slavery."[65] He also regularly offered gifts to slaves, discussed the condition of maroons with planters such as the D'Arifat family, and learnt French with Creole fables, stories by Perrault rewritten in Mauritian Creole, "the language of the slaves" which Flinders extolled in his diary as denoting "Genius."[66]

These sympathies were tempered by Flinders' progressive immersion in French planters' lives on the island. Not only was he witnessing their everyday lives, but actively contributing to the management of their estate: "arranging," for instance, "a table for Mr Labauve of the slaves in his habitation" in 1807, educating planters' children in *Le Refuge*, and regularly visiting and hunting with local merchants.[67] In his diary, Flinders confessed developing a "warmest friendship" with his French hosts, amongst whom he contrived to perform his status as a gentleman, and therefore further demarked himself from other subjugated groups on the island. Perhaps owing to these exchanges, Flinders' sympathies with slaves altered following his liberation, and the invasion of Mauritius by British forces in 1810, as he came to defend the interests of the Pitots—a family of ship-owners involved in the French slave trade, with whom he became great friends in detention. From 1811 to 1813, he opposed the claims made by British abolitionists against the family, who were involved in a case of "slave trade attended with circumstances of peculiar cruelty" from Madagascar to Mauritius.[68] Among the evidence cited by the abolitionists was the brig *L'Eclair*, captured by a former British prisoner on the island, which had been fitted out by the Pitot brothers, to trade in cattle in Madagascar. The ship was found to contain "126 blacks on board hidden in a confined space almost without air." Immediately after the capture, Charles Pitot wrote to Flinders in England to condemn the claims of the British abolitionists.[69] Flinders took charge of the case on his behalf: in 1812 he had made out his statement to proctors in the Admiralty court, in 1813 he sat through hearings at the court, and confronted abolitionists by arguing that the scope of the middle passage differed from the slave trade in the Indian Ocean, the

[61] Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, II, 331-332.
[62] *Matthew Flinders Private Journal*, 2-3 March 1807.
[63] Ibid., 14 November 1804.
[64] Flinders was also interested in "slaves' holidays" and their celebrations of New Year's Eve in particular, which he related, at great length, in his diary. Ibid., 31 August 1805, 1 January 1806.
[65] Ibid., 26 February 1808.
[66] Ibid., 3 May 1806, 3 October 1807.
[67] Ibid., 10 June 1807.
[68] The case was led by Zachary Macauley. See Ibid., 6 December 1812.
[69] National Library of Australia, Manuscripts, MS 5954, Letters by Matthew Flinders to Thomi Pitot, Port Louis, Mauritius, 1806-1814.

journey from Madagascar to Mauritius being only 160 leagues and taking up to a fortnight.[70] For Flinders, "a comparison of the cruelty in one case, cannot therefore be applied to the other with justice." The letters Flinders and, later on, his wife exchanged with French colonists, suggest that they both had their interest close to their hearts, which they defended with dedication in Britain.

What motivated this gesture? Flinders' diary and correspondence suggest that he developed an affective friendship with the Pitots in detention. His changing views on the French slave trade might have also mapped onto other interests, the many discussions he had with French planters on the subject of science, magnetism, longitude and cartography, which brought them closer during a period of six years.[71] Here, perhaps we are dealing with what Walter Johnson has identified as the "master trope of agency"—should we be surprised to see war prisoners siding with French colonists, and contributing rather than opposing French imperialism?[72] Is agency merely about resisting the captors, defending those oppressed by them? The experience of British prisoners of war in France and the interactions and reactions they led amongst French contemporaries certainly complicate this trope.

L'Esclave et le Prisonnier: Concluding Remarks on French Reactions

The prisoners' ambiguous place as "transimperial subjects" led philosophers, journalists and administrators to reflect on their role in French society, and their relation—in state and status—with slaves in the long eighteenth century.[73] This question was a continuation of a long-lasting conversation formalized in bilateral treaties and by Renaissance theorists.[74] The Enlightenment brought new debates on the "laws of nations" and ransoming practices. Many took issues with Grotius' earlier claims, based on Classical texts, that the enslavement of war captives was as permissible as their killing, although not common place "among Christians."[75] Whilst Barbeyrac concurred in *Du droit qu'on a sur les prisonniers de guerre*, Montesquieu, Rousseau and perhaps most importantly Emerich de Vattel postulated that the brutalization and use of war captives as unfree labour force was against the principles of civilized nations—i.e. France and Great Britain.[76] As recent works have shown, these theories ignored the reality of the "color line" of eighteenth-century global warfare: the servitude of captured black sailors and the enslavement of other servicemen "darkened" by conflicts abroad.[77] These discussions nevertheless reveal the importance of colonialism as forming "the implicit background" against which the contours of eighteenth-century international laws, particularly those regarding war captives, came to be framed along the

[70] Carter, *Companions in Misfortune*, 112-14.

[71] See National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. The Flinders papers. FLI25, Letter from Matthew Flinders to Ann Flinders, Wilhems Plains, 19 March 1806. Rough translation of Pitot's letter to the French astronomer De Lalande, 1812.

[72] Johnson, "On Agency,"113-24.

[73] Expression borrowed from Rothman. *Brokering Empire*.

[74] See the brief history of POW treatment and international laws in Vourkotiotis, "Background information," 11-36.

[75] "among Christians it is generally agreed, that being engaged in War, [those who] are taken Prisoners, are not made Slaves." For an analysis of Grotius's theory of enslavement and capture, see Rushforth, *Indigenous and Atlantic Slaveries in New France*, 93-5.

[76] On the importance of Vattel in this conversation and the conceptualization of international laws, see Chetail and Haggenmacher, eds. *Le Droit International de Vattel*. British prisoners in France were fully aware of these texts, particularly Vattel's theory of civilized captivity. Lawrence, for instance, explained in his memoir how: "in the first ages all prisoners of war were either put to the sword or sold like slaves; but as nations grew more polished, their lives were given to them on condition that they would remain prisoners till the ensuing peace." Lawrence, *Picture of Verdun*, II, 182-83.

[77] Zabin, "Black cargo and Crew," 106-32

lines of "civilized" practices versus "barbaric" others.[78] Further writings tried to sharpen the contours of war captivity in relation to slavery during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.[79] The jurist Fieffé-Lacroix, for instance, contrasted, in a neoclassical manner, the *Code Napoléon* with Roman texts pertaining to slavery and POWs.[80] Yet, this political and legal conversation did not reach any firm consensus under Napoleon, leaving the local French administrator rather perplexed when dealing with cases of captured people of color. In Lorraine, General Wirion's embarrassment in dealing with the case of Mulatto women captured in the Atlantic, and sent to Verdun to be treated either as prisoners or human possessions, bears witness to the *ad hoc* practices of war captivity, and its ambivalent relation to slavery during the period.[81]

French contemporaries adopted an equally ambivalent colonial language when observing the lives of Napoleon's British captives. Whilst regional newspapers, such as *Le Narrateur de la Meuse*, described the prison depot of Verdun as "a colony of captives" (*notre colonie de captifs*), local physicians like Dr Madin could confess fears, in private diaries, that the lavish lifestyle of certain British prisoners had been "inoculated, by giving a contagious example, to the indigenous population."[82] The roles are here somewhat reversed: the captives being perceived as settlers endangering the French "*indigènes.*" This colonial discourse was coupled with a critique of the enslaving treatment French captives received across the Channel, being "robbed," "cloistered regardless of their rank" in Norman Cross, and "experiencing long voyages and mistreatments on ships," if not death.[83] This was regarded as "unfair," "inhumane," "persecutory," "calumnious," and conflicting with the "magnanimity" displayed by the French in allowing British captives to "settle" in Lorraine.

British POWs in Napoleonic France, along with their French observers, were clearly preoccupied with slavery and imperial concerns, which framed the ways in which they perceived and narrated detention during the period. This paper has aimed to highlight that war captivity was more than a Franco-British affair. Detention formed a transimperial "contact zone," a space of colonial intersection, not only reflecting but shaping imperial ideas and dialogues. Other routes could be taken to further develop this approach: it would be interesting to compare this with the use of slave motifs amongst French POWs in Britain. We know, particularly through the work of Mary Isbell, that French prisoners utilized the slave metaphor and the Haitian Revolution to make a plea about their treatment, as evidenced in stage directions for a performance of *The Revolutionary Philanthrope, or The Hecatomb of Haiti* aboard a hulk in Portsmouth in 1807.[84] But historians have yet to explore how British observers responded to this, how the metaphor was modulated in words and performance on this transnational stage, and more broadly perhaps, to what extent the circulation of prisoners impacted British and French imperialisms during the war.

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[78] Mégret, "From "Savages" to "Unlawful Combatants," 265-317.

[79] *Le Narrateur de la Meuse*, 8 July 1805.

[80] Fieffé-Lacroix, *Les Elements de la Jurisprudence*, 7-357. See also, Fieffé-Lacroix, *La Clef des Lois Romaines.* Earlier in the 1780s, Jean Baptiste Robinet had stated his views that war prisoners having committed a crime punishable by death should instead be enslaved. Robinet, *Dictionnaire Universel*, XXIX, 221-2.

[81] Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes, YJ 28, Letter from Wirion to the Ministry of Defence, Verdun, 12 June 1806.

[82] "Leur passion pour le jeu et le gros jeu commençaient, par la contagion de l'exemple, à s'inoculer dans les indigènes." Bibliothèque d'étude de Verdun, BEV, Rec422-1, Madin, "Journal manuscrit," 1804-1806, 24 December 1804.

[83] "Nos français prisonniers en Angleterre sont claquemurés sans distinction de grades à Normancross [sic.]; ceux qui ont eu de longues traversées à faire, ont tellement été maltraités sur les vaisseaux, que la plupart ont succombés sous le poids de leurs peines; tous ont été dépouillés de leurs effets précieux. A cette conduite injuste et inhumaine, nous opposerons celle magnanime de la France." Bibliothèque d'étude de Verdun, BEV, Rec422-1, Madin, "Journal manuscrit", 1804-1806, 24 December 1804.

[84] Isbell, "A French Amateur Theatrical Aboard the British Prison Ship, *Crown*."

War captivity was undoubtedly a catalyst for discussing the boundaries of bondage, after the conflicts. Full of apocryphal and dramatic stories, the maritime memoir published by Louis Garneray, one of the 130,000 French prisoners in Britain, reveals the emotional role of slave metaphors in their retrospective writings. In *Mes Pontons*, he ardently evoked the yoke of his seclusion in colonial terms: "I was determined to undertake anything, confront everything, to shake the dreadful slavery that weighed upon me."[85] Garneray used slavery, a legal system in France at the time of his captivity, to denounce his past experience to a different audience, a post-1848 reader having witnessed the abolition of the institution by the Second French Republic. Other French soldiers, now serving as historians of the conflict, elaborated on this theme, by contrasting, as Maximilien Sébastien Foy puts it, the "degree of liberty" offered by the French State to its foreign detainees with "the slavery and malaise of French prisoners abroad."[86]

Overall, the prevalence of these retrospective slavery metaphors, along with the colonial images invoked in the narrations, poems and plays of their British counterparts and those of their French observers during the period reveal the imperial nature of war detention. This paper aimed to highlight how war captivity intersected French and British colonial imaginations and imperialisms during the conflicts. Exploring this overlooked dimension enables us to relocate Napoleonic experiences of war captivity within a broader imperial context, and to acknowledge the impact of its colonial theatres. It also extricates debates on the "treatment" of prisoners from partisan narratives, by looking at how the captives themselves, their captors and contemporaries placed their transnational experiences within a global frame. Contradictory, multifaceted, pliable to editing concerns, the slavery metaphor served various purposes. Most of these analogies likened the captive's state, rather than their status, to that of slaves, which meant that prisoners of war and slaves were rarely put on par. But these diverse associations of ideas, narrative strategies, and the prisoners' occasional experience of life in colonial outposts such as Mauritius, reveal how closely interlaced coerced mobility and colonialism were in the late eighteenth century.

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[85] "Je me sentais déterminé à tout entreprendre, à tout braver, pour secouer l'affreux esclavage qui pesait sur moi". Garneray, Louis. 1851. *Voyages, Aventures et Combats.* I, 28.

[86] "Les Français ont été humains, miséricordieux envers les prisonniers. Le degré de liberté et de bien-être qu'on leur a accordé contraste avec l'esclavage et le malaise des prisonniers français à l'étranger. Que l'on compare Verdun aux pontons de Plimouth [sic.]!" Foy, *Histoire de la Guerre de la Péninsule sous Napoléon*, 105.

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