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Literary Adaptation and the Fabric of Colonialism *Paul et Virginie* on Printed Textiles

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Abstract This paper analyses three different textiles printed with illustrations from Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), produced in 1795, 1802, and 1818, by at least two different manufactories: Petitpierre et Cie in Nantes and Oberkampf in Jouy-en-Josas. In following the adaptation history of *Paul et Virginie* across textiles, and against the rapidly shifting political landscape of Revolutionary France, this article demonstrates the degree to which Bernardin's novel could be presented in vastly different ways, from abolitionist to proslavery, testifying to both its longstanding appeal and the ease with which it could be mobilised toward radically different political agendas.

Keywords Literary textiles. Printed fabrics. Empire. Paul et Virginie. Literary adaptation. Slavery. Toiles de Jouy. Toiles de Nantes.

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1 *Paul et Virginie*, a Bestseller

While the story of Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* might be familiar to some French readers, the novel is less famous outside of France, and even there, for a long time it fell out of favour.[1] As Jean-Michel Racault has demonstrated, few eighteenth-century novels have had such success and influence and yet been so infrequently read. Recently, the work of Racault (1986) has encouraged a resurgence in interest in this complex and curious text (15). It was a print phenomenon from the eighteenth right through to the nineteenth centuries; alongside Voltaire and Rousseau, Bernardin was one of the most frequently reprinted Enlightenment authors (13). Not least of *Paul et Virginie*'s attractions is the fact that its printed tradition extends into other media. Racault writes,

> La constitution d'une tradition iconographique se développant à partir des premières illustrations du roman, naissance d'un mythe littéraire de *Paul et Virginie*, voire d'une 'légende de *Paul et Virginie*' devenue pratiquement autonome par rapport au texte générateur, et dont il serait intéressant d'interroger les fonctions sociales et idéologiques ainsi que les points d'ancrage dans l'évolution historique. (22)
>
> It would be interesting to examine the constitution of an iconographic tradition developing from the first illustrations of the novel, the birth of a literary myth of Paul et Virginie, or even of a 'legend of Paul et Virginie' which has become practically autonomous from the source text, and whose social and ideological functions as well as its points of reference in historical evolution.

Building upon Racault's suggestion, as well as the important bibliographical work of Paul Toinet (1963), this paper examines *Paul et Virginie* designs across three printed textiles between 1795 and 1818. In following the adaptation history of *Paul et Virginie* across textiles, this paper analyses the degree to which the story became either more or less abolitionist as the designs wavered from the original narrative, at the same time as these transmedia decorative images fostered a broad cultural understanding of the work as a foundational work of French literature.

1 I am grateful to the anonymous readers of this piece and to the delegates and organisers of the conference, *Adapting and Rewriting in the Age of Enlightenment* (2024), at Università Ca' Foscari, at which a preliminary version of this work was first presented, for their support of and comments on my work. This piece is indebted to Brycchan Carey for his encouragement and for his helpful suggestions to improve my understanding of the politics of the period. Any errors are my own.

Such an approach to literary adaptation, which builds upon Linda Hutcheon's foundational scholarly framework by embracing the material culture of commercial and industrial interventions (Hutcheon 2013; Elliott 2020), helps us to better understand but also self-consciously craft a literary history which takes into account the popular cultural phenomena which contribute to canon-formation. It takes as its basis an appreciation of different modes of access to culture, and the diverse literacies of a period in which not all readers were readers of text. As Lisette Lopez Szwydky (2020) has taught us, material cultural adaptations served as "equal or sometimes even primary sites of cultural engagement" (9). In the case of *Paul et Virginie*, the printed matter of various media that circulated in the wake of its publication contributed to ideas around the novel which have been mobilised towards particular political moments.

This paper traces the history of *Paul et Virginie* printed textiles from 1795 to 1818, when they appeared in three different designs. The first design was produced by Petitpierre et Cie of Nantes in around 1795 **[figs 1-2]**. The second was designed by Jean-Baptiste Huet for Christoph-Philippe Oberkampf's manufactory of *toiles de Jouy* in 1802 **[fig. 3]**. The third was another Oberkampf design of 1818 **[fig. 4]**. Reading the textiles against the original text, each other, and the rapidly shifting political landscape of Revolutionary France, this article demonstrates the degree to which Bernardin's novel could be presented in vastly different ways, from abolitionist to proslavery, testifying to both its longstanding appeal and the ease with which it could be mobilised toward radically different political agendas.

2 The *Paul et Virginie* Phenomenon

Paul et Virginie first appeared within Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Études de la nature* (1788) and then soon after as a standalone work (1789). Set in Île-de-France, now Mauritius, where Bernardin had been based in the French administration from 1768 to 1771, the tragedy portrays an idealised island community where human nature seems inherently good because insulated from socially constructed European prejudices, or 'civilization'. It follows two children, Paul and Virginie, brought up together as siblings by two single mothers, who come to fall in love. Amidst the parents' social and class-based concerns about the pair's marriage (Virginie is of noble lineage whilst Paul is illegitimate), Virginie is reluctantly sent to Europe to secure her inheritance, and on her return dies in a shipwreck. Bernardin had been a pupil and follower of Rousseau, whose influence is palpable in the work's concerns with nature, society, and education.

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The novel was immediately translated into English, first by Jane Dalton, as *Paul and Mary, an Indian Story* in 1789, and again in 1795 as *Paul and Virginia* by Helen Maria Williams, a recognised supporter of abolitionism since her 1788 verse, "A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade". Williams's edition, with accompanying illustrations, was printed by John Hurford Stone in Paris, at his radical Imprimerie Anglaise, where he had also printed the work of Thomas Paine (Dalton 1789; Williams 1795). Composed whilst Williams was imprisoned during the Reign of Terror, her translation included her prison sonnets and became the standard English edition (Kennedy 2002, 122). There were multiple unauthorised and pirated editions produced on both sides of the Atlantic, but the Williams version was that which helped to establish the work as an international bestseller (Bidwell 2011).

The novel was a sensation. It was excerpted in newspapers (David 1986, 240), adapted into popular operas by Rodolphe Kreutzer in 1791 and Jean-François Le Sueur in 1794, and presented in the form of a comic opera by James Cobb for the London stage in 1800. A *Paul et Virginie* ballet ran in Paris from 1808 to 1828 (Calè 2007). The novel also inspired such texts as François-René de Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801) and *René* (1802), Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), and George Sand's *Indiana* (1832). In Mauritius, Georges Azéma's *Noëlla* (1874) reclaimed the characters as a foundational myth in the collective imagination of the Indian Ocean and Mascarene Islands (Zatorska 2018, 169, 181).

Paul et Virginie was widely illustrated throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by the leading artists of each moment (David 1986, 239). As Racault argues, "ce roman est quasiment né illustré" (this novel was almost born illustrated) (240). Or, at least, the illustrated edition of 1789 and Williams's illustrated translation of 1795 both testified to whilst also perpetuating the success of the text: investment in engraved images was a considerable financial risk and so usually only undertaken for works already established as popular. The illustrations for *Paul et Virginie* transformed the text from one originally intended for an elite literary audience to one that appealed to young readers and those with limited literacy (240). Many editions re-illustrated the same scenes, producing what Valérie David has called '*L'hypericonicité*' (hyper-iconicity), meaning that the images themselves refer back to a whole history of illustrated editions of the work (237).

Prints of *Paul et Virginie* were also produced for display around the home, as in Jean-Frédéric Schall's series of six aquatints (1791). One of these, *L'adolescence de Paul et Virginie – Ile-de-France*, engraved by Augustin Legrand, became the most-repeated image of the novel, exemplifying David's *hypericonicité*, since it saturated the print market and became immediately recognisable or archetypal.

Based on a passage from the novel, the image shows the children sheltering beneath Virginie's skirt during a downpour, unconscious of any impropriety. Bernardin was intricately involved in the commissioning of images for his works, additionally providing the artists with feedback, so can be argued to have helped shape the reception of his work as it began to unfasten from the text in the cultural imagination (Jongeneel 2020, 44).

Else Jongeneel has attributed the appeal of these decorative prints to "la religiosité et de la morale 'naturelle' de l'idylle de Saint-Pierre" (the religiosity and 'natural' morality of Bernardin's idyll) (43). But their appeal was in no small part due to the beauty and perceived exoticism of its location and the adaptability of its narrative to the 'noble savage' motif which remained popular throughout the nineteenth century (Cussac 2021). Illustrations of *Paul et Virginie* proliferated at a time when progressive voices were making themselves heard in relation to the transatlantic slave trade. The French antislavery movement had gained momentum with Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des loix* (1748) and Denis Diderot's contributions to the *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772). Building upon this foundation, Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1771) and Guillaume-Thomas Raynal and Diderot's *Histoire philosophique et politique des deux Indes* (1774), promoted and justified rebellion (Labio 2004, 675). Jacques Pierre Brissot and Étienne Clavière co-founded *La Société des Amis des Noirs* (the society for the friends of black people) in Paris in 1788. Brissot, its secretary, was a friend of Williams, who joined his political movement, the prorevolutionary *Girondins* (Kennedy, 90; 213). Williams's translation furthered Brissot's strategy for the *Amis des Noirs*, which included the publication and translation of abolitionist literature (Seeber 1937, 160-72). By and large, the *philosophes* tended to consider slavery as an economic necessity and simply criticised its extreme abuses rather than seeking its abolition. Bernardin, meanwhile, had views which were difficult to pin down, alternating at times between admonition and accommodation, but he was considered more progressive than many of his fellow thinkers (Labio 2004, 675). The values of his text were widely seen to be pro-revolutionary and antislavery, though as the novel was adapted across media, its original radicalism became diluted.

3 Paul et Virginie en Toiles

Copperplate printing on textiles was a recent innovation in revolutionary France, until which point patterns were created using hand-printed wooden blocks. As a new technological practice, it had emerged in Ireland in 1752, England from 1755, then made its way to Switzerland and France from around 1763 and certainly before 1774 (Brédif 1989, 52). Cotton and linen became new media for the

transmission of images already fashionable on paper (Eaton 2014, 112). The kinds of printed patterns available for textiles increased with the advent of copperplate technology. Because of copperplate's propensity to produce finer lines than those printed from wood blocks, human figures began to be possible on textiles in ways which lent themselves to storytelling on fabric. Even when roller printing seemed to transcend copperplate printing as the most efficient way of achieving seamless printed patterns on fabric, copperplates continued to be used to print complicated human scenarios perhaps due to the difficulty of capturing such movement and detail with the mechanical punch (Brédif 1989, 131). This led to the invention of what we now call '*toiles de Jouys*', a term for cotton or linen printed with usually monochrome designs (often in red, blue, or black, upon a cream ground) depicting peopled historical or mythological pastoral scenes. They are so called because they were first produced in 1760 at the manufactory of Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf, at Jouy-en-Josas, in France. Rival factories producing similar designs were established at cities like Rouen and Nantes.

Political themes on printed textiles were common but they were also a risk, because current affairs moved so quickly, and investment in fresh designs and the engraving process could only be returned after several years of printing (Gril-Mariotte 2009, 179). Patterns had to remain in fashion long enough to turn a profit. Many textiles were designed and produced during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries depicting literary scenarios or commemorating literary greats. Predominantly used for soft furnishings, and particularly bedroom hangings, *toiles de Jouy*, especially literary *toiles*, promoted a literary and pastoral aesthetic that idealized nature and society for the purposes of comfort and relaxation.

Literary fabrics include many versions of *Les Fables de la Fontaine* (Fables of Fontaine), first printed between 1770 and 1772, and then in a new design by Oberkampf manufactory's Jean-Baptiste Huet in 1805, against a background of Diana and Venus.[2] Literary textiles could also be commemorative, as with Huet's *Le Tombeau de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (the tomb of Jean-Jacques Rousseau), after Jean-Mchel Moreau le Jeune, produced by Gorgerat Frères et Cie in Nantes from 1778-83.[3] By necessity, textile designs based on literary works reflected what investors predicted, rightly or wrongly, would be the most longstanding popular texts of the moment. This prediction was

2 Huet, J-B. (c. 1805). *Les Fables de la Fontaine*. Roller print on cotton in bister, with block print in yellow. Musée Oberkampf. 977.20.

3 Huet, J-B. (after 1778). *Le Tombeau de Jean Jacques Rousseau*. Furnishing fabric. Art Institute Chicago. 1976.63a-c. https://www.artic.edu/artworks/50413/le-tombeau-de-jean-jacques-rousseau-the-tomb-of-jean-jacques-rousseau-furnishing-fabric.

in no small way based upon the text's illustration history and sales of its printed images. In turn, literary textiles ultimately helped to shape and perpetuate the reception of the titles they depicted. *Paul et Virginie*, a hugely popular moral tale set in a beautiful landscape, because it seemed to be amenable to adaptation upon the rapidly changing contemporary politics of revolution and slavery, was a literary work that simultaneously tapped into even as it transcended the global politics of the period, meeting two of the main goals of contemporary *toiles*.

The Petitpierre et Cie manufactory of Nantes (known as Favre, Petitpierre et Cie from 1802 to 1818 between Favre joining and Petitpierre leaving the business) produced their *Paul et Virginie* printed cotton possibly as early as 1795, taken from or inspired by the 1788 edition (Gontar 2013). A black-printed fragment is held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (the Met).[4] Fragments of a red-printed version are held by the Victoria and Albert Museum (the V&A) in London **[fig. 1]** and in a private collection. The same pattern printed in polychrome survives at the Musée des Salorges, Nantes, France **[fig. 2]**. Whilst it is unattributed, it appears to be the same design as that produced by Petitpierre et Cie and so likely of the same manufactory. All are dated in their respective catalogues as circa 1800.

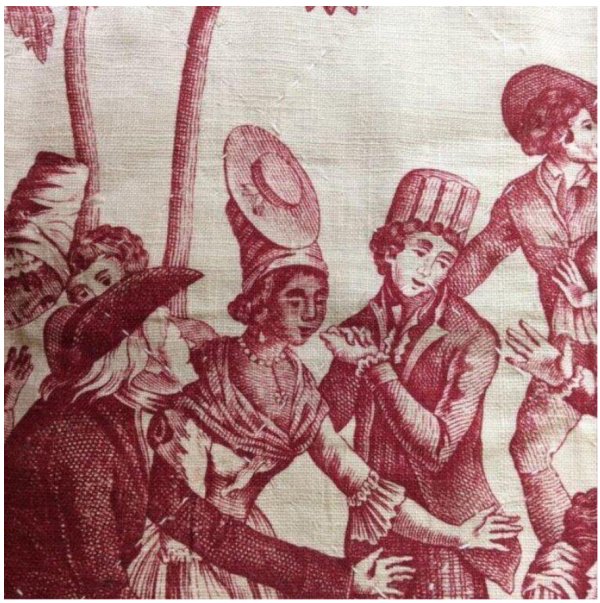

Figure 1 Favre, Petitpierre et Cie, *Paul et Virginie*. c. 1800. Printed cotton, 30 x 25 cm. Private Collection

4 Favre, Petitpierre et Cie. (Early 1800s). *Paul et Virginie*. Linen. 149 x 93 cm. The Met. 26.233.15. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/221845.

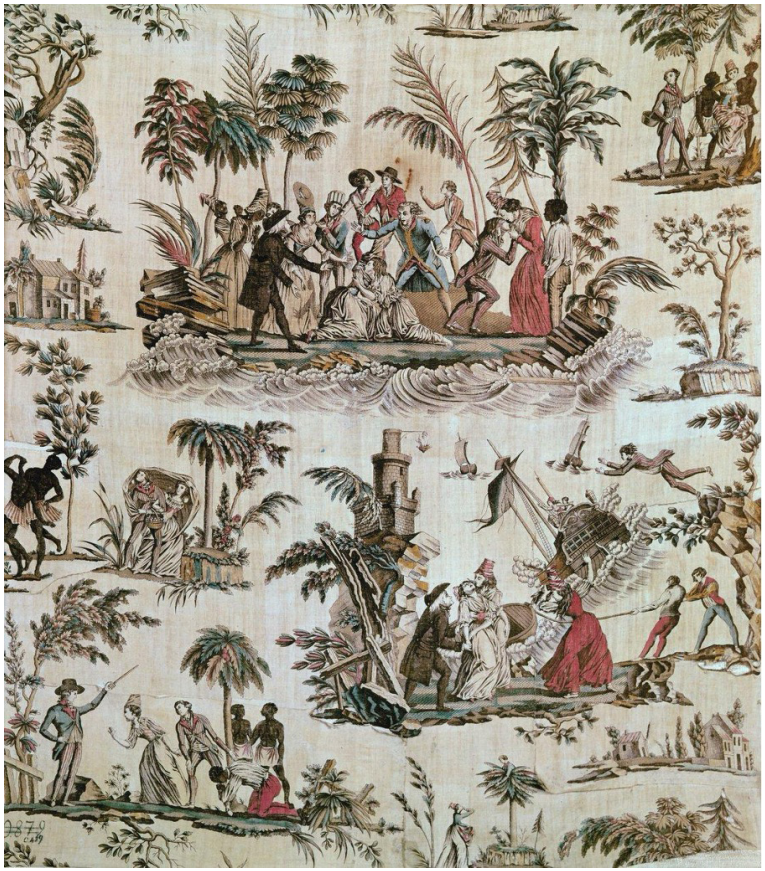

Figure 2 French School, *Illustrations of incidents from the novel Paul et Virginie*. c. 1800. Printed cotton or toile de Nantes. Musée des Salorges, Nantes

These textiles, capitalising upon the novel's immediate success, are likely to be the earliest fabric representations of Bernardin's novel. They attempt to capture some of the novel's key moments, such as the children sheltering beneath Virginie's skirt. The shipwreck scene is a conglomerate image that includes rescue attempts from the shore, Paul jumping into the sea, and the recovery of Virginie's corpse. The central and largest image is one that combines several moments within the text: it shows Virginie's mother fainting at the news of her death, supported by Madame de la Tour, and surrounded by a crowd. The remainder of the design is concerned with what is arguably the central moment of the children's coming of age: Virginie's intercession for a runaway slave.

It is worth revisiting this episode, which is the children's first real encounter with slavery outside of their home. The children live in an idealised and unrealistic household structure. The family's enslaved workers, Domingue (named after France's largest Caribbean colony, St. Domingue, which would erupt in revolution within years of the novel's publication) and Marie, his wife, are unquestionably affectionate and faithful. From the perspective of their enslavers, Domingue and Marie occupy a liminal space between staff and family members. The family speak to them, and about them, with a kindness which is belied through the implicit power structure that devalues their humanity and their contributions to family life. This unrealistic depiction of servitude suited ameliorationist discourses, but its legitimacy is called into question when the children are exposed to other modes of living on the island. In Bernardin's novel, Virginie meets an escaped enslaved woman and, after providing her with a meal, and acting from the perceived naturalness of her own family structure, she returns the woman to her master. This is the first indication that perhaps the world that Bernardin depicts is not such an oasis for a natural and innocent childhood. Virginie, accompanied by Paul, is frightened by the plantation owner, who wields a stick as he listens to her entreaty, and as soon as he has agreed to pardon the woman – only, indeed, because of his attraction to Virginie – Virginie runs away in fear, unconsciously mimicking the flight of her enslaved companion.

Virginie has little time to reflect upon her actions, as the youngsters soon become lost in the forest. Between themselves, the children discuss what has happened, with Paul asserting that he would have fought the man if he had refused Virginie's request to pardon the slave, little knowing that the master's words were superficial. Virginie's response is full of concern for Paul, but shows little for the returned woman:

> 'N'aie pas peur', lui disoit-il; 'je me sens bien fort avec loi. Si l'habitant de la Rivière-noire t'avoit refusé li grace de son esclave, je me serois battu avec lui'.
>
> — 'Comment', dit Virginie, 'avec cet homme si grand et si méchant? A quoi l'ai-je exposé? Mon Dieu! Qu'il est difficile de faire le bien! il n'y a que le mal de facile à faire'. (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 1789, 35)

> 'Don't be afraid', he told her; 'I feel very strong when I'm with you. If the inhabitant of the Black River had refused to pardon his slave, I would have fought with him'.
>
> 'How', said Virginie, 'with that man, so tall and so wicked? What did I expose him to? My God! How difficult it is to do good! Only evil is easy to do'.

Virginie is conscious that she has risked both of their safety in this errand, but seems more concerned about the dangers to which she briefly exposed Paul than about the future of the woman who sought her charity.

Virginie's refrain ("Oh, qu'il est difficile de faire le bien!" – Oh, how difficult it is to do good!) demonstrates how even acts intended to be good can be evil (47). And yet she remains naïve as to the outcome for the woman whom she forced to return. The closest she comes to regret is through examining the impact of her actions upon herself and Paul, as they find themselves hungry and with blistered feet:

> Il ne faut rien faire, pas même le bien, sans consulter ses parens. Oh! J'ai été bien imprudente!; et elle se prit à verser des larmes. (44)
>
> You shouldn't do anything, not even good things, without consulting your parents. Oh! I've been very imprudent! And she began to cry.

The lesson that Virginie takes away – that she should not have acted without her parents' consent – underlines her concern for her own loved ones whilst she continues reluctant to critically engage with her own family's participation in the system that enables the plantation master's cruelty.

The children are eventually discovered by the enslaved Domingue who, with the help of the family dog, learned of their visiting a plantation by the Rivière-noire:

> C'est là où j'ai appris d'un habitant, que vous lui aviez ramené une négresse maronne, et qu'il vous avoit accordésa grace. Mais quelle grace! Il me l'a montrée attachée, avec une chaîne au pied, à un billot de bois, et avec un collier de fer à trois crochets autour du cou. (46)
>
> It was there that I learned from a local that you had brought him a runaway slave, and that he had granted you her pardon. But what a pardon! He showed me her, tied up, her feet chained to a wooden block, and with an iron collar with three hooks around her neck.

Whilst Domingue criticises the treatment of the Master, he also subtly questions the children's expectations of pardon from a plantation owner, though his lesson falls upon deaf ears.

With sore feet, the children rely upon Domingue and a group of passing maroon men, who, having seen the children's intercession for the fugitive, offer to help carry them home. While the maroons profess gratitude to the children for their intended kindness to the

fugitive, their version of events again underscores its consequences by referring to the 'mauvais maître' (cruel master):

> Bons petits blancs, n'ayez pas peur; nous vous avons vu passer ce matin avec une négresse de la Rivière-noire; vous alliez demander sa grace à son mauvais maître. En reconnoissance, nous vous reporterons chez vous sur nos épaules. (48)
>
> Good white children, do not be afraid; we saw you this morning with a Black woman from the Black River; you were going to ask her cruel master for her pardon. In gratitude, we will carry you home on our shoulders.

The maroons' opening gambit – a plea to not be afraid – reflected the current political situation whereby maroon communities were the 'the principal danger feared by colonists' in Île-de-France (Allen 1999, 35). The colonial society of the island depended upon *détachements* or patrols dedicated to capturing or killing maroons (35). In a sense, the children had imitated the civil forces at play elsewhere in their island community, only to find that their safety is undermined by the white slave master and literally upheld by outlaws, an outcome that upturns the seeming naturalness of the social order that they have come to accept. Domingue and the maroons enact a double return, first ensuring that the children mentally revisit their actions, whilst also returning the children home, a willing return to a loving family that differs widely from the experience of the female fugitive. The maroons model for the children a real, unambiguous, act of good.

The children's escapade does not lead to their questioning of the status of their own enslaved workers, Domingue and Marie, nor to more explicit condemnations of slavery within the text, but this episode of misplaced virtue functions as a correction of Virginie's naivety ahead of her coming of age. Virginie's journey to secure pardon for the escaped woman is repeated throughout the narrative, first through Domingue's search for the children, which leads him to the plantation where it took place, and later through Paul's nostalgic retracing of their childhoods across the island after her drowning. This repetition within the text, a subtle but stark criticism of slavocracy at work on the Île-de-France, reveals how far the scene, central to the children's coming of age, is also central to the narrative itself.

The 1795 textiles conform to this reading. They depict the moment that Virginie pleads with the slave master to pardon the runaway who is, on these textiles, depicted as male rather than female. The transformation of the fugitive's gender is a design choice embedded in cultures of propriety. Mary Favret and Marcus Wood have argued that visual depictions of naked enslaved women being violently abused served as a form of pornography in this period, with black female

bodies becoming what Wood calls 'the side of terrible anxieties and repressions involving white sexual confusion and guilt about the slave trade' (Favret 1998; Wood 2000, 161). Eschewing references to gratuitous male-on-female violence is one of the ways in which this textile sanitises the message of the novel for domestic display. Given the notable absence of Marie from the fabric, however, the main reason may have been an avoidance of the aesthetic cultures of representing female enslaved workers, a shorthand for which was toplessness. Changing the gender of the fugitive from female to male enabled the scene to be depicted without risking lewd interpretations. This adaptation thereby removes the intersectional violence at play in the original text, whereby Virginie, though threatened by the plantation owner's ogling misogyny, is saved by her white femininity.

We also see the children's return home across two scenes. The first depicts Paul satisfying Virginie's hunger through acquiring a cabbage from a tree. The second shows Virginie being carried home on an apparatus of branches by two maroons. In the novel, both children are carried home, by four maroons, and are accompanied by Domingue, who is absent from the fabric. The two maroons feature a further twice across the fabric. First, the designer places the maroons at the scene of the intercession, though in the novel they remain unseen. Second, they appear in a dance which has no source in the text. The fabric designer includes this extra scene for the men beyond their recorded presence in the novel. This enhances their significance to the story whilst conforming with a white audience's expectations for a 'noble savage' decorative design.

Whilst the umbrella and the shipwreck images bookend Bernardin's novel's main trajectory of innocence in nature thwarted by contact with Europe, the textiles represent the narrative between those moments – and the children's personal growth – as dependent upon and shaped by their co-living with people of colour. The textiles emphasise freedom over slavery, since the people of colour in the design are all fugitives or maroons. The only obviously enslaved person featured is the escapee that the children naively returned to a plantation only to be brutally punished, and who serves as the central character in the main moral lesson of their childhood, albeit one from which they seem not to benefit. Virginie's tragic death is foregrounded on the textile through the shipwreck and her recovered body, but the tragedy of the unnamed fugitive, female in the text, male on the textiles, is also afforded space.

The central scene, whilst indulging the grief of the bereaved parent, supplies a cosmopolitan scene of support from people of diverse heritage, one specially adapted for the textile. In the novel, the narrator and Domingue are the only people present at Madame de la Tour's faintings fits. The 1795 textiles seem to merge the fainting of the mother with Bernardin's description of the reception of Virginie's funeral pall:

> Lorsqu'elle fut arrivée au lieu de sa sépulture, des négresses de Madagascar et des Caffres de Mosambique, déposèrent autour d'elle des paniers de fruits, et suspendirent des pièces d'étoffes aux arbres voisins, suivant l'usage de leur pays. Des Indiennes du Bengale et de la côte Malabare, apportèrent des cages pleines d'oiseaux auxquels elles donnèrent la liberté sur son corps; tant al perte d'un objet aimable intéresse toutes les nations, et tant est grand le pouvoi de la vertu mal- heureuse, puisqu'elle réunit toutes les religious autour de son tombeau! (209-10)
>
> When she arrived at her burial place, Black women from Madagascar and Kaffirs from Mozambique placed baskets of fruit around her and hung pieces of cloth from nearby trees, according to the custom of their country. Indian women from Bengal and the Malabar Coast brought cages full of birds, which they set free on her body; so much does the loss of a beloved person concern all nations, and so great is the power of unfortunate virtue, since it unites all religious people around her tomb!

Virginie's death prompts in the novel the coming together in equality of many people living across the island, in a sentimental scene of shared values. It is free Malabar women (i.e. from Kerala in India) who tend to Virginie's body:

> Nous portâmes le corps de Virginie dans une cabane de pêcheurs, où nous le donnâmes à garder à de pauvres femmes malabares, qui prirent soin de el laver. (205)
>
> We carried Virginie's body to a fisherman's hut, where we entrusted it to poor Malabar women, who took care to wash it.

In the central image on the *toile de Nantes* and Petitpierre et Cie fabrics, the women of colour on the left of the image wear fine dresses and jewellery, indicating their free status. They may represent women with Malabar, Madagascan, or Bengali heritage, in line with some of the places mentioned in the text. Meanwhile, the status of a boy on the right, the only male figure of colour in that image, and the only man without a jacket, remains unclear. In the red-printed textile there is a subtle difference in the shading of the skin of the woman closest to Marguerite and Madame de la Tour: her skin tone is decidedly darker than in the polychrome version, creating an image that displays equal numbers of white women and women of colour **[fig. 1]**.

As of 1795, the year in which these textiles were likely produced, antislavery had become government policy, since in France, under Robespierre's leadership, slavery had been abolished in all French colonies by the Law of 4 February 1704. Even after Robespierre's

demise, the Convention continued to pursue antislavery policies. The 1795 textile adaptations of *Paul et Virginie* print and carefully curate scenes from Bernardin's text in ways that align with the current political climate. They look to the margins of this text, emphasising the importance of people of colour to the narrative, bringing them centre stage. The *Paul et Virginie* textiles of 1795 represent in their largest and main vignette a community of collective mourning comprising people of colour and white European settlers in a spirit of equality, representing Bernardin's text in a distinctly antislavery light. Whilst the scene does not exist in the text, it remains within the bounds of the descriptions of the wider island community that Bernardin provides when painting the image of the impact of Virginie's death.

4 Oberkampf Revisits *Paul et Virginie*

When Oberkampf designer, Jean-Baptiste Huet, produced his *Paul et Virginie* textile in 1802 **[fig. 3]**, he worked from the same images that were available to the unidentified designer of the Petitpierre et Cie fabric: those that appeared in the edition of 1789 (Gril-Mariotte 2009) and the Schall aquatints of 1791. However, the effect is quite different.

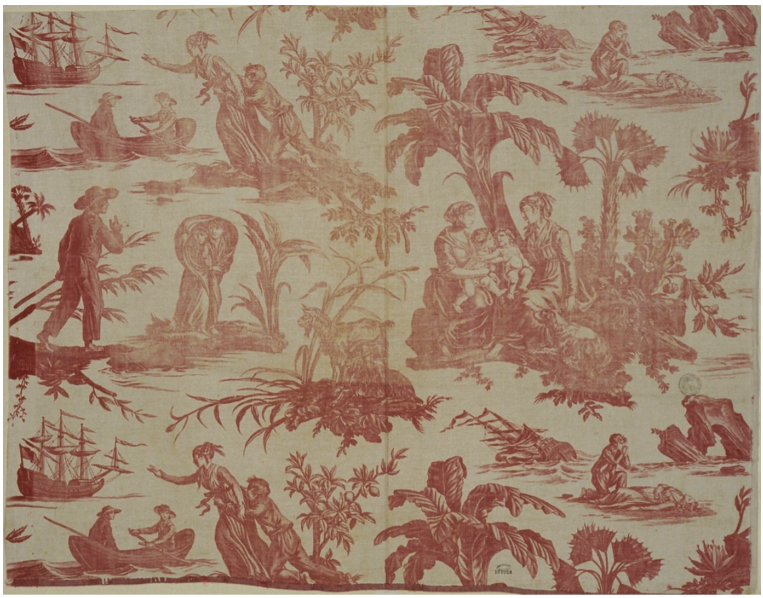

Figure 3 Jean-Baptiste Huet, *Paul et Virginie toile imprimée*. 1802. Furnishing fabric, 74 x 94cm. Bibliothèque Forney, Paris

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The design is red-printed on a white ground, with the largest image portraying Paul and Virginie's shared parenthood by two single mothers in an idealised pastoral scene with the pet dog, Fidèle, after Schall. Smaller scenes of the storm and the shipwreck feature between, as illustrated by Moreau le Jeune and Joseph Vernet's *Le Naufrage de Virginie à l'Île de France* (1789), respectively. Like the Petitpierre et Cie fabric above, the images are scattered across the fabric in a placement that fosters a sense of the pastoral, emphasising the lush foliage evident in Bernardin's novel and known to thrive on the island.

The Oberkampf textile was produced at a turning point in the French administration's approach to slavery in their colonies. In France, slavery was abolished in 1793, following a series of ruses by Léger-Félicité Sonthonax in 1793 to secure the allyship of Toussaint Louverture in his bid to recapture colonies from the British (Dubois 2004, 154-5). In 1801, Louverture captured Saint Domingue, abolished slavery, and installed himself as its governor, only to have Napoleon attempt to re-establish slavery there the following year. The Haitian Revolution would eventually succeed in 1804 but slavery would not be abolished until 1848 (Davis 1975). 1802, then, had seen slavery reinstated on the back of abolition, through serious violence and bloodshed. The *Paul et Virginie* story, with its setting in a slave economy, and its reliance upon the characters Domingue and Marie, could not but prompt consideration of the current political climate in relation to the transatlantic trade in people.

The Oberkampf textile presents Bernardin's narrative in a completely new light: it entirely omits people of colour. Whilst the V&A information page for the fragment explains then novel's debt to the tradition of 'the noble savage', you would not know from this textile that the story dealt with slavery. The *toile*, printed with various scenes including *Paul and Virginie*'s shared infancy on their mothers' laps, the popular motif of the pair walking beneath Virginie's skirt during a rain shower, and the rowing boat rescue of the shipwreck, omits people of colour, most pertinently the figure of Marie, who originally featured in the foreground of the central image of the women with their babies taken from Schall, with Domingue present, too, in the background. These pictures, distributed around the fabric with watery scenes between, emphasise the island setting of the narrative, and turns a colonial enclave into a settler paradise. The centrality of slavery to the story is belied by this design: a whitewashed literary textile for white households.

But this is far from an island utopia. Bernardin's novel is heavily overshadowed by both sexual shame and the spectre of slavery (Kirkley 2011, 107-8). The children's mothers either eloped or bore children illegitimately, a fact that determines the naming of Virginie and their exile to the island. The very setting of the novel locates the narrative in empire. Mauritius had been renamed the Île-de-France after its

annexation in 1715, since when colonial administrators, including Bernardin himself, had been posted there to rule it until 1810, at which point it changed hands to the British. Paul and Virginie's families are dependent upon the enslaved labour of Marie and Domingue within an economy that was highly suspicious of maroon activity (Allen 1999, 35). And yet no people of colour feature on the Oberkampf textile. They are erased from the narrative, Marie and Domingue cropped out of the central image, perhaps in response to the reinstatement of slavery in 1801: this was a rapidly changing political landscape and one that textile designers may have wondered how best to navigate.

The 1802 fabric by Oberkampf was so successful that a new, monochrome, design was launched in 1818 **[fig. 4]**, featuring detailed vignettes in regular shapes against a patterned backdrop, creating a gallery-style effect reminiscent of the print rooms popular in English and Irish historic houses from 1750 through to the early decades of the nineteenth century (Box 2021), perhaps indicating the fabric's intended appeal to cross-Channel customers. Its launch followed Bernardin's luxury 1806 edition of the text, with new illustrations, and coincided with the first publication of his *Complete Works*, published from 1818 onwards. By this point, more images were available than ever, and the Oberkampf designers had the opportunity to craft a new visual narrative for Bernardin's text.

However, whilst new illustrations were available to draw upon, the 1818 textile repeated many of the key scenes we have already seen.

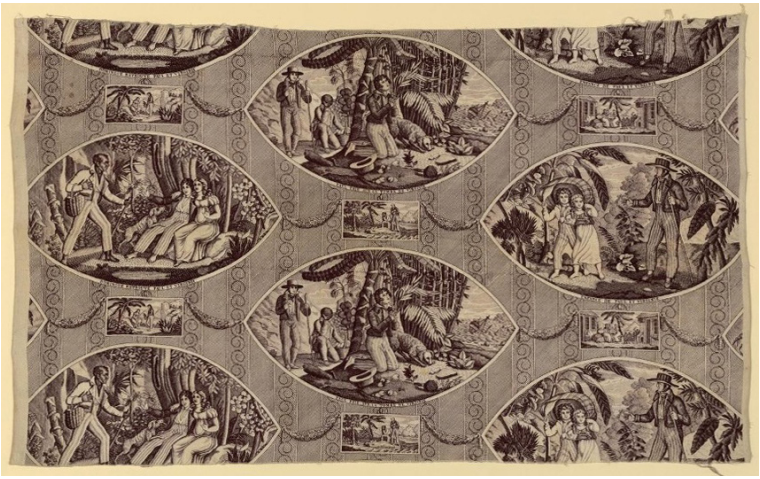

Figure 4 Oberkampf Factory, *Paul and Virginie Furnishing Fabric*. After 1818. 51.1 × 84.8cm. The Art Institute of Chicago

The fabric can be read both horizontally and vertically. It repeats three key scenes from the novel in large almond-shaped frames, one across each of three columns, each of which has a small rectangular image beneath it. The pictures are joined together along the horizontal plane by decorative garlands, though the order of the images defies chronology. The almonds in the left column repeat the image of the children's discovery by Domingue after getting lost, between small rectangular images of Paul tending to Virginie's blistered feet. The central column repeats the image of Paul praying on Virginie's tomb in the large almond, whilst his discovery with the narrator of her body fills the small rectangles between. The final, third, column represents the childhood of Paul and Virginie, placing the famous petticoat umbrella image in the large almond (it seems that a *Paul et Virginie* textile could not be a *Paul et Virginie* textile without this image) and the nursing image in the smaller rectangle. As with the Petitpierre et Cie textile, the image of the children's infancy omits the enslaved Marie and Domingue, though the dimensions of the space would certainly allow for their inclusion. This either indicates adaptation upon adaptation or a deliberate excision of those characters from the design.

Whereas the 1802 fabric dispels slavery from a settler Eden and, in doing so, mutes the antislavery message of the original text, Domingue remains present in the 1818 fabric, retaining his integral role in the narrative, and is named in the caption for the illustration of his rescuing the children. He also features, head in hands, in the image of Paul at the tomb. The 1818 Oberkampf design is less inclined to completely ignore slavery than the 1802 fabric, but its vision of the story conceals the reason for the children needing to be rescued. Rather than confronting viewers with the horrors of plantation cruelty by depicting the escapee and her punishment, the textile represents Domingue as a loyal enslaved worker simply bringing a basket of provisions to the children. His basket is repeated in the central image, demonstrating his role as a provider and as essential to the settlers' survival and wellbeing. The 1818 Oberkampf design unambiguously represents slavocracy as a vital, even idealised, component of the island paradise.

As Hélène Cussac has argued, decorative arts adaptations of *Paul et Virginie* 'imagined the French colony as a version of Eden, even if the novel itself was concerned to show Eden compromised by corruption' (Cussac 2021). The degrees to which these three textile designs either elide or tackle slavery is vastly different. Changing with imagined public opinion, the textile designs cater for a clientele at first deemed to be against slavery, then either abolitionist or deluded, before attempting to accommodate the trade in people with a vision of an island utopia, just as French politics wavered between abolition, slavocracy, and accommodation.

5 The Fabric of Slavery

Literary fabrics function as merely a small group of a series of polite, at times political (nationalist and colonial) and cultured products emerging from the textile trade. Printed fabrics produced excerpted versions of illustrated texts, repurposing book illustrations, recomposing narratives, and presenting them in new ways. Tom Mole (2017) demonstrates that tracing the web of reception 'makes visible the range of media operating in the nineteenth century, the omnivorous ways in which cultural consumers moved among them, and the sophisticated strategies cultural producers developed for negotiating between them' (19). In this case, analysing the adaptation of *Paul et Virginie* across textiles reveals the ways that these cultural producers developed new story arcs that first examined the most challenging element of the text, then denied the very presence of slavery in the Île-de-France, and later accommodated it within an image of a tropical Eden.

Paul et Virginie textiles added another facet to what had become a sensory and social experience: *Paul et Virginie* was a multimedia phenomenon, in textual, visual, aural and textile formats. The *toiles* brought the text more firmly into the domestic sphere, enabling readers to style their homes based on the literary, artistic, and musical trends of the day. The fabric may have prompted readers to recall specific passages, pieces of music, or works of art that continued to proliferate. Recognition of the narrative was a primary attraction for such textiles, underpinning their cultural kudos. Objects beyond the book shaped and advanced literary meanings far beyond the printed text. The new surfaces, material qualities, placements and uses of these objects transplanted the literary text into new contexts, adopting the values of the new medium, location and its associated socio-cultural currency. With these fabrics, *Paul et Virginie* became truly tactile. They provide another plane along which to analyse the text's representation of enslaved labour.

The purchase and use of such products was, of course, a kind of conspicuous consumption, which highlighted isolated, decontextualised, literary moments. The meanings of these printed objects are manifold: they have their own inherent meanings as objects, in their use value and display, they carry meanings through their adapted images, and they also recall earlier renderings as well as the original literary text. The multimedia products printed with *Paul et Virginie* illustrations domesticated colonial endeavour within the sociable interior. Whilst decorating the home with the 1795 designs would demonstrate a realist reading of Bernardin's text, signifying an abolitionist or progressive political ideology, to decorate the home with the Oberkampf fabrics of both 1802 and 1818 was to display versions of, and potentially demonstrate an uncritical

preference for, Bernardin's text without its teeth. The 1802 design sidelined the antislavery rhetoric of Bernardin's novel altogether, whilst the 1818 textile promoted a Republic comfortable, even cosy, with the traffic in people.

As the debate about abolition continued in France, *Paul et Virginie* continued to be culturally relevant, the subtlety of its antislavery message proving useful to both sides of the case. The uses and placement of these products can present some slightly different meanings. In the form of decorative textiles, the 1795, 1802, and 1818 designs would have been prominently displayed in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century home, as curtain fabric or as drapery and hangings for beds, in bedrooms that were considered less private than they are today and, especially when tastefully decorated, appropriate for receiving visitors. In textile form, printed fabrics were 'a lightproof, tactile, and undulating version of the fragile copperplate prints' from which they were adapted (Lee 2022, 62). Such drapes turned sleeping areas into darkened islands that literally shut out the reality of slavery even by appropriating its main exports. As Gontar tells us, bed draperies were expensive and attractive items, and printed textiles in that context provided stimulating matter for debate and discussion within the 'personal yet open setting of the nineteenth-century bedchamber or parlour'. And as she points out, there is no doubt of its use in households built upon wealth accrued through the very trade it denounced (Gontar 2013).[5]

As Marshall McLuhan famously argued, the medium is the message: the cotton also has a story to tell. Building upon this position, Lucas has described the ways in which, firstly, a printed engraving that represents a scene from a novel can be read in accordance with or in divergence from the original narrative. Second, the reading of that same image on a textile, for instance, could be very different to the story print tells upon paper: 'The media and context in which the illustration occurs renders the image open to quite different readings' (Lucas 2003, 139). As Maire-Laure Ryan (2004) points out, different media, in this case, books, freestanding prints, textiles, "are not hollow conduits for the transmission of message but material supports of information whose materiality, precisely, 'matters' for the type of meanings that can be encoded" (1-2) (see also Rippl 2015, 8).

The cotton fabric itself speaks of empire. The cultivation and manufacturing of cotton by Europeans was a seventeenth and eighteenth-century innovation of global capitalism that depended upon exploiting (under)paid labourers in India (Beckert 2014). The

5 Traite des Nègres, ca. 1825, Frédéric Etienne Joseph Feldtrappe (French 1786-1849), mulberry-on-white roller-printed cotton signed "E. Feldtrappe", 101 x 33 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund.

Compagnie des Indes (the French East India Company) had occupied Mauritius, calling it Île-de-France, from 1721 to 1767, during which time it served as a centre for trade, as well as a naval base and plantation colony. Being situated strategically between Europe and India, Île-de-France facilitated the trade in cotton and textiles from India, which it either shipped onwards or exchanged with agricultural produce grown by enslaved people removed from Madagascar, Mozambique and West Africa (Gottmann 2016).

Although cotton was not widely produced by enslaved labour until after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, after which it was rapidly adopted by plantations in the United States, Bernardin nevertheless depicts cotton a product of the slave economy in his novel. Domingue plants "des cotonners sur les hauteurs" (cotton plants on the higher ground), which Marguerite and Madame de la Tour spin for the use of their family, saving the rest for Paul to trade overseas in preparation for his marriage (Bernardin 1789, 15, 54, 96). Bernardin also captures the trade in textiles in the narrative. When Virginie receives money from her aunt to prepare for her journey to Paris, merchants bring their wares to her humble cottage:

> Ils déployèrent au milieu de ces pauvres cabanes, les plus riches étoffes de l'Inde; de superbes basins de Goudelour, des mouchoirs de Paliacate et de Mazulipatan, des mousselines de Daca, unies, rayées, brodées, transparentes comme le jour, des baftas de Surate d'un si beau blanc, des chittes de toutes couleurs et des plus rares, à fond sablé et à rameaux verts. Ils déroulèrent de magnifiques étoffes de soie de la Chine, des lampas découpés à jour, des damas d'un blanc satiné, d'autres d'un vert de prairie, d'autres d'un rouge à éblouir; des taffetas rose, des satins à pleine main, des pékins moëlleux comme le drap, des nankins blancs et jaunes, et jusqu'à des pagues de Madagascar. (110-11)

> Amidst these humble huts, they displayed the richest fabrics of India: fine dimity from Gudelour, handkerchiefs from Pellicate and Mussulapatan, Dacca muslins – plain, striped, embroidered, clear as day – Surat baftas of such beautiful white, calico of every colour, including the rarest, with sand-colored backgrounds and green branches. They unfurled magnificent silk fabrics from China: lampas with intricate cut-outs, damasks of satiny white, others of meadow green, others of dazzling red; pink taffetas, full-hand satins, soft pekin as fine linen, white and yellow nankeens, and even pagues from Madagascar.

Virginie is no ordinary consumer, however, selecting fabrics for everyone in the household except herself, and having to take gifts back to ensure she had sufficient provisions for her journey. Whilst

Bernardin takes care to identify the origins of each fabric in the story, by the time his novel was published many such fabrics touted on Mascarene trade routes would have been produced in France. In a reversal of geography, the centre of global textile production had shifted from South East Asia to Europe, with ports like Nantes taking a considerable share of what was a lucrative trade (Dobie 2010, 93). Cotton was printed and finished in Nantes, before being exported to the colonies as stock (sometimes to dress enslaved people, with cloths intended for the plantation economy, called 'Guinea cloths') or as currency in exchange for enslaved people, who were then sent to labour in French colonies, and so on (Gontar 2013). Cotton, silk, and printed textiles continued to use orientalised names (as in the case of '*indiennes*' and 'chintz', from the Hindi *chīṃṭ*) even when produced in the West, retaining what Madeleine Dobie has described as their 'exotic Eastern aura', as the colonial contribution to the European textile industry remained masked behind an exotic aesthetics of terminology and design (93).

At the same time that *indiennes* and *toiles* were traded for people, the *Paul et Virginie* fabrics of 1795 identified the plight of enslaved people. As was the case with the 1825 textile, *Traite des Nègres* (Slave Trade), by Frédéric Etienne Joseph Feldtrappe, a more explicitly abolitionist printed cotton design, such textiles reflect 'moral ambiguities that were perhaps conveniently ignored' in the places in which they were manufactured (Gontar 2013; Brédif 1989, 131). The seemingly progressive design of the 1795 textiles in their centring of a multi-ethnic community coming together upon the death of Virginie could have been simply a commercial ploy to appeal to a market for antislavery commodities. After all, Petitpierre et Cie, the Nantes manufactory that produced the red *Paul et Virginie* fabric, also produced Guinea cloth, producing and distributing a tool intended for the perpetuation of human trafficking and which, as Gontar argues, 'served as a means that allowed others to subjugate and exterminate individuals and their culture' (77). Particularly in the case of the Oberkampf textiles, the fabrics inscribed the power imbalances of empire upon a colonial commodity.

6 Conclusion

The variants of *Paul et Virginie* fabric that circulated around Europe and were displayed in homes from 1795 through to the nineteenth century show diverse ways of reading Bernardin's novel. As Catherine Labio has demonstrated, the reception history of *Paul et Virginie* can be considered a 'barometer of changing attitudes towards slavery' from its publication to the nineteenth century (Labio 2004, 675). Textiles emblazoned with illustrations of *Paul et Virginie* not only

reflected the owner's literary sensibilities but also carried with them notions of empire and difference. The earliest *toile de Nantes* presented an inclusive colonial society, whilst the first Oberkampf fabric whitewashes Bernardin's story. The final Oberkampf design, from 1818, went some way toward reinserting people of colour into the tale, but without any of its nuance regarding the evils of the traffic in people. Through the shared motif of the shipwreck and the children's idealized childhood, all three designs portray a beautiful landscape at the threat of European civilization, despite the novel itself additionally portraying colonialism as an internal and unavoidable danger. The textiles' differences suggest that what seemed to be at stake for manufacturers of *Paul et Virginie* printed fabrics was the degree to which the novel's colonial context was perceived to be a desirable aesthetic for interior design. But even whilst the 1802 Oberkampf textile edits out the histories of people of colour from the Île-de-France story, the fabric itself does not lie, its raw materials produced and circulated within an empire dependent upon unequal labour.

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