

The Haitian Revolution: A Microcosm of Atlantic Slave Resistance

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Introduction

Edmund Burke, Irish statesman and philosopher upon visiting the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue in the mid 1750s, upon witnessing the heinousness of slave treatment, affirmed the need for slavery reform “or else they will liberate themselves.”¹ The latter proved prophetic. On 22 August 1791, thousands of slaves massacred their slave owners marking Saint Domingue’s eruption into what would become a 13-year long revolutionary conflict. The major forces of the Haitian Revolution included black slaves (creole and otherwise), free-coloureds, whites (loyalists and otherwise), and French, British and Spanish militias. The revolutions was originally led by charismatic ex-slave Toussaint Louverture - the most successful black commander - and later helmed by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who completed the quest for independence on 1 January 1804.² The name ‘Haiti’ was finally adopted as a symbolic erasure of its colonial past. If you count its repercussions on Guadalupe and Guyane, the Haitian Revolution essentially freed one fifth of the American enslaved population.³ During the Transatlantic slave trade, black skin was a badge of enslavement, but the Haitian Revolution revamped that badge as a sign of resilience and freedom.⁴

The Haitian Revolution, by all accounts, was a watershed moment of unprecedented scale. Its remarkability has often separated it from the experiences of other enslaved peoples. Academically, the Haitian Revolution was left out of early seminal projects such as R. R. Palmer’s *Age of the Democratic Revolution* and Jacques Godechot’s *France and the Atlantic Revolution of the Eighteenth Century*. Perhaps this is a result of an ignorance of Haiti’s applicability to the revolutionary paradigm, an implicit bias based on race, or a chosen omission due to its paramountcy. Likewise, previous pedagogical practice and common knowledge has largely marginalised study of the transformative impacts of the Haitian Revolution; luckily, that is

¹ E. Burke, *An account of the European settlements in America in six parts* (England: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1758).

² Franklin W Knight, “The Haitian Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (2000): 103-4.

³ David Geggus, “The Haitian Revolution in Atlantic Perspective,” in *The Atlantic World c.1450-c.1820*, ed. Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan (Oxford Handbooks series, Oxford University Press, 2011), 544.

⁴ Afua Cooper, “Acts of Resistance: Black Men And Women Engage Slavery In Upper Canada, 1793-1803,” *Ontario History* 99, no. 1 (2007): 7.

beginning to change.⁵ This paper attempts to discuss how the Haitian Revolution was a microcosm of slave resistance, and thus pertinent to constructions of resistance experience in the Atlantic Slave trade era as a whole and not solely an extraordinary irregularity. In using the term ‘microcosm’ this paper hopes to champion history, and resistance, as a continuum. To ensure moments of particular gravitas are not confined to only certain time frames; ‘microcosm’ implies innate exemplification of, connection to, and interplay with broader slave resistance narratives and not a facsimile. The Haitian Revolution’s complexity, performance and its existence as a manifestation of freedom all point to the Haitian Revolution as a microcosm of slave resistance as a whole.

Epitomizing the Complexity of Resistance.

Slavery itself is simultaneously a labour, carceral, legal, sexual and gender system.⁶ Thus resistance to it materializes in these same spaces, which indubitably manacles resistance to complexity. The Haitian Revolution’s display of agency and converging aspirations embodies the complexity of resistance. Firstly, the display of Haitian agency is paradoxically exuded by foreign intervention in that the ex-slaves fighters (led by Louverture) sided with whomever was offering them the ‘best’ option. Put briefly, the ex-slaves first acquired Spanish aid against the Kingdom of France, later siding with France against Spain and the United Kingdom (when it was said they had abolished slavery), and finally siding with the British against the French and Spanish (Napoleon’s intervention).⁷ Their loyalties were flexible as they deliberated their future, a notable display of agency and pragmatism that was only concerned with self-determination and abolition, not broader geopolitics. Enslaved populations were subjected to the most heinous of acts, an incomparable callousness that history should not delimit the slave fighters, particularly its leadership, to simply oppressed peoples with no mediation. The Haitian Revolution is a manifestation of agency within context. Therefore, rejecting, to some extent, Orlando Patterson’s notion of ‘social death’ and total powerlessness.⁸ The success of Toussaint and others, in concert with the nature of resistance,

⁵ John D Garrigus, “White Jacobins/Black Jacobins: Bringing the Haitian and French Revolutions Together in the Classroom,” *French Historical Studies* 23, no. 2 (2000): 260.

⁶ Dr. Afua Cooper, personal communication, 13 September 2020.

⁷ Laurent Dubois, and American Council of Learned Societies, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁸ Orlando Patterson, and American Council of Learned Societies, *Slavery and Social Death a Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

conforms to Max Webster's discussion of power dynamics being 'sociologically amorphous.'⁹ The agency of the slave fighters epitomizes the complexity of resistance as a whole.

Secondly, the notion of sovereignty and revolution proved complex, as whites and blacks both desired change, and even amongst those groups aspiration was not homogenous. The poor and elite white population of Saint-Domingue frequently toyed with autonomy from the French king, a prospect of which's desirability grew commensurately with the wealth of the free-coloured population due to racist societal dogma. Saint Domingue accounted for 80% of slaves sold in the French colonies, and three fourths of the French exhibitions as a whole. It was a prime market, and thus French settlers desired a monopoly over it.¹⁰ Colonists had rebelled against metropolitan rule and reform in the 1720s and 1760s, proving unrest was common. Moreover, only a few years before the Haitian Revolution, there had been a white-settler revolution in 1788-1792, calling for socially exclusive self-government.¹¹ Additionally, initial British intervention was an appealing alternative to conservative white settlers who opposed the regime, although ironically later they would find themselves fighting against the British. Historian David Geggus posits that the Haitian Revolution was several revolutions in one.¹² Although its outcome adhered to only certain aspirations, notably enslaved black people, the prospect of revolution was shared.

Amongst Saint Domingue's Black population, there were around 500,000 slaves, but also approximately 30,000 free-born, wealthy planters of mixed descent, commonly known as mulattos (although there were a multitude of other terms based later on their degree of blackness).¹³ Since procured wealth and power was built upon slavery, not all free-coloureds were in favour of abolition, and thus at times fought with those working against emancipatory aims. Trinidadian writer C.L.R. James trenchantly notes the color-consciousness and power struggles between blacks and mulatto was contrary to the ideals of independence and revolution.¹⁴ Interestingly, Dessalines was killed *after* independence, quelling a mulatto uprising in 1807 and encapsulating the imbroglio that was the Haitian Revolution and subscribing to a larger phenomenon that even after

⁹ Max Weber, *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* (London; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1976).

¹⁰ David Geggus, "The French Slave Trade: An Overview," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2001): 126.

¹¹ Geggus, *Haitian Revolution*, 534.

¹² *Ibid.*, 535.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 534.

¹⁴ Andrew McIntosh, "C. L. R. James and The Black Jacobins Revisited," *Society* 40, no. 4 (2003): 69-71.

“successful” revolutions unrest does not evaporate.¹⁵ The reason for enslaved participation in the revolt varied too, stemming from revenge, abolition, or simply self-determination. Rumours that leaders had been ‘conceding to black slaves’ were the most prevalent methods of burgeoning support, a common place in Caribbean uprising as a whole.¹⁶

Division existed even amongst slaves, as tensions between Creole-born and African-born slaves emerged as a result of the incessant influx of slave ships, and Creoles maintaining an upper class within the slave community, again exemplifying that it was not an immutable race war.¹⁷ The chronicle of the Haitian Revolution lacked rigid cleavages. The flexibility of the slave belligerents was on display as they sought abolition, which proved increasingly corkscrewed. Haitians persisted even as abolition was rumoured, applied, revoked, and finally taken. It was war fought on racial, gendered, and class lines, but the materialization of these notions varied immensely just as in other moments of resistance where lines were blurred because of social, political and economic self-interests. Therefore, it denies generalisation of resistance histories that suggest it only occurs on solely a dichotomous clash of victims and perpetrators. Said categories existed in Haiti, but were nuanced, therefore suggesting the revolution to be a microcosm of slave resistance.

Performing the Revolution the Role of the Subaltern

The Haitian Revolution also exemplifies the role of the subaltern groups, such as women and slaves, within the performance of resistance. Needless to say, this paper is an analysis of a slave revolt, rendering it a subaltern history in and of itself. That being said, histories have focused on Toussaint and his generals (a ‘great men’ trope of the Late Modern period) positioning them as the dominant social group of this particular history. It is worth noting that beyond the confines of this paper, Toussaint Louverture has been marginalized within the spheres of common knowledge and historical thought, despite his centrality to the archives of the Haitian Revolution. This section looks to shed light on the subaltern - women and specifically Saint Domingue slaves - within a wider subaltern study of the time, which would be enslaved people. Indeed, the Haitian microcosm does conform to R. R. Palmer’s notion that ‘aristocratic revolution’ was a catalyst for democratic

¹⁵ Carolyn E. Fick, and American Council of Learned Societies, *The Making of Haiti the Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, 1st ed. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 205.

¹⁶ Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Slavery, Freedom, and Abolition in Latin American and the Atlantic World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 238.

¹⁷ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 21.

revolution.¹⁸ However, the subaltern populations of black women and slaves were the ones that maintained its momentum. The conflict between the whites and mulattoes awoke the ‘sleeping slaves,’ a phenomenon not limited to Haitian case of resistance.¹⁹

First, we look at the historical appraisal of the Haitian revolution, and how it connects to subaltern performance of slave resistance. Barbara Bush outlined the ‘invisibility’ of black women in the history of the West Indies due to historical misconfigurations of black women accepting slavery more readily, being ‘attached’ to white men on the basis of sexual relations and conforming to stereotypical characterizations of slaves. Such one-dimensional assessments, as Bush makes evident, limit the exploration of the role of black women in slave resistance.²⁰ This analytical shortcoming is made clear with the black women of Saint Domingue, within the context of the *mulattoes* (and other various terms) and free-coloured peoples, in that the master/slave schism is muddled, thus linking the recollection of resistance performance in Haiti to wider slave resistance narratives.²¹

The centrality of women to the successfulness of the institution of slavery is embodied by the legal doctrine *partus sequitur matrem*.²² It is an adaptation of Roman law, literally translating to ‘that which follows the whom’ that suggests the children of a slave shall inherit the status of the mother, especially stark in a largely patriarchal society. This pernicious doctrine was upheld by most slave holding colonies; it rid women of their reproductive rights and allowed for the perpetuation of brutality.²³ Women in Saint-Domingue were routinely subjected to rape, and withheld them from pursuing monogamous relationships as a part of heinous colonial attempts to combat the high infant mortality and low fertility rate.²⁴ Moreover, slave ships to Saint-Domingue

¹⁸ R. R. Palmer, and American Council of Learned Societies, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959).

¹⁹ C.L.R. James as quoted in Kadish, Doris Y, “The Black Terror: Women’s Responses to Slave Revolts in Haiti,” *The French Review* 68, no. 4 (1995): 668.

²⁰ Barbara Bush and American Council of Learned Societies, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Kingston; Bloomington; Heinemann Caribbean: Indiana University Press, 1990).

²¹ Arnold A. Sio, “Race, Colour, and Miscegenation: The Free Coloured of Jamaica and Barbados,” *Caribbean Studies* 16, no. 1 (1976): 8.; David Greggus, “The Haitian Revolution in Atlantic Perspective,” in *The Atlantic World c.1450-c.1820*, ed. Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 540.

²² Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 4.

²³ Afua Cooper, “Slavery and Freedom in the Americas,” *HIST* 3380, Online Lecture, 13 September 2020.

²⁴ Jayne Boisvert, “Colonial Hell and Female Slave Resistance in Saint-Domingue,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 66.

carried more men than women and children, proliferating reliance on women. Slavers often relied on imports to replace dead slaves, creating a brutal revolving door.²⁵

Women also participated on all levels of the revolution.²⁶ It is safe to assume that women participated during the massacre of white slavers over the course of the revolution, as there was a pent up anger shared amongst slaves. Not only did women actively serve in the revolution, they also held high ranks. Marie-Jeanne Lamartinière, who led Toussaint-Louverture's army in the Battle of Crête-à-Pierrot, is one such example.²⁷ Additionally, black women were given no special treatment upon capture, being subjugated to the same punishment as other forces, thereby suggesting widespread female participation.²⁸ Along with the physical importance, the Haitian revolution exemplifies the symbolic importance of women in the performance of resistance. Catherine Flon is a national heroine, reportedly being responsible for stitching the first flag of Haiti in 1803 - a visual expression of sovereignty - and thus outlining the axial role of women in slave resistance.²⁹ Whilst Haiti has its own examples, it remains a microcosm of resistance in that the often subaltern groups bear the responsibility of the personalised and prevalent resistance performance.

Manifestations of Freedom

The chronicle of the Haitian revolution epitomized the unrest experienced by enslaved people throughout the Transatlantic slave trade in that Haiti did not pioneer slave resistance, but was the revolt with the most tangible success and concrete ramifications. Slave revolts have existed for as long as slavery itself. Rebellions have proven to take many shapes and forms, differing in scale and even in aspiration. Slavery was a diversified labour system, facilitating diverse manifestations of freedom.³⁰ Therefore, this section will look at the personalization of resistance, examples of resistance that preceded the Haitian Revolution, and those that followed it in order to highlight the correlations between said Haiti's experience with her contemporaries.

²⁵ Geggus, *French Slave Trade*, 126.

²⁶ Boisvert, *Colonial Hell and the Female Slave*, 71.

²⁷ Jana Evans Braziel, "Remembering Defilee: Dedee Baziles as Revolutionary Lieu de Memoire," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* (2005): 59.

²⁸ Philippe Girard, "Rebelle with a Cause: Women in the Haitian War of Independence, 1802–04," *Gender & History* 21, no. 1. (2009): 73.

²⁹ Nicole Willson, "Unmaking the Tricolore: Catherine Flon, Material Testimony and Occluded Narratives of Female-led Resistance in Haiti and the Haitian Diaspora," *Slavery & Abolition* 41, no. 1 (2020): 32.

³⁰ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 237.

The success of the Haitian Revolution is in large part due to the personalized manifestation of freedom and resistance of religion - in this case, Haitian Vodou. According to Laurent Dubois, Vodou is a syncretic mixture of Catholicism and West African religions, which rejected Africans' status as slaves.³¹ Versions of this blending, syncretism or cultural hybridity, are present globally. A partial appropriation and partial subversion to the values and culture of the colonised power is crucial part of identity building and the human story.³² This cultural resistance renders Haiti a microcosm of slave resistance as a whole. It is said that the larger revolt was initiated by a secret Vodou ceremony, called Bois Caïman on 14 August, allegedly led by Vodou high priests and maroons Dutty Boukman and Cecile Fatiman, in which thousands of slaves attended and later on 21 August began to kill their masters, subsequently taking control of the Northern Province.³³ Even before the revolution of 1791, Haitian Vodou proved a medium of resistance. For example, a Vodou priest named François Mackandal sparked a rebellion from 1751-57 by uniting the maroon bands and establishing a network of secret organizations among plantation slaves.³⁴ Religion, in general, served as a refuge, and thus resistance, for many slaves.³⁵ Historian Patricia Gómez-Cásseres categorizes the various Cuban religions that emerged during times of slavery as resistance to acculturation, a so-called "spiritual marronage."³⁶ Of course, Haiti had a distinct manifestation of freedom, but the medium of religion, especially a personalized one, remains constant throughout the Atlantic colonies.

Along with 'spiritual marronage,' slaves repeated physical marronage. This was the practice of running away from slavery, a frequent occurrence in enslaved societies.³⁷ Fugitivity was not only integral to the success of the Haitian Revolution (it was catalysed by maroons, and morale was largely sustained by them) but also essential to resistance moments in the Atlantic.³⁸ The most well-known (yet still sparsely discussed in standard curricula) community of maroons

³¹ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 40-4.

³² Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 83.

³³ Perry James, *Arrogant Armies: Great Military Disasters and the Generals Behind Them* (Edison, NJ: CastleBooks, 2005), 60.

³⁴ Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean: From the Arawak and the Carib to the Present* (New York: Facts on File, 1992), 80.

³⁵ Katharine Gerbner, "Religion, Community, and Slavery on the Colonial Southern Frontier," *The Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 4 (2016): 906.

³⁶ Patricia Gómez-Cásseres, "Afro-Cuban Religions: Spiritual Marronage and Resistance," *Social and Economic Studies* 67, no. 1 (2018): 118.

³⁷ Cooper, *Slavery and Freedom in the Americas*.

³⁸ Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 4.

was Quilombo dos Palmares, located in North-Eastern Brazil, whose history was adapted to film by Carlos Diegues in 1984. The prevalence of marronage as a whole deteriorates early scholarly machinations of slavery that posited it was intrinsically unfree, just as the Haitian Revolution epitomizes agency and resistance within the context of slavery. The mythos the maroon leaders' capacity for freedom, exemplified by Nanny of the maroons in Jamaica, and Zumbi of Palmares, was also widespread.³⁹ Perhaps this inspiration was a latent form of resistance that was to make itself clear within other revolts, similar to how white colonists feared the Haitian Revolution would embolden other black diaspora slave societies to pursue their own freedom.⁴⁰ Revolts after 1804 highlight Haiti's suitability as a microcosm in that they persisted until slavery was universally abolished, notably the series of revolts in 1812 in Puerto Rico and in Cuba.⁴¹

Moreover, the 1823 Demerara Revolt and Busas Rebellion, in concert with other maroon communities that were to emerge, especially in Brazil which was late to abolish slavery.⁴² Even the American Civil War echoes the Haitian chronicle, regardless of debate over its causes.⁴³ Therefore marronage, both spiritual and physical, as well as the emergence of other revolts, parallel the aspirations of sovereignty exhibited by Toussaint-Louverture and Dessalines.

Conclusion

The Haitian Revolution exists as a microcosm of Transatlantic slave trade-era resistance due to its complexity, performance, and the multiplicity of resistance events beyond Haiti, such as marronage. Its global ramifications are also worth mentioning, as it quashed Napoleon's dream of an Atlantic empire, forcing him to sell Louisiana in hopes of financing the Napoleonic Wars. It proved the racist apprehensions and superiority complexes of the 'civilised' whites to not only be unjust and flawed, but also abhorrent. The Haitian microcosm pertains to slave resistance in the Transatlantic slave trade era, but also of other anti-colonial struggles. Once we understand colonialism as the method of empire, we can then position the Haitian revolution as the underlying historical blueprint for the collapse of empires.⁴⁴ This rings especially true for the struggles of

³⁹ Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 100.

⁴⁰ Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution*, 545.

⁴¹ Schmidt-Nowara, *Slavery, Freedom, and Abolition*, 230.

⁴² Cooper, *Slavery and Freedom in the Americas*.

⁴³ Geggus, *Haitian Revolution*, 544.

⁴⁴ Deborah Cowen, "Following the Infrastructures of Empire: Notes on Cities, Settler Colonialism, and Method," *Urban Geography* 41, no. 4 (2020): 469-86.

independence in Africa during the 20th century.⁴⁵ Although this analysis does emphasize similarity, it should not be taken as platitudinous. The Haitian Revolution remains a moment worthy of celebration and is continuing to be more commonly commemorated outside of the black diaspora.⁴⁶ Its French or American counterparts get more recognition, but the Haitian Revolution of 1804 stands alone amongst nations of her time as the only nation-state truly committed, even if only for an instant, to freedom. It shall be immortalized by textbooks and retaught globally to ensure not only its history is enshrined within memory, but also its lessons.

⁴⁵ Branwen Gruffydd Jones, "From Rupture to Revolution: Race, Culture and the Practice of Anti-colonial Thought," *African Identities* 13, no. 1 (2015): 4-17.

⁴⁶ Charles Forsdick, "Interpreting 2004: Politics, Memory, Scholarship," *Small Axe*, no. 27 (2008): 1-13.

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