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Passing Through Plaçage: A Study of Racial Ambiguity Within 17th and 18th Century Colonial Louisiana

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Abstract

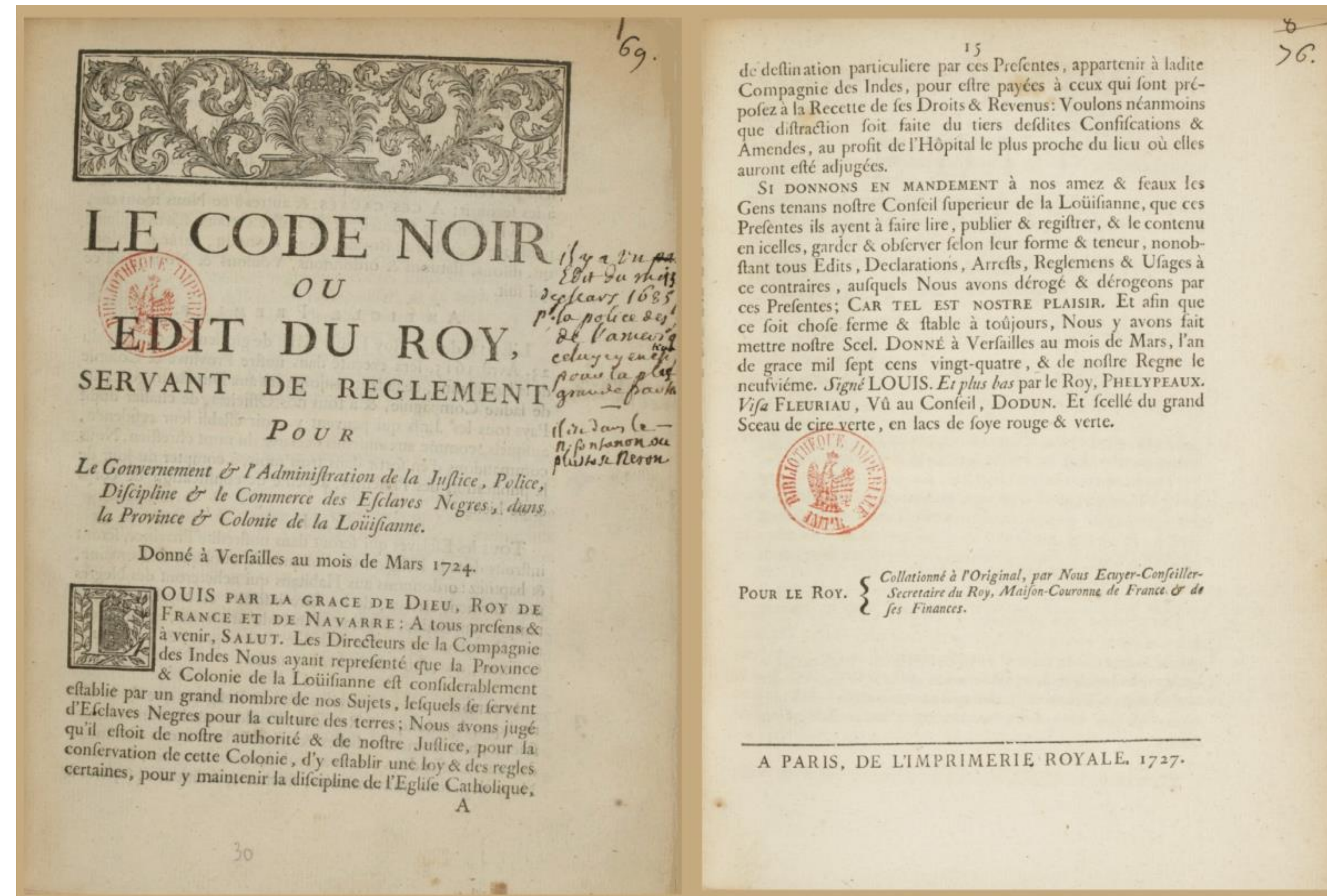
This presentation explores mixed-race relationships in US history, especially how "passing" as white contributed to the social and economic status of women of color. How are today's ambiguous racial identities embedded in this complex history?

Passing Through Plaçage: *A Study of Racial Ambiguity Within 17th and 18th Century Colonial Louisiana*

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BACKGROUND

- In colonial Louisiana, there was a prohibition of mixed-race relationships. Despite this, a practice known as "plaçage" was commonplace, in which white male suitors would engage in a "left-handed" marriage with a woman of color, known as Creoles.
- Creole women were put into different designations based on their Black ancestry. "Mulatto" indicated mixed-race (usually $\frac{1}{2}$ Black), "Quadroon" designated those of $\frac{1}{4}$ Black ancestry, and "Octoroon" was the equivalent of $\frac{1}{8}$ Black.



First page of the Edit du Roy or *Code Noir* on the Slaves of the Isles of America, March 1685, in Versailles. This code explicitly prohibited relationships of any kind between whites and persons of color, whether free or slave. (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- If the Code Noir, a social code that outlined racial relationship guidelines, specifically stated Black and White relationships were prohibited, how did plaçage become so prominent?
- How did this type of relationship change after Louisiana was added to the United States, and with tense racial attitudes?

Contemporary Concerns

- Presently, are there mixed-race individuals that "pass" as Caucasian who are impacted culturally due to their racial ambiguity?
- Is there pressure to adopt the race and/or culture that an individual "presents" as? What are the repercussions?

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Emerging Themes

Creole women were able to find success due to the creation of Storyville, a district of New Orleans which emerged in the late 19th century. However, the success came at the price of prostitution. Since Creoles were so highly eroticized, these women were the most sought after by wealthy white gentlemen. These women also became the first to be pushed outside of the city limits with new moral codes, as they were seen as threats to white women.

Other Findings

Until the mid 1980s, Louisiana's strict race codes adhered to the "one-drop rule", in which even minute ancestral lineage to Black persons deemed the individual either Black or Colored. From 1970-1984, the Louisiana census dubbed someone "Colored" if they had $\frac{1}{32}$ Black ancestry. (Compared to the Nürnberg Laws of 1935, which ceased at $\frac{1}{16}$ Jewish ancestry)

THEORIES

Theory 1: Due to the strict racial and legal codes within Louisiana starting in the late 17th century, the relationships white men had with Creole women were "permitted" due to the ability these women had to pass as white, however, being of mixed descent, it was easier for these men to discard the women in favor of more "appropriate" legal relationships when necessary.

Theory 2: Once plaçage was no longer commonplace (post Civil War), Creole women were pushed into other forms of income, predominantly prostitution.