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Writing the overseas. Africa, Americas and Asia in the French personal writings (18th century)

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For some years now, the historiography of French society in the early modern period has been endeavouring to restore the link between the history of the kingdom of France and that of its overseas territories (New France, Louisiana, the îles du Vent and the îles sous le Vent, Cayenne, Bourbon Island and the Isle of France, etc.). These different spaces were most often considered as strictly distinct from the point of view of their social organization and working. Personal writings, such as those used by Sarah Pearsall and Karin Wulf about the British Atlantic worlds, are nevertheless an excellent source for exploring their connections and similarities. As in the kingdom, the French colonists who settled in these overseas territories left behind them a corpus of personal writings, generally correspondence or travelogues, but also an (unfortunately small) number of diaries, memoirs or autobiographies. This paper will present this corpus of colonial personal writings for understanding how they differ from their equivalents written in France, and the specificities of the themes they address. The question of colonial domination as well as relations between races is of course central in these writings. They thus open up to a reflection particularly on otherness at the very moment when the French nation is being founded and extended.