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Beyond the Atlantic: Unifying Racial Policies across the Early French Empire

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Beginning in the early eighteenth century, a coherent body of racial policies emerged across the French Atlantic and Indian Oceans, targeting the socioeconomic status of people of non-European ancestry and restricting their right to marry or have sexual relations with French people. In addition to very specific local circumstances in the colonies, this coherent body of policies emerged because authorities attempted to standardize policies across the two oceans. The circulation of official correspondence and people on a transoceanic scale facilitated these changes. The scope of this standardization and circulation means that we cannot understand the full landscape of French racial discourse and policymaking unless we look at the Atlantic and Indian Oceans together. Yet the current historiography on race in the French colonies remains compartmentalized into smaller geographic units. Little work has been produced on race and racial policies for the French Indian Ocean, and the vast majority of publications on this topic have so far been produced by Atlantic specialists. Considering France's Atlantic and Indian Ocean colonies side by side demonstrates that racial policies in the Atlantic were shaped by developments in the Indian Ocean—and vice versa.