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‘Women are Women everywhere’: Work and power in white women’s letters from the eighteenth-century French Caribbean

White women, French-born or creole, have not received much attention in the historiography of the French Caribbean colonies, which in recent years has mostly, and importantly, focused on the lives of enslaved women, as well as the various societal spaces negotiated by free black women and women of colour in – or outside the plantation system. White women still mostly appear as wives, daughters or sisters of white men – they are shown as lazy, indolent, and more often than not completely unconcerned with the horrendous reality of enslavement and slavery, unless they show up in court papers as especially brutal, ruthless plantation mistresses. The accounts of white women in the French Caribbean colonies which have, so far, dominated the picture only rarely include individuals, and hardly ever statements by these individuals themselves. Instead, the historiography frequently quotes well-known chroniclers like the famous Alexandre Moreau de Saint-Méry who described white Caribbean-born ladies as spoiled, supremely weak and constantly unhealthy due to the climate, but also prone to “prolonged sleeping, the inaction in which they live, the lack of any kind of regime.” Both the frequent lack of variation in the source material, and the persistent association of the white female colonist with an inactive existence on the wealthier kind of plantation, leads to the fact that many French or French Creole women, whose often city-based lives and work and the role which they played in shaping 18th French Caribbean societies and economy have, so far, been very much ignored. This paper uses letters written by female colonists from the 18th century French Caribbean to shake up and test this old and incomplete picture. White women’s narratives of their own work, including social reproductive work, remarkably often show them taking economic decisions and responsibility; exercising and claiming power within the colonial framework, for example over their enslaved personnel or over their co-workers, but also over family members. This paper looks at how white women narrated their own work in their letters; how they took credit and validation from it, and how they created epistolary representations of their selves of which work, and the economic and social power gained, claimed, performed, and expressed through work were an integral part; representations which showed them as women who were physically capable of working, and of working successfully, in the notoriously dangerous colonies of the Caribbean, where so many men were time and again incapacitated by illness.