Auguste Lussan’s *La Famille créole: How Saint-Domingue Émigrés Became Louisiana Creoles*

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**Introduction**

The 1791 slave uprising in Saint-Domingue, followed by the revolution and Haiti’s independence in 1804, had a profound impact on Louisiana. Soon after the uprising began, hundreds of refugees from the island trickled into New Orleans. Around 1803, thousands more arrived. Six years later, in a few months between 1809 and 1810, 10,000 of them poured into the region when they were no longer welcome in Cuba, where they had first settled after fleeing Saint-Domingue. The sheer number of refugees doubled the population of New Orleans, which reached 25,000 by 1810, turning it into the seventh largest city in the United States; by 1820, it was the fifth largest. The Saint-Domingue refugees’ impact on New Orleans in particular, and on Louisiana as a whole, was not just numerical. Within a few decades, they transformed the city into a cultural centre: the refugees created the first newspapers, theatres and opera in New Orleans. Economically, although most refugees were impoverished when they arrived in Louisiana, many became part of a successful middle class as merchants, teachers, journalists, actors, politicians, lawyers and doctors. Politically, they added to the controversies surrounding Louisiana’s loyalty to the American government by boosting the number of French speakers, and they reinforced the three-tiered racial system that troubled Americans, who were accustomed to a binary racial organization.

By the late 1830s, at the time of Auguste Lussan’s play *La Famille créole* [The Creole Family] (1837), Louisianians’ collective memory of this important community was already beginning to fade as the death of older refugees and exogamy dissolved the community (although not its culture) within the larger
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Creole society of the region (Dessens, 2007: 61–62). Lussan’s play acts as a reminder of the centrality of the Saint-Domingue refugees to Louisiana’s identity by telling the story of the Clairville family, former planters from Saint-Domingue. But it does so in a way that carefully Americanizes both Louisiana and its Creole refugees. Typical of the genre of the melodrama to which it belongs, it offered entertainment with a conservative ideology that was reassuring for the public during chaotic times (Przybos, 1984: 308). The portrait of Creoles given by Lussan is indeed a reassuring one, one that avoids the predominant political controversy of Louisiana in the early nineteenth century, namely slavery, while highlighting the Creoles’ loyalty to the young United States. Given the important political role theatre played in Louisiana at the time, it should perhaps not be surprising to discover that Lussan’s 1837 melodrama could be more than entertainment.

Founded at the turn of the century thanks in large part to Saint-Domingue refugee actors, theatres were booming in Louisiana by the 1830s and 1840s. Part entertainment, Louisiana plays and theatres also participated in the identity politics of the region where French, Creole, Cajun and Spanish influences faced a rising Americanization after Louisiana became a state in 1812. According to Lewis William Newton, Louisiana theatres were one of the social factors that influenced race relations (Newton, 1929: 192–227) as well as relations between the Francophone and Anglophone communities in Louisiana (ibid.: 155–91). Lussan’s La Famille créole, with its careful avoidance of the issue of slavery and its equally careful Americanization of the Clairville family, exemplifies this.

Little is known about Lussan himself. Born in France, where it is believed he was a struggling artist, he came to New Orleans in the 1830s to pursue his acting career, became a published poet and playwright, and died in 1842. He is perhaps best remembered for his tragedy in verse Les Martyrs de la Louisiane (1839), a highly patriotic play that tells the story of the 1768 revolution in Louisiana during which Frenchmen defied the then Spanish governor and were killed. Alcée Fortier reveals that Les Martyrs was particularly successful and became well read by both French and American Louisianians for its patriotic dimension (Fortier, 1886: 39). Although less known than Les Martyrs, Lussan’s first play, the romantic drama in prose La Famille créole, is no less important for its subtle contribution to Louisiana’s identity politics. Although the play was published and performed in New Orleans, the newspapers of the time do not indicate anything about how it was received. Ruby van Allen Caulfield, however, suggests the play must have had some

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1 For book-length studies on melodrama, see Brooks, 1976; Thomasseau, 1984; and Przybos, 1987.
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degree of success given its multiple performances at the French Theater (van Allen Caulfield, 1929: 171). The French Theater in New Orleans where it was performed was indeed a marker of quality, so it would be reasonable to imagine that Lussan’s play met a favourable audience.

The five-act play takes place in 1794. It opens and ends in New Orleans, but the three central acts take place in Paris. In the first act, the Clairvilles (father Clairville, mother Clémence, daughters Cécile and Marie, and Clairville’s younger brother Alphonse) have just arrived in New Orleans from Saint-Domingue. Initially uncertain about settling in Louisiana, the Clairvilles think about moving to France instead. After preparing for their return to France during the first act, Clairville the father, and his daughter Marie spend the next three acts in Paris. The father hopes to find a way to regain some of his fortune so as to ensure his family’s future, and to bring the rest of the family to Paris. While in Paris, however, the father and daughter are falsely accused of treason by revolutionaries and barely escape the guillotine. Following their near-death experience in Paris, they quickly return to Louisiana, which has become by then their only place of salvation.

Beyond reminding its Louisiana audience of the very presence of the Saint-Domingue Creole community that was beginning to be forgotten, the play also defines the Creole community as both deeply Louisianian and American, while avoiding the political issues of slavery and loyalty that plagued Louisiana politics at the time. By presenting a family of planter refugees from revolutionary Saint-Domingue as primarily refugees from revolutionary France fleeing political persecution, the play absolves them of their likely past as slaveholders in the Caribbean and of any revolutionary tendencies. As a result, the family appears as politically innocent, neither linked to the highly political issue of slavery in late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century Louisiana, nor belonging to the feared category of revolutionaries. The refugees become paragons of injustice in need of Louisiana/America for their salvation. The play thus inscribes the story of the Saint-Domingue refugees in Louisiana into the traditional American story of the United States as a beacon on the hill for refugees fleeing political persecution.

Saint-Domingue: A Place of Oblivion

Although the family is identified very early on as a family of a ‘colon de Saint-Domingue réfugié à la Nouvelle Orléans’ (Lussan, 1837: I. i. 1)²

² Owing to the peculiarities of the page numbering of this play, currently only
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... [colonial refugee from Saint-Domingue to New Orleans], Saint-Domingue is largely absent from the play’s dialogues. However, it is implicitly present in the family’s behaviour. For instance, Clairville, the father, enters the stage as a man in shock: his hand shakes as he lifts it. He reveals ‘une émotion croissante’ (I. i. 2) [a growing emotion] and sheds a tear listening to his brother, who worries about him. But far from lingering on the past, he is ready to face his destiny and move on. He repeats several times that he is ready to read the much-awaited letter from France that is to inform him of the state of his finances, and ready to act upon what it says: ‘Je suis bien préparé [...] Je te le répète. Je suis bien préparé!’ (I. i. 2) [I am really ready [...] I am telling you again. I am really ready]. The father’s insistence on his own readiness to face his future, although obviously mixed in with clear signs of anxiety, reveals how much he is ready to forget about his past in Saint-Domingue.

The rest of the text confirms his desire to forget about the past, if not altogether ignore it, by not allowing the issue of colonialism and the subsequent slave rebellion on the island to enter the narrative, in spite of these events being the catalyst for Clairville’s new life. Indeed, the textual references to colonial life in Saint-Domingue amount to barely noticeable hints about the life that was lost: wealth, happiness, a plantation, ‘une existence douce et calme’ (I. ii. 7) [a sweet and calm existence]. There are only three other references to their life as colonial planters in Saint-Domingue. Furthermore, as if further to distance the Clairvilles from their Saint-Domingue memories, these references are made either for or by Adolphe, who is not a Creole himself but a Frenchman that Marie (Clairville’s daughter) is to marry. In the first act, when Clairville remembers the unforgettable ‘soirées de l’habitation’ (I. i. 4) [evenings at the plantation] they left behind, he is actually quoting Adolphe. In the second act, when Marie devotes a short passage to the beauty of Saint-Domingue, she reveals she only enjoyed these sites thanks to and with her fiancé Adolphe. Far from remembering the island for itself, she remembers it as a wonderful place only when Adolphe was there with her:

Oh! Mon bonheur t’avait suivi! … [...] cette mer bleue, ces beaux sites de ma patrie, que j’aimais tant à admirer avec toi sur le morne, avaient perdu tous leurs charmes! Je donnai la liberté à mes oiseaux; mes fleurs […] se fanèrent […] Une profonde rêverie s’empara de mes sens! […] Je croyais
être encore dans le jardin, assise sur le tertre! ... J’étais dans le cimetière, à genoux sur la tombe de ma sœur Hermine! (II. iii. 5; emphasis added)

As Marie reveals how she stopped caring for the beauties of the island as soon as her French fiancé left, one realizes how little she seemed to care for the island itself, and how much her own relationship with the island was more dependent upon Adolphe than on her own experience of the reality that surrounded her.

The Clairvilles’ apparent detachment from Saint-Domingue is further evidenced in the text when the last reference to colonial times there comes directly from Adolphe himself. As Adolphe and Marie are about to die under the guillotine in Paris, he briefly cheers Marie up by telling her they will relive ‘nos délicieuses soirées à St. Domingue’ (IV. v. 10) [our delightful evenings in Saint-Domingue] in heaven soon after their death. This last mention of Saint-Domingue confirms how the island is, for both Marie the refugee and Adolphe the Frenchman, if not altogether forgotten, at least no longer in existence.

Like the colonial memories about the island, references to the Saint-Domingue revolution barely enter the text and are even more elliptic. Accounts of the revolution amount to four brief references that do not always betray any emotion about the events. In fact, the Saint-Domingue revolution always appears under the guise of euphemisms: never referred to as a revolution or a rebellion, it has become ‘les événements de St. Domingue’ (I. i. 1) [Saint-Domingue’s events], ‘notre départ de St. Domingue’ (I. iv. 10) [our departure from Saint-Domingue], ‘nos malheurs’ (II. iii. 5) [our misfortunes], ‘nos désastres’ (III. iii. 4) [our calamities]. Such references are never contextualized, nor followed by any additional information about the Clairvilles’ precipitous departure from the island.

The silence of the Clairville family about Saint-Domingue, as well as the lack of emotion when they do refer to it, may of course be a facade to hide great pain: a way to contain the events so as to render them more bearable emotionally. Such an interpretation, however, is deeply inconsistent with the characters and the rest of the play. Lack of emotions is indeed neither the hallmark of the Clairville family nor a feature of romantic drama, the genre

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3 This and all subsequent quotations from this source were translated by the author of this chapter. ‘Alas! My happiness followed you! ... [...] this blue sea, my country’s beautiful sites that I loved so much to admire with you on the hill, had lost all their charms! I gave my birds their freedom; my flowers [...] died [...] A deep state of dream overtook my senses! [...] I would think I was still in the garden, sitting on the hillock! ... I was in the cemetery, kneeling on my sister Hermine’s tomb!’
to which the play belongs. In fact, emotions abound in this play, but they are never about Saint-Domingue and always about Paris. During the course of the father and daughter’s stay in Paris, which the play focuses on, they both display a wide range of feelings: from the satisfaction of Clairville who has recovered most of his fortune (II. i) and Marie’s bliss at the prospect of her wedding (II. ii–iii) to their fear, anger, suffering and despair upon being wrongly imprisoned, accused of treason and about to face the guillotine (II. vi–vi; III. v; III viii; IV. iii). This emotional turmoil continues until the end of the play: after the relief of escaping from the guillotine at the last minute by some *deus ex machina* intervention, they are saddened anew by the news of the mother’s madness once back in New Orleans, and happy again when she is finally cured.

This wide range of emotions is typical of the genre of the play. As romantic drama (or melodrama), it is written with the explicit purpose to stir emotions. Epitomized by Victor Hugo’s 1830 romantic play *Hernani*, romantic drama, unlike classical drama, mixes tone (tragedy, comedy, drama) and focus (human, social, historical) while stirring emotions around an innocent hero or heroine who has become the victim of a great injustice.\(^4\) Typical of the genre, Lussan’s play reveals the series of injustices suffered by the Clairvilles, and displays their emotional responses to them. However, his text only allows the display of emotions to narrate the Clairvilles’ exile from Paris, but refuses to offer a similar emotional space to reveal anything about their departure from Saint-Domingue. Upon closer scrutiny, even Clairville’s initial deeply felt emotion as he first enters the stage is not about his feeling of loss for the island but about his lost fortune. Clairville is indeed more worried about getting his money back from his French business partners than about the island he left behind, suggesting that he used the island mostly to turn a profit. While the scarcity of references to and the lack of emotions towards Saint-Domingue effectively banish the family’s Caribbean past from the narrative, these omissions stand out even more strongly once we see the family’s reaction to being expelled from France. Whether the Clairvilles’ silence over their life in and departure from Saint-Domingue is the result of trauma, or genuine callousness, we cannot know for sure. What we do know is that the expulsion of their past life on the island from the play effectively uproots this family from Saint-Domingue and from their slave-holding past. In the text, the colonial past is past and Saint-Domingue is relegated into

\(^4\) Although melodrama and romantic drama can be used interchangeably (as in this chapter), Brooks saw romantic drama as the nineteenth-century continuation of melodrama, which started during the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century.
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oblivion: the place of loss is symbolically a lost place, one to which the Clairvilles will never return.

The muted reaction of the Clairville family towards their life in and departure from Saint-Domingue is clearly revisionist as it conflicts with what we know about how refugees actually behaved. For many refugees from Saint-Domingue in New Orleans, ties to the island remained alive for many years, even decades. Until 1825 when Charles X ordered Haiti to repay its former colonists some of the money they lost in the Saint-Domingue revolution, many Saint-Domingue refugees were still hoping for a return to the island. It is only in 1825 and after, not as early as in 1794 as the play suggests, that Saint-Domingue refugees in New Orleans really severed all ties with the island. Older refugees and their memories of the island were dying, and their wills mentioning properties on the island clearly could not be honoured (Dessens, 2007: 61–62).

Although the text severs the refugees’ ties to Saint-Domingue earlier in time, it cannot readily present the Clairvilles as Louisianians until it also rids them of their allegiance to France. The text takes much longer (three acts to be exact) to separate the Clairville family from its French roots, but it does so nonetheless.

Paris: From Salvation to Hell

The place that dominates the play is neither Saint-Domingue nor New Orleans, but Paris, where the three central acts of the play take place. One could even say that the first act that takes place in New Orleans is already so much about Paris that New Orleans is only truly present in the last act, while Paris occupies the other four. Paris initially appears as the only place where the family can recover, financially but also emotionally, from its losses in Saint-Domingue. The play opens in a modest apartment in New Orleans shortly after the Clairvilles’ escape from Saint-Domingue in 1794. Alphonse, Clairville’s younger brother, is excited by the arrival of several letters from France addressed to his older brother: ‘Enfin! Des nouvelles de France’ (I. i. 1) [At last! Some news from France]. As Clairville goes through his mail from France, a list of their contacts in France reveals the strong links (both familial and professional) the Saint-Domingue refugees have with France, all the while underlining the absence of such links with New Orleans. Clairville glances at a letter from a cousin, another from a friend and commandant, before opening the much awaited letter from Germont, a friend and ‘négociant en produits coloniaux’ (I. i. 3) [trader in products from the colonies] who is to inform him of the status of his finances.

Germont’s letter seems reassuring regarding Clairville’s ability to recover
some of his money from former business partners. However, the letter is also terrifying. Sparing no detail, Germont describes the horrors of the French Revolution and the dangers that await Clairville should he decide to go to Paris to claim the money he lost from the French merchants he did business with while in Saint-Domingue. Germont insists on the chaos, the guillotine, the heads that roll daily, the anarchy and the injustices. But nothing discourages Clairville, who quickly becomes obsessed with leaving for Paris, as he sees the latter as the only place for his family’s salvation. Refusing to linger on his recent past in Saint-Domingue, or on his present situation in New Orleans, Clairville envisions Paris as the only place where he can ensure a stable future for his family. For him, staying even temporarily in New Orleans would condemn him to poverty (I. ii. 7). By comparison, leaving for Paris is, he explains, a double necessity: one that will allow him to get a hold of his finances, and to secure a husband for his daughter Marie, who is to marry Adolphe, Germont’s son. This double goal reveals the intertwined nature of the emotional and financial ties that link Clairville to France. This double bind, however, initially seems to leave no room for New Orleans and, indeed, the family as a whole does not envision a future anywhere else but in Paris.

Clairville’s love for Paris is indeed shared by the rest of the family. When he announces his trip to Paris with Marie (I. iii.), during which the mother Clémence and sister Cécile are to stay behind and join them later, Marie is sad for the duo who were so eager to see France: ‘Pauvre mère! Pauvre Cécile! … comme elles vont être douloureusement affectées en apprenant cela! … c’est que, vraiment, nos parts ne sont pas égales! … Pour moi tout le bonheur! Pour elles la douleur!’ (I. iii. 8). Clairville’s preference for Paris is thus not a personal preference but is shared by the family.

The first three scenes of the second act confirm Paris as the place of salvation for the family. We learn how in less than two months in Paris Clairville was lucky to recover most of his finances, and his daughter’s wedding is now imminent. We even enjoy a romantic scene between Marie and her fiancé Adolphe. Everything suggests that the family will soon reunite in Paris and live happily ever after.

This fairy tale ends abruptly, however, when Clairville and his daughter are suddenly involved in France’s political turmoil. In the scene following Adolphe and Marie’s blissfully romantic moment, the chaos of revolutionary Paris emerges and in less than one scene everything the Clairvilles recovered

5 ‘Poor mother! Poor Cécile! … how painfully saddened they will be when they know! … it’s that, really, our shares are not equal! … For me only happiness! For them pain!’
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is threatened: their finances, the wedding, not to mention their lives. This reversal of fortunes emerges from a twist in the financial and emotional ties that linked the Clairvilles back to Paris. Bernard, Clairville’s former administrator, refuses to refund Clairville’s lost money and announces that, unless Marie marries him, Clairville will be denounced as a traitor, imprisoned and very likely killed.

The reversal of Clairville’s fate radically changes his perspective on Paris. As revolutionary Paris enters his life, Clairville starts seeing Paris as a place of utter chaos. From a city of salvation, Paris becomes a city of ‘pygmées audacieux et cruels’ (II. vi. 15) [bold and cruel pygmies], governed by illiterates (II. viii. 16) without civilization, justice, ‘urbanité’ [politeness] or ‘galanterie’ [gallantry] (III. ii. 3). Ironically, the vocabulary used to describe Paris (‘pygmées’, ‘sans civilisation’) strangely mirrors that typically used by some colonists to describe native and enslaved populations in the Caribbean. As Lussan’s text transfers onto French revolutionaries the critiques uttered against Saint-Domingue revolutionaries, the play transforms the Clairvilles into clear victims of an injustice and political oppression. They are not slaveholders who were intrinsically linked to the slaves that rebelled against them. Instead, they become utterly innocent victims of a turmoil they never helped create. After all, the play makes sure to remind us that they are not aristocrats, that their name is ‘Clairville’, not the noble ‘de Clairville’ (III. iii. 4). It also reaffirms that the Clairvilles are not royalists (III. iii. 15). Neither nobles nor royalists, their imprisonment in France’s revolutionary prisons is presented as an absolute injustice. Their status as innocent victims from France’s revolution further helps the text insert them in the narrative of Louisiana/America as the land of the free for people fleeing persecution at home. But Lussan’s text goes even further. To ensure the undeniable insertion of the Creole family into Louisiana society, Lussan not only rids the Clairvilles of their multiple cultural allegiances to Saint-Domingue and France but also, as we will see, its rids them of any political ideology that could have been seen as controversial for the times in Louisiana.

Louisiana: Le nouvel Éden

As death dominates Paris, the city can no longer be the place for the Clairvilles’ future. It is Louisiana that soon emerges as their only place of salvation. The quick degradation of the image of Paris is mirrored by an equally quick emergence of Louisiana as the only place of peace and civiliza-


of his imminent imprisonment, Clairville lets out a ‘Mais c’est affreux! ... c’est à préférer mille fois nos forêts à votre civilisation!’ (II. vii. 15; emphasis added) [But it is horrible! ... it makes one prefer a thousand times more our forests to your civilization!], using the possessive adjectives ‘nos’ [our] and ‘votre’ [your] to separate himself from France while anchoring himself in Louisiana. Although Adolphe chastises him for being unjust ‘pour notre malheureuse patrie’ (II. vii. 15) [for our unfortunate country], re-anchoring Clairville in France with yet another possessive, Clairville’s symbolic loss of his French nationality is unmistakable. In fact, others no longer see him as French. When interrogated in prison, revolutionaries ask him why he came to France, a question that Clairville interprets as meaning he is no longer French if he needs a reason to go to France (III. vii. 14). Later on, when the Duke de Jumonville, who shares Clairville’s prison cell, thinks of Clairville and his daughter, he hopes they can return to their country (‘leur pays’) as quickly as possible (IV. iv. 6), confirming that Clairville is no longer seen as French in the eyes of both revolutionary and pre-revolutionary France.

Clairville is not alone in experiencing a change of heart for Louisiana. Marie, who was so excited at the prospect of leaving Louisiana for Paris, begins to have feelings for the region even before the tumultuous events in Paris. While envisioning her future with Adolphe, she expresses her strong desire to live close to her mother, sister and uncle left in New Orleans. Adolphe reassures her not by envisioning that everyone settles in Paris but by thinking about settling in New Orleans next to them, buying a plantation, and ensuring their legacy as ‘la mère et le médecin des malheureux’ (II. iii. 6) [the mother and the doctor of the poor] (Adolphe being a young doctor). Although Adolphe’s idea initially appeared as the fantasy of a young couple, it quickly becomes revelatory of the emotional ties that have begun to blossom between the Clairvilles and New Orleans.

As the horrors of Paris literally reject and repulse the Clairvilles, Louisiana becomes the antithesis of Paris, and the new hope for their salvation. While Paris is chaos and death, Louisiana is peace and life. Ironically, we encounter the heavenly nature of Louisiana literally at the moment the Clairvilles enter their prison cell in Paris. As they step in, their cell companion, the Duke de Jumonville, reads aloud a passage from Chateaubriand’s *Le Génie du christianisme* [The Genius of Christianity], which presents Louisiana as heaven on earth: ‘une délicieuse contrée que les habitants de l’Amérique appellent le nouvel Éden’ (III. i. 1) [a delightful region that inhabitants of

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6 This is an anachronism since Chateaubriand’s text was published in 1802 and Lussan’s play, although written in 1837, takes place in 1794, eight years before Chateaubriand published his text.
America call the new Eden], an expanse extremely fertile thanks to the rich waters of the Meschacebe, a region where ‘la grâce est toujours unie à la magnificence’ (III. i. 1) [grace is always linked to magnificence]. This passage about Louisiana’s natural wealth and abundance of life contrasts sharply with the quote from Clairville’s last letter to his wife, in which he describes Paris as utterly disordered, and France as forever lost (III. viii. 15). Ironically, this very description is also the kind of discourse that might previously have been used by colonists to describe Saint-Domingue.7 Such an exotic discourse was also often used to attract potential settlers to newly colonized regions and it seems to perform a similar role in the text as the Clairvilles begin to consider settling in Louisiana.

As the play presents the Saint-Domingue refugees as twice exiled, once from the Caribbean, once from France, it strips them of any cultural allegiance to another country. But, most importantly perhaps, it cleanses them of any political ideology that could have rendered them undesirable in Louisiana at the turn of the nineteenth century. Neither royalists nor revolutionaries, neither pro- nor anti-slavery, the Clairvilles paradoxically become apolitical political refugees. In other words, Lussan’s play carefully avoids directly addressing the dominant political issues in Louisiana during the same forty years that span the play’s story and its publication (1794–1837). Nonetheless, by rendering his characters apolitical, Lussan addresses these issues indirectly.

The first of these is the issue of slavery. On the one hand, the 1791 Saint-Domingue insurrection and the subsequent mass immigration of Saint-Domingue refugees with slaves to the United States gave rise to the fear that such an insurrection could spread to slaves in the southern United States. The fear initially ran so deep that Louisiana Governor Carondelet (1791–7) banned the import of Saint-Domingue black slaves in 1792, preventing Saint-Domingue refugees with slaves from settling in Louisiana. The following year, Thomas Jefferson himself (then US Secretary of State and in favour of gradual rather than sudden emancipation) issued ‘an apocalyptic warning of the danger of slave rebellion’ (Matthewson, 1995: 216). Several attempted insurrections in the following years only seemed to justify Louisiana’s growing fear of an uprising. In early April 1795, there was a failed attempt at a rebellion organized in Pointe Coupée, Louisiana (Baur, 1970: 403). In March 1796, a slave rebellion scare arose on the German Coast in Louisiana. In 1800 and 1802, in Virginia, and in 1804 and 1805, in Louisiana, more slave rebellions were discovered and suppressed (Matthewson, 1995: 218; Dormon, 1977: 392). In 1811, the January slave uprising on the German Coast, the ‘largest

7 I would like to thank Martin Munro for this remark.
slave revolt in US history’ was led by Charles Deslondes, a mulatto from Saint-Domingue (Thompson, 1992: 5–8), and ‘modeled its organization after the [Saint-Domingue] revolutionaries’ (Kastor, 2001: 839). In 1822, the revolt organized by Denmark Vesey in Charleston, South Carolina, was discovered one day before it was to be launched. Finally, the 1831 Virginia insurrection organized by Nat Turner followed by an 1835 aborted insurrection further contributed to a permanent ‘siege mentality’ in the South in general and in Louisiana in particular (Rodriguez, 1992: 415). Although fear of rebellions came in ‘spurts’ in the South, overall, the fear of an insurrection was ever present (Dormon, 1977: 392; Matthewson, 1995: 218).

Lussan’s 1837 play was thus written and performed in a politically charged period in Louisiana, a period during which slavery as an institution was beginning to show serious signs of decline. Fear of growing pro-abolitionist sentiments was compounded in Louisiana by the abolition of slavery in most of the British Empire in 1834, and by the rise of pro-abolitionist sentiments in France. Literature was certainly not immune from politics and many French Romantics (Lussan’s contemporaries) repeatedly displayed pro-abolitionist sentiments in their writings. Eventually, French politicians voted to abolish slavery in 1848, ten years after Lussan’s play. Paradoxically, this domestic and international pro-abolitionist context helps account for Lussan’s creation of characters entirely detached from the issue of slavery. By silencing the Clairvilles’ past as slaveholders from the island of Saint-Domingue, and by presenting them as not having imported slaves with them to Louisiana, the play severs any link whatsoever between the Clairvilles and the issue of slavery that permeated Louisianian politics at the turn of the century. This political decision on Lussan’s part helped render the Clairvilles less controversial as new Louisianians.

The play further insists on the apolitical nature of the Clairvilles as it details their expulsion from revolutionary France, and, by extension, removes them from the feared category of French revolutionaries. This was yet another important aspect to consider in ensuring a refugee’s acceptance into Louisianian society of the time. Indeed, fear of an insurrection in the South did not just focus on blacks and freemen and women of colour. It also included whites, particularly Northerners in favour of the abolition of slavery, and partisans of the French Revolution. In 1790s Louisiana, Governor

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8 Claire de Duras’ *Ourika* in 1823 and Victor Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal* in 1826 reveal how both men and women writers in France were concerned by the issue of slavery in the early nineteenth century. For more on the topic of French Romantics and slavery, see O’Connell, 1973. For more on the topic of women writers and slavery, see Kadish and Massardier-Kenney, 1994.
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Carondelet and his successor Governor Miró feared French partisans so much that they ‘used propaganda […] to portray the French Revolution at its worst’ (Hanger, 1993b: 7). Fear of those partisans became so intense that, according to Hanger, ‘colonial officials […] accused, jailed, and deported many more whites than free blacks for seditious behavior in the 1790s’ (ibid.: 12). By creating characters that fell victim to French revolutionaries, Lussan’s play further ensures that his Creole refugees appear as politically non-threatening as possible.

Apolitical yet persecuted, the Clairvilles are bound to appear loyal to Louisiana, thus erasing another worry among American politicians: although French speaking, the Clairvilles offer a portrait of Creoles that reassures Anglo-American politicians who were worried by the perceived lack of ‘loyalty and national identity of a [Louisiana] population composed primarily of people born under French and Spanish colonial rule’ (Kastor, 2001: 828). Louisiana’s large Gallic population was indeed often seen as not American enough by Anglo-Americans. If their language was one issue, their three-tiered society was another. Lussan’s play indirectly addresses the latter. By focusing exclusively on white Creoles from Saint-Domingue, when in truth Creoles from Saint-Domingue were a multiracial group composed of whites, black Creoles and Creoles of colour, Lussan modifies another Creole reality to make Saint-Domingue refugees more acceptable for the growing Anglophone majority in Louisiana. The play thus illustrates a major shift in 1830s Louisiana society that occurred in large part in response to the Americanization of Louisiana.9 The Americanization of the region meant the rise of new forms of racial division within the multiracial Creole community. White Creoles in search of acceptance by the rising Anglophone population in the region felt under pressure to place clear boundaries between whites and blacks. By not inserting any Creole of colour or black Creole characters in his ‘Creole family’, Lussan participates in the white Creoles’ attempts to re-appropriate the term for themselves at a time when they felt under pressure to adopt the Anglo-American binary division between blacks and whites and abandon their historical, social and cultural ties to black Creoles and Creoles of colour.

Conclusion

Far from being realistic, La Famille créole is a romantic drama, which, as a rule of the genre, is meant to excite emotions. To that end, it is clearly Manichean in its world view, as it presents Paris as hell and Louisiana

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9 Louisiana became American territory in 1804, and part of the Union in 1812.
as heaven on earth, and is melodramatic in tone as it alternates between tragedy, comedy, and drama, and melodramatic in content as it alternates between historical, social, and emotional drama. However entertaining its melodramatic quality might have been for the audience at the time, the play, however, did not escape politics. As it carefully removes any political and cultural layers that could render the Clairvilles controversial, the play portrays the ‘Creole family’ as desirable Louisianians and even as desirable Americans.

Lussan’s 1837 play about Saint-Domingue refugees from the 1790s thus ironically illustrates the changing understanding of what it meant to be Creole in Louisiana by the 1830s. While Saint-Domingue refugees initially redefined Creole identity in Louisiana in the early days of their arrival, Lussan’s refugees become emblematic of Louisiana’s changing understanding of its own Creole identity some forty years later. As the region faced several political crises (around the issue of slavery on the one hand, and loyalty to the federal government on the other), the Creoles certainly felt the need for a respite from politics. Lussan’s play allows such an audience to escape politics by presenting a Creole family that is seemingly apolitical. In the process, however, the play’s many silences speak volumes on the very issues that obsessed Louisiana at the time. By focusing on the need for a family of refugees to let go of its ties to both Saint-Domingue and France, the Creoles’ French and Franco-Caribbean roots (and their subsequent links to the issues of slavery and revolution) are highlighted only to be erased. In the process, the refugees (and the Creoles they pretend to represent) are rendered more compelling as victims (since they clearly appear to be fleeing France because of unjust persecution rather than Saint-Domingue because of their position as planters), and more compelling as new Americans (since they had to break their ties to any other country in order to survive).

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