The Making of Haiti

The Saint Domingue Revolution
from Below

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Slavery and Slave Society

At its height in 1789, the French colony of Saint Domingue, the Pearl of the Antilles and the pride of France, was by far the wealthiest and most flourishing of the slave colonies in the Caribbean. The tremendous fortunes amassed by the white planters, as well as the merchant bourgeoisie of that era, had been generated by the forced labor of over half a million black slaves, raided from their homelands in Africa and forcibly brought to the New World to fill the preeminent and ever-expanding demand for labor and profits. Yet there was very little in its early seventeenth-century beginnings to indicate that Saint Domingue would become the colonial Hercules that she was by the eve of the revolution. The first French settlers were, in fact, of a dubious nature, composed of former *filibusters*, or pirates and freebooters operating in the coastal waters, along with the inland *boucaniers* involved in hunting and the trafficking of hides. What little subsistence farming the *boucaniers* did engage in eventually gave way, by the 1670s, to the more lucrative exploitation of tobacco and, by 1685, of indigo, thus initiating the transition to a plantation-oriented economy and the introduction of forced labor. The first imported laborers to Saint Domingue, however, were the *engagees*, or white indentured servants of peasant and laboring class origins, initially from the western maritime region of France, who came to serve under three-year contracts and eventually worked and lived side by side in near-equal numbers with black slaves. It was the conversion to indigo, though, financed in part through capital derived from spurious *filibuster* operations, that accelerated the utilization of Africans as plantation laborers. The larger-scale, labor-intensive production of sugar and the exclusive induction of black slaves into the colonial work force were by then hardly two decades away, with the engagees eventually occupying the lower ranks of *économe*, or overseer, specialized tradesmen, and, occasionally, steward on the plantations.

It was from these disparate elements that a dominant white colonial planter class emerged in the eighteenth century, and by the eve of the revolution constituted the most significant segment of the white population, for it
was upon the plantation system and slave labor that the entire economy and wealth of Saint Domingue depended. During the latter decades of the colonial regime, however, most planters no longer claimed permanent residence in the colony. Indeed, one rarely came to Saint Domingue with the desire to stay any longer than it would take to make a quick fortune. Simply stated, the first and foremost aim of the planters was to make money, to make more money, and to make it all as quickly as possible in order to return to France to enjoy the luxuries and comforts that their overseas investments ensured them. In general, most colonists considered themselves as mere travelers in the colony and spoke continually of returning or of returning to France within the following year. In fact, a significant portion of the planter class seldom, if ever, set foot on the island.1

These absentee planters were represented in the colony either by their agents or plantation managers, who kept them more or less informed of production levels, profits, expenses, and the general operations of the plantation. The agent or procureur, a usually a permanent resident in the colony, thus took over full administration of the plantation and assumed all the rights and prerogatives of the owner. In his turn, the procureur could become a plantation owner himself. But the delegation of powers to an agent almost invariably meant harsher treatment for the slaves than if the master were present to check the excesses of an overzealous or often sadistic overseer.2

For the colonial planter, life was generally one of monotony and isolation, compensated by sheer dissipation and indulgence.3 The arrogance and conceit of the white planters was sustained by surrounding themselves with a swarm of domestic slaves to satisfy every need, want, or caprice. Indeed, the most visible sign of wealth and the most flagrant indication of superiority consisted in the number of domestic slaves at one's disposal, for “the dignity of a rich man consisted in having four times as many domestics as he needed.” To further ensure their prestige and enhance their status, some planters would usurp nobility by merely inventing a fictitious past, laying false claims to their ancestry, and thereby hiding their lowly origins.4

Yet all this extravagance merely contributed to the boredom and social alienation of the typical planter, separated as he was by long distances over deplorable roads from the nearest neighbor. Whatever social life existed in Saint Domingue was to be found in the two principal cities of Le Cap and Port-au-Prince, where the cultural and intellectual activities of the colony were centered. Although attempting to imitate French culture, the cities were nonetheless vulnerable to local habit, debauchery, and decadent lifestyles; so for the rural planter, social life centered invariably around his business: his slaves, his sugar, his cotton, his coffee, his profits.

These planters, as well as their white counterparts in the cities—the representatives of the French maritime bourgeoisie and the French-born bureaucracy—were collectively known in the island as the grands blancs. At the head of the bureaucracy were the governor and the intendant, both appointed by the king as his official representatives and charged with the functions and control of colonial administration. Together they represented the absolute authority of the king, against which there was no recourse, and thus created a constant source of bitterness for the colonists. The planters hated them for their arrogant, despotic pretensions and were only further frustrated by the special privileges and protection accorded by the Crown to the merchant bourgeoisie.

Alongside the grands blancs in city and country were the lower- and middle-class whites who, as plantation managers, procureurs, and économes in the country, were known as petits blancs. In the towns, they occupied positions as lawyers, shopkeepers, retail merchants, grocers, and tradesmen, usually carpenters or musars. While many of the petits blancs were descendants of the former seventeenth-century engagés, there were also among the urban “small” whites a whole host of vagabonds, petty criminals, debtors, and soldiers-of-fortune who swarmed to Saint Domingue, where, regardless of one’s background or origin, the single privilege of race could elevate the most despicable to a position of social respectability.5 A British soldier who was sent to Saint Domingue some years after the revolution began, spoke of “the necessity the White People are under, of making a pointed difference between the two Colours.”6

It would be an oversimplification, however, to argue, as one historian has done, that despite the social and economic differences that separated the planters from the petits blancs, these differences were of relatively minor importance since they were submerged under the one unifying factor of race prejudice, tending to be the diverse sections of the white population.7

Race prejudice was undeniable practiced by white society against the mulattoes and the blacks, and by virtue of the common bond of superiority that membership in the white race alone afforded them, the various categories of whites, as diverse in their origins as in their social and political functions, nonetheless formed a distinct and privileged social caste. Their superiority thus extended not only over the entire mass of black slaves—some fifteen times their own number—but, as well, over the afrancises, or free persons of color, who constituted an intermediate sector of colonial society but whose numbers, estimated roughly at twenty-seven thousand, nearly equaled that of the whites.8 There was a universally accepted and a judicially enforced
increased over time to hold a near-equal balance with the white population. The most dramatic rate of increase, however, occurred in the last two decades of the colonial regime, when the free-colored population jumped from a mere 9,000 in 1770 to 27,300 in 1789, nearly twice the increase of the white population for the same period. In fact, by 1789, Douay's numbers had far exceeded their total in the rest of the French and British West Indies combined. Even more alarming for whites was that this demographic increase paralleled a sustained economic growth among the affranchis.

If at first the afrianchis provided competition with the petits blancs for jobs in the specialized trades on the plantations, by mid-century and especially after 1763, many had become plantation owners themselves at the rise and rapid expansion of coffee production brought much of the underdeveloped mountainous regions of the West and the virtual frontier in the South under cultivation and ownership by the afrianchis. Through industry, thrift, and a characteristically sober life style, they had made considerable economic strides and were amassing fortunes that rivalled and, at times, surpassed those of some whites. Thus, moreover, was becoming disturbingly evident as early as the 1750s, as the colonial administrators inquired the ministry of the marine:

These men are beginning to fill the colon and it is of the greatest perversion in the white society to see them throw off continually increasing amongst the whites, with fortunes that are greater than those of the whites. Their steels (sugar) is increasing at an alarming rate, it accumulates large capital, finally and unemployment. Thus, when interests periodically clashed between the colonial planters and the royal bureaucracy, times culminating in defiance or rebellion, it was among these disaffected elements of the petits blancs that the planters readily recruited their support. And equally as bitterly, the colonial planters opposed the metropolitan bourgeoisie, the great merchants and slave traders by whom, because of their exclusive commerical privileges, they felt unjustly exploited. Filled with feelings of autonomy and of contempt for metropolitan authority, the colonial planters saw themselves as the legitimate heirs to Saint Domingue as an enframed race by virtue of their residence in the colony, and they increasingly came to resent the absentee owners of their own lands for their affiliations with the metropole.

But beneath these divergent elements were the free mulattos and free blacks who, because of their color, constituted an immediate class between the white and the slaves. Due to the widespread practice of concubinage by the white masters with their female slaves, followed by eventual grants of freedom to the offspring of such unions, a free colored population emerged at the beginning of the eighteenth century and, by 1789, had
return to Europe or even inheritors of property upon the father's death. 2

By 1703, at least three hundred white planters were married to women of color in Saint Domingue, in spite of the laws that punished them as such. 23 The affranchis imitated white manners, were often educated in France, and, in turn, sent their own children abroad to be educated. Having become slave-holding plantation owners, they could even employ white contract labor among the petits blancs.

Not only did their situation pose a potential threat to the political hegemony of the whites, but because of their color and their free status, the whites saw them as a threat to racial hegemony in the colony and, from there, to the maintenance of slavery itself. The irony of it was that many of the affranchis were themselves slaveowners and, if only theoretically, allies of property with the whites. 24 So it was only through repressive social legislation that the whites of Saint Domingue could hope to maintain their privileges and prerogatives against the economic and social encroachments of the affranchis. A memoir from the king sent to the intendant and the governor of Martinique in 1777 unequivocally stated the policy of the metropolis concerning the state of the colored population in the French colonies: "The gens de couleur are either free or slave: The free are affranchis and descendants of affranchis; however far removed they may be from their [black] origins, they retain forever the imprint of slavery." 25 This, then, was the general principle preventing any effective assimilation with the whites. By virtue of their racial origins, the affranchis were legally defined, for all intents and purposes, as a distinct and subordinate social "caste."

Although restrictions against the social advancement of the affranchis date as far back as the early 1720s, the turning point in colonial, as in metropolitan, legislation came after 1763 and accompanied both the economic and demographic explosion of the affranchis. 26 By strictly forbidding free persons of color to hold any public office in the colony, to practice law, medicine, pharmacy, or certain privileged trades, such as that of goldsmith, 27 the whites sought to establish insurmountable barriers to frustrate the social and political aspirations of the free coloreds and to preclude all possibility of their assimilation on an equal basis. Yet at the same time, the affranchis were required to participate in the defense of the colony, as an ordinance of 1768 made militia duty compulsory for all free mulattoes and free blacks between the ages of fifteen and fifty-five. They were to provide their own uniforms and equipment, to serve in separate units, and would be commanded by white officers. 28 In addition, a local law-enforcing body, the marechaussée, had been created for the chief purpose of hunting down and capturing runaway slaves, or maroons; it was composed exclusively of affranchis, whose superior capabilities in pursuing slave deserters into inaccessible and dangerous mountain retreats were candidly recognized by colonial authorities. 29 By making the composition of the marechaussée exclusively colored, the whites could incidentally reinforce the contempt of the free mulatto but his own black origins and at the same time exploit his difficulties to a white slave society, even though it denied him full equality.

The colonists left nothing to circumstance, though, and out of their own fears of slave conspiracy denied the affranchis the right to freely assemble in public after 9 p.m. for any reason whatsoever, be it for a wedding, for a public dance, or any other festivity. This was punishable by a fine of three hundred livres for the first offense and the loss of freedom for any subsequent offense. The free blacks also risked losing their freedom if caught sheltering or in any way aiding a fugitive slave. The mulattoes and free blacks were equally forbidden to engage in games of chance and, by the 1770s, to travel to or enter France for any purpose. 30 They were forbidden to take the name of their former master and natural parent. Their inferior status was reinforced by regulations stipulating their mode of dress in the colony, both to degrade and humiliate them and at the same time to prevent assimilation. 31 In short, outside of owning property and slaves, about "the only privilege the whites allowed them," as James wrote, "was the privilege of lending white men money." 32

If the affranchis thought of themselves as equal, deference reminded them that, in social relations with the whites, they were still inferior. Should they invite a white to their house for dinner, they could not sit with that person at the same table. They were obliged by law to submit with utmost respect to the arrogance and contempt which whites not uncommonly displayed toward them. 33 A mulatto who publicly struck a white person in retaliation, in self-defense, or for any other reason could ultimately (even though it rarely happened) be punished by having his right arm cut off. 34 But, "for insults and a premeditated assault" on a white man, one free black was condemned to death by hanging. And since it was imperative to keep free blacks and slaves subordinate, the Crown ordered that the decree be published throughout the colony. A free mulatto of le Cap was sentenced to three years on the public chain gang for having raised his hand against a white man who forcibly tried to remove a slave woman accompanying him along the road. Another free mulatto received the same sentence simply for causing a white man to fall off his chair when he threw a stone that broke the cross bar. On the other hand, a white man of le Cap, having struck a free mulatto and nearly causing him to lose his eye, was simply fined three thousand livres. 35 In spite of their freedom from the institution of slavery, the mulattoes, as the free blacks, never escaped the opprobrium of their origins.

But the great mass of the population consisted of the slaves, and it was upon their backs that the tremendous fortunes of the colonial planters, as
of the French maritime bourgeoisie, were built. It was upon their continuous labor, as slaves, that all this seemingly endless prosperity depended. By 1789, Saint Domingue boasted well over seven thousand plantations, over three thousand in indigo, twenty-five hundred in coffee, close to eight hundred in cotton, and some fifty odd in cocoa, but the cornerstone of her economy and the key to her rapid expansion was sugar. If prior to 1690 the colony had not one sugar plantation, within fifteen years there were already 120, more than 100 of these being established over a mere four-year period from 1700 to 1704. The first decade of the eighteenth century thus set in motion a veritable "take-off" period for what would be another eighty-five years of sustained and unparalleled growth. By mid-century, the number of sugar plantations had increased fivefold to six thousand and reached its peak near eight hundred on the eve of the revolution, making the colony by far the single most important sugar colony of the Caribbean (having long since surpassed Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Lesser Antilles, as well as Barbados, in the British West Indies) and certainly one of the greatest wealth-producing colonies of the world. But the explanation for that wealth may, in part, be found in the particular requirements of sugar production itself. The cultivation of cane and the multi-stage process of producing sugar necessitated both a large and a highly diversified labor force. This invariably brought about dramatic increases in the number of slaves imported into the colony and provided perhaps the greatest impetus to the expansion of the French slave trade in the eighteenth century.

By comparison, the seventeenth-century slave trade was almost insignificant, supplying the French West Indies with little more than one or two thousand slaves annually toward the end of the century. Though figures for the eighteenth century periodically fluctuate, they reached an overall average from 1700 to 1792 of some 14,500 captives per year. In actual numbers, however, the slave trade had significantly increased after the Seven Years' War, averaging roughly 26,400 per year from 1764 to 1792, and, in the last decade of the colonial regime, from 1783 to 1792, some 37,000 slaves per year. A highly lucrative business, the slave trade was by no means an autarkic economic activity, but a constituent part of a much broader and more highly diversified system tying together slavery, the colonial slave trade, colonial commerce (including both colonial imports and their reexportation to foreign markets throughout Europe), and the slave trade into an interdependent and interlocking web. In most cases the amrapeur, or outfitter, of a slaving expedition to Africa was also an importer of colonial commodities, which were loaded in the islands for the return voyage to France once the captives were sold to colonial planters. In fact, more often than not, colonists made partial payment for their slaves with colonial products, usually sugar or coffee. According to official government statistics for 1789, the value of colonial imports to France, primarily sugar and coffee, as well as indigo, cotton, cocoa, and a few hued, had soared to roughly 218 million livres. Although exports from the metropole to the islands, such as flour, meat, wine, and textiles, totaled 78 million livres by comparison, still, a full two-thirds of the 218 million livres were reexported to the markets of Europe, either in bulk or after having eventually been turned into refined goods.

Bordeaux was without question the center of the French colonial trade. By the end of the Old Regime, the city was furnishing over 50 percent of Saint Domingue's imports from France and by the 1760s already accounted for up to half of all French exports of colonial commodities to Europe. With such a tremendous volume of imports and exports, where "so much wealth provided endless possibilities for enterprising businessmen," there was little reason for Bordeaux merchants to invest directly in the slave trade, which actually existed only as an auxiliary element in the local economy. Yet without slavery and the slave trade to supply the laborers producing the colonial commodities, Bordeaux's role as the center of the French colonial trade would have been diminished considerably. Colossal economic prosperity hinged on sugar, and sugar production, a labor-intensive operation, required massive numbers of slaves. The slave trade was thus fundamental to the triangular system and, in fact, became the cornerstone of the Nantes economy, as it additionally stimulated and directly financed other sectors of economic activity, foremost among which was shipbuilding, but which also included printed textiles, iron works, and sugar refining.

These derivative activities were hardly exclusive to Nantes, however. As in the area of refining, colonial sugar supplied the refineries of Orléans, Dieppe, de Bercy-Paris, Marseilles, and, of course, Bordeaux. In the Bordeaux suburbs alone, some sixteen refineries had been in operation by the mid-eighteenth century and, as early as 1740, were refining a yearly average of fifty shiploads of raw sugar at roughly two hundred tons each. Whereas, by the eve of the revolution, her sister city, Nantes, had become the shipbuilding leader of all French ports in order to meet the needs of the slave trade, for Bordeaux the shipbuilding industry, as that of refining, rapidly flourished in response to her colonial trade. One may safely say, then, that the colonies contributed to the development of French industry while, at the same time, supporting a sizable portion of her international trade, as well. As to the political virility of the French bourgeoisie on the eve of the revolution, it had, as Jean-Jaures observed, been bolstered by the fortunes generated both directly and indirectly by the slave trade itself: "Sad irony of human history! The fortunes created at Bordeaux, at Nantes, by the slave trade gave to the bourgeoisie that pride which demanded liberty and so contributed to human emancipation."
Perhaps the most important source of wealth for the maritime bourgeoisie, however, lay in the area of finance capital. As most colonists had insufficient capital to purchase slaves outright, credit was extended to the planter, allowing him to delay or defer his payments over several years. Habitually, colonists simply refused to honor the totality of their obligations, and at least 10 percent of their debt to slaves was regularly unpaid. During the final decade of the Old Regime, the period from 1783 to 1792, the slave-trading debts of colonial planters to the Nantes traders had reached some 45 million livres, much of which, with the outbreak of the Saint Domingue slave revolution, would never get paid. Nonpayment or deferred payment of debts by colonists was actually endemic to their situation and not a particular feature of the end of a regime. One colonial administrator complained in 1733 that "all the colonists owe twice as much as they own. The practice here is that, when they have borrowed, they do not reimburse; when they buy some land or a plantation, they never pay." But if merchants and traders were creditors to the colonial planters (a situation they did not appreciate), they themselves had become debtors to the process.

To offset the colonial debts owed them and their own consequent lack of capital reserve, they borrowed heavily from the huge banking houses of Paris, as well as those of Bordeaux, Nantes, or Marseilles, locally. Many a slave trader finally found himself in the position of having to take over the financially troubled plantation of a debtor colonist, thus becoming concurrently a plantation owner and a buyer of slaves, as well as a supplier of slaves and shipper of colonial raw material. His reliance, if not dependence, upon the Parisian (and often foreign) banks was, on the one hand, reinforced, while, on the other, he began to play an increasingly direct role in the colonial economy and in colonial affairs.

Relations between crediteurs planters and the French merchant bourgeoisie were characteristically marked by deep hostilities and jealousies on both sides. If the merchants saw the colonial planters as a vile and deceiving race of profiteers, unscrupulously defrauding them of their produce for personal gain, the planters hated the merchants for the unfair (as they saw it) privileges bestowed upon them by French mercantile policy. According to the policy known as the Exclusive, dating back to the days of Colbert, "the colonies are founded by and for the Metropole." That is, to assure maximum economic benefits for the mother country, all manufactured goods consumed by the colonists were imported from France. By the same token, all exports of raw materials from the colony were to be sold exclusively to France and to be carried exclusively aboard French ships. The mercantile policy of the Crown both encouraged and sustained the economic growth of the merchant bourgeoisie while leaving the Saint Domingue planter virtually in a state of political and economic dependency upon the metropolis. The smuggling by planters of cheaper foreign or even foodstuffs and finished goods, into Saint Domingue was thus far from uncommon and a practice that further exacerbated relations between colonists and French metropolitan merchants. Many of whom had by now also become absentee owners. If their interests happened to coincide, relations might superficially be cordial, but on the whole, they remained perpetually antagonistic and characteristically hostile.

By 1789 nearly every sector of colonial society was in a state of unrest—slave against master, multitudes against white, "small" white against "big" white, both of the latter, at various times, against the local administration and especially the French bourgeoisie. While alliances might be made among groups against a common enemy, such alliances were occasional and of short duration, to serve only immediate interests. On the eve of the revolution, each group had its own grievances, and each represented particular interests arising out of the specific conditions and contradictions of class and caste, intertwined and confused as they were by the colonial politics of race.

But once the revolution had opened, it was not the sedulous activities of colonial planters seeking independence from French authority, but the great mass of black slaves themselves, who would deliver the decisive death blow to colonial Saint Domingue. When they revolted in full force in 1791 and forward, the whole system, already seriously shaky, crumbled into pieces impossible to put together again. The year 1791 marked the climax of a long and deep-rooted tradition of slave resistance in many forms, some overt, some covert, some individual, and some collective, some even potentially self-destructive. In conjunction with the impact and influence of the French Revolution, which provided the historical conditions for the emergence of a full-scale revolution in Saint Domingue, the more limited scope of traditional slave resistance was thrown wide open. New avenues and alternatives for achieving old goals were now within reach. Even more than by the legislative decrees of France, it was through the obtrusive intervention of their own efforts, their own popular initiative, and often spontaneously organized activities into a complex web of political and military events, such as the Saint Domingue slaves won their own freedom and finally became a politically independent nation.

By 1789, two-thirds of the roughly half a million slaves in Saint Domingue were African-born.25 Over a period of three centuries, Africans had been uprooted by force from their homelands, packed on slave ships, and sold in the Americas to fill a constantly expanding demand for labor in what one writer has called "the most colossal demographic event of modern times."
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With the slave trade, however, came a rich diversity of African cultures, nations, tribes, languages, religions, classes, customs, all subsumed under the dominant structure of slave society in Saint Domingue. In his Description... de l'île de Saint-Domingue, Moreau de Saint-Mery delineated three major regions of Africa from which the slaves of Saint Domingue were successively extracted. The first arrivals in the early sixteenth century came chiefly from the region and outlying areas of Senegal on the upper west coast and were generally of the Islamic faith, from there. European slaves moved southward during the seventeenth and especially eighteenth centuries along the west coast toward the Gulf of Guinea, where they replenished their supplies in human cargo. Here in the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast (Ghana), and the Slave Coast (roughly, Togo, Benin, and a part of western Nigeria) were to be found twenty-five nations or tribes, including Dahomeans, Ardas, Haussas, Ibos, Yorubas, Mina, Niterables, and Bourripui, among many others. A third and equally important regional grouping of slaves came from the kingdoms of the Congo and Angola, south of the equator, and even, to a significant degree after 1773, from Mozambique on the east coast of Africa. In general, one can safely say that by the latter part of the eighteenth century these last two regional groupings, whose belief systems and patterns of thought were essentially animistic, not only represented the vast majority of the slaves introduced into the colony, but also constituted the overall cultural framework, wherein voodoo, that most vital spiritual force in the slave culture of Saint Domingue, derived its distinctive characteristics.

The French observer, Hilliard d'Aubertueil, estimated that during the years from 1660 to 1776, over 800,000 slaves had been imported from Africa to Saint Domingue. By the end of that period, when he wrote, there were only 290,000. He went on to say, as did Père Labat for the seventeenth century, that over one-third of the Africans brought to the colony died off within the first few years. Such an excessive mortality rate among the newly arrived slaves was due as much to the psychological shock of becoming a slave, to moral despondency and an inability to rapidly adapt and physically resist the rigors of chattel slavery, as to the grossly inhuman conditions aboard the slave ships and to resulting sicknesses, not the least of which was scurvy. Through his extensive research of plantation papers and colonial correspondence for eighteenth-century Saint Domingue, Deben has found that the mortality rates of newly purchased Africans during the first three to eight years of their induction could—with exaggeration—be generally evaluated at 50 percent, thus confirming the approximation of the eighteenth-century French antislavery advocate Frossard.

The fact was, the slave population of Saint Domingue never reproduced itself, and the reasons lay squarely on the conditions and economic relations of slavery itself. In fact, d'Aubertueil estimated the working life of an average plantation slave who was born in the colony to be little more than fifteen years, and it was certainly no longer than that for civilized Africans who had survived the initial years. Slave mortality, it seems, was a matter of overwork, undernourishment, and the absolution of the masters. These slaves were literally worked to death because they were the units of production and, as such, represented an investment that, once amortized, had already yielded its profit. So, once dead, infirm, or otherwise physically unable to continue working, they were replaced by additional investments in new slaves. Indicative of this pattern was the age distribution of slaves on most plantations: the principal age group consisted of slaves between the ages of seventeen or eighteen and thirty-five. Given the disproportionately high fertility rate among slave women, this necessarily required a constant influx of new acquisitions into slaves.

To assure the submission of the slaves and the master of the owners, slaves were introduced into the colony and eventually integrated into the plantation labor system within an overall context of social alienation and psychological, as well as physical, violence. Parental and kinship ties were broken; their names were changed; their bodies were branded with red-hot irons to designate their new owners; and the slave who was once a social member of a structured community in Africa had, in a matter of months, become what has now been termed a "socially dead person," that is, one who no longer had a socially recognized existence, either before law or by custom, outside of the master whose authority was absolute. Given these odds, most slaves had little choice but to submit and hope to survive. Their actual introduction into the labor force, however, followed a short period of acclimatization, usually six to twelve months, during which they were assigned a slave tutor and a small plot of land to begin cultivating; as well, they usually were required to build their own quarters. This period of transition was supposed to ease the pains of adjustment to the new environment and to the conditions and economic demands of the owners. However, despite all the preparatory measures taken by the planters, or for that matter because of those inadequately taken, from one-third to one-half of the newly arrived slaves, as we have seen, died off during the first few years.

Those who survived and were fully inducted into the plantation system occupied a variety of positions. In general, slave laborers on all plantations were organized into work groups, or crews, usually one or two major ones and a smaller one. The first were composed of the strongest and healthiest slaves, both men and women, doing the heaviest and hardest work, such as the tilling and clearing of the soil, digging the ditches and canals, planting and picking on the coffee estates, or cutting the cane on the sugar plantations, as well as the cutting and clearing of trees and extraction of rocks.
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which were tasks undertaken by the men. These workers were under the direct orders of the driver, or commandeur, himself a slave.

In the smaller or secondary atelier, then, one would find the less robust: the newly arrived Africans not yet integrated into the regular work force; women in their seventh or eighth month of pregnancy and others who were nursing infants, as well as children between eight and thirteen who were not yet ready for the major atelier. Work in these smaller ateliers was generally lighter and more varied, such as planting foodstuffs, fertilizing plants, or weeding and clearing dried leaves from the cane. As in the major ateliers, however, they too were subject to the direct orders of a commandeur.

The oft-quoted observations of Girod-Chantarre, a Swiss traveller of the time, vividly describe the working conditions of the field slaves on a typical sugar plantation, where:

The slaves numbered roughly one hundred men and women of different ages, all engaged in digging ditches in a cane field [in preparation for the planting of the cane], most of them naked or dressed in rags. The sun beat straight down on their heads; sweat ran from all parts of their bodies. Their arms and legs, worn out by excessive heat, by the weight of their picks and by the resistance of the slavery soil, became so hardened that it broke their tools. The slaves nevertheless made tremendous efforts to overcome all obstacles. A dead silence reigned among them. In their faces, one could see the human suffering and pain they endured, but the time for rest had not yet come. The merciless eye of the plantation steward watched over the workers while several foremen, dispersed among the workers and armed with long whips, delivered harsh blows to those who seemed too weak to sustain the pace and were forced to slow down. Men, women, young and old alike—none escaped the crack of the whip if they could not keep up the pace. 50

By far the most intense utilization of the slaves' labor was on the sugar plantations, where, during the harvest and grinding season, an ordinary workday could easily average eighteen to twenty hours. Because of the nature of sugar production, work on the plantation was almost nonstop and followed a nearly complete twenty-four-hour schedule. As one historian put it, "the operations of cutting, hauling, grinding, clarification, filtration, evaporation and crystallization had to be carried out in that order, without interruption, simultaneously, and at top speed. 51 Since the processing of the cane once cut had to be completed in a matter of hours lest its yield in juice diminish and spoil, night work was inevitable. For the night shifts, slaves were recruited from the major atelier and divided into four sections, the first two working from eight to midnight, and the second two from midnight until six the next morning. 52 Night work for the first shift naturally followed a full day's work of cutting and hauling in the fields from five or six in the morning until sundown at six or thirty in the evening. Equally, work for the second shift of slaves preceded a full twelve-hour workday that ended at six the following evening. Each night shift alternated with the other so as to keep operations uninterupted. So, during the grinding season, which ran for five to six months, roughly from January to July, many a slave received little more than four hours sleep per day. The only compensation for night work was a slightly better diet and more tasks.

In general, women were used to load the mills for grinding. It was a particularly dangerous task as one could easily lose a finger, a hand, or one's whole arm in the mill wheel, and all the more dangerous since it was part of the night work. 53 Once the juice was extracted, the residue cane, or bagasse, later to be used as fuel for the boilers, was gathered and stacked by children and the less vigorous slaves. 54 Once the grinding was done and their shift over, these women and children were then sent back to the fields.

Simultaneous with this operation, the boilers (usually arranged in a series of five) were maintained by slaves—who stoked the fires from beneath, while several others, specially selected for their capabilities, supervised the whole process from boiling to eventual crystallization. These workers remained at their posts and were separated from the ordinary field slaves, at least for the grinding season, before returning to the fields themselves. All were supervised by a head master, or maître-sucrier, usually a white plantation employee but not uncommonly an exceptional black slave. As can be imagined, when the maître-sucrier was himself a slave, frictions and jealousies were easily aroused between him and the commandeur, the two positions being of relatively equal importance in sugar production and requiring much the same knowledge of soil conditions, watering, fertilization, the health and maturity of the plants, their openness when cut, and so forth. In fact, the maître-sucrier could often become a commandeur and vice versa. 55

The type of work, however, the rhythm of production, and the intensity of labor in which a slave was involved varied both according to the season and the nature of the crop being produced. While the sugar plantations were by far the most labor-intensive, on the coffee plantations, where the rhythm and seasonality of production were quite different, work was less arduous and the hours just as long. These estates were situated on mountainous slopes in the newer, unexplored and unsettled regions of the colony, where the climate was far cooler and the rains more frequent. Yet this hardy made for healthier living or working conditions for the slaves. Ill-protected against the evening and night shift with inadequate clothing, ill-fed, undernourished, and overworked, the slaves on the coffee plantations suffered a mortality rate that was exceedingly high, 56 especially so since the slaves on these plantations were almost entirely Africans, many having just arrived. Although the planting and intermittent harvesting of coffee was, by comparison with work on the sugar estates, less routine and rigid and the discipline somewhat less
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exacting, night work was also a regular feature of the working day, and it followed a full day's harvesting and gleanings. After the evening meal, slaves continued to sort and husk the coffee beans, often until midnight, and sometimes even after. So here, too, the slave was often left with no more than five hours sleep. As on the sugar plantations, labor was divided into ateliers, and the workers supervised by a commandeur.

The role of the commandeur on the plantations was central, for it was upon him that the rhythm of work in the fields depended and under his direct authority that the vast majority of the slaves labored. More often than not, especially toward the end of the colonial period, he was recruited from among the creole slaves and would be a person whose general demeanor projected authority and commanded respect. He would be in his prime, intelligent, one who knew how to execute the orders he received and who in turn was obeyed by those under his command. To enhance his prestige and stature, he would receive finer clothing than the other slaves at the end of the year, and he was, in general, even better dressed than many a domestic slave. Although he was never led to expect favors gratuitously, neither was he left without a reasonable hope of receiving them. Often he was consulted by the master for advice on purchasing new slaves of a particular nation or on purchasing a former runaway at auction. In a sense, this preferential treatment and these decision-making opportunities created the illusion for the commandeur that he was himself a plantation steward. But if his privileged position and authority within the slave hierarchy set him apart from the mass of laborers and cast him in an envious light, on the one hand, it was, on the other, these very same authoritative qualities and daily contact with his white superiors that made the commandeur a potential revolutionary leader. As Deben summed it up, he was the life and soul of the plantation. He knew the slaves well—the particular disposition, personality, capabilities, and limitations of each one. So if the smooth functioning and uninterrupted pace of work and production depended on the commandeur, so too did the spirit of rebellion and organizational potential for revolutionary activity among the plantation workforce. And as we shall see later, much of the success of the August 1791 revolt in the West Indies was due to the pivotal and influential role of the commandeur. Toward the end of the colonial period, in fact, it was not uncommon to find a commandeur at the head of an entire atelier engaged in collective maroonage.

Also in the upper ranks of the slave-labor hierarchy on the plantations were the artisans, or nègres à talent: carpenters, cooperers, masons, wheelwrights, cartwrights, loggers, and guardians of the animals, the latter usually being former or retired commandeurs. And finally, apart from those who labored in the productive process were the domestics. Given their exposure to and contact with white society, they also were instrumental in propagating resistance movements throughout the colonial period, as well as on the eve of the 1791 outbreak. Their rank was visibly enhanced by finer clothing, better food, a far less arduous work schedule than the field laborers and, in general, somewhat better treatment by the masters, whom they often accompanied on trips back to France. But regardless of one's rank or station in slavery, in Saint Domingue a slave was a slave and was at all times subject to the economic vicissitudes of the system. Thus, domestic slave families serving the same master for several generations, or extended families through marriage in the same parish or district, could face the very real possibility of having parental ties indiscriminately broken up should the owner choose to sell his plantation or return to France. On these occasions, domestics were often relegated to the fields by a new owner, and in reaction to their loss in status they might turn fugitive and join the ranks of the maroons.

These, then, were the privileged positions in the slave hierarchy, those that afforded slightly better conditions for certain slaves, almost invariably creole, and that set them apart from the ordinary field hands whom they often despised and considered inferior. Indeed, the daughter of a skilled slave would never entertain the idea of marrying or forming a couple with a field slave. In Saint Domingue, these latter had little or no hope at all of ever advancing. The lot of the average field slave was, on the whole, one of misery and despair. From the age of fourteen, youths were enrolled in the regular work force of the large plantations, where they continued to labor until the age of sixty. Rare, indeed, was the slave who survived to reach that age. Women in the fields were treated no differently from the men, except for a brief reprieve when pregnant or while nursing a newborn. Herded together in what were known as the cahors à nègres, or slave quarters, families lived in straw-covered barracks, one next to the other, row upon row, at some distance from the master's house, or grande case. On the average, they were no more than twenty-five feet long, twelve feet wide, and fifteen feet high, with one or two partitions in the interior. There were no windows and, with the exception of a single door, no ventilation. Narrow straw cots of a rudimentary sort, only slightly elevated above the bare earth floors, served as beds. Crowded together in these confines, father, mother, and children all slept indiscriminately.

Slaves were awakened at five in the morning by the sound of the commandeur's whistle or by several cracks of his whip or, on the large plantations of over a hundred slaves, by a huge bell. After the recital of perfunctory prayers by the steward, slaves began work in the fields until eight, were allowed to stop for a meager breakfast, and then returned until noon. The midday break lasted until two, when they returned at the crack of the whip
to labor in the field until sundown. On many plantations slaves were forced to work at the end of the day to gather feed for the draft animals, often having to travel considerable distances from the plantation. Finally, the food had to be gathered, and dinner, consisting of rice, but rarely, if ever, any meat or fish, had to be prepared. During the grinding season on the sugar plantations, slaves then faced what must have seemed like interminable hours of night work at the mills, or of husking and sorting on the coffee plantations.

What little time the slave had for rest was consumed by other types of work. The two to four hours per day for rest at noon, as well as Sundays and holidays, were granted the slaves by law. And on most plantations, slave families were allotted a small piece of land on which to grow their food. Cultivation of their garden, upon which they were more often than not totally dependent for their subsistence, could be undertaken only on Sundays and holidays, or in the meager time remaining after preparation of the midday meal. On plantations where a piece of land was not provided, slaves were sometimes required to work Sundays, as well. By allotting small plots to the slaves for their own subsistence, the owner freed himself from the cost and responsibilities of feeding them; yet these "kitchen gardens," meager as they were and with as little time as the slaves had to plant and tend to their crops, came to be seen by the slaves as their own and thus eventually contributed to the development of a sense, if not of "proprietorship," at least of the firm notion that the land belonged to those who cultivated it.

It was in the kitchen gardens, as well as in the fields, that slaves acquired and developed not only certain agricultural skills, but also a knowledge of the soil and the ability to cultivate new crops. And where their survival depended upon being able to produce their own food and to assure their own subsistence, their ingenuity, creativity, and resourcefulness were keenly stimulated and pushed to new limits. As laborers, slaves knew their own worth. An anecdote cited by de Wimpfen reveals in all its utter simplicity—and perhaps even with a tinge of naivété—that Negroes steal at night because they are underfed and undernourished. It was a common practice for slaves to steal chickens or a few potatoes from the master, even at the risk of severe punishment. One historian notes how a slave woman, for having stolen a duck, received fifty lashes of the whip, had spiced lemon juice rubbed over her wounds, was chained to a post, and remained there to expiate her "crime." 

Under slavery, it has been written, "all is a question of practice: the will of the master is everything. It is from his will, and his will alone, that the slave may expect misery or well-being." In general, slaves were both underfed and undernourished. It was a common practice for slaves to steal chickens or a few potatoes from the master, even at the risk of severe punishment. One historian notes how a slave woman, for having stolen a duck, received fifty lashes of the whip, had spiced lemon juice rubbed over her wounds, was chained to a post, and remained there to expiate her "crime." 91 In 1784, over eighty years later, nothing had changed. The Baron de Saint-Victor, in a prophetic statement, related that "three-quarters of the masters do not feed their slaves and rob almost all of them of the time provided them by law for rest. It is too much, and sooner or later these misfortunes will be driven to the horrors of desperation." The abuses of the planters had reached a point where the Crown found it necessary, the same year, 1784, to reimpose by royal ordinance the provisions of the 1665 Black Code concerning the hours of work, restrictions on punishments, and establishing minimal controls over the inhumanity of the masters. The ordinance now made it a legal obligation of all masters to provide the slaves with small plots exclusively for their per-
...and use, and, in order to protect these kitchen gardens from being utilized to feed an entire villeins, the ordinance required that the plantation managers assume this responsibility.

That slaves could be intimidated into submitting to such conditions can only be explained by the use and necessity of both psychological and physical violence by the masters. Just as the slave's existence depended entirely upon the master's will, so there could be no masters without slaves. And to reduce the human spirit to the level of submission required of slaves necessitated a regime of calculated brutality. While the origins of New World slavery were undeniably economic, in its essence slavery was a social relationship of power, and the power of the master over his slaves was almost absolute. On one level, only the sheer terrorism and brute force of the masters could keep the slaves from killing them off. And though slaves occasionally tried this, the balance of power, until the eve of the Saint Domingue revolution, lay in the hands of the white colonists.

It was through terror that the colonists instilled fear in the slaves and through fear that the slaves' labor was motivated. The Baron de Wimpffen, who knew the colony well, nonetheless wrote with a sense of incredulity that some slaves simply could not be made to move in the morning without being whipped. In Saint Domingue, where slavery rapidly assumed a modern capitalistic orientation, where profit was, if not the sole, at least the dominant, motive for owning slaves, and where profit depended not merely upon maintaining a constant flow of production but upon expanding it, the uses and refinements of terror took on ghastly proportions. One is almost tempted to sum up the situation crudely: the greater the need for profits, the greater and more insidious the violence.

Punishment, often surpassing the human imagination in its grotesque refinements of barbarism and torture, was often the order of the day. Only with the advent of the Black Code in 1665 were certain written restrictions placed upon the masters to limit the extent of their brutality. It recognized whipping with a rod or cord as the single right of the master over the slave in administering punishments, though it singularly omitted any limitation on the number of blows. The degree of latitude planters offered themselves is suggested in a statement made by M. de Gallifet, a purportedly humane master but one who, in 1702, nevertheless felt that "any wrongdoing that was not sufficiently punished by one hundred blows of the whip should be handled by the court." Nominally, the Code left such forms of punishment as torture, mutilation, quartering, hanging, and the like, to the judicial system, while the severity of punishment by whipping was left, for a full century, entirely up to the temperament of the master or, worse, his agent. It was not until 1784, and again in 1785, one century later, that the number of blows a master could deliver or have delivered by the overseer or the slave driver, was limited to fifty. And this was heralded as an enlightened, humanitarian measure and a step forward in master-slave relations.

The Black Code also gave the slave the right to bring a case of outright cruelty or deprivation by a master to the attention of the Crown governor, but prevalence of the complaint was left to the discretion of the prosecutor. In reality, law remained as it had always been, in the hands of the individual slaveholder. The fate of the slaves, and in more than a few cases their life or death, depended rather upon the character and personality of the masters or of their agents, who commonly and consistently flouted the restrictions—odious in themselves—prescribed by the Black Code and subsequent royal legislation.

The barbarism of some masters left little to the imagination. While administering the whip, they would stop, place a burning piece of wood on the slave's buttocks, and then continue, reversing the subsequent blows all the more painful. Common was the practice of pouring pepper, salt, lemon, ashes, or quicklime on the slave's open and bleeding wounds, under the pretext of cauterizing the skin, while at the same time increasing the torture. This method was particularly utilized for interrogating or "putting to the question" slaves suspected of some criminal wrongdoing. It was expressly forbidden by an ordinance of 1712, not only for the "unheard-of cruelty [of the treatment] even among the most barbarous nations," but also because other slaves who had not yet suffered such punishments, intimidated by the example, are taken to desist in order to escape such inhumanity as this. Other examples exist of slaves being thrown into hot ovens and consumed by fire; or of being tied to a skewer above an open fire, there to roast to death; or of having white-hot slats applied to their ankles and soles of their feet, this being repeated hour after hour. There were masters who would stuff a slave with gunpowder—like a cannon—and blow him to pieces. Women had their sexual parts burned by a smoldering log; others had hot wax splattered over hands, arms, and backs, or boiling cane syrup poured over their heads.

Some preferred the art of direct mutilation. They would hang a slave by the ears, mutilate a leg, pull teeth out, push open one's side and pour melted lead into the incision, or mutilate genital organs. Still others used the torture of live burial, whereby the slave, in the presence of the rest of the slaves who were forced to bear witness, was made to dig his own grave. Some would have a slave buried up to the neck and the head coated with sugar, leaving it to be devoured by flies, while others managed to invent insidious variations. Less refined cruelties, but none the less horrible, included locking slaves up in barrels, dragging them by horses, making them eat their own excreta and drink their urine. Those slaves who dared to run away faced having a foot cut off or being whipped to death when caught and returned. One young
In Resolution Sartell [17]...

The instructions set down basic minimum standards of health care, hygiene, nutrition, and housing for the slaves, as well as specific instructions regarding methods of working the slaves and of administering punishments. Given the excessive indulgence in cruelty of many masters, his guidelines on punishment might even seem humane by comparison. Basically, however, they reveal a highly controlled, highly rationalized sort of madness and underscore the master mentality. Concerned with the smooth and disciplined functioning of the plantation, it was necessary that one develop the "art" of executing punishments:

Slow punishments make a greater impression than quick or violent ones. Twenty-five lashes of the whip administered in a quarter of an hour, interrupted at intervals to hear the cries which the unfortunate always plead in their defense, and resumed again, continuing in this fashion two or three times, are far more likely to make an impression than fifty lashes administered in five minutes and leave a danger to their health. This objective is especially important for serious punishments. Woe to him who punishes with pleasure. He who does not know how to punish is unfit to command.

While defenders of slavery claimed that those masters who indulged in sadistic and barbaric treatment of their slaves were the rare exception in Saint Domingue and were, in any event, socially and politically ostracized by their class, certain cases suggest otherwise. The most blatant and oft-quoted example is that of the Le Jeune case in 1788. Le Jeune was a wealthy coffee planter from Plaisance, in the North Plain. He believed that his slaves were being killed off by poison and had put to death four of his slaves who he suspected were responsible. Two other women were mercilessly tortured by fire while being interrogated. Le Jeune's slaves went to the Cap to register an official complaint against their master's barbaric behavior. Two magistrates of the state went to the plantation to investigate the matter, only to find the allegations of the fourteen witnesses and to denounce him before the courts. In defiance of these threats, fourteen of Le Jeune's slaves went to le Cay to register an official complaint against their master's barbaric behavior. Two magistrates of the state went to the plantation to investigate the matter, only to find the allegations of the fourteen confirmed. The two slave women, barely alive, were still in chains, their legs so badly damaged they were already decomposing.

All the evidence presented against Le Jeune, and the case against him was even further strengthened by the subsequent death of the two women. Le Jeune took quick measures to flee before he could be arrested. The fourteen slaves were again called upon to testify and insistently stuck to the letter of their original accusations. Support for Le Jeune came swiftly. Every influential sector of white society was solidly behind him. The concluding remarks of the governor and intendant summed up the case: "It seems, in
a world that the security of the colony depends upon the acquittal of Le Jeune." Not a single judge or magistrate wanted the responsibilities of condemning Le Jeune, regardless of the incontrovertible evidence against him. Finally, after a long delay, the judges rendered a negative verdict, acquitting Le Jeune and rendering the case against him null and void. 104

Was this merely an isolated case? Or was it but one example among a multitude of crimes committed and condoned by the whites against slaves? In the first place, the government of the colony, on principle, rarely intervened in master-slave relations. And as it was highly unlikely that slaveowners would denounce each other, about the only cases heard were those in which a slave’s initiative may have caused a master to be charged before the court. In fact, it was only with the royal ordinances of 1784 and 1785, during the last few years of the colonial regime, that slaves were permitted to legally denounce the abuses of a master, overseer, or plantation manager. Even so, slaves’ statements were still not received as legal testimony against their own masters and could be used only to clarify circumstances surrounding a case. 105 But if some slaves did respond to the new measures by denouncing their master’s brutality, in general, they were still held in fear of punishment and torture if they dared to do so. Le Jeune himself later commented that,

far from the fear and equity of the law, “it is the feeling of absolute power the master holds over the slaves’ persons that prevents them from stabbing the master to death. Remove this brake and the slave will attempt anything.” 106

So official cases on record were few. In addition, the dossiers of those cases that did reach the courts were conveniently burned every five years. 107

The Le Jeune case does, however, provide insight into the class and race interests at stake in Saint Domingue society and reveals the precarious position in which the masters found themselves, a position that neoslavery and invariably evoked white solidarity in its defense, especially in the most shocking and incriminating of cases. The obsessive need to protect white supremacy at all costs and to ensure the consequent submission, not only of the slaves, but also of the free colored population, was conversely manifested in a 1784 decree condemning a free black slaveowner. Since the death of his female slave was a direct result of his cruelty, he was to be publicly beaten with a rod by the Executioner of High Justice (a slave whose death penalty had been commuted in exchange for this odious duty), then branded on the right shoulder with the letters GAL and sent to the galley for three years, during which time he was required to provide proof of his status or be sold as a slave of the state. He was also forbidden ever to own or acquire a slave as a slave. 108 Le Jeune, for his part, was acquitted for crimes committed to a greater extent. Not only did the Le Jeune affair exonerate the white masters whose inhumanity flew in the face of already inhuman practices and standards, but it gave further proof of the utter futility of slaves’ attempts to bring

Slaves and Slave Society

Slaves to account for their deeds. The Black Code remained as it always had been, a dead letter. The generally accepted and practiced principle in the colony was that a white could never be in the wrong vis-a-vis a black, thus placing supreme authority over the slaves in the hands of the masters and sanctioning this tyranny through the complicity of the legal and judicial system.

The master-slave relationship, however, was a two-sided one. On the one hand, as we have already seen, the master held absolute rights of life and death over the slave and could and did exercise these at will. Existence for many a slave was at times one of total fear—for one’s entire being, the fear of utter death. But from this state of fear, in which slaves constantly faced the possibility of torture and often the harsh reality of a brutal death, grew a consciousness of one’s own self-existence. 109

Slaves existed in and for themselves, and in this ongoing life-and-death struggle, they developed a sense of their own identity, one inerably opposed to the very persons upon whose lives depended. Resistance and protest were therefore both natural and necessary features of slavery. But when one considers the relationship of power upon which the system was built and the overwhelming odds in favor of the master, the human problems involved in the whole phenomenon of slave resistance become far more complex. Open resistance was not always possible, nor even prudent. Thus slaves adapted and accommodated themselves to the situations and circumstances surrounding them at different moments, and measured their resistance in relation to the reasonable or perceived chances of success. 110

Within the system, however, were areas of autonomous slave activity, forms of cultural resistance contributing to a reinforced sense of self-identity and found within the slaves’ own popular culture. At night, or on Sundays or holidays when not working, slaves freely expressed another side of their personality. The Baron de Wimpffen, who took the trouble to observe and to listen to slaves when they were assembled together, away from the master and the plantation steward, remarked with astonishment on the dynamic nature of the slave personality: “One has to hear with what enthusiasm, with what precision of ideas and accuracy of judgment, these creatures, gloomy and taciturn in daylight, now squatter below their fire, tell stories, talk, jest, communicate, express opinions, approve or condemn both the master and all those around them. Slaves brought with them to the New World their natural and acquired capacities. Numerous slaves considered illustrious by the undiscerning white could read and write their own language and were fully educated at their own culture. 111

The colonial Hildert d’Auberteuil wrote of them in 1776, affirming that “no human species has more intelligence.” after which his book was banned, its

Their induction into the New World, however, was also a meeting and
Melding of cultures, and from this historical situation emerged what came to be the single unifying language of creole, decidedly African in its structure and rhythm, but characteristically European in its lexical dynamics. The genesis and subsequent evolution of this language, assumed to have occurred out of the very early eighteenth-century slave experience in Saint Domingue, thus provided a common linguistic framework for communication among slaves, one into which new African arrivals of diverse ethnic groups and languages could readily be integrated. In fact, through cultural adaptation to their New World setting, slaves had, by the eve of the revolution, acquired an essential unifying tool that enabled both Africans of widely different origins, as well as slaves born in Saint Domingue, to share experiences, exchange views and opinions, communicate their ideas, and even conspire against the masters.

But at the same time, slaves expressed their African identities in cultural ways that the sociolinguistic necessities of slavery did not impose upon, and to which they remained intensely attached. One of the favorite leisure-time activities of slaves, practiced with passion and fervor, was dancing. Despite the rigors and fatigue of slavery and in addition to the repeated prohibitions against nocturnal gatherings (especially if they included slaves from different plantations), in Saint Domingue as in all plantation societies throughout the New World, slaves invariably found the energy to dance, and even to travel several miles if necessary, for the occasion.

The calenda, the most popular dance, involved young and old alike, even small children barely able to walk.18 Moreau de Saint-Mery remarked that one actually had to see this dance performed to believe how lively, how animated, and yet how rigorously measured and graceful it was.19 The orchestra consisted of two types of drums, the smaller of the two called a tambouron, along with numerous gourds filled with pebbles or grains of corn for accompaniment. The dance, a primitive type of violin with four strings, completed the arrangement. Women, gathered round in a circle, responded in chorus to the “call,” an improvised phrase or song forcefully delivered by one or two singers, after which both men and women would circle the circle in pairs, to begin dancing and, in succession, continue almost indefinitely into the night.

Another dance, as evenly measured as the calenda but distinctively lascivious, was the chica, of West African origin and practiced generally throughout the Caribbean.20 Describing the steps and the bodily movements of the dancers, male and female, Moreau depicts the chica as “a kind of struggle where every tone of love and every move of triumph are brought into action: fear, hope, disdain, tenderness, capture, pleasure, refusal, frenzy, evasion, ecstasy, frustration; all has its own language in this dance.”21 The impression it created was so powerful, in the author’s words, that whether African or creole, no blacks ever saw this dance performed without experiencing great emotion, lest they be taken for having lost their last spark of sensitivity.22

The various dances in which slaves so lucratively indulged had their origins in Africa and were a fundamental part of the cultural heritage they brought with them to the colony where, upon contact with the European cultures, they evolved to what they are today. Common to all slave dances was the vital and pivotal role of the drum and the drummer to animate and succeed in this language. The group formation of these dances also assured the responsive structure and the distinctive unique talents and the dancers, each with their own originality, expressed their African identity in cultural ways, and the dancers, eager to sustain the prestige of their respective nations, would solicit the approval of the spectators in its favor.23 So closely were the cultural ties that a dancer of a different nation was sometimes seen as an intruder by those present and not particularly welcomed by them. The naturalist Deschartres related during his stay in Saint Domingue how one the dancer had desperately offered gifts of affection, a bit of money, even his last few chickens to be received at an Aranda gathering in the Arénique valley; with each attempt the poor man was invariably rejected.24

But not all dances were secular. Voodoo, both a sacred dance and a religion, was expressly forbidden in the French colonies, and from the very beginning, the colonists tried in vain to crush it.25 And not only was the strict practice of voodoo forbidden to slaves, but severe restrictions were also imposed on the calendas, which sometimes served as a cover for voodoo gatherings. Pere Lahut observed that they have passed laws in the islands to prevent the calendas, not only because of the indecent and lascivious postures which make up this dance, but especially to prevent too many blacks from assembling and who, finding themselves gathered together in joy and usually intoxicated, are capable of revolts, insurrections or bands. But in spite of these laws and all of the precautions the masters take, it is almost impossible to suppress the dances, because, of all the diversions, this is the one which [the slaves] enjoy the most and to which they are the most sensitive.26

In fact more than one planter often found it necessary to give in to an actual as an element in the slaves’ culture and at least tacitly tolerate the dances.

Voodoo had not only survived, but had evolved under slavery for over two hundred years and had become, by the eve of the revolution, a far more
One dance that held a particularly prominent place in the overall practice of voodoo in Saint Domingue was the danse à Don Pedro, introduced into the colony around 1768 and bearing the name of its originator. 12 Coming from the Spanish part of the island, Don Pedro established his cult at Petit-Galave, in the South Province, which served as a base from which to propagate his influence throughout the colony. 13 The dance was far more violent in its movements than other voodoo dances. With eyes fixed downward while drinking tafia, reputedly mixed with gunpowder, the dancers would enter into a state of frenzy, producing what observers described as epileptic-like contortions, and would continue dancing until near or total exhaustion. 14 During the ceremony a pact was made among all participants, committing them to secrecy, solidarity, and the vow of vengeance. 15 Voodoo, however, was more than merely a ceremonial dance bent on vengeance. It was a religion and, as such, played a vital role in the daily lives and general world view of its adherents. During the ceremonies, slaves often called upon the various gods, or loa, for spiritual comfort, guidance, protection from misfortune, and cures for their sicknesses, as well as vengeance against their oppressors. 16 The French anthropologist Alfred Metraux relates, in the words of a present-day Haitian peasant woman, a statement that sums up for him what voodoo devotes expect from their gods: "The loa love us, protect us and watch over us. They show us what is happening to our relatives living far away, and they tell us what medicines will do us good when we are sick. If we are hungry, they appear to us in a dream and say: 'Don't despair, you will soon earn some money,' and the money comes." 17 Metraux hastens to suggest that "she might, however, have added: The loa inform us of the plots being hatched by our enemies." 18

Although Metraux's study is based on twentieth-century practices in Haiti, it nevertheless provides keen insights into a religion whose basic elements have largely remained unaltered and which occupied such an important place in the lives of most slaves. It has the further advantage of treating voodoo from a purely anthropological vantage point, thus removing it from the romanticized and denigrating category of "fanaticism," "opiatist frenzy," "collective hysteria," or just plain superstition, to which it was relegated by almost all seventeenth- and eighteenth-century observers.

In a voodoo ceremony, dancing plays not only a prominent, but an essential role as a ritualistic act and is carried out in precise rhythm in the drumbeats, which govern the steps and movements of the dancers. The drumbeats themselves are a religious symbol and are viewed as the very vessel of a deity. The drumbeats, in unified interaction with the dancers, thus evoke numerous families of gods and release various "mystic forces," which are believed to "work" on those who are summoned. The climax of the ceremony occurs with the blood sacrifice, wherein a goat or fowl is offered to the loa. The killing is preceded by a ritualistic act embracing both divination and communion, after which a sacred type of food or drink is given to the animal. If consumed, it is deemed acceptable to the gods, and those making the sacrifice attempt to identify themselves with it or to "infect" their own bodies with the mystic powers invested in it. The blood is collected in a gourd and tasted by the houngan, or priest, and then successively by the assisting houngans, or "servants of the gods."

Communication between the gods and mortals is then established through the phenomenon of possession which "is nothing more than the descent of a god or spirit come to take possession of a chosen person. . . . The god uses the body of a man or a woman to manifest himself to his worshippers, share their amenities, make known his wishes or his will, wreak vengeance or express gratitude, as the case may be." 19 The possessed thus becomes both the vessel and the instrument of the god, through which the latter expresses his or her personality. Possession is therefore a fundamental element in the religious experience of the initiated. Moreover, "[it is] a controlled phenomenon obeying precise rules . . . [and] every god is expected to appear in his turn when the devotees summon him by songs in his honor." 20 The psychological implications of possession for the Haitian peasant, as for the slave living under dehumanized conditions and the terror of brutal punishments, are profound: "The very real satisfaction to be gained by a poor peasant woman who becomes the vessel of a god and is able to parrot about in silken dresses acknowledging marks of respect from the crowd has not been sufficiently underlined by studies of possession as a phenomenon."

While voodoo constituted for the slave a unique and autonomous cultural form, it would nevertheless be wrong to assume that its development and proliferation in Saint Domingue occurred independently of other influences. All religious practice, except for Catholicism, was outlawed in the colony, and in accordance, all slaves were to be baptized in the Catholic church. However, the religious, as well as the educational, instruction of the slaves was never seriously or widely undertaken, either by the masters or by the church. Thus, superficially, many of the ritualistic aspects of Catholicism appeared in voodoo, but consciously adapted and reinterpreted by the slaves to accord with their own religious beliefs. 21 In this way, Catholicism
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served as a kind of mask, or façade, behind which their own beliefs and practices could flourish. One might even say that, under the Black Code, the prohibition to practice voodoo and the alternate obligation of nominal membership in the Catholic church provided "an external structure for the voodoo consciousness, a consciousness which arose out of slavery itself."

Similarly, slave burials were often an occasion for the expression of African ways. The Black Code not only obliged masters to have their slaves baptized in the Catholic religion but also to provide for their burial in church cemeteries, though in designated sections. Given the generalized disregard and neglect of cemeteries in Saint Domingue, coupled with their frequent displacements and relocations, slaves eventually came to appropriate for themselves the sites of cemeteries abandoned by the whites. There they came at night to bury their dead. Moreau de Saint-Mery relates one such case, among many others, in the South: "At Aquin can still be seen what is said to be the ruins of the [old] chapel. A cross was noticed there not so long ago. A superstition, the grounds for which are difficult to imagine, had led the slaves of the Aquin parish to bury their fellow companions there. All attempts to make them bring the dead to the present cemetery have been in vain: they would wait for night to fall to elude surveillance. In the end, we were wise enough not to make of these circumstances an object of religious persecution." It is evident here that Moreau's use of the term "religious persecution" refers not to Catholicism due to the slaves' own religion. He depicts a typical funeral procession in the South, where "the African slaves gather together in a large crowd to bring their [deceased] companions to the cemetery. The women, preceding the corpse, sing and clap their hands while the men follow. A slave accompanies the corpse with a bamboula on which he strikes, once and again, a mournful note." Paradoxically, the once-communal cemeteries now abandoned by the whites had become the "privileged" sanctuary for African slaves to freely continue their own religious practices and cultural ways concerning the dead, while the funeral ceremonies themselves served as an occasion for slaves to gather together in traditional celebration. And like the voodoo dances, slave funeral ceremonies, when they did occur, were at least tacitly tolerated by the colonists, though expressly forbidden by law.

Despite rigid prohibitions, voodoo was indeed one of the few areas of totally autonomous activity for the African slaves. As a religion and a vital spiritual force, it was a source of psychological liberation in that it enabled them to express and reaffirm that self-existence they objectively recognized through their own labor (and of which they were subjectively conscious through the daily realities of coercion and fear). Voodoo further enabled the slaves to break away psychologically from the very real and concrete chains of slavery and to see themselves as independent beings: in short, it gave them a sense of human dignity and enabled them to survive. Indeed, the sheer tenacity and vigor with which slaves worshiped their gods and danced in their honor—in spite of the risks, in spite of incredibly long and physically exhausting hours of labor during the day and often half the night—eloquently attest to voodoo as a driving force of resistance in the daily lives of the slaves.

But insofar as voodoo was a means of self-expression and of psychological or cathartic release from material oppression, the slaves' acquired consciousness as autonomous beings remained stoically imprisoned within themselves as they invariably faced their oppressors the next day. It was only when slaves were able at various times to translate that consciousness into active rebellion and, finally, into the life-and-death struggle of revolution aimed at the total destruction of their masters and of slavery, that emancipation could and did become reality. For self-hatred turned outward, the drive to affirm one's own existence and the urge to destroy the oppressor were as fundamental a part of the slaves' daily existence as we were submission and accommodation in appearance.
Slave Resistance

Through repression and terror the white masters managed to erect a system of social control to contain and regiment the half million black slaves whose labor created their wealth, but they could not annihilate the slave's human spirit.

Slave resistance to the brutality and human degradation of the system took many forms, not all of them overt, and some of them even self-destructive. Similarly, not all slaves resisted to the same degree or in the same ways, depending upon their place in the ranks of slavery, their treatment as a slave, their cultural background or, simply, their individual level of tolerance and capacity to endure. It was well known, for example, that the slaves were more inclined to suicide, even collectively, as a response to slavery than slaves of other nations. Of the lbos, Moreau de Saint-Mery wrote that they had to be closely watched, as "feelings of chagrin or the slightest dissatisfaction pushes them to suicide, the idea of which, far from terrifying them, seems rather to offer something alluring because they believe in the transmigration of souls." 1

Suicide, however, was certainly not limited to the lbos. One reads time and again throughout the literature how slaves often preferred death to a lifetime of slavery. In the words of d'Aubertueil: "The greatest dangers and even death do not frighten the Negroes. They are more courageous than men subjected to slavery ought to be. They appear insensible amidst torment and are inclined to suicide." 2 Or, in the nearly exaggerated tone of the second captain of a slave ship leaving Mozambique: "The blacks, an impossible race, prefer death to slavery." 3

In response to those who sought to justify the slave trade by claiming that they were saving the blacks from a life of hunger, misery, and mutual destruction in primitive Africa, a white colonist, himself creole, remarked with astonishment:

If the blacks were so undernourished and so miserable in Africa... how is it that they are so well-proportioned, strong and in such vigorous health when they arrive in the colonies? And how is it that at the end of one year here, their health diminishes, they become weak, thin and unrecognizable—a state from which, if they do not die, they never completely recover? ... Likewise, if the blacks were so miserable and without feeling in their native land, why are they driven by despair to commit suicide, one of the chief reasons for which they are so scrupulously kept in chains on the haws?... How is it, then, that their yearning for freedom is so insatiable? 4

Indeed, the first instance of resistance, and of suicide as resistance, occurred aboard these slave ships, most often while still at port, in the initial stage of what was to become for most a long and tortuous journey toward a life of perpetual bondage in the colonies. For those unable to escape before being loaded on the ship, one must set sail. The reason for this is that the slaves have such a love for their land that they despair to see that they are leaving it forever, and they die from sadness. I have heard merchants who participate in this commerce affirm that more Negroes die before leaving port than during the voyage. 5

While some captives succeeded in throwing themselves into the sea, often with chains still attached, others would knock their heads against the ship or hold their breath until they suffocated; still others would attempt to starve themselves aboard the ship, hoping to die before the end of the voyage. To force recalcitrant slaves to eat, some ship captains would have the slaves' lips burned by hot charcoal; others would try to make them swallow the coal if they persisted. To set an example, one captain even reportedly went to the extreme of having molten lead poured into the mouths of those who stubbornly refused all food. 6 In another instance, a young African girl of sixteen, having been taken captive aboard a slave ship, was so profoundly affected that she categorically refused everything given her to eat. In a short time her health diminished. When, however, she learned that she was to be taken back aboard the ship, she killed herself. 7

Once sold and introduced into the plantation system, slaves continued to resist individually and collectively by means of suicide. Death was seen not only as a liberation from the extreme conditions of slavery but, according to popular African beliefs, as a means of escape permitting the dead to return to their native land. 8 However, feelings of despair or, conversely, of outraged dignity and pride were not the only factors provoking suicide. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, contemporary observers became aware of a calculated motive on the part of slaves who committed suicide either
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individually or collectively to inflict serious economic damage, if not ruin, upon the master. Regarding slave suicides, Pierre Labat wrote in 1701:

"But if these slaves were desperate enough to kill themselves in order to inflict less on their masters."

As a means of resistance, then, suicide was also an offensive measure that could go beyond purely personal considerations and, in the same blow, aim at the economic base of the planters.

Slave women often resorted to abortion and even infanticide as a form of resistance rather than permit their children to grow up under the abomination of slavery. D'Auberteuil, himself a colonial planter and a slaveowner, criticized the tyranny of the system that pushed women to commit acts of-abortion and spoke of the slaves' self-destructive acts in these terms: "If they see the earth as a place of torment and pain, is it not those who are dearest to them who will be the first to be sacrificed by their deadly compassion?"

In cases of infanticide, the death of the child usually resulted from a sickness referred to by contemporaries as maigre de mischance, or lockjaw [tetanus], a sickness that struck only newborn babies and only those delivered by black midwives. Irresistibly, death occurred within the first few days. Once slave woman from the Rossignol-Desdunes plantation in the district of Artibonite admitted having poisoned or killed in this manner over seventy children in order to spare them the pains of slavery. 12 Although other considerations may have played an additional role in the motivation of such acts—vengeance against a master for cruel treatment, the desire to inflict pain upon a master when the slave child was in fact his own, jealousy, retribution—under all instances, the net result was the near decimation of a potential work force.

Equally as characteristic of slave resistance, however, was its opposite, outwardly aggressive or assertive, rather than self-destructive, nature. One slave captain complained before arriving to unload his captive cargo: "The older ones are uncontrollable; they turn fugitive. Not only are they of little use in the colony, but they are even dangerous." 13 About this particular ship they broke out in revolt. Armed revolts were actually not unusual during the first stages of captivity and, in fact, occurred far more frequently aboard slave ships along the African coast or during the voyage than in the colony itself. The sheer randomness with which they are often treated or passingly referred to in ships' registers may strongly suggest that slave revolts in these situations were indeed commonplace occurrences and, in the opinion of a recent historian of the French slave trade, were even "expected and accepted as internal wars of the triangle." 14


eleider to Revolution

Slave Resistance

But if slave revolts were far more recurrent aboard the ships at harbor and during the voyages than in Saint Domingue itself, it may be that, outside of desperate and precipitous revolt at the one end, or suicide to divest oneself of a difficult master at the other, alternative modes of resistance aboard ship were few and far between. An organized slave society no doubt afforded more varied, and perhaps even more effective, long-term means and ways of resisting or protesting one's conditions than open revolt. Significantly, the revolts and conspiracies to revolt that did occur in Saint Domingue were nearly all situated in a relatively early period of the colony's economic and sociopolitical development, the very first one occurring in 1522 while the island was still under exclusive Spanish rule. 15 Within the twenty-five years between 1679 and 1704, four other armed conspiracies had been planned by slaves in different parts of French Saint Domingue, all aimed at the massacre and annihilation of their white masters. 16 In the end, however, they were localized affairs that the authorities quickly crushed, and so collective armed revolt remained at this time a limited form of slave resistance with minimal chances of success. With the one notable exception of the Makandal conspiracy in 1757, no other organized slave revolt was conceived before the revolution in 1791. 17 But then the conspiracy of 1757, as well as the revolt of 1791, which dramatically opened the black revolution, occurred within a context substantially different from that of the earlier revolts. The revolt that was planned by Makandal in the North, and which subsequently was to pave the way to "all persons of the colony," was both conceived and organized in marronage. Also, some evidence exists to suggest that marronage may indeed have contributed to the basic groundwork and general form of the massive outbreak of 1791. 18

Of the many and diverse forms of resistance, marronage proved in the end to be the most viable and certainly the most consistent. From the very beginning of the colony under Spanish rule, throughout its long history under the French, until the abolition of slavery in 1793-94, slaves defied the system that denied them the most essential of social and human rights: the right to be a free person. They claimed that right in marronage. But it was not until 1791 that this form of resistance, having by this time acquired a distinctively collective characteristic, would converge with the volatile political climate of the time and with the opening of a revolution that would eventually guarantee that right. That marronage had become an explosive revolutionary force in 1791 was due as much to the global context of revolutionary events as to the persistent traditions of resistance which, necessarily, remained narrower in scope.

Prior to the revolution, colonial observers who bothered to question the motives of slaves who left the plantation to eke out an existence for themselves in the mountains or in other secluded, inaccessible areas, or on the fringes of plantation society where they risked being recaptured, almost
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Invariably invoked undernourishment, cruel treatment, or overwork as the chief causes: in short, the living and working conditions of slavery. While all of these factors contributed to the slaves’ decision to escape, it leaves the question unanswered as to why supposedly humane masters often had as many fugitives as the cruel ones. For the planters to voluntarily accede that fugitive slaves had fled to become free persons, that they had the ability to consciously and materially negate the condition of perpetual bondage imposed upon them by slavery, would be to undermine the ideological foundations of slavery itself. More than that, such an admission would require both a fundamental reevaluation and a consequent rearrangement of the entire economic base of their wealth and power. Thus jeopardizing the viability of the slave system to which their own survival was intrinsically tied. No ruling class does this gratuitously. They did not accede to it, rather, that it was merely a recurrent manpower problem, which in part it was.

On the other hand, contemporary literature and administrative correspondence (especially in the two decades preceding the revolution) reveal a tendency, both implicit and explicit, to see in marronage not only the individual will of the slave to be a free person, but a force that, if unchecked, threatened to destroy the colony. In an extract from the register of the Upper Council of le Cap, one finds this statement, written in 1767: “The slave . . ., inconstant by nature and capable of comparing his present state with that to which he aspires, is incessantly inclined toward marronage. It is his ability to think, and not the instinct of domestic animals who flee a cruel master in the hope of bettering their condition, that compels him to flee. That which appears to offer him a happier state, which facilitates his inconstancy, is the path which he will embrace” (italics mine). Or, a memoir of 1775 on the state of the maroons in Saint Domingue that declares that marronage, or the desertion of the black slaves in our colonies since they were founded, has always been regarded as one of the possible causes of their destruction. . . The Minister should be informed that there are inaccessible or repeatedly inaccessible areas in different sections of our colonies, which serve as retreat and shelter for maroons; it is in the mountains and in the forests that three tribes of slaves establish themselves and multiply, invading the plains from time to time, spreading alarm and always causing great damage to the inhabitants.

Of the maroons, Père Chevalier wrote earlier that “once they see that they will die, it matters little how they will die, and the least success renders them practically invincible.” On the one hand, the colonists tried, if not to eliminate, at least to control, marronage through a long series of rigorous punitive laws, even the death penalty. On the other hand, some planters preferred a more humane treatment of their slaves. Regardless of the measures taken, and in spite of them, marronage persisted as a means of resisting slavery.

Slave Resistance

It was practiced in a variety of ways and involved slaves of all occupations, the creole elite as well as the African field laborers. The vast majority of the maroons were men, on average between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five, thus in their prime. Although they were more than twice as numerous as the women in the slave population of Saint Domingue, one finds nonetheless a significant proportion of women estimated at 15 to 20 percent among the maroons, in addition to young children and even an occasional aged slave.

Marronage was practiced both collectively and individually, in small groups as well as in larger established communities, in organized armed bands or by slaves as free persons with a trade in the urban centers. When slaves left the plantations, they left with knowledge of what their future would be, nor did they know how long their marronage would last, nor whether they would be recaptured. While some may have fled to escape punishment or cruel treatment and returned in a plea for clemency, others had made a consciously planned and determined break from slavery, from the master and the plantation regime, and were prepared to face the unknown. They carried out their escape with the bare minimum of clothing and food, often taking with them a few tools, a horse, a mule, or a canoe and, not uncommonly, arms of some sort. Rarely, if ever, did the African-born slave live in marronage alone. Many went off to join other slaves already established and subsisting in bands in the heavily wooded mountains, often living in entrenched camps closed off by walls of woven hanks and surrounded by ditches of some twelve to fifteen feet deep and eight or ten feet wide, lined at the bottom with sharpened stakes. Others, fortunate enough to find some long-abandoned piece of property in an isolated region, attempted to assure their survival off the land. Once established, some even risked their newly acquired freedom by going back to the plantation at night to secure the escape of their wives or children, left behind under circumstances that rendered impossible the collective flight of the family.

The most frequent refuge for the field slave was in the Spanish part of the island, the colony of Santo Domingo, or in the extensive range of mountains in the South, extending eastward to form the border between the two colonies. Here, since the beginnings of slavery, slaves had formed permanent and collective marron communities. The very fact of these communities was, in fact, established in the eastern Bahoruco mountains by the last survivors of the indigenous Arawaks, brutally massacred, enslaved, and finally exterminated under the genocidal practices of the Spanish. Within the perimeters of these mountains, of which Bahoruco comprised only the eastern limits, other well-known marron communities existed, notably in the southern region of Plymouth, which provided asylum for the periodic marronage of diverse groups of slaves, and in Maniel, stretching from the...
and to... 

In the case of the Marais, the authorities forbade any... 

A peace treaty was signed granting pardon and acceding to independence of the remaining maroons. Each family would receive a small plot of land and provisions for eight months to assure their subsistence until their farms became productive. 40 In addition to these long-established and well-known communities, other bands in various parts of the colony, smaller in number and perhaps lesser known, waged similar struggles throughout the colonial era in defense of their precariously acquired freedom. Establishing themselves in the forests or in the thickly wooded foothills of the mountains, they maintained a marginal but independent existence. They, too, had their chosen leaders whose decisions governed the organization and functioning of the group. When conditions no longer permitted them to subsist on the land, it became necessary for them to descend at night upon neighboring plantations in organized raids, pillaging, and ransacking, sometimes even devastating the plantation to secure food, animals, additional arms, or other necessary supplies for their survival. These marauding maroon bands often created such terror as to cause certain planters in relatively isolated areas to sell out or simply to abandon their holdings.

In 1705, the Upper Council of Léogâne published an official report on the movement and activities of the maroons in the South: They gather together in the woods and live there exempt from service to their masters without any other leader but one elected among them: others, under cover of the cane fields by day, wait at night to rob those who travel along the main roads, and go from plantation to plantation to steal farm animals to feed themselves, hiding in the living quarters of their friends who, ordinarily, participate in their thefts and who, aware of the goings on in the master’s house, advise the fugitives so that they can take the necessary precautions to steal without getting caught. 31

Two years later a special body, later reinstated permanently as the marabout, in which the affranchi would be required to serve, was created in the North to hunt down and capture fugitive slaves.

It was precisely the aggressive and intrepid aspects of maroonage that necessitated, from the beginning of slavery, the adoption of repressive and punitive measures to eliminate what many contemporaries came to consider a continual plague and a danger to the security of the colony. 12 The first comprehensive legislation dealing with maroonage appeared in the Black Code of 1685. Slaves of different plantations were now forbidden to assemble together, be it in celebration of a marriage, to organize a calendar, or for any reason whatsoever, under punishment of the whip or the burning brand of the fleur de lys. For those who persisted, it could mean death. Slaves were forbidden to carry anything that might be considered a weapon or to circulate without a written pass from the master. A fugitive slave in flight up to one month from the date of his reported escape would have his ears cut off and the fleur de lys branded on one shoulder. If his flight should span another month, he would be hanged, in addition, and the fleur de lys stamped on the other shoulder. After that, the punishment was death. Any affranchi providing asylum to a fugitive slave was fined three hundred livres in sugar for each day of protection given. An affranchi offering shelter to a fugitive or in any way aiding a slave in committing thefts, or in becoming a maroon, could lose his freedom and be sold into slavery along with his family. 24 Planters were now permitted to shoot on sight any slave they believed to be a fugitive, a provision that incidentally caused innocent slaves mistaken for fugitives to be recklessly killed. 31

In 1741, following a maroon attack on the town of Mirebalais, additional punishments for maroonage were imposed. Captured fugitives were put in public chain gangs for a specified period of time, sometimes for life. Two years later, the punishment for maroons caught with arms of any kind was death. 26 In spite of these restrictions, as well as subsequent ordinances of similar consequence, maroonage remained a well-entrenched mode of resistance to slavery. In fact, official estimates in 1754 had brought the number of French slaves living in maroonage in the Spanish colony alone to nearly three thousand. 28 The administration of the colony passed a new ordinance in 1767. The affranchis were now forbidden to purchase arms or munitions without the express permission of the Crown prosecutor. The attempt was clearly made to cut off all sales of arms between the free persons of color and the maroons, and thereby control the problem. 27 Yet during the two decades before the massive slave revolt of 1791, when the more openly aggressive and题为 "Share Resistance" 的段落中的信息。
plantation system allowed them greater mobility and freedom of movement than that of the field slave.

Many took advantage of the situation when seen by the master on a day-to-day basis, and never came back. Others, having learned to read and write, fabricated their own passes indicating that they were on an errand for the master. The practice had become so common that it was nearly impossible for the authorities to distinguish, at the marketplace, in the streets, at the crossroads, between the free blacks and those who, using passes to escape from the plantation, gave themselves out to be free. In 1764 the Chamber of Agriculture of Port-au-Prince proposed, as a control measure, that all legitimately free blacks fourteen years of age and over be forced to wear a standardized medallion indicating their name and the nature of their enfranchisement.  

To escape detection, some slaves would carefully change names; most were dressed in their best clothing to project the outward appearance of a free black. Some even pushed their audacity to the extreme and attached a pair of stolen pistols in false holsters onto the saddle of a stolen horse as a sure guarantee that they would be recognized as a free black, especially since slaves were forbidden to own or ride a horse. They fabricated false documents of enfranchisement, baptismal certificates, or any other type of documentation to legitimize their assumed status. Others, having stolen a horse or mule upon leaving the plantation, would travel considerable distances to reach an isolated town or bourg where they were unknown, sell the animals, and establish themselves in the community as free. Unless pure chance should bring the master or a neighbor to the area for some unwonted reason, it was nearly impossible for the fugitive to be discovered. Moreover, his security was further safeguarded by the fact that the masters, upon discovering the flight of a slave, generally assumed that the slave had taken refuge in Spanish territory, without considering the possibility of other regions within the colony. Thus, once having established himself for two or three years in a given town, working and living as a free black, the slave was accepted by the community as free, and his status thereafter remained unquestioned. For example: "A hard-working slave will pass from this region to that of Port-au-Prince; to greater security he can take a name more closely resembling that of a free black . . . he will work at his trade; at the end of a few years he will marry, have children; and there you have a whole family which has become free through the effrontery of its head and yet which has no other right than that usurped by a plausible tongue." If circumstances should arise that might cause a slave to be detected, he was prepared to move on to another area, take on another identity, and establish himself elsewhere. Some may have succeeded indefinitely, and of these there is obviously no record. But most managed to remain in marronnage undetected for at least a few, if not a considerable, number of years. So
in accommodation and perpetual submission. It meant that avenues of escape did exist—perhaps they were no less perilous than life under slavery. In any case—and whether or not the individual slave decided to resist to them was as much a matter of choice as the force of circumstance. Mar­
mongue offered no guarantees, but there were—primarily in colonial society was testimony that slavery was not an irrevocably closed system. Second, a contingent relationship necessarily developed between the fugitives and their plantation counterparts, who often sheltered them, gave them food, helped them steal for provisions, and, aware of the goings-on in the master's house, could advise and warn them. Reciprocally, the impact of armed maroons who audaciously raided nearby plantations and occasionally even attacked white colonists, forcing them to organize might rights, could be highly disruptive of the plantation slaves. Although it was strictly forbidden for slaves to carry arms of any sort, exception was made by the colonial administrators for the slave commandants, "in order to defend the slaves' quarters and keep guard of their animals and crops against the outrages of the maroons." 26

If a certain complicity, tacit or otherwise, existed between the fugitive and the plantation slaves, it also existed between the fugitive and the free blacks. A royal ordinance of 1705 revealed that the punishments established in the Black Code of 1665 "against free blacks who facilitate the means by which slaves may become maroons or commit acts of theft did not stop them from sheltering such maroons in their houses, from concealing their theives and sharing the booty with them." Consequently, any free black who mitted one of these acts "would lose his freedom and be sold into slavery along with his immediate residing family." The profits, with the exception of one-third reserved for the informer when there was one, would go to the Crown. 27 And so, here again, one finds evidence of reciprocal relations between two sectors of the black population, the one not so far removed from slavery itself. Through repressive and discriminatory legislation, the free coloreds were to serve as a buffer to protect white supremacy and buttress the slave system, but their more immediate in free persons in colonial slave society could also facilitate avenues of maroonage and flight for slaves. Conversely, however, the repercussions of this contact with fugitive slaves could drastically influence both the status and social conditions of the free blacks, who themselves risked becoming slaves. 28

In this vein, one ought perhaps to be cautious of succumbing to the tendency to classify the maroons as a type of separate entity that existed entirely outside of the system. While this seems to have been the case with the Maniel maroons on the Spanish border, it did not exclusively characterize maroonage within the colony. The maroons, one ought to remember, were still slaves and, when caught, were subject to the laws and practices governing slavery. Though they existed on the fringes of the plantations, they were nonetheless an integral element of slave society generally. Thus to see them simply as a distinct or separate group might be to suppose that fugitive slaves, once punished, were never reintegrated into the plantation universe. The manner in which they never repeated their acts of defiance to turn fugitive again, or that the hard-working and apparently accommodating plantation slave who stayed on to hide his time never turned fugitive himself. Significant relations did exist between maroons and other elements of the larger society, and it is perhaps from the dynamic that the practical conse­quences of maroonage and, ultimately, its potential for popular revolutionary organization and activity in Saint Domingue might best be understood.

Similarly, reciprocal relations existed between maroonage as a mode of slave resistance, in itself, and other forms of resistance for which maroonage provided conditions that allowed these to prevail. Among them was voodoo. As one of the first collective forms of resistance, it was both a cultural and, in its practical applications, a politically ideological force. Since it was severely outlawed in the colony and therefore forced into clandestinity, its development and proliferation were reinforced in the general context of maroonage. The maroon leaders of African origin were almost without exception either voodoo priests or, at least, voodoo devotees. And, of course, the case has generally been made for the perpetuation, or at least reconstitution within a New World context, of African ways in maroonage. Characteristically, it was in the voodoo ceremonies that African traditions, language, dance, religion, world view, and medicine were all evident. Indeed, the words of the sacramental voodoo hymns were almost all, if not exclusively, of African origin. In a sense, then, the various African languages constituted in themselves a form of cultural protest against the colonial order, as well (as we have seen) as means of reinforcing a self-consciousness and a cultural identity independent of the white masters. Voodoo as generally practiced in Saint Dominigue (and especially its linguisti­cally diversity) constituted, in effect, a broad synthesis of the various religious beliefs and practices of all the African nations forming the slave population. One of the most famous voodoo hymns, chanted in unison for the initiation of a neophyte, according to Moreau de Saint-Mery, is the following:

Eh! (Boombo) bent! bent!
Canga bafio te
Canga bafio te

It is of Congolese origin; more specifically it is in the Kikongo language and might be translated this way:
The significance not only of the words but of the levels of meaning is to be found both within the African society and culture of the Congo, or Bakongo, and the New World setting of Saint Domingue. For if, as Morant de Saint-Mery observed, the incantation was used for the initiation of a neophyte, then it may pertinently involve the creation of a n'kisi charm, whereby one symbolically "ties up," or gathers together, the enumerated powers by tying a string around the combined elements. Mbumba may be Mbumba Loango, the rainbow serpent invoked in adoration in the coastal Kongo initiation societies, Khimba. Bafoti, meaning "the coastal people," more than likely referred to the coastal Fioti, who were slave traders that hunted down and captured people of the Kongo interior to trade them as slaves to the Europeans, or the white man, the Mandinka. The Fioti were thus feared and believed capable of using their powers, not the least of which was witchcraft. And so, the tying up of the nkóki, or witches, may refer as much to these slave traders, the Fioti, as to any other person believed to be an evil spirit causing hardship, taking other people's goods, making animals disappear, making the earth sterile, killing in mysterious ways, or, more pertinently, being responsible for the slaves' bondage.

By the eve of the revolution the Congolese were certainly among the most numerous of the ethnic groupings populating the African-born slave population, and although reputedly well-adjusted to slavery, they constituted the predominant nation among the maroons. Their prosperity by the end of the colonial period also helps explain the considerable cultural input of this grouping into a religion embraced and informed by the ethically diverse African slave masses. It was precisely this pluralistic nature of Saint Dominguan voodoo and its dissimulation to separate into ethnic cults, as was the case in Brazil, for example, that allowed it to function as a far-reaching collective force. Not surprisingly, it was from the voodoo tradition that the African-born maroon leaders generally emerged. Almost exclusively, if not voodoo priests, they were at least fervent voodoo devotees of one rite or another, whether rada, conglo, or peto. And so a popular religion on the one hand, voodoo constituted, on the other, an important organizational tool for resistance. It facilitated secret meetings, as well as the initiation and the adherence of slaves of diverse origins. Provided a network of communication between slaves of different plantations who gathered clandestinely to participate in the ceremonies, and secured the pledge of solidarity and secrecy of those involved in plots against the masters. Describing the inside goings-on of a colonial voodoo ceremony, Morant de Saint-Mery writes:

They propose plans, they decide upon steps to be taken, they prescribe actions that do not habitually have the public order and tranquility as object. A new oath, just as unanswerable as the first one, requires each one to remain silent on what has transpired, to conceal what has been concealed, and sometimes a case, containing the still-warm blood of a goat, will seal on the lips of the participants the promise to suffer death rather than reveal anything, and even to administer death to whoever may forget that he had solemnly bound himself to the oath.

And of the powerful influence the voodoo high priest held over the members:

One can hardly believe the extent of dependence in which the Voudoo chiefs hold the members of the sect. There is not one of these who would not prefer the worst of everything to the misfortunes that befall him if he does not attend the meetings, if he does not devoutly comply with what Voudoo demands of him... In a word, nothing is more dangerous in every respect than this cult of Voudoo, founded on the extravagant notion—but one which can become a terrifying weapon—that the ministers of the being decorated by this name know all and can do all.

By far the most extraordinary and awesome of these pre-revolutionary voodoo maroon leaders was François Makandalé. According to a contemporaneous
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Makandal, a maroon leader, was born in Guinea into an illustrious family that undertook his education at a very early age. He was supposedly brought up in the Moslem religion and apparently had an excellent command of Arabic. As a young man he possessed a remarkable mind and, introduced to the arts, displayed a keen interest in music, painting, and sculpture, while having acquired a considerable knowledge of tropical medicine, despite his young age. Very little else is known about his background, for at the age of twelve he was captured as a prisoner of war, sold as a common slave to the European traders, and shipped to Saint Domingue. Here he was sold again, this time to Lenormand de Mezy in the district of Licede, whose plantations were among the largest and wealthiest in the North. It was, incidentally, as another of Lenormand’s plantations, in Morue Rouge that the plans for the August 1791 revolt were drawn up less than fifty years later. According to one version, Makandal turned fugitive after his hand was amputated, having caught it in the machinery of the sugar mill while working the night shift. Another, however, attributes his maroonage to the consequences of a dispute between himself and his master over a young and beautiful Negress. Apparently Makandal’s master had, out of vengeance, ordered him to receive fifty lashes of the whip, whereupon Makandal refused this humiliation and precipitously took to the woods. Here he began his long and notorious career, one that spanned nearly eighteen years, as a prerevolutionary maroon leader.

Operating from his mountain retreat during these years, he carefully built an extensive network of resistance with agents, as one account goes, in nearly all points of the colony. Whether the extent of his machinations actually reached these limits is questionable; it is certain, however, that his influence covered the better part of the North province. His ultimate weapon was poison. Having acquired considerable knowledge of herb medicine, a talent that his master recognized very early, he instructed his followers in its uses and developed, according to the above account, an “open school of this esculent art.” Effectually, he chose his followers from among those slaves (and probably some free blacks, as well) known in the colonies as procuillers and who were engaged in dealing and selling petty merchandise and trinkets from Europe in the slaves’ quarters. It was, as another source relates, “among these procuillers that Makandal’s disciples and most trusted partisans were to be found, and, above all, it was they whom he used for the good or the evil that he wished to accomplish.”

His qualities of leadership, his sense of organization, his stature as a religious cult leader, his eloquence as an orator, not only rivaled that of the European orators of the day, but surpassed it in strength and vigor, affording him an immeasurable influence and command over the slaves in his following. Every contemporary account of Makandal substantiates this point. One of these suggests that he was at the head of a band of fifty-some maroons, while another claims that, together with his two chief associates, Mayombé and Teveselo, Makandal had assembled a considerable number of maroons. Moreover, on the summit of their nearly inaccessible mountain retreat, “they had their women, their children, and well-cultivated lands; sometimes armed bands of these brigands descended at Makandal’s orders to spread terror and ravage the plantations of the neighboring plains, or to extinguish those who had disobeyed the prophet.” Having persuaded many a slave that it was he whom the Creator had sent to carry out the destruction of the whites and to liberate his people, Makandal was thus able to extract not only the most unyielding allegiance from his fugitive followers, but to extend his influence over vast numbers of slaves on the plantations of the whole North Plain region.

Here, a few considerations may be posed concerning marronage in the New World context, and in Saint Domingue particularly. At first glance, one may be inclined to interpret this case of prerevolutionary marronage as one of the many “restorationist” movements of traditional slave resistance, given the messianic style of leadership espoused by Makandal, as well as the existence of a fairly settled community of followers in apparent withdrawal from slave society. Even more, Makandal’s conspiratorial movement in the 1750s was not yet a part of that “bourgeois, democratic revolutionary wave” sweeping through the Age of Revolution in the late eighteenth century. Yet, as a maroon leader, Makandal did not restrict or marginalize his activities exclusively outside the plantation system, nor did he attempt, in the isolation of wooded mountain retreats, to create an independent, socially and politically organized Afro-Caribbean community, as was evidently the case with the Bahourouco and Maqel maroons on the eastern border, or as in other Latin American and West Indian colonies. Rather, marronage became the organizational vehicle, drawing nonetheless upon existing African beliefs and practices, religious animism, and herb medicine, for building a resistance movement aimed at nothing less than the destruction of the white masters and of slavery. Significantly, he had adepts and followers within slave society and within the parameters of the plantation system who, as procuillers, as domestic slaves on an errand, or as “occasional” maroons, actively procured and distributed various poisons, potions, and other “remedies.” Here, then, was a case of a maroon band with a formidable leader operating in a permanent state of marronage, but one that extended itself, at the same time, to set about a vast movement of resistance. It was a type of marronage that differed qualitatively from that practiced by other Saint Dominguean maroon bands or communities in terms of its organization, its infiltration into the plantation system for the recruitment of slave allies and adherents, and in terms of its overall goal.
In this vein, the observations of de Vaissière appear singularly lucid: “Makandal was more than simply a leader of maroon bands. Not that he disdained the pillaging and ransacking of plantations, or the theft of cattle and other ordinary exploits of fugitive slaves; but he seemed at the same time to have seized the possibility of creating out of maroonage a center of organized black resistance against the whites.” More than that, he had a solid understanding of the racial origins and development of Saint Domingue, as well as their broader implications. To illustrate this before a large gathering of slaves, he had a vase full of water brought to him, in which he placed three scarves—one yellow, one white, and one black. Pulling out the yellow scarf first, he told his listeners: “This represents the original inhabitants of Saint Domingue. They were yellow.” “These,” he said, pulling out the white scarf, “are the present inhabitants. These, finally, are those who will remain masters of the island; it is the black scarf.”

For the first few years, he remained completely unknown to the white masters (except his own who, after a number of years, most likely gave him up for dead) and, with extraordinary audacity, went from plantation to plantation to proselytize and stir up the zeal of his partisans, often under cover of the anonymity afforded by calendars and other nocturnal slave gatherings or festivities. During the next twelve years of maroonage, he and his followers pursued their ultimate plan with a constancy and ingenuity, as one report goes, that “one would almost be tempted to admire.” Finally, the day and the hour were set when the water of all the houses in le Cap was to be poisoned. Within the core of his band he had disciplined agents—captains, lieutenants, and various other officers—operating and organizing on the plantations. He knew the names of every slave on each plantation who supported and participated in his movement. He had an exact list of those slaves who, once the poison had struck panic throughout the town, were to organize in contingents from le Cap and spread out into the countryside to massacre the whites.

The aim was to overthrow the white regime, whereby the blacks would become the new masters of Saint Domingue. It was the first real attempt in the long history of slave resistance at disciplined, organized revolt aiming not only at the destruction of the white masters and of slavery, but at the political notion of independence, albeit historically premature and rhetorically expressed in messianic overtones. The final goals of the conspiracy were not achieved, and unfortunately we have no way of knowing what the outcome might have been. It was, ironically, an inopportune and unfortunate carelessness on the part of Makandal that led to his capture. He managed to maneuver a spectacular but short-lived escape and was promptly recaptured when dogs were finally sent upon his trail. He was summarily tried and burned at the stake.
Among those arrested for crimes relating to poison was Assam, a young slave woman belonging to the planter M. Vallet of la Souffriére, and Pompee, a free black and farmer on the plantation of Sieur Descelettes [des Gouttres], who served as intermediary. The official interrogation of Assam, dated 27 September 1757, offers certain insights into the attitudes and motives, as well as the methods used by slaves in their fight for freedom. Upon reading and evaluating the interrogation, it seems clearly evident, in spite of her protests to the contrary, that Assam knew full well it was a death-inducing potion she administered to two slaves of the plantation who had fallen ill and finally died shortly after her treatments. Originally, she told her master she would be able to obtain a remedy to cure their illness but needed a pass for at least a day. Pompee directed her to the quarters of a slave named Jean on the Laplaine plantation at Limbe. There she met several other Negresses who had evidently come for the same purpose. Jean asked her to stay for four or five days; this would give him enough time to collect the herbs he needed and to prepare the concoction, which he did in her presence: sage, mixed with an egg yolk and boiler scrapings, into which was mixed pois puits, blue verbena, and wheat herb. These were all boiled together and a black powder added. Before Assam left his quarters, Jean drew some blood from her shoulder, rubbed the cut with gunpowder, and scraped the blood off with a knife, placing it in a piece of ram's horn, which he then put in his pocket. Upon returning, Assam administered this remedy to the sick slaves, but far from alleviating their illness, she precipitated their death. Then, so as not to lose contact with the substance in her possession, Assam threw away her concoction, though insisting all the while that it was a "good remedy" Jean had given her.

Further, her reactions to Pompee's peremptory attitudes toward the white masters and even his offer to purchase her freedom were, in the face of her interrogators, nominally negative. She declared that she had nothing against the whites and got along well with her master. On the whole, it is doubtful she was sincere in her declarations. But was she lying in a plea for clemency? Was she trying to conceal names and information? Or was she a willing and conscious participant in the use of poison, who, at the same time, found herself unable to overcome a certain inner ambivalence? Thus caught in torment, facing torture and fearing for her total being, did she feel inclined to express a sympathy toward her master? During her trial in December 1757 it was only as she was being terrorized with burning laths that she agreed to tell all she knew, not wanting to "suffer the fire twice." At this point, she finally divulged the names of some fifty accomplices, both men and women, admitted to having poisoned three of her master's children whom she had nursed, as well as a certain number of slaves on his plantation, and, according to the same source, provided the means by which the authorities were able to arrest Makandal, "who was their leader." Finally, she was accused of twice having administered poison to her own master.

M. Courtin, the seneschal of le Cap, had spent two days and two nights with Assam to extract information from her. During this time, she also declared that the Jesuit priest Father Duquesnoy, a cure des ngres charged with the religious instruction of slaves, had come to visit her in prison for confession. He had forbidden her, under punishment of eternal damnation, to reveal the names of her accomplices, advising her that it was far better to endure the torments that could be inflicted upon her rather than succumb to the whites and risk the torments of eternal damnation. This type of tacit complicity was not entirely atypical of the Jesuits. Some even provided protection and asylum for slaves, but this was often for the protection of the Jesuits' reputation. To spare other slaves from inevitable torture, Father Duquesnoy effectively offered spiritual absolution to Assam if she witheld the names of her accomplices. Another Jesuit, in Guadeloupe, protested the execution of slaves who were only reputedly, but not proven to be, guilty. At le Cap, the Jesuits were reproached by the Upper Council for fostering too close a contact with the slaves, in general, and with their own, in particular, whom they designated as "servants" rather than slaves. The order was suppressed by royal edict in 1764 after having been expelled from the colony in 1763 on charges of "being in complicity with the slaves." As an official body, however, the Catholic Church generally worked hand in hand with the white masters and the colonial administration. In the slave community, as institutional role was in fact one of utter domination and spiritual terror aimed at breaking the slaves' spirit of rebellion and liberation. By virtue of a special regulation issued by the French government and addressed to the priests of the French colonies, slaves who committed acts of resistance, such as abortion, poisoning, or arson were threatened by the priests with being refused the sacraments of the church, with excommunication, and eternal damnation. In addition, the regulations ordered the priests to deliver specially prescribed sermons to these slaves, designed to infuse them with a sense of worthlessness and self-hatred for their acts. Voodoo, on the other hand, provided slaves with an outlet and tantalisms believed to protect the holder against any harm while committing an actting of resistance that was justified by this religion. Because voodoo was practiced clandestinely, it not
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only provided an important vehicle for resistance, but also helped to create and sustain an atmosphere of terror that tended to keep the planter in a state of psychological insecurity, if not paranoia.

Whether the poisons that slaves obtained and used with such alarming proficiency were actually toxic herbal potions derived from certain plants and prepared by African blacks who held the knowledge and highly guarded secrets of herb medicine; or whether they were simply compositions of an arsenic base, disguised by the presence of various colonial herbal substances, remained for the colonists a matter of dispute.106 What is more significant, however, in the context of racketism and harassment, is the impact the use of poison had upon the colonial mentality, at times producing collective panic and hysteria among the white population. Thus, in addition to the countless fatalities resulting from the use of poison as a weapon of slave resistance, this practice contributed greatly toward maintaining the master class in a state of fear from which there appeared to be little effective recourse. Through the uses and abuses of poison, the slaves themselves placed the masters in a position of uncertainty and dependence, for, in the final count, their economic survival, as well as their own life or death, were matters that could equally be determined by those they oppressed. As a social relationship of forces, power in the hands of the Saint Domingo colonists was never totally absolute, nor were the slaves ever totally victims. It was a double-edged sword that could just as easily turn against the master, and often did. Gabriel Debien even accedes that it was possible the slaves using poison had as their aim "to dominate their master, to make him suffer the supreme humiliation of his ruin; it was a hidden power they had, but one close at hand." 107

To what degree, then, were the colonists' fears justified? The correspondence of local administrative officials gives some indication as to the extent of popular involvement in the use of poison. In the words of du Millet, lieutenant-judge of Port-de-Paix, situated at a considerable distance from le Cap along the northern coast of the colony:

This colony is swarming with slaves, so-called soothsayers and sorcerers who poison and who, for a long time, have conceived the plan of insensibly wiping out all the whites. ... These blacks are of a sect or a new kind of religion formed by two leaders, old Neogene, who for many long years have been fugitive and whose names are Makandal and Tassereau: These two sectarians have fortunately been arrested, ... but unfortunately they have a considerable number of sectarians and disciples; there are presently over two hundred in the prisons of le Cap: We have roughly a dozen in those of Port-de-Paix since instructions have been delivered a fortnight ago, and twenty-two more have been denounced; and I have reason to believe that those who remain to be discovered in the various quarters of this department are equal in number to those at le Cap.108

Slave Resistance

Another letter, written two months later from le Cap, in June 1758, reveals that, since the execution of Makandal, four or five were burned at the stake every month. Already twenty-four slaves, both men and women, and three free blacks had suffered the same punishment. The author goes on to state that

as soon as they are put to question, the marrachasses arrest nine or ten others as declared accomplices. Thus the number of criminals increases in proportion as one is executed. ... There are now 140 accused in prison.

Of the blacks who have been executed, some have admitted to killing by poison thirty to forty whites, even their masters, their wives, their children; others, two to three hundred slaves belonging to various masters.

There are some planters who had fifty to sixty slaves working on their plantation. In less than two weeks, they had only four or five remaining, and sometimes not even one. I know many who have had this misfortune befall them.109

What was particularly alarming was that "for every one unfortunate that [Makandal] instructed, a hundred more can likewise be instructed."110 Another letter, written the same month, states that

there are hardly any slaves, especially those of the nations from the Gold Coast, who in our colonies do not have knowledge of various plants containing poisons or the necessary elements with which to compose them. There have always been those who have used this knowledge, but for two or three years the practice had become so common in the North that, in addition to a very large number of whites who have perished by poison, one can add at least six to seven thousand slaves who were destroyed by this wretched practice. ... A considerable number of accused still remain in the prisons of le Cap, as well as those of Fort Dauphin and Port-de-Paix.111

What becomes strikingly evident from these reports, then, is the generalized state of shock in which the colonial authorities, and many a planter, found themselves. On the one hand, such shocking revelations may indeed have stimulated the masters' fears, while these fears, with a cumulative effect, may then have prompted excessive slave arrests and executions to provide the masters with a desperate sense of security, regardless of the cost. And so in this vein, in the fundamental relationship between master and slave, what the masters believed their slaves capable of doing, what they thought the slaves could and would do, was equally as important as that which the slaves actually did or did not bring about through poison. And yet, they learned exceedingly little from this whole episode. Had they heeded their own fears over what could have happened in 1758, instead of psychologically displacing them through both a literal and a figurative witch hunt, thus erecting a precarious sense of security, they may well have been better prepared and less incredulous and dumbfounded over what did happen in 1791.
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Unfortunately any systematic, quantitative social study of the Makandal conspiracy and the "epidemic" wave of poisonings surrounding the event is all but impossible. The evidence, when it does exist, is far too fragmentary, and we must rely upon the colonial correspondence and administrative reports for the elements with which to construct an interpretation. Given the torture tactics used in extracting confessions from suspected slaves, one may justifiably raise questions as to whether all of those arrested and executed were actually guilty; whether the numbers of slaves having perished by poison, reaching into the hundreds by one report and the thousands by another, were accurate; whether the numbers of slaves incarcerated in colonial prisons were exact. But that these massive arrests may have served more to assuage the fears that gripped the masters than to actually punish the guilty ones, and not obviate the fact that the fears were themselves perpetrated, in the first instance, by the homicidal activities of at least some of the slaves. And then, one may also assume that there were a good number of slaves and free blacks who used or distributed poisons and who were never caught or identified.

Yet in the end, Makandal and his followers did not succeed in exterminating the whites nor in becoming "masters of the island," a fact that led some observers to conclude that there never were the clear intentions of the slaves who engaged in acts of poisoning. Rather, the failure of the conspiracy prompted them to interpret such acts purely in terms of individual interest: vengeance, jealousy, reduction of the work load, infliction of economic loss on a master, elimination of inheritance rights by poisoning the master's children and thus preventing the breakup of their own families, or the hastening of the day of emancipation provided in the master's testament. As we have already seen in the general correspondence of the period, acts of poisoning were as often inflicted upon other slaves as upon the masters. In many of these cases, however, slaves aimed at damaging the master financially, at reducing the size of his work force to prevent the expansion of his operations, and thereby to exert a measure of control over their own working and living conditions under slavery. In a letter addressed by a colonist to the Comte de Langeron, these motives are clear:

"The hatred which slavery aroused in them against us has given rise to extraordinary thoughts of vengeance, the sad effects of which we have suffered in seeing three-quarters of our laborers perish from sicknesses of a cause unknown even to doctors. When we discovered who the followers of Makandal were, they admitted that they had put to death a large number of whites and an even larger number of blacks, and that the only reason they did this was to restrict their masters to a small number of slaves in order to prevent them from undertaking production that would cause them to be overworked."

To this end, many acts of poisoning were carried out against plantation work animals, as well as against other slaves or against the master and his family. Additionally, slaves who could not be trusted with the secrets of these homicidal endeavors were among the first to fall victim to the poisonings used by fellow slaves.

As to the personal desire for freedom on the part of slaves who individually committed acts of poisoning against their masters, sufficient evidence exists to reveal the conscious and deliberate nature of such acts. A letter from the interim intendancy at le Cap, dated 13 January 1758, just a week before Makandal's execution, revealed the motive of four slaves, three women and one man, who poisoned their masters. These slaves were tempted by the expectation of enjoying their freedom sooner that they could have hoped for in the testament that their masters had left, and that is what prompted them to cut short their masters' lives by poisoning them. In a similar vein, Pompée had told the Negress Assam that when the whites live too long, the slaves who were waiting for their freedom gave the masters drugs to make them die sooner, that many free blacks had gained their freedom this way, and that she should do the same. In the opinion of the intendants, the practice of granting freedom by testament would, if left unchecked, lead to the destruction of the colony. The problem, then, could be remedied only by passing a law that, except in the case of a slave noted for "distinguished services," would annul all future acts of liberty granted to slaves by testament. In yet another letter, written only a month earlier, additional evidence of the desire for personal freedom in the poisoning of masters is provided, but the blame for this widespread practice is placed upon the decadence of colonial lifestyles: creole women afraid to die with the reputation of being poor if they did not provide for the emancipation of their slaves; or the concubinage of the masters with their Negro slaves, eventually assuring the freedom of the latter. Thus, given the promises of freedom that were "lavishly accorded by the masters," many slaves were tempted to poison them and become free by virtue of their testament.

Individual acts of poisoning, then, could be motivated by diverse factors, but whatever the motive, the consequences of such acts struck at the economic base of the slave system. However, the fact that individual instances of poisoning occurred for individual reasons on a more or less wide scale does not necessarily exclude the motive of collective liberation in the Makandal conspiracy, nor does it undermine the material objectives of the revolt. Yet the historical relationship between the generalized social phenomenon of slave poisonings and slavery, as cited by various colonists throughout the North Province, and the actual 1757 political conspiracy of Makandal, remains for the historian a conjectural one. One can argue, however, that
these poisonings were all acts of sustained resistance against the nature of slavery and the colonial order, and as such contributed to the creation of a state of fear, uncertainty, and even paranoia and hysteria within the master class. It was, after all, only toward the end of some eighteen-and-odd years of clandestine maroon activity to build a slave network, to distribute these poisons, instruct a following, and establish trusted contacts on the plantations throughout the Noré Plain that Makandal could actually organize an effective slave underground and crystallize a precise plan of attack.

One letter, written from le Cap and dated 8 November 1758, suggests even after the arrest and execution of Makandal and the other leaders, along with hundreds of their followers, that the operations and plans for revolt had still not entirely been crushed: "The principal leaders of these rebels have been burned and, of late, eight others have been arrested at the source which supplies water to the military barracks; their plan was to inject poison in the canal that carries the water to the fountain and thereby kill off the troops who proved to be the only obstacle holding them back and preventing them from exterminating the whites." So the evidence seems to indicate that, however loose or rudimentary the Makandal affair may have been, it was neither a spontaneous eruption nor was it only blind terrorism, but rather a deliberately organized plan of revolt that appears to have taken concrete form within a concurrent context of widespread, often unexplained, poisonings that he and his followers had done much to create.

Indeed, by 1757, the use of poison had become a generally established practice among many slaves, and they carried out their acts with impunity: "What alarms us further is to see how little these unfortunate are touched by the fate of those that are executed and how little an impression their punishment makes upon them." The reporter gives as an example the case of one master from Lombe who had obtained a writ from the judge allowing the execution of the accused slaves belonging to him to take place on his plantation. Three days after the execution, the commanding officer, M. de Goody, went to the plantation with a contingent of fifteen whites. Three of M. de Goody's slaves found the means to poison the whole contingent. As they began vomiting, an antidote was promptly administered, and they were saved. The three slaves were arrested and executed. Other contemporary observations further attest to the intrepid way in which slaves continued to resist. M. de Rochefort wrote that "the very day scheduled for the greatest number of executions of [Makandal's] accomplices, other domestic slaves were poisoning their masters and guests." Another relates: "In fact, the frequent punishments and torture which their compatriots suffer before their eyes creates no fear in them whatsoever, and it must be said that the victims endure the most cruel torments with an unequalled steadfastness, appearing on the scaffold and at the stake with ferocious courage and tranquility." Moreover, slaves who administered poison often did so in a highly calculated manner. Of the poisons used, some were so dangerous and so violent that when given to drags, they inflicted immediate death. Others had a much slower effect, causing the victim to languish five to six months before finally dying. Some slaves would consciously administer small doses of poison in their master's food or drink as an initial warning. If the master's cruelty persisted, the doses could be increased and finally induce death. Makandal's final plan was a premature attempt at revolution. The component elements comprising its general framework were those found within the material and historical parameters of mid-eighteenth-century slave society in Saint Domingue: poison, violence, and maroons. It was nevertheless a forecast of what would come in full force some thirty years later. It signaled what had become an incipient movement among the masses, at this stage fragmentary and inexorable and not yet conscious of its revolutionary potential, but one that tended toward the eventual destruction of slavery and one whose arrowed goal, despite the messianic overtones and African outlook of its leaders, was nonetheless the independence and mastery of Saint Domingue.

Concurrently, within this general context, another widespread, almost "epidemic," use of poison was discovered around May 1757 in the regions of le Cap and Fort Dauphin, only eight months prior to Makandal's capture. The first arrest was made on the Lavaud plantation, where countless numbers of slaves had perished within an astonishingly short period of time, and where Lavaud and his wife were left in a hopelessly languishing state of health. Again, it was a domestic slave, Médor, who was suspected as chief perpetrator of the poisonings. It is probable that Médor had established formal links with Makandal, and the documentary evidence available certainly suggests this. However, following his arrest, Médor killed himself before he could be brought to the tribunal for more extensive questioning. His role as a leader behind the poisonings on the Lavaud plantation, however, facilitated by his position as a domestic, certainly places him within the overall scheme of poisonings generally attributed to Makandal and his accomplices from as far as Port-de-Paix at the one end, to Fort Dauphin at the other. It is also certain that he and Makandal operated at the same time, within and around the same geographic base of le Cap-Fort Dauphin, and shared a common vision of emancipation. Inherent in that vision was the belief in its immensity and the necessity of an eventual confrontation with the whites. Médor's final declaration, situated at an undefined point between the hyperbolic and the prophetic, nevertheless sheds light on the attitudes and motives of many a slave who used poison as a means of resistance: "If slaves commit acts of poisoning, they do it in order to obtain their freedom. . . . There is also a secret among them which can only lead . . .
to the destruction of the colony, of which the whites are totally unaware and of which the free blacks are the principal cause, using all possible means to increase their numbers in order to be in a position to confront the whites whenever necessary.122 Indeed, had not the free black Pompei advised the slave Assam to obtain her own freedom by poisoning her master?

With the onslaught of arrests, interrogations, and executions following the Makandal affair, colonial opinion tended to discount the existence of an organized plot or even a general tendency among the slaves toward liberation and the eventual extermination of the masters. Yet the impact of the whole affair upon the colonial mentality and upon subsequent legislation suggests at least that the white masters' fears of continuing slave resistance were nonetheless real and not necessarily without due cause. In fact, the repercussions of the Makandal affair, as those of the Le Jeune case in a similar fashion, may actually tell us as much about the master mentality in Saint Domingue as about slave activities relating to poison per se.

On 21 March 1758, two months after Makandal's execution, the Upper Council of le Cap declared illegal the fabrication or distribution of "makan·dals," or talismans, as well as the casting of evil spells, under the pretext that these constituted a profanation of holy artifacts.123 The same ordinance equally forbade slaves to compose or to distribute any sort of remedy to other slaves without the master's permission. Another ordinance of 7 April 1758 prohibited any slave ceremony involving a death prayer for one of the members. The prohibition against "makan·dals" was also extended to free blacks and mulattoes. For the slaves, prohibitions were reinforced against bearing arms, the sale of foodstuffs in the towns, and assemblies after 7 P.M., even in churches. A free black providing asylum to a fugitive slave would, along with his entire resident family, lose his freedom. A further act of the Upper Council of le Cap ordered in 1761 that churches be closed after sundown and described in an attempt to minimize their direct contact with the slaves. All affranchis, whether black or mulatto, were forbidden to wear sword, saber, or mancehette unless they were members of the ma·ester·haut.

In the end, the Makandal affair was not simply an isolated episode in the history of slave resistance. On the one hand, 1758 marked the climax of slave resistance by means of poison, facilitated by marronage (especially of the chief leaders) and reinforced by the powerful influences of colonial voodoo. But the use of poison as a weapon against slavery hardly began, nor did it end, here. Throughout the eighteenth century, plantations were periodically plagued by the ravages of poison on their plantations, and if they believed they had rid themselves of the problem with the wave of executions and repressive legislation after Makandal's death, they proved singularly shortsighted. 12

During the 1760s, it became clear that actually only a minority of the slaves who engaged in poisoning, or who were believed to have done so, had been eliminated. Cabon relates that during this period, some plantations had even been decimated due to massive executions of suspected slaves.123 As the poisonings continued, the general feeling was that the principal culprits, as well as the rest of their leaders, remained untouched by the combined campaigns of planters and administrators to torture, to inflict a multitude of cruelties, to burn alive suspected slaves from whom they attempted to extract confessions and denunciations of accomplices. One legislator wrote that "punishment by fire to which the criminals have been condemned is totally incapable of frightening them, of making them admit to their crimes and of preventing those who wish to imitate them from continuing the intrigues of their secret undertakings." 124 While some colonists suggested suppressing grants of freedom by testament altogether, others proposed their retention, but only in very special cases, thus keeping alive the illusory hopes of eventual freedom in order to maintain the docility and obedience of slaves. A few of the more enlightened minds proposed humane treatment and sufficient food as a palliative to stimulate respect among slaves for their masters, all to little avail.

By 1780, however, the wave of poisonings that had seemingly swept the North in the 1770s had finally subsided, the specific use of poison as a means of resisting slavery continued to be tossed: in 1777, for example, the slave Jacques, belonging to Corbières, arrested for having poisoned over one hundred of his master's animals in eight months; in 1781, an apothecary arrested for selling a lethal drug to a slave who poisoned himself; or in 1784, the Negress Elizabeth, called Zabeau, arrested for attempting to poison her master by introducing emetic substances in his food and drink.125 In fact, the administrators found it necessary in 1780 to issue an ordinance reinforcing half a dozen previous ones concerning restrictions on the sale of poisons and other dangerous drugs in the colony. In addition, the 1780 ordinance made it illegal for free persons of color, as well as slaves, to compose or distribute a remedy of any sort and in any form, or to undertake the cure of sick persons.126 The notoriously cruel Nicolas Le Jeune related in 1788, just three years before the massive slave revolt in the North Plain, that his father had lost through poison over four hundred slaves in twenty-five years, and fifty-two more in only six months. In less than two years, he himself had lost forty-seven slaves and thirty mules.127

During the 1770s and 1780s, however, at least in the Fort Dauphin region in the North, more overtly violent forms of resistance seemed to replace
the covert schemes of poison as a retaliatory arm. The outright murder and assassination of a master or other white, plotted by small groups of half a dozen slaves, or even by individual slaves, were noted in 1776, 1779, and 1784. Here, in the case of group-led assassinations, the slaves leading the plots operated in the higher ranks of slave society: a miller and a coachman, a commandeur, a sailor, and a quartermaster (no doubt a domestic). As well, the 1770s witnessed the emergence of armed maroon bands swarming plantations and throwing "the whole district of Fort Dauphin into a state of alarm." Noël, the leader of one of these, had assembled "a considerable number of slaves around him, and notably several commandeurs of different ateliers"; his intrepidity even "terrified the gens de couleur to the point where they no longer dared confront him," and a reward was therefore issued. Even more formidable, it seems, was the armed band led by Thérimaque Camisa, seconded by Isaac and by Pierre Candise, numbering some three hundred. Though the interpretation of the evidence has led to much controversy, the impression still remains that, on the whole, marronage was probably increasing during the decade or so preceding the revolution. As well, collective marronage involving groups of slaves and even entire ateliers, sometimes headed by the commandeur, was not an unusual occurrence after 1784.

Undercurrents of thought forecasting a change were expressed in both the slave and the white communities. Perhaps unconsciously foreseeing the black revolution that would break out among the masses eight years later, M. de Bouvray, a colonial planter and brigadier in the royal army, observed in 1783 that "a slave colony is a city threatened by attack; we are treading on powder kegs." Again, by 1786, some slaves were spreading the concept of independence.

In the North, the mulatto Jérôme, called Poteau, and his black companion, Télémaque, inspired by the contemporary vogue of mesmerism, were holding clandestine nightly assemblies that drew large crowds, usually numbering up to two hundred slaves from the plantations around Mamelade. The two leaders distributed iron bars and other cabalistic objects while preaching independence and instructing others in the same practice. Jérôme and Télémaque were arrested and sentenced to the galleys for life in December 1787. The presiding magistrate believed that this public punishment "would prove once and for all the impotence of their practices" and the empty powers of their talismans "to protect them from the punishments which justice must always deal out for brazen-faced charlatanism." What this magistrate did not see, or did not want to see, wrote Cahon, was that these superstitious practices had gone beyond the limits of what the colonists deemed the narrow consciousness of the slaves, to attain the concept of an independence embracing perhaps even the entire race.

Slave resistance had spanned several centuries and was expressed or carried out by the slaves in many ways. Patrol revolts, conspiracies, plots to kill the master, suicide, infanticide, voodoo, maroonage, marronage with its long and diverse history, all have witness to the slaves' human spirit and capacity to assert an independent will. If undercurrents of a consciousness harboring the eventual destruction of slavery and the master class had become evident in the half-decade or so before the revolution, it was not until 1791 that this consciousness became substantively collective, when, beginning in the North, entire plantations of slaves deserted in rapid succession to join what had become a massive revolutionary army. And what was unique about this slave revolt, in addition to its highly disciplined and broadly based organization, was the widespread (and alarming) extent of popular participation and support. Although somewhat fragmentary, there is even evidence to suggest that, in fact, a few of the early leaders of the revolt, notably Boukman and Jean-François, had an acquired experience of popular marronage.

For nearly three years, between 1789 and 1791, the slaves of Saint Domin­
gue witnessed the revolts of the properied classes. The white colonists began by claiming their rights and demanding the abolition of the economic and commercial restrictions laid upon them by the Ancien Régime. They were followed by the affranchis, who demanded an equal footing with the whites. New forces had burst open in the colony. Talk of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" fell upon the receptive ears of domestic slaves, who interpreted these slogans in their own way as they perpetually served their white masters. One colonist writes in 1789: "What perplexes us the most at this time are the menaces of a revolt... Our slaves have already held assemblies in one part of the colony with threats of wanting to destroy all the whites and to become masters of the colony." Another lucidly observes: "Everyone has made a habit of arming himself and of grouping together to patrol the roads and the large savannas. These precautions seem to make an impression on the slaves, but the work is going badly, and it is easy to perceive that something is being conspired and will break out in mutiny on one plantation: This will be the signal for all the others." It was the French Revolution that provided the opportunity for that revolt.
The Coming of the Black Revolution

Once news of the convocation of the Estates General was announced in 1788, colonists in Saint Domingue, as well as absentee planters in France, began rapidly organizing committees and clubs, thus establishing a network of communication between these spontaneously formed bodies as they set out to determine how best to make their claims and grievances known to the national assembly that would convene the following year.

In Saint Domingue, the aristocratic planters of the North were the first to take the initiative. During 1788 a small party had coalesced around the issue of colonial representation in the Estates General and by August had formed, illegally and with the utmost secrecy, a committee to propagate its views and rally support among the planters of the outlying parishes. This committee, along with the propaganda emanating from the Chamber of Agriculture in Le Cap, had sparked the creation of similar committees in the two other provinces. They were all actively engaged in preparing official lists of grievances, or colons, as well as the eventual election of deputies who would present these claims and specific interests to the Estates General.

They wanted an end to what they called "ministerial despotism" and reserved for themselves alone the right to legislate on the internal structure and administration of the island. The governor and intendant were to become mere figureheads representing the king and would fall under the influence and control of colonial authority. They wanted an end to the prohibitive measures of the Exclusive and demanded the right of free trade and the opening of colonies to merchant ships of other countries, especially for the unrestricted importation of grain and slaves. Land distribution, jurisdiction, finances, legislation—these were all matters that for the colonists could best be decided upon by themselves. By declaring that only the colony could act in its own best interests, they saw themselves not as subjects of the French Crown, but rather as a French province, distinctively different from the others by virtue of climate, agriculture, the specific nature of its slave-based economy, and the particularity of its social and racial structure.

Their aim was to stabilize and to increase their colonial possessions and productivity, and for this they explicitly excluded the mulattoes and free blacks from the primary electoral assemblies. By the end of the year, they had elected their own deputies to France in the belief that the members of the Estates General, because of their unfamiliarity with the specific needs of the colonies and general ignorance of colonial affairs, would accept them as experts and, with little debate, adopt whatever they proposed. They were themselves unaware, however, of attitudes prevalent among some of the more enlightened leaders of the revolutionary movement in France, who influenced by the ideas of the philosophes, depicted the slave-owning colonists as "a breed of political teachers and violators of human dignity."1

The colonists had not yet even obtained the right of representation. Since their petitions for admission into the Estates General had already been rejected by the king and the royal bureaucracy, and subsequently by the nobility, their last refuge was in the Third Estate, which by June had come to the forefront of the revolution in France. Assembled in the Tennis Court at Versailles, the Third Estate had declared itself the nation, the true representatives of the people, and swore, as a body, never to disperse. Almost all the colonial deputies had also participated in this oath, and in the general euphoria and enthusiasm that surrounded the event, the Third Estate recognized the principle of colonial representation.

Given the wealth and economic importance of Saint Domingue to France, the provisional deputies brazenly requested twenty colonial representatives. At this point Mirabeau, a liberal bourgeois and member of the French abolitionist society, the Amis des Noirs, indignantly intervened and maintained that the principles of proportional representation followed in France allowed the colony only four deputies. Moreover, he continued, with biting irony: "You want representation in proportion to the number of inhabitants. But have the blacks and free persons of color competed in the elections? The free blacks are property owners and taxpayers. Yet they could not vote. And, as to the slaves, either they are men or they are not; if the colonists consider them to be men, let them free them and make them eligible for seats; if not, have we, in proportioning the number of deputies to the population of France, taken into account the number of our horses and mules?"2

A compromise was reached, and the colony was allowed six deputies. Colonial representation in a metropolitan assembly was an audacious innovation. It was contrary to the established theory of mercantilism and had never before been granted by a European power. In essence, the idea of colonial representation embodied the general principle of "no taxation without representation" over which the North American colonies had already fought a war for independence. It was a victory for the Saint Domingue deputies, but a precarious one for which they would in the end pay dearly. Without realizing it, the colonists had seriously compromised their future and their fortunes by demanding representation in a parliamentary body in revolution. They were caught in the trap of their own ambitions and would...
now have to find a way to separate their own private interests from those of France, from the principles guiding the revolution and embraced in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, which proclaimed that "all men are born and remain free and equal in their rights."

At the same time as the white deputies from Saint Domingue were seeking admission to the Estates General, the mulattoes residing in Paris had organized a parallel movement for representation under the leadership of Julien Raimond. Their cause was hopeless in the colony since they were excluded from the electoral assemblies. In Paris, at least, they had allies, and with the help of the Ama des Noirs, whose leading spokesman, Abbé Grégoire, was a member of the Constituent Assembly, they were allowed to present their case in October. The assembly was hard-pressed to make a decision, but remained ideologically consistent with its own revolutionary principles and declared that no part of the nation would ever claim its rights in vain before the elected assembly of the French people. The mulattoes had also succeeded in obtaining a recommendation from the Credentials Committee, of which Grégoire was a member, for two representatives. Their cause was filled with new hopes. Yet reaction and fear were now stronger than ever among the white colonial forces.

The Massiac Club, a group of notable and influential colonists in Paris, had already organized themselves in opposition to colonial representation. They had between them the imminent dangers of the whole debate. Officially founded in August 1789, they had set themselves the task of coordinating a system of pressure to block the aspirations of the pro-representation party. They strongly contested the powers of the six deputies who had already been admitted provisionally, as the question of mulatto representation began taking on wider proportions. It was, incidentally, to the absence of the Massiac Club that the mulattoes first addressed their petitions, seeking at least some support from their allies in property. By intrigue and intimidation, the members of the club, now in alliance with the colonial deputies, attempted at every opportunity to suspend all discussion of colonial affairs and prevent the reemergence of the mulatto question in the National Assembly. Thus, Grégoire’s recommendations were never heard.

By now, events in Saint Domingue had taken their own course. News from France was slow in coming, and the colonists had already taken the initiative of electing district and provincial assemblies months before the arrival of the convocation orders promised by the minister of the marine. The Provincial Assembly of the North accused Peynier, the governor, of hiding the orders, and began stealing ministerial mail. Peynier was forced to act and finally decided to issue the orders of convocation. The general colonial assembly was to be located at Léogâne. This only infuriated the provincial assembly further, as it meant to retain control of the revolution in the North and begin delegating itself both legislative and executive powers in the name of the colony.

The gens de couleur, as free persons and as property owners, continued to demand full and equal rights of citizenship with the whites. They were richer, more numerous, and far more militant than elsewhere in the French West Indies. In Saint Domingue, they outnumbered the whites in the south and constituted an equivalent force in the West. The planters, aware of the activities of the mulatto delegation in Paris, became increasingly fearful and determined at all costs to undermine their movement. They kept the mulattoes under strict surveillance, issued curfews, and tried to intimidate them through arrogance and brutality. If they allowed the free persons of color to vote and hold office, they would, they believed, open the way to and encourage insurrection among the slaves. It would be the end of white supremacy and of their fortunes.

At Le Cap, they had already executed one mulatto, Lacombe, for having submitted a petition to the Provincial Assembly of the North requesting political rights for free persons of color. In November, a white, Ferand de Baudrières, seneschal of Petit Goâve, had written a similar petition. He was arrested at his residence, dragged through the streets, and brutally killed by a furious mob of petits blancs who cut off his head and paraded it through the town on a spike. At Aquin, Laugier, an elderly, respectable mulatto and close friend of Raimond, was suspected of having in his possession a copy of the petition that prompted the death of de Baudrières. Shot down at his home, he was then tied to a horse and left to be dragged to death, though his life was spared by the intervention and aid of his slaves and some neighbors. A notary at Petite-Rivière nearly missed being killed for having drawn up a petition claiming the political and civil rights of the mulattoes and free blacks.

By February 1790 the planters began organizing elections for the new colonial assembly. Rejecting the instructions of the minister, Le Lazare, they decided upon Saint Marc as the site of the assembly and, in a special ordinance issued by the provincial assemblies, explicitly excluded the mulattoes and free blacks from the primary electoral committees. By the end of March, the deputies from the three provinces met in Saint Marc and on 14 April, avoiding any reference to their colonial status, declared themselves the General Assembly of Saint Domingue.

While all this was going on in the colony, the National Assembly in France had not yet determined the official constitutional status of the colonies. The Saint Domingue deputies realized they could not introduce measures concerning the colony without reopening the debate on the mulatto question. Conscious of the precarious position in which they now found themselves, a deputy from Martinique, de Curt, proposed in November 1789 the creation
of a special Colonial Committee in order to examine all colonial questions from the floor of the assembly, where debate would more likely focus troublesome attention and publicity upon the racial interests of the planters.

The committee was to be composed of an equal number of colonists and wealthy port merchants, whose role would be, among others, to present a plan for a constitution of the colonies. Strong opposition came at this point from Abbé Grégoire. In his speech on 9 December, he maintained that the question of a constitution for the colonies could not be considered so long as the question of the rights of the free persons of color had not been settled. It was an issue that had plagued the colonial deputies from the very moment they had begun agitating for representation in Paris. In spite of Grégoire's efforts to settle the mulatto question first, and in view of the recent events in the colony, the proposal for a colonial committee was accepted on 2 March 1790. Although only two colonists and two port merchants were named to the committee, the other eight, including Barnave, who was chosen to head the committee, were solid supporters and allies of the colonists, as of the merchant bourgeoisie, and susceptible to the influence and manipulation of the Massiac Club.  

The committee had less than one week to come up with a constitutional plan for the colonies. Drawing from work that had already been under way in the Massiac Club, Barnave submitted his report to the National Assembly on 8 March. The report officially recognized the already-existing assemblies in Saint Domingue, authorized each colony to submit its own proposals for a constitution, and finally, aiming at the Amis des Noirs, declared guilty of crime against the nation anyone attempting to undermine or invite agitation against the interests of the colonists. Not a word was mentioned on the burning question of mulatto rights. By sanctioning the already-elected assemblies, which excluded the mulattoes, the decision as to who was and who was not a citizen was left entirely to the prejudices and dispositions of the white planters.  

The report quelled the fears of the colonists as it gave nearly complete local autonomy to the colonies, reassured the maritime bourgeoisie by postponing revisions of the Exclusive, thus avoiding any mention whatsoever of the slave trade, and left only a glimmer of hope for the mulattoes. The assembly received Barnave's proposals, incomplete as they were, with an overwhelming ovation, naively subverting all discussion. The vote was taken and the report of 8 March approved by what was, for the liberal opposition, an ejection majority.  

The instructions that followed, outlining the application of the 8 March decree, gave full legislative powers to the Colonial Assembly, which by now was acting in the colony as a miniature Constituent Assembly, but whose laws, in spite of its declared intentions to circumvent the National Assembly's, still needed the approval of the latter and the perfunctory sanction of the king.  

The Colonial Assembly was free to propose modifications of the commercial relations between the colony and France and, in short, would hold virtual sovereignty over its internal regime. But the instructions remained ambiguous on the explosive question of the political rights of mulattoes and free blacks. Article 4 merely stated that the right to vote and hold office be accorded to all persons twenty-five years of age who owned property or paid the requisite amount of taxes, and who fulfilled a two-year residence requirement.  

Violent opposition came both from the colonial deputies and from the pro-mulatto forces led by Grégoire. Were not the mulattoes and free blacks persons? Did they not own property and pay taxes? Grégoire demanded a clarification of Article 4. He understood the word persons to mean mulattoes and free blacks, as well, and insisted that they be expressly included in the wording. The colonial deputies wanted Article 4 suppressed altogether, or else rewritten to specifically exclude mulattoes and free blacks. The assembly refused to face the issue, closed the debate, and dispatched the instructions, along with their inherent ambiguity, to the colony.  

The news of the 8 March decree and the instructions of the twenty-eighth did not arrive until the end of May. In the meantime, the assembly of Saint Marc had already assumed supreme legislative authority in the colony, declared itself permanent, and had begun a thorough reorganization of the colony's administrative structure. On 22 May, it issued a decree serving as the constitutional basis of the colony. The decree declared that if urgency dictated, its laws, as those of the National Assembly in France, were subject to the right of the mulattoes. The assembly at Saint Marc had already assumed supreme legislative authority in the colony, declared itself permanent, and had begun a thorough reorganization of the colony's administrative structure. On 22 May, it issued a decree serving as the constitutional basis of the colony. The decree declared that if urgency dictated, its laws, as those of the National Assembly in France, were subject only to the sanction of the king. Moreover, any law passed by the National Assembly on affairs of common interest between the colony and France were subject to colonial veto. Henceforth, Saint Domingue was to be a federative ally rather than a subject of the French government. By the same decree, it suspended all functions of the colonial deputies in the National Assembly, who were now to be so more than commissioners charged with presenting its decrees for official sanction. In July, it passed a law contrasting the Exclusive to open up the ports for the unrestricted importation of certain foodstuffs. In the face of this insurrectionary activity, which had gone far beyond the moderate intentions of the 8 March decree, and which seemed to be driving the colony toward virtual independence, the governor issued a proclamation denouncing the General Assembly as a traitor to the nation and amassed his troops to dissolve it by force. Saint Domingue was now divided into two distinct camps. On the right were the pompeux blancs, the royalists, and all those who had occupied military or administrative posts in the colony. The Provincial Assembly of the North, dominated by the wealthy
aristocratic planters and commercial bourgeoisie believed the Saint Marc assembly had gone too far for its own good and for the good of the colony. They recalled their deputies, sided for the time being with the royalists, and aimed to regain control of the revolution. On the left were the patriots, or the pampres, who supported the constitutional reforms of the Saint Marc assembly and for whom the revolution had opened up certain avenues of advancement. Both sides bid for the support of the mulattos, extending hypocritical overtures and promises to win them over.

The Saint Marc assembly rebutted the governor's denunciation by declaring Peynier a traitor, as well as the officers of his staff, and issued a call to arms of all citizens. The Provincial Assembly of the North offered its services to the governor. It was decided that Colonel de Mauduit would leave Port-au-Prince on 5 August with his royalist regiment to collaborate with de Vincent, commander of the forces in the North; both would converge at Saint Marc and force the assembly to dissolve. Upon the arrival of the troops, a twenty-four-hour ultimatum was issued. The assembly was left defenseless and faced certain defeat. The eighty-five remaining members took advantage of the presence of a ship, the *Léopard*, docked in the Port-au-Prince harbor, and with the aid of a sympathetic crew who maneuvered it to Saint Marc, all eighty-five jumped aboard, sailed to France, and tried to plead for justice in the National Assembly.

In France, the mulattos had attempted ever since the adoption of the 8 March decree to obtain a clarification of their rights implied in Article 1, but with no success. De July, a lawyer and member of the *Amis des Noirs, intervened on their behalf to solicit an explanation from the Colonial Committee, which remained noncommittal. The National Assembly had effectively washed its hands of the whole problem by delegating to the Colonial Assembly the sole initiative for its constitution and its laws governing the status of persons.

It was clear that the aspirations of the mulattos were now a lost cause in France. Vincent Oge, a close friend and colleague of Raimond, understood this. He had already made it known to Barnave and the Colonial Committee that if the whites persisted in refusing to recognize persons of color as free citizens, he would force them, by arms if necessary, to recognize their rights. The activities and agitation of the mulattos in Paris had caused the colonists' fears to reach an unprecedented stage. The Massiac Club issued directives to all the major ports, advising ship captains to refuse passage to any person of color leaving for Saint Domingue. In spite of these measures, Oge managed to escape. He went first to England, where he was secretly received and aided by the abolitionist leader Thomas Clarkson. With an advance of thirty pounds, he left for the United States, purchased some arms, and arrived in Saint Domingue on 21 October.

When the planters of the Saint Marc assembly had received news of the March decrees, along with the equivocal provisions of Article 4, they vowed that they would never accord political rights to a "bastard and degenerate race" and expressly excluded them from the primary assemblies. When a group of mulattos appeared before the Provincial Assembly of the South at les Cayes to request a clarification of their rights, they were told that "nothing can destroy nor even alter the line of demarcation which both nature and our institutions have irrevocably fixed between you and your benefactors." The assembly further warned them against taking any action that would be "incompatible with the state of subordination in which you must continually remain." The new colonial assembly prescribed by the March decrees had been elected without a single mulatto or free black vote.

Oge's plan upon arriving in Saint Domingue was to secure by force the application of these decrees for his people. Having managed to evade the police, who had been warned of his arrival, he went on to Dondon where he had family and friends, and there organized a common front of gens de couleur against the forces of white supremacy. Among his supporters were his brother, Jacques, and Jean-Baptiste Chavannes, a close friend and associate who had already proven his military abilities as a soldier in the North American war for independence. With an armed following of over two hundred men, including some free blacks, they advanced to Grande-Rivière, joined with additional forces to take over the city, and disarmed the white population without incident. Oge then dispatched letters to the governor, to de Vincent, and to the Provincial Assembly of the North. In the letters, he demanded the just application of the March decrees, stating that they would proceed to elect their own representatives and, if thwarted in their endeavors, would meet force with force. The Provincial Assembly immediately countered their demands by sending its forces to defeat the insurgents. Vastly outnumbered and overpowered, they were forced to disband. Oge and a number of his companions fled to Spanish territory, whence they were soon extradited.

The trial did not take place until February 1791, when, on the twenty-sixth, Oge and Chavannes were both sentenced to a merciless death. They were led by the executioners to the parish church where, with a cord around their necks and on bended knee, they were to repent their "crimes," after which their bodies were tied to a wheel and broken on a scaffold where they died—opposite the execution place for whites. As a reminder of the written and unwritten laws of white supremacy for all to see, their heads were cut off and exposed on stakes. Oge's on the road leading to Dondon, and Chavannes's on the one leading to Grande-Rivière. Two days later Oge's brother, along with some twenty-one others, were also condemned to death, and thirteen more sentenced the following month to the galleys for life. Such
Gregoire took the stand to demand an adjournment; the opposition called for an immediate vote but was defeated. When the debates resumed on the evening, it was Robespierre who laid the issue squarely before the members of the assembly. The colonial supporters were undermining the very foundation of those principles upon which their own rights and liberties were founded. If the colonies were to be preserved at the price of submitting to colonial threats by adopting legislation contrary to the most basic principles of humanity, then they should perish: “We will sacrifice to the colonial deputies neither the nation nor the colonies nor the whole of humanity...I ask the Assembly to declare that the free persons of color be allowed to enjoy the rights of voting citizens.” The question was settled on 15 May. Political rights were granted only to those persons of color born of free parents. The existing colonial assemblies, which excluded mulattoes and free blacks, were to remain: those persons of color born of free parents and possessing the requisite qualifications would be admitted to all future assemblies. It was in fact a conservative measure that enfranchised only a small minority of the mulattoes and free blacks in Saint Domingue.

The colonists were infuriated. The deputies, the members of the Colonial Committee, the Massiac Club—all forgot their former differences and joined together to organize a united front to subvert the application of the 15 May decree. By July, the legislative powers of the colony were reorganized. Most of the colonists in France had by now returned to Saint Domingue, where they were fortified by the planters in a common front of white solidarity and white supremacy. The governor, Blanchelande, managed to postpone the arrival of the new colonial assembly opened at Léogâne on 1 August, and within a fortnight the black revolution had begun. It was not the few hundred mulattoes and free blacks included in the law that the planters feared. The entire social and economic structure of the colony, slavery itself, and the precious fortunes tied to it were at stake. To allow even a few mulattoes to vote would immediately open the whole question of those mulattoes still in slavery or born of only one free parent, and from there the abolition of slavery would be but one step away. The new colonial assembly opened at Léogâne on 1 August, and within a fortnight the black revolution had begun.

The slaves had depended neither upon France nor upon the successes or failure of the mulatto struggle. They were organizing for something that did not figure in any of the political debates, either in France or in the colony. But for the past three years they had witnessed the events, the agitation, the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary ferment that was throwing the colony...
Deserts en masse during the night to assemble in the woods. At the same time, groups of slaves from five nearby plantations, numbering roughly fifty-six in all, and this time including a commandeur, in addition to the entire owners of two other plantations, were reported maroon. The following day, as the marchauides arrived, accompanied by neighboring planters to break up the meetings, the slaves resisted with unrestrained courage and determination. Thirteen were captured and a number of others mortally wounded. Some sixty of them, armed with rifles and machetes, had retreated to the coast but were pursued by the marchauides, who took one of their leaders and killed a second. Eight other leaders had been executed, as well; two of them were broken alive on a scaffold, and six were hanged.

The planters and the authorities believed that an example such as this one would bring the rest of the slaves, who had dispersed, back to the masters from whom they would presumably seek pardon and thereby avoid the tragic fate of their leaders. But, as one colonist wrote, “We have not yet seen any of them come forward.”

The planters were forced to increase their surveillance over the slaves, organize nightly patrols, and search the slave cabins for arms. In spite of these measures, slaves managed to communicate and consort with those of other plantations in the districts. The domestic slaves, largely outside the plantation itself, were in continual contact with whites and consequently in the best position to receive and disseminate information. At the market place, in the port towns, at the crossroads, they spoke with one another, exchanged ideas and information, overhead the discussions and arguments of the whites, and communicated what they knew, either directly or through contacts, to their black compatriots in the fields.

The whole structure of colonial Saint Domingue was rapidly being transformed. The traditional antagonisms and hostilities between the planters and the bureaucracy had reached their peak and were now fought out in the open. The planters, as a class, were mercilessly divided amongst themselves in the early days of 1788. They wanted certain reforms, but were uncertain as to how they should proceed. It was a small minority of the planters of the North that took the lead and pushed for representation in France, and it was the same planters whose troops joined the counterrevolutionary royalist forces a year later to smash the patriot legislature at Saint Marc. The “small” whites had deserted their former allies of convenience, the royal bureaucrats, and now sided with the planters to lynch and kill mulattoes and free blacks, whose aspirations and energies were unleashed by a revolution the planters themselves had begun and could no longer control.

The colony had never been in such a state of social and administrative chaos. Not only was the old colonial regime shattered to pieces, the governor and the bureaucracy stripped of their former powers, the prerogatives of the
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merchant bourgeoisie dismantled with the opening of the ports. but the new regime had no centralized power. Authority shifted regionally back and forth between the Provincial Assembly of the North and the Colonial Assembly in the West, each attempting to concentrate control in its own hands and in its own interests.

Planters were far too preoccupied with these problems to worry much about the effects their words and actions might have upon their slaves. They had come to Saint Domingue to make a fortune out of slavery, and they saw no reason for things to change. Although a few might have foreseen the dangers that lay ahead, most generally assumed that slavery was as inviolable as it was enduring. It had lasted for over two hundred years. Slave rebellions had occurred in the past, and maroonage had been a constant plague. But the revolts were always isolated affairs, and maroon bands were invariably defeated along with their leaders. For the planters, there was no reason to believe that slave activity was any different from what it had been in the past.

They would soon learn, but only by the raging flames that within hours reduced their magnificent plantations to ashes, how wrong they were.
The insurrection that broke out in August 1791 was by no means a spontaneous or unmediated event. The slaves in the North had been consciously preparing and organizing themselves for weeks before that fateful night of 22 August, which marked the beginning of the end of one of the greatest wealth-producing slave colonies the world had ever known—the pearl of the Antilles, as it was extravagantly called.

On Sundays, slave representatives from the major plantations would meet clandestinely to lay the plans for the general insurrection, but it was on the night of the fourteenth, one week before the actual outbreak, that the final scheme was drawn up and the instructions given out. Numbering some two hundred in all, consisting of "two delegates each from all the plantations of Port-Margot, Limbé, Acul, Petit-Anse, Léogâne, Plaine du Nord, Quartier-Morin, Morne-Rouge, etc., etc." covering the entire central region of the North Province, they were assembled to fix the date for the revolt that had been in the planning for some time. 1 They met at the Léonard de Mésy plantation in Morne-Rouge, and all of the delegates were upper-strata slaves in whom the masters had placed their confidence, most of them commandants whose influence and authority over the field slaves were undoubtedly considerable. Upon a given signal, the plantations would be systematically set aflame, and a generalized slave insurrection set afoot. To dissipate any hesitation or equivocation the assembled conspirators may have had, a statement was read by an unknown mulatto or quarteroon to the effect that the king and the National Assembly in France had decreed three free days per week for every slave, as well as the abolition of the whip as a form of punishment. They were told that it was the white masters and the colonial authorities who refused to consent and that royalist troops were on their way from France to execute the decree by force. The news was of course false, but it represented the nearest thing to freedom the slaves had ever known, and it served as a rallying point around which to galvanize the aspirations of the slaves, to solidify and channel these into open rebellion.

Although the majority of the delegates agreed in principle that they should await the arrival of these royalist troops, the slave representatives from some of the plantations in Limbé and Acul insisted upon instigating the war against...
the white at whatever cost, with or without the troops. In the end, they nearly agreed to begin the revolt that very night, but then went back on this decision as they considered it inappropriate to carry on, on the spot, a general insurrection for which the plans had been finalized only that evening. The majority of the slaves had thus decided to wait, and the date was fixed for the twenty-second.

The early leaders forming the core of this movement were Boukman Dutty, Jeanne Bollet, Jean-François, and Georges Dessayou. The first two, according to one source, were to take charge of the initial stages of the movement, while Jean-François and Dessayou were to take over first and second command of the insurrection once under way. Toussaint Louverture, who would emerge as supreme leader of the revolution years later, served, inscrutably at this point, as the link between these leaders and the system, carefully dissimulating his actual participation. Although he remained on the Breda plantation, where he served as coachman for the manager, Baron de Libertas, he had by now already been a free black, or affranchi, for well over a decade. With a pass signed by the governor, Toussaint was thus permitted to circulate freely and to frequent other plantations; but he was also in communication with influential elements of the royalist faction who hoped to profit from, and who even helped stimulate, the brewing slave insurrection by invoking a common cause—the defense of the king, who had, they rumored, granted the slaves three free days per week. Once they had used the slave insurrection to defeat the rival patriot faction, once power was re­stored in royalist hands and the king securely on the throne of France, the blacks, they no doubt believed, could then be persuaded by their leaders to return to the plantations and be duped back into slavery. Undeniably, links between the slave leaders and certain royalists in the early stages were important, but for the latter to have assumed that the slave insurrection would, in the end, amount to little more than a traditional jaquette was, in the unmitigated context of impending revolution and imperial wars, to make a profoundly grave mistake. Of the leaders, it was Boukman who was to give the signal for the revolt. He had been a commandeur and later a coachman on the Clément plantation, among the first to go up in flames once the revolt began. While his experience as commandeur provided him with certain organizational and leadership qualities, the post as coachman no doubt enabled him to follow the ongoing political developments in the colony, as well as to facilitate communication links and establish contacts among the slaves of different plantations. Reportedly, Boukman was also a voodoo priest and, as such, exercised an undisputed influence and command over his followers, who knew him as "Zamba" Boukman. His authority was only enhanced by the overpowering impression projected by his gigantic size.

Once the conspirators had reached agreement on the date, set for the twenty-second, the accord was solemnized by a voodoo ceremony held in a thickly wooded area known as Bois-Caiman, not far from the Leronnand plantation. According to most accounts, the ceremony was officiated by Boukman and a voodoo high priestess, an old African woman "with strong eyes and brawny hair," just as terrifying as her counterpart. Amidst rag­tag streams of lightning and violent bursts of thunder, as the account goes, accompanied by high winds and the torrential rains of the storm that had broken out that night, the high priestess raised her knife to invoke the deities, as such, her counterpart, was, in essence, a call to arms:

"It is thus, as well, that the white man does. The god of the white man calls him to commit crimes; our god asks only good works of us. But this god who is so good orders revenge! He will direct our hands; he will aid us. Throw away the image of the whites who thrusts for our tears and listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us." 

C'est la liberté il fait nan cœur nous tous; "Listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us." It was a refrain that would later recur under Boukman's leadership during the early days of the insurrection as he would exhort the insurgent slaves under his command to attack.

The story of this ceremony has long since passed into legend, rendering all the more difficult the separation of actual fact from the elaborated mythology that later developed around the event. Contemporary evidence is sparse; in fact, there is no mention of it at all in the archival documents that recount the conspiracy and are based largely on the testimony of a few slaves. But then, given the imperative of utmost secrecy in voodoo ceremonies, it is hardly surprising that no detailed contemporaneous accounts exist. The few existing in the archival documents are themselves contradictory and doubtfully authentic. In fact, certain nineteenth-century Haitian family papers clearly identify one of the participants in the Bois-Caiman ceremony as Cecile Faismat (that family member's own grandmother), a green-eyed mulatto woman with long silky black hair, the daughter of a Caro­uese prince and an African woman. She was herself a mambo, a voodoo high priestess. But in the absence of additional detailed documentation, many questions may still be raised concerning this event. Did all of the Morne-Rouge slave delegates participate in the Bois-Caiman rival ceremony? Or conversely, were the participants in the Bois-Caiman ceremony the same individuals as those whose political views were expressed at the Morne-Rouge assem­
It is earlier that evening? Certainly, Boukman, as one of the chief leaders of the revolt and the orator who delivered the Bois-Caiman speech, would have been present at both. Here then, the often-assumed antipathy of elite creole slaves toward voodoo, and toward African-born slaves practicing it, may be brought into question as well. All or nearly all of the slave delegates were from the upper ranks of slave society usually filled by creole slaves. Cecile Fatiman, though a creole mulattress, was nonetheless a mambo. But was she actually the officiating priestess described quite dissimilarly in the one account as "an old negro with strange eyes and bristly hair?" As to so many questions pertaining to clandestine slave practices and activities in Saint Domingue before and during the revolution, where hard scientific evidence is intrinsically lacking, the answers will necessarily remain conjectural ones. What we can safely say, however, is that the Bois-Caiman ceremony did historically occur following the Morna-Rouge assembly; second, that the oration delivered was authentically Boukman's and that the ceremony was, after all, a voodoo event.

Even more important, though, is the historical significance of the 14 August assemblies, and this can be viewed on both an ideological and a political level. First, the Morna-Rouge gathering was a thoroughly organized affair and constituted in every sense a revolutionary political assembly, where issues were discussed, points of view and differing strategies presented, where a final agreement was reached, and a call to arms issued. That agreement was then confirmed and solemnized during the ritual ceremony at Bois-Caiman by a blood pact (and the symbolic drinking of the blood is mentioned in the one contemporary account of Dalmas) that committed the participants to utmost secrecy, solidarity, and a vow of revenge. In this sense, voodoo provided a medium for the political organization of the slaves, as well as an ideological force, both of which contributed directly to the success of what became a virtual blitzkrieg attack on the plantations across the province.

Equally as controversial in relation to the general framework and early stages of the conspiracy is the role of marronage. Whether the August revolt was actually planned and organized in marronage, or rather by slaves in privileged positions within the plantation system, will no doubt remain a matter of dispute. What is probably closer to the truth is that the two elements worked hand in hand. Some evidence suggests that Jean-François was a maron at the outset of the revolt and that Boukman was chronically marron. The report of the civil commissioner Roume states that "for several weeks slave delegations had assembled on Sundays to work out together the plans for this destructive project." As these slave delegations all came from different plantations throughout the North, from "Port-Margot, Limbe, Acul, Feite-Anse, Lisonade, Plaine du Nord, Quartier-Morin, Monte-Rouge, etc., etc., attendance at the meetings would have necessitated some sort of fairly regular petit marronage, unless of course each and every one of them had a Sunday pass. Even so, passes were notoriously forged by even minimally literate slaves.

On the other hand, it is known that Toussaint was in close communication with Jean-François, Biassou, and Boukman even as he remained on his plantation and did not officially join the ranks until nearly three months later. We also have the statement (referred to below) of the Desgriseaux slave commandeur revealing that coachmen, domesticites, and other trusted slaves of the surrounding plantations, in addition to the commandeurs, were involved in the conspiracy. Or, the statement of an old Gallifet slave, Ignace, who was "distinguished from the other slaves by his exemption from any sort of work," who held the secret of the conspiracy for a long time and who had received instructions from a free black, one of those sentenced in absentea in the Oge affair. In fact, another of the core ringleaders was Jean-Baptiste Cap, a free black said to be possessed of substantial income and property.

An incredibly vast network had been set afoot and facilitated by the interaction of several elements. These were African, as well as creole, and included the dynamics of marronage, as well as the subversive activities of commandeurs and of house slaves, and even a restricted segment of the free blacks (Toussaint was himself a free black), whose mobility and closer relationship to white society afforded them access to news and information on the political situation. To separate any one element from the others, as if they are by nature mutually exclusive, will invariably leave the vital questions about the revolutionary organization and capacities of these black masses perpetually unanswered.

The 14 August conspiracy was an ingenious plan, and it would have been perfect were it not for the premature activities of a few slaves in the Limbe district, who either misunderstood the final instructions or who impatiently insisted, in spite of the accord, upon beginning the revolt before the designated date. On 16 August, two days after the Morna-Rouge affair, some slaves were caught setting fire to one of the buildings on the Chabaud estate, in which the bagasse, or straw residue of the sugar cane, was stored. One of them, armed with a saber, was the commandeur from the Desgriseaux plantation. A physical battle ensued, and, though wounded, the slave was arrested, put into iron, and interrogated. Upon questioning, he revealed that the commandeurs, coachmen, domesticites, and other slaves whom the masters trusted from the neighboring plantations had formed a conspiracy to burn the plantation down and kill off all the whites. He named as leaders a certain number of slaves from the Desgriseaux plantation, four from the Flaville plantation in Acul, and Paul, a commandeur on the Bhn plantation in Limbe.
Upon confirming the declaration of the Desgréeux commandeur, the municipal authorities of La Plaine issued a warning of the impending danger to the planters of the district and suggested to the manager of the Flaville estate that he apprehend those of his slaves who were denounced by name. Incredulous and unsuspecting, the Flaville manager summoned his slaves and offered his own head to exchange if the denunciations of the Desgréeux commandeur proved true. They all categorically denied any truth to the commandeur’s statement, as did Paul Blin, who was also questioned and who also replied that the accusation brought against him was “false and slanderous,” that filled with gratitude for the continual benevolence of his master, one would never see him involved in plots hatched against the whites or their property. A few days later, the twentieth another conspirator, a mulatto slave, Francois, from the Chapoton estate was arrested and put to questioning for his part as accomplice to the assault committed at the Chabaud plantation. It was he who finally revealed the details of the Morne-Rouge assembly on the fourteenth. The following day the crew from the Desgréeux plantation was also to be arrested as one of the named conspirators, whereupon he managed to escape and went off to warn Paul Blin; together they joined the other ring leaders to prepare “the iron and the torch” for the execution of their dreadful projects. The general insurrection broke out on the following night as scheduled.

At ten o’clock, the slaves of the Flaville-Turpin estate in Arac, under the direction of one Auguste, deserted en masse to make their way to the Clement plantation, where they joined Boukman and combined their forces with the rest of the slaves there. Their numbers reinforced, they immediately set out to the Tremise estate; having narrowly missed the resident carpenter with his bullwhip and his prisoner another conspirator, a mulatto slave, Arul, where a dozen or so of these slaves had killed the refiner and his apprentice, as well as the manager. The only whites spared were the doctor and his wife, whose services they deemed might prove to be of great value to them. By midnight the entire plantation was aflame, and the revolt had effectively begun. The troops, by now consisting of all the slaves from the Turpin Flaville, Clement, and Nois plantations, returned with the three prisoners to the Clement estate, methodically assassinated M. Clement and his refiner, and let the prisoners there under guard. Armed with torches, guns, sabers, and whatever makeshift weapons they were able to fabricate, they continued their devastation as they carried the revolt to the surrounding plantations. By six o’clock the next morning, both the Molines and Flaville plantations were totally destroyed, along with all of the white personnel of all the plantations in the Arac district, only on two did some of the slaves refrain for the time being from participating in the revolt.

From Arac, these slaves proceeded westward the same morning, the twenty-third, toward the immediately adjacent Limbe district, augmenting their forces, by now close to two thousand, as they moved from plantation to plantation and established military camps on each one as they took it over. One horrified colonist wrote at this point that “one can count as many rebel camps as there were plantations.” Making their way into Limbe via the Saint-Michel plantation, they were immediately joined by large numbers of slaves in the district where the premature beginnings of this insurrection had been seen a week earlier. Within those few hours, the broad sugar plantations of Saint Domingue were literally devoured by flames. A resident merchant of la Cap remarked how, “like the effect of epidemic disease,” the example set by slaves on one plantation communicated itself throughout the quarter of Limbe, and “in a few hours that immensely rich and flourishing country was overwhelmed with a vast sea of horror and devastation.” Nor was there much tolerance in these crucial hours for slaves, and especially commandeurs, who hesitated or who offered opposition, for “whenever they have committed their ravages,” the writer notes, “the practice was to reduce or oblige the Negroes on different plantations to join their party.” Those who discovered a reluctance or who refused to follow and assist in their designs if they could not escape were cut to pieces.

Continuing westward, the slaves attacked Port-Margot in the early evening of the twenty-fourth, landing at least four plantations, and by the twenty-fifth the entire plain of this district had been destituted. The slaves took care to destroy, as they did from the very beginning and would continue to do throughout the first weeks of the revolution, not only the cane fields, but also the manufacturing establishments; sugar mills, tools and other farm equipment, storage bins, and slave quarters; in short, every material manifestation of their existence under slavery and its means of exploitation. Insufficiently armed and totally unprepared, the planters could do little to oppose the rebels, and nothing to stop the fears that lasted for three days. The residents of Port-Margot had believed for a long time that their slaves had had no part in the revolt; but almost all the slaves in the lower quarter ended up participating in it. Coordinating their forces with insurgent slaves of the plantations situated in the hills and mountainous region bordering on Limbe and Plaisance, they completed their near-total destruction of the parish, leaving only the central area intact.

As these slaves attempted to penetrate Plaisance on the twenty-fifth, they met with armed resistance, the first they had encountered, from a group of inhabitants who managed to drive them back into the Limbe plain, whereupon they divided up and returned by two different routes the following day. Having terrorized the inhabitants upon their return, having pillaged and burned dozens of plantations, they took possession of the Roseau Champagne, where they set up military outposts and fortified their troops.
Here, they held out for over three weeks while the planters, disorganized and badly armed, having already suffered serious casualties, awaited aid from the neighboring parishes. Yet whatever aid the whites managed to muster remained insufficient, for when strategically enveloped, the slaves would disband and retreat into the mountains, only to attack again at different points with replenished and reorganized troops. At the very moment that these slaves were carrying out their depositions and defending their positions to the west of Acul, which appeared to have been the center, or hub, from which the revolt would spread in all directions, slaves in the parishes to the east rose, torch in hand, with equal coordination and purpose. The movement of the revolt was indeed advancing like wildfire, and within these first few days, from the twenty-second to the twenty-fifth, the plantations of the Petite-Anse, Quartier-Morin, and Plaine du Nord parishes surrounding le Cap, as well as those of Limonade, all to the east of Acul, went up in flames as swiftly and as methodically as had those to the west. The slaves on one of the Gallifet estates in Petite-Anse, however, had prematurely begun to revolt either on the twenty-first by attempting to assassinate the manager, M. Mossoy. That it was on the smallest of the three, on La Gassette, that this incident occurred is hardly surprising. Of Gallifet’s three sugar plantations, it was here that the slaves’ conditions were harshest. In fact, two years earlier, in 1789, twenty of these slaves had organized a “strike,” or work stoppage, in the form of collective maroonage, by remaining in the woods for two months in order to have the commandeur removed. The account of the incidents from 20 to 24 August, presented by Dalmas, offers a small glimpse at some of the logistical difficulties involved in actually carrying through and strategically coordinating each part of the revolt. Particular circumstances over which the slaves had no control, such as the presence of key white personnel on the specified day, or other factors, like the degree of accord or dissidence between the commandeur and the slaves, or the role of the domestics, or simply the degree of impatience among the slaves, varied from one plantation to another.

For a reason that is unclear, the slaves at La Gassette had decided to begin before those in Limbé and Acul, and some twenty of them (no doubt some of the same who had deserted in protest in 1789) attempted to kill the manager during the night of his return from le Cap on the twentieth or twenty-first. It was also on the twentieth and twenty-first that two of the key conspirators, the slave François and the Desgroisoux cook, were arrested in Limbé, and while the latter got away, François was taken to le Cap, put to question, and revealed a major conspiracy afoot. The La Gassette slaves, if they had gotten wind of the arrests, may have deemed it unsafe to wait any longer. Whatever the case, their attempt on M. Mossoy’s life was unsuccessful, and the procureur, M. Odeluc, along with several other whites from the main plantation, came to investigate. The commandeur, Blaise, who was the instigator of the assassination attempt, had already fled to warn the other leaders on the main plantation, La Grande Place, for when Odeluc returned there later that night, he found the gate wide open and the lock broken: “It was the work of the leader of the revolt who, seeing that the attempt at La Gassette had failed, ran with all his might to hold off the other conspirators.” Several fires had, however, already broken out in the immediate area. The Gallifet slaves did not move until Boukman’s band, or a section of it, arrived from Limbé on the twenty-fourth. Dalmas relates that, on the night of the twenty-third, the rebel bands, “leaving the Plaine du Nord parish behind them,” entered Petite-Anse and began their attack, not on the Gallifet, but on the Choiseul plantation. From there they advanced on the Pére de la Charité, Borgars, and Clerici plantations, killing the managers and setting the bagasse sheds ablaze, after which they entered the Quartier-Morin parish. Here, according to Dalmas, they met with some resistance from several ateliers who were opposed to the revolt, and then retreated en masse to La Gassette. It was here that Odeluc had concentrated the few forces to La Gassette. They had met with some resistance from whites available who, upon sight of the band, fled, leaving Odeluc prey to his own assassin, his trusted coachman, Philibert. As Odeluc pleaded for his life and reminded Philibert that he had always been kind to him, the coachman replied: “That is true, but I have promised to kill you.” Dalmas states that the slaves then did so. By the twenty-fourth, the insurgents had already established themselves at Gallifet to form a major military camp. Effectively, on the twenty-fourth, as two deputies who had hastily been dispatched by Governor Blanchelande to solicit military aid from the United States prepared to sail, “the village of Petite-Anse had already been destroyed, and the light of the flames was visible in the night in the town.”

Earlier that day, while the insurgents had begun to penetrate Quartier-Morin, a battalion of citizen volunteers set out around noon to contain them. While Dalmas claimed, on the one hand, that the slaves of Quartier-Morin “displayed as much disdain and horror toward the rebels as they did toward their masters” and pushed them back, a participant in the volunteer battalion provides quite a different picture. He writes on the twenty-fourth:

Having arrived at the Quartier-Morin, which had yet received no injury, we saw the fire upon the plantation Choiseul [the other one being in Petite-Anse], which is at the foot of Morin. We ran on towards the place, at the spot where the three leagues is at the foot of Morin. We ran on towards the place, at the three leagues of the plantation we found the overseer killed, his body mangled, and marks of teeth in several parts. A few negroes remained with about 40 negro women; we killed 8 or 10 of the number and the remainder got off.
The following day, the twenty-fifth, he writes that all, or nearly all, was ablaze in the parish. On four plantations (perhaps those to which Dalmas referred) the slaves did not take part, but, the observer informs, in less than two weeks they "who hitherto had remained quiet, yesterday [5 September] revolted, in the engagement at Petite-Anse, and joined the body of insurgents."

What these two apparently contradictory accounts appear to indicate, then, is the dispersion of the insurgents into diverse bands that must have struck several places at once upon their entry into the parish on the twenty-fourth. At a few plantations, they were pushed back by recalcitrant slaves, while at others, such as Choiseul, where they had amassed some five to six hundred cohorts, they obviously enjoyed the complicity of the ateliers. In fact, this seems to have been the general pattern of the revolt from the beginning, as the one or two thousand that they were on the first day split into bands to attack the designated plantations, automatically increasing their numbers as well as their strategic superiority. By midnight, the conflagration had already spread to neighboring Limonade, and almost simultaneously, on the twenty-fifth, the Plaine du Nord parish was hit. In this latter parish, situated directly between Auln and Petite-Anse (and apparently circumvented on the twenty-fourth), rebel slaves arrived at the Robillard plantation and, joined by most of Robillard's atelier, began by assassinating the commandeur, who had refused to take part in the rebellion. What followed was a scene typical of those produced on plantation after plantation during these first days of insurrection. The rebels set fire to Robillard's three bagasse sheds, as well as the boiler house, the curing house, the mill house, and all of the cane fields. Thirteen of his boilers had been sledged to pieces, along with the rest of the sugar manufacturing equipment, including the mill. In addition to Robillard's own house, they burned down the lodgings of the cooper, the carpenter, and the commandeur whom they had just killed. "In a word," wrote Robillard, "all that was left of my property was part of the shed for the hand trucks which the brigands spared along with two large tables to take their meals. Everything, all the other buildings, all my furniture, as well, were totally consumed by flames. And once they had achieved their destruction, they set up a military camp, having spared their own quarters for the purpose."

What appears to emerge from these accounts, then, is a brilliantly organized and strategically maneuvered plan of revolt that, had it succeeded in its entirety, conceivably would have enabled the slaves to very rapidly take possession of the entire North Province. For within three days, by the twenty-fifth, once all of the major parishes concentrated in the upper North Plain region had been hit and communication links between them severed, a junction was to take place between insurgent bands from these various communities in Cay and fellow rebels in the capital. (See Map 2.)
The very first rumors of a plan to burn the capital were uncovered on the twenty-second, immediately prior to the outbreak of violence at Acul and Limbe. Writing to the minister of the marine a little over a week after the insurrection began, Blanchelande relates that, having been invited by the Provincial Assembly of the North on the twenty-second to hear the declarations of various persons arrested the day before, "I was convinced that a conspiracy had been formed, in particular against the city of le Cap, without being able to determine precisely whether it was fomented by whites, mulattoes, or free blacks, or even yet, by the slaves." Then, referring to the sequence of events as they did in part unfold, Blanchelande goes on to say, "There was some talk of setting fire, on the night of that day [the twenty-second], to the plantations neighboring around le Cap; fire would then break out in this city and would serve as the signal to assassinate the whites." As the revolt in Acul grew awesome in dimensions, as diders from one plantation to another joined the revolt in succession, fear for the defense of le Cap, whose inhabitants included some eight to ten thousand male slaves, caused Blanchelande to recall the detachment he had sent out early on the twenty-third to aid the planters of Acul. Le Cap was now the seat of colonial government and already sheltered a good number of whites who had managed to escape the vengeance and fury of their slaves. Fears of a conspiracy were confirmed as, wrote Blanchelande, "we had successively discovered and continue daily to discover plots that prove that the revolt is combined between the slaves of the city and those of the plains; we have therefore established permanent surveillance to prevent the first sign of fire here in the city which would soon develop into a general conflagration." Other indications that the burning of le Cap was an integral part of the original strategy are revealed in various letters of colonists and other residents writing at the moment the events were occurring. Mme. de Bouvray, whose husband, the marquis de Bouvray, had commanded a part of the military operations against the rebels, wrote to her son-in-law of the insurrection that had just burst open. She relates that it was because of the impatience of the Desgrieux atelier, "more ferocious than the others," and which began to revolt several days before the intended date, that the measures conceived by the others "to burn le Cap, the plantations, and to massacre the whites all at the same time," were broken. The impetuous and premature activities of the Desgrieux slaves had apparently given the planters of the surrounding parishes enough time to become informed of the revolt, and though some of them managed to escape the carnage, nothing could save their plantations from the rebel torchers.

From another resident we learn that, after the first plantations had been set ablaze on the twenty-fourth and a score of whites assassinated, "the rebels dispersed and then came up to set fire to the city. They have been

refused and, in spite of their rage to advance on the city, we are certain their attempts will be in vain as it is guarded by the camp at Haut du Cap, which is the only point through which the rebels can penetrate the city." According to another report, after the slaves had revolted on the Chabaud plantation in Limbe, "they advanced toward le Cap, and most of the slaves on the plantations along the way joined them... The rebels marched without stopping and came within two miles of le Cap; we believe they were not. that night already 1,500 strong." A resident merchant of le Cap also states that "on the 25th, the hand from Limbe advanced into this neighborhood." Another writes on 26 August: "Since the 23rd every entrance to the city and every part of the neighborhood has been guarded with the greatest care. For these two days past, a camp of 300 men has been formed in the upper part of the city. The negroes are at a distance of one league, and frequently approach in numbers to bid defiance. Many of them are killed by our cannon. They, notwithstanding, come up armed." Finally, confirmation that the conspiracy against le Cap (coordinated with the revolt in the plains) had been scheduled for the twenty-fifth was obtained, when, because of concentrated security around le Cap, an attempt was made at the end of the month, on the thirtieth and thirty-first, to take the upper part of the city. An anonymous observer, having kept a journal of the disturbances, relates: "Yesterday [30th] some indications of a conspiracy had been discovered; several negroes have been taken and confined, some executed. It appears that the plot is to set fire to the city in 400 houses at once, to butcher the whites, and to take the city in the night by escalade. It appears that the revolted negroes have chiefs in town and who correspond with those in the plains." Referring to this discovery on 30–31 August of the renewed plot against le Cap, another writes that "thousands of these scoundrels are going to fall under the iron hand of justice." One of them, sentenced to be broken on the wheel, was the free black Jean-Baptiste Cap., an organizer and key leader of the insurrection. In fact, as it was the practice of the insurgents to elect titular heads, a king and queen whom "they treated with great respect" in each quarter that they occupied, Jean-Baptiste Cap had been chosen as "King of Limbe and Port-Margot." It was as he incited the slaves on one plantation immediately outside the city of le Cap to revolt that he was denounced by its commandant, seized, and interrogated, no doubt under severe physical duress. From him the authorities learned that "in the night of the 25th [August] all the negroes in the plain were to attack the city in different parts; to be seconded by the negroes in the city, who were to set fire to it in several parts at once." He further declared that "in every workshop in the city there were negroes concerned in the plot." For logistical reasons and tightened security around the capital, & seems the plan had been postponed to the end of August.
It was on this occasion, the first of three unsuccessful attempts to capture le Cap, that Boukman was cited leading the band of insurgents, by now close to fifteen thousand, that had come to lay siege in the capital. The citing of Boukman is referred to in an account compiled from letters written by the nuns of the Communauté des Religieuses Filles de Notre-Dame du Cap-Français (an educational order for young girls in the colony) as they witnessed, from the window of their convent, the events that were occurring. They spoke of a former pupil, a mulattress later known as the princess Améthyste, head of a company of Amazons; she had belonged into the voodoo cult and had inveigled a good number of her companions to follow. They would leave the convent at night to participate in ritual dances to the African chant, the words of which, inexplicable to the whites, were:

(Excerpt from the account)

The narrator of the account relates that the king of the voodoo cult had just declared war on the colonists; they were marching to the assault on the cities and had come to lay siege to le Cap. Amidst the rebels was Zamba Boukman inciting them to attack the barracks and the convent, which lodged a good number of young girls and other colonists. Then, in what amounts to a paraphrase of Boukman’s Boin-Caiman oration, the writer notes how Boukman “in his poetic improvisations, reminded the insurgents that the whites had enslaved them because they were the oppressors of the slaves, whom they crushed without pity, and [now] they would stand in the countryside.”

The relationship between voodoo and the insurgent or the spirit of insurrection is certainly not a gratuitous one, nor is it, on the other hand, entirely intangible. The “Ed et euh! Moumba” voodoo invocation dated back at least to the mid-eighteenth century in colonial Saint Domingue. When, as part of the initiation ceremony for a neophyte, it was a call for protection against the dreaded forces of those who had enslaved them and, as such, a form of cultural and spiritual protest against the horrors of their New World environment. On the eve of the slave insurrection, however, in the midst of what would be a difficult and dangerous liberation struggle to actually rid themselves of their enslavers, the invocation certainly must have taken on a more specific, a more political if still fetishistic, meaning for the individual rebel who would need now, more than ever before, a great deal of protection and, perhaps even more, luck in the nihilistic endeavors that lay ahead. Similar, Boukman’s Boin-Caiman oration—by no means a voodoo invocation in its strictest sense—may nonetheless have been an exhortation for the slaves to rely on the governing forces of the Supreme Being found within nearly all African animistic religions, as opposed to the “false” Christian God of the whites. In other words, they must draw from within themselves, from their own beliefs, and their belief in themselves, for success.

By September, all of the plantations within forty miles either side of le Cap had been reduced to ashes and smoke; twenty-three of the twenty-seven parishes were in ruins, and the other four would fall in a matter of days. If during the first few days of the revolt the slaves were roughly ten to fifteen hundred strong, perhaps even two thousand by one account dated 23 August, their numbers continued to swell with astonishing rapidity as they were joined by masses of slaves that deserted or were otherwise swept from their plantations, one after another, throughout the countryside. By September, all of the plantations within fifty miles either side of le Cap had been reduced to ashes and smoke; twenty-three of the twenty-seven parishes were in ruins, and the other four would fall in a matter of days.
back, and tolerably well armed; the remainder are almost without arms."

And though at first their losses were heavy by conventional standards, "their numbers," wrote one colonist, "unfortunately increase one hundred fold in proportion." In less than two weeks, the original core of ten to fifteen hundred had increased over tenfold to fifteen thousand. Some claimed twenty thousand, one-third of them fully equipped with rifles and ammunition pilfered from the plantations. The rest armed with sabers, knives, farm implements, and a whole host of other contrivances that served them as weapons. Fear and panic among the whites spread almost as rapidly as the insurrection itself, causing some to believe that there were, at this point, as many as forty or fifty thousand slaves in revolt, a number the rebels did, however, achieve by late September or early October, and the number may even have reached close to eighty thousand toward the end of November. The total number of slaves in the North Province was roughly one hundred seventy thousand. Here then, within the initial lightning stage of the insurrection, within the first eight to ten days, were fifteen thousand slaves (a number that continued to multiply) who had deserted their plantations, by will or by force, or by the sheer thirst and compulsion of events purposefully set in motion by the activities of a revolutionary core. Had this phenomenon occurred anywhere else but revolutionary Saint Domingue, it quite reasonably would have been called a maroon war, and under the colonial regime of Saint Domingue, the colonists characteristically would have designated these slave troops as maroons, ravaging maroon bands with their chosen leaders. But if the maroon wars that broke out in Jamaica and elsewhere had occurred in a context of revolution, had they assumed the same magnitude and degree of political complexity, the circumstantial question of whether the slaves were maroons or revolutionary rebels, or some combination of both, would have played its role in the historiography of slave rebellion in these plantation societies as well. It should be sufficient to say, as one sociologist of slavery has so lucidly pointed out, that all armed slave rebellion necessarily takes on a maroon dimension. Here in Saint Domingue, the whole situation had radically changed; the colonial context in which colonists could try to reassure themselves by seeing armed maroon bands as entities outside of the plantations—troublesome, to be sure, but not enough to threaten the foundations and institutional viability of slaves—had now fallen into a million pieces and reposed, literally, on little more than a pile of ashes.

In this whole process, caught up in the web of events that were taking place, many slaves became maroons by deserting their plantations, perhaps having killed the master, the overseer, or even their own commandeur, perhaps having set fire to a cane field or a shed. Once maroon, they then found themselves in an irreversible position with little choice but to defend their lives with arms. The transformation of the fugitive slave or deserter into a hardened, armed rebel, fighting for freedom, is one that occurred, to be sure, to varying degrees, within the consciousness of each individual slave; but also, this transformation was accelerated by collective rebellion in a context of revolutionary social and political upheaval.

The example of some slaves on the Vaudenul plantation in the Plaine du Nord parish. just prior to the outbreak, may provide a small glimpse into these very evocative circumstances. Situated at Morne-Rouge, it was very near the Lenormand plantation where the 14 August conspiratorial gathering had first taken place. Around the twentieth, at about the same time as a new of the Limbé conspirators were being arrested and interrogated, and just before the revolt presumably broke out at Gallife's estate, the commandeur at Vaudenul was caught setting fire to a part of the cane field. Apparently the slaves here were divided in their support for the insurrection that was to take place. Seeing the manager in battle with the commandeur, some of the slaves came to the aid of the manager and caught the commandeur, who, according to one letter, revealed that he had been influenced by a free mulato; but then, according to another letter, twenty-eight of the Vaudenul slaves had also gone maroon. Three of them were captured in Limbé and revealed the conspiracy.

Here one may ask whether the Vaudenul maroons were actually involved in the revolt, as was the commandeur, or whether, having knowledge of the conspiracy, they ran away to flee the impending destruction. If the latter had been the case, however, there would have been no need to flee since they would have had the support of the rest of the atelier, as well as the protection of the manager, whom the other slaves had just saved. More likely, they were in complicity with the commandeur, some of the slaves came to the aid of the manager and caught the commandeur, who, as he had just been apprehended with the aid of the other slaves, their own turn undoubtedly would be next. One may also find it significant that at least three of them ran away to Limbé, where the insurrection was to break out. Once having become maroons, though, it was now only a matter of days before the other twenty-five would be swept along into the larger body of insurgent slaves as a constituent part. It is perhaps at this juncture that slave deserters, who in ordinary times were called maroons or fugitives (and up to this point still are by their unsuspecting masters), become, by the very nature of the circumstances, insurgents, brigands, and rebels. They had in fact embarked on a collective struggle never before waged in such a manner, or on such a scale, by colonial slaves anywhere, and their activities were now inscribed within an irreversible revolutionary situation. The real significance of their movement, in the early days as well as throughout the revolution, was the profound impact of self-stylization, of the popular organization and the obtusive intervention of these slaves—on a massive scale—on a revolutionary process already several years in motion.
During these first weeks of revolution, the slaves destroyed the whites and their property with much the same ruthlessness and cruelty that they had suffered for so many years at the hands of their masters. The scenes of horror and bloodshed on the plantations, as whites helplessly tried to defend themselves or, at best, to flee from the unleashed terror and rage of their former slaves, were only too reminiscent of the brutality that the slaves themselves had endured under the plantation regime. Yet as atrocious as they were, these acts of vengeance were surprisingly moderate, in the opinion of one of the best-known historians of that revolution, compared with the cold-blooded, grotesque savagery and sadistically calculated torture committed by their oppressors throughout the past. These were impassioned acts of revenge, of retribution, and were relatively short-lived.

Amidst the violence and fury of the August days, there were some slaves whose sense of decency and rage of human understanding nevertheless stood apart from the all-consuming force of collective vengeance. A frequently cited example is that of a slave who was himself implicated in the revolt but who resisted, and later lost, his own life to save those of two colonists, M. and Mme. Baillon, and their family. The slave was Paul Blin; he was, as we know, a commander and one of the original conspirators. He had also become one of the leading generals. According to one account presented in the 30 November address to the National Assembly, the black nurse of M. and Mme. Baillon, who resided with their daughter and son-in-law on their plantation, warned them that there was not a minute to lose and offered to accompany them in their flight. This nurse was Paul Blin's wife, and it was she who secured the food for her master and mistress. Paul, for his part, had promised to find them a canoe, but when they came to the spot where it was to be, it turned out to be nothing more than a dilapidated skiff with neither oars nor mast, and no one to navigate it. As Paul's wife reproached him for the manner in which he fulfilled his promises, he answered that he merely provided this means of escape as a death preferable to that which the rebels had prepared for these unfortunates, and that it was the best he could do.

A somewhat different version of the account, related by Brian Edwards, has it that the slave, Paul, after leading the Baillon couple safely into the woods, left to join the revolt and made frequent trips between the rebel camp and the white fugitives, providing them with food, a canoe, then a boat. He came back once again to lead them through the woods to Port-Margot where, after nineteen days of various hardships, they would finally be able to make their way to le Cap, and then took leave of them forever. In all probability Paul Blin was present at the Morne-Rouge assembly and, had he participated in the Bois-Caiman ceremony, as well, no doubt would have committed himself to the sacred vow of vengeance so essential to the success of the revolt.

The remarkable sense of humanity on the part of Blin, observed in the Edwards account, may also be due to the influence, persuasion, and solicitations of his wife who, as a woman, led him to confront the struggle within himself—the inner struggle of any individual engaged in violent revolution—between his devotion and responsibility to the cause he had undertaken (especially as a high-ranking chief in Limbé) and his sentiments toward those near him, but who were unavoidably part of the enemy class.

The uncontrolled explosions of vengeance and suppressed hatred that marked the beginning of the revolution constituted, however, only a temporary stage. Once expended, these destructive energies were progressively channelled into military strategy, tactical maneuvers, and political alliances as the slaves gained territory and began to stabilize their positions. They had no experience in the use of military weaponry, and though their losses in the early engagements were heavy, they learned quickly enough. A le Cap resident who participated in the militia observed how, "in the beginning of the insurrection, the negroes made their attacks with much irregularity and conclusion, and their weapons were mostly instruments of labor, but ... they now come on in regular bodies, and a considerable part of them are well armed with muskets, swords, etc., which they have taken and purchased." They would ransack the plantations for money, precious metals, furniture, clothing, sacks of coffee, sugar, and indigo, for any article of value they could place their hands on, in order to equip their army or to trade with the Spaniards for additional guns and ammunition. In this respect, as well as in discipline, in the opinion of the militia recruits, they were growing more formidable. When they repelled an attack by the whites on one of their outposts, they would make off with cannons and other equipment left behind with which to wage their struggle.

During these first months, the blacks continued to defend their positions across the province through tactical guerilla warfare. They retreated into the hills when it was to their advantage, organized their forces for counterattacks, and often continued to burn and ravage the nearby plantations in reprisal. Previous to Governor Blanchelande's attack on one of their fortified encampments at the Galliéet and d'Agoult estates, they were a full six thousand, two-thirds of whom had secretly retreated during the night before his two columns had even arrived. Though Blanchelande reported to the minister of the navy that he had taken possession of the two plantations during an hour's time and with only one wounded, the report of a militia volunteer revealed otherwise: "It began at five in the morning and they gained possession of the one hundred or so of the revolt."

The free mulattoes and Negroes, most of them mounted, had entered first, and as orders had been given to take no prisoners, a horrible carnage ensued. The slaughter finished at two...
that Blanchelande claimed were killed in the encounter, however, no distinction was made between the women, children, and the aged, who were all indiscriminately butchered, and those insurgents actually bearing arms. In fact, the vast majority of the two thousand rebels who remained had, in their turn, also taken flight through the cane and thicket. The pillaging then began, and Blanchelande "found it impossible to continue my expedition to turn it to any greater advantage." Though white troops often had the military advantage, they generally "thought it imprudent, in small bodies," in the words of one observer, "to pursue their advantage," once the insurgents had dispersed in their retreat. From the Gallifet camp, the rebels had rejoined a body of eight to ten thousand encamped at Marne-Rouge just outside le Cap. 86

One general described their tactics and sense of military organization in this way:

They established themselves near everywhere on the lower cliffs and on the slopes of high mountains to be within better range of their incursions into the plains, and to keep the rear well protected. For this, they always had behind them nearly inaccessible summits or gorges that they were perfectly familiar with. They established communication links between those positions in such a way that they were able mutually to come to each other's aid whenever we partially attacked them. They have surveillance posts and designated rendezvous positions. 87 These were maroon tactics, as they were utilized and refined in much the same way by maroons in other Caribbean colonies where resistance had turned to actual warfare.

What the slaves lacked in military hardware they compensated for with rage and ingenuity. They camouflaged traps, fabricated poisoned arrows, feigned cease-fires to lure the enemy into ambush, disguised tree trunks as cannons, and threw obstructions of one kind or another onto the roads to hamper advancing troops; in short, any means they could invent to psychologically disorient, frighten, demoralize, or otherwise generally confuse the European units in order to defend their own positions. On their flag was inscribed a motto calling for death to all whites. They marched to African martial music and would begin an engagement with considerable order and firmness, crying out victory. But they would retreat in what whites could only understand as "confused precipitation." 88 To disperse a prodigious body of slaves advancing on le Cap, Blanchelande's troops had "fired three times, but without the least effect," as each man had devised for himself a kind of light mattress stuffed with cotton as a vest to prevent the bullets from penetrating, "and thus stood the fire without shewing any signs of fear," as one observer noted. 89

When caught by their pursuers, they could convincingly invoke past affec-

The slaves were organized in bands, as European armies were organized in regiments, and although interband rivalry and divisions were not uncommon, the internal discipline of each band or camp was maintained with an iron hand by the individual leaders. In the camps, the least sign of subordination or slightest evidence of uncertainty was often met with unimaginably harsh treatment and, on occasion, death. 90 In the first weeks, their main camps were concentrated westwardly in Limbe, Marne-Rouge, and at Gallifet in Petit-Anse. Following the Gallifet defeat in September, major strongholds had already formed, by October, in the eastward districts of Grande-Rivière and Dondon, by November, Fort-Dauphin and Quinaminthe at the eastern extremity of the province near the Spanish border, where participation of the free coloreds was particularly evident, were under rebel control. 91 It was under the military command of Jean-Baptiste Marc, a free black, seconded by César, a recently emancipated free black, that they gained control of Quinaminthe. Jean-Baptiste Marc, in particular, was described as one who ruled with the air of an army general (and who was also well known in Fort-Dauphin for thievery). Through intrigue, skillful displays, and brilliant maneuvering, they had feigned descent from the rebels and allied themselves with government forces under de Touda, who graciously supplied them with as much military armament as they needed or requested, allowing them to hold complete control for over three months. De Touda had nothing but praise for César, whom he credited with having
Riviere stated that, although there saved the entire district from the "brigands," and he promised to write the Colonial Assembly to recommend that he receive a handsome recompense for his services. Cesar ascended to Dondon, having first taken the precaution of lending three of the best canons in the cane fields. Within two days, he was back fighting with his black confederates in the attack on Marmelade. Shortly thereafter, Jean-Baptiste Marie was among those obtained replenished munitions to fight a few brigands, turned on the garrison and converged with rebel forces who took control of the district. For the time being, the blacks had allied with the counterrevolutionary royalists, a segment of the clergy, and to some extent with the mulattoes, but in none of these cases were they directed or controlled by their allies of convenience. In the rebel camps in the east, where the free colored population of the North was concentrated, mulattoes nearly always occupied inferior positions. Blanchelande, writing to the minister of the marine, observed that the mulattoes of leTrou and Grande-Riviere, who had joined the rebel slaves, "have no authority over them; their leaders are all chosen from among the blacks, and not one from the gens de couleur." A prisoner of war in Jean-Francois's camp at Grande-Riviere stated that, although there were many armed mulattoes amongst the black rebels, in general they were scrupulously surveyed. One of them, Despres, had even been suspected of collaboration with the whites and of preventing the capture of Fort-Dauphin where he had resided. Biassou issued orders on 23 December to have him killed. If the royalists, for their part, tacitly supported and supplied the black forces, they believed they could use the slave insurrection to destabilize the colony to their advantage, defeat the patriot faction, and restore the Ancien Régime. And when it was all over, the slaves would passively go back to their plantations as before. What they did not see was that the black insurrection had leaders and a raison d'être of its own.

The revolution had, in fact, produced hundreds of local leaders, for the most part obscure ones, slaves as well as free blacks like Jean-Baptiste Marie or Cesar, who held military posts on the plantations, organized raids, and maneuvered with France's enemies, with royalists and Spaniards, for ammunition, military supplies, and protection. Certainly the most revered of the early leaders, however, was Boukman. In November, during an attack by the Cap regiment in the Acul plain, he was killed, the first of the original leaders to fall, while defending a rebel post at Fond Bleu. Upon his death, it was Jean-Francois and Biassou who would coordinate the activities and assume the direction of the New World's first colonial liberation struggle of its kind. Jean-Francois now officially assumed the rank and responsibility of general, while Biassou, as lieutenant-general, was second in command, and Jeannot in charge of the black troops in the east.

As a political leader, Jean-Francois was ambitious; as a general, he was outwardly pompous and unabashedly flaunted his ego by decorating his uniform with an abundant assortment of medals and other impressive military insignias, not the least among them being the Cross of Saint-Louis. Yet he was a man of exceptional intelligence for one who had spent the greater part of his life as a slave; he was highly respected and especially well liked by the mulattoes and free blacks under his command, as well as by the "better subjects" among the slaves. Biassou was of a far more fiery disposition. He was, according to Madiou, a fervent voodoo adept and kept himself surrounded by houngans, from whom he frequently sought advice. He was impulsive and forever ready, at the first sign of personal insult or political deception on the part of his white enemies, to take revenge on the prisoners in his camp. He would have killed them all were it not for the judicious interventions of Jean-Francois or Toussaint, who at this stage served as Biassou's secretary and as physician of the black army. Jeannot, as well as being commander in the east, had also received the title of judge, giving him undisputed authority over the life or death of the prisoners. He was a man of insatiable vengeance who thrived on torturing the white prisoners in as barbaric and heinous a manner as that of those masters who knew no bounds. His tyranny did not stop here, but extended equally to the blacks under his command. Following a crushing defeat in Limbe by the combined forces under General Blanchelande, Jeannot immediately suspected treason, and Paul Blu was the victim. Knowing that he had helped some white masters to escape, Jeannot had him burned alive on the nefarious pretext that he had removed the bullets from their cartridges.

By November, the political situation in the colony had changed with the arrival of the civil commissioners from France. Negotiations would soon be under way between the rebel leaders and the French representatives. Upon being informed of Jeannot's excesses, Jean-Francois, a man of humanity in spite of his arrogance, and possessing a sense of common decency, was revolted by such atrocities. He also realized that this executioner was a danger and a liability to their revolution; more than that, his uncontrolled barbarism could seriously jeopardize their imminent negotiations with the white authorities. The black general had Jeannot tried and gave him a military execution at about the same time that the whites, who had killed Boukman in battle, cut his head off and garishly exposed it on a stake at the public square in leCap with the inscription: "The head of Boukman, leader of the rebels." News of Boukman's death had in fact produced a profound effect in the rebel camps. There the slave leaders went into mourning and ordered solemn services to be held in honor of their deeply revered comrade. But within the ranks of the slaves, the immediate reaction was quite different; their only wish was to assassinate, on the spot, every white prisoner to atone for
firing their leader’s death. Finally, they turned the event to their own advantage, extolled their abilities and successes on the battlefield, derided the whites for their cowardice, and celebrated with a countdown lasting three days. 32

A far more serious differentiation between the mentality of the mass of slave rebels and that of their chief leaders, however, evidenced itself during the period of negotiations that had brought about a temporary cease-fire, as well as a set of demands formulated by Jean-François and Biassou. It was under these circumstances that the first signs of division appeared between the aims of those who had become the official leaders of the revolution, and the aspirations of the black masses. Together they had practically annihilated an entire province; that they were fighting to free themselves can hardly be denied. But neither Jean-François nor Biassou, nor even Toussaint for that matter, knew what to do at this point. While Toussaint mediated and kept the peace within their camp, the difficult and unfortunate responsibility of officially representing the revolutionary slave masses in negotiation with French authorities fell to Jean-François.

The whole scope of the revolution, only three months under way but rapidly taking on wider and graver proportions, had gone far beyond his capacities as the political leader of a people engaged in revolutionary struggle. To negotiate the outright abolition of slavery would be absurd; no ruling class ever negotiates away the economic foundation of its own power. Jean-François knew this as well as anyone. When asked about the real causes of the insurrection by one of his white prisoners—it was M. Gros, a le Cap lawyer who had served as the general’s personal secretary—Jean-François eventually answered, after brushing earlier questions aside, “that they have not taken up arms to obtain a liberty which, even if the whites choose to grant it, would be for them nothing more than a fatal and venomous gift, but at least they hoped for an amelioration of their condition.” 112

Gros published an account of his captivity shortly thereafter, in which he relates somewhat differently that, while refusing to explain himself categorically, Jean-François nevertheless gave as his reply to this question:

“It is not I who have installed myself as general over the slaves. Those who had the power to do so have invested me with this title; in taking up arms, I never claimed to be fighting for general emancipation which I know to be an illusory dream, as much in terms of France’s need for the colonies as the danger involved in procuring for these uncivilized peoples the weapons and munitions that would become infinitely dangerous for them, and that would inadmissibly lead to the annihilation of the colony. Moreover, if the owners had not stayed on their plantations, perhaps the revolution may never have occurred.” 33

Following this statement, the slave leader unleashed his animosity toward the procureurs and échevins, and wanted included as a fundamental article of their demands that these men should no longer exist in Saint Domingue. 34
nowhere with the Colonial Assembly, the slave leaders had now turned to
the newly arrived civil commissioners to be heard. The black troops soon
learned of the impending negotiations and, near one camp, had assembled
themselves and "appeared ready to break by force any negotiation that would
conduce their return to the plantations." Of these slaves, Gros remarked
that "it is useful to point out to those who are so good natured as to believe
their slaves are being forcibly detained and that their [real] dispositions are
peaceful ones, that, out of a hundred of these, generally speaking, if there
are four whose intentions are good, it would be a lot: all of them, rather,
breath forth nothing but the total destruction of the whites." At

At the Gallifet camp in Grande-Rivière, the slave troops and especially
their commander, Jean-Baptiste Godard, openly affirmed that the civil
commissioners were representatives without any power and without a mandate,
that it was not the king who had sent them, and that if they proposed peace,
it was to trick them into submission before killing them all off. It was not
the whole truth, but it was not too far from it. Some of them even began
murmuring that it was all because of the mulattoes that their leaders had
entered into relations with the whites of le Cap. If a few of the white pris-
oners tried to convince these slaves that their revolt was pure folly, that the
king had never granted them three free days per week, and that only the
Colonial Assembly could legislate on such matters, they pretended not to
listen and said that the government would give them what they wanted or
they would continue the war to the bitter end. Abbé de la Porte tried to
frighten them by describing the might and power of the combined forces of
France, Spain, and Britain, and all the other kingdoms of Europe that would
unite to exterminate them if they did not give up their arms and go back to
the plantations, but his words, as he said, went in at one ear and out at the
other.

The proclamation of 28 September 1791, decreed by the National
Assembly of France and sanctioned by the king, granted amnesty to all free
persons in Saint Domingue charged with "acts of revolution." Biassou re-
ceived a copy of it and had it read to his troops, who could not have cared
less. They wanted war and "bout à blancs"—an end to the whites. Most
of all, they wanted their three free days per week, and as for the other
three days, they would see about those in due course. At this point Toussaint
rose, demanded that the proclamation be reread, and delivered such a
moving speech in creole that the slaves' attitudes suddenly changed to the
point where they were willing to go back to their various plantations if that
was what their leaders wanted. Already Toussaint's qualities of leadership
were beginning to take shape, and he knew more than anyone else what
they really wanted. He had been discreetly involved in the 14 August affair
from the very beginning and carefully observed all that went on, before finally
deciding in November to join with Biassou and Jean-François. Once the
agreement was reached to surrender their prisoners, Toussaint accompanied
the prisoners as escort to the bar of the Colonial Assembly.

But for the mass of armed slaves, this also meant their return to the plan-
tations. They were now violently opposed to any settlement whatsoever with
the whites, and, at the Tannerie camp along the way to the site designated
for the exchange of prisoners, they beseeched the delegation with sabers and
threats of sending all their heads off to le Cap, swearing vehemently against
peace and against their own generals. "We were convinced this time of
a great truth," wrote Gros, "that the slave would never return to his duties
but by constraint and by his partial destruction." It was the uninstructed
mass of slaves, and not their leaders, who saw so clearly what was at stake,
regardless of the cost. And if the price they were ready to pay was high, it
was no greater than the human suffering they had already endured.

The Colonial Assembly disdainfully refused to accede to any one of their
leaders' demands (except for a nominal agreement on the release of Jean-
François's wife), even after the number of requested emancipations was
reduced by Toussaint himself from four hundred to sixty. He returned to
their camp and told the slaves what they already knew. There was nothing
to be gained, neither from the civil commissioners nor from the Assembly,
Jean-François convoked his council, and it was unanimously decided to
continue the war to the bitter end. Most

The slaves in Jean-François's band began on 15 January by attacking
and recapturing the district of Ouanaminthe. On 22-23 January, the slaves
under Biassou attacked le Cap to secure ammunition and to replenish their
diminished resources. It would be another two years, however, before Toussaint
would emerge as the one to give clear, vigorous, and decisive direction
to the profoundly felt aspirations of these slave masses who had killed their
masters and burned the plantations to be free.
The Mulattoes and the Free Blacks

5

The slaves in the West and the South at this time had not, like their compatriots in the North, yet emerged as a collective force, independently organized by their own leaders and with self-defined goals and perspectives. The political situation in these two provinces was dominated, on the one hand, by the activities of the mulattoes and free blacks to obtain the civil and political rights guaranteed them by the 15 May decree and, on the other, by the attendant intensification of divisions and hostilities between the contending factions within the white ruling class. It was, ironically, in the absence of such massive slave revolt as overwhelmed the North and threatened to destroy that province's economy and social foundations, that the struggles of the various parties in the West and South became increasingly acute, rapidly turning to violence and then, inevitably, to open warfare. For the slaves, neither the stakes nor the alternatives were nearly as clear as they were in the North, where insurgent blacks had taken the lead and remained in the forefront of the revolution, where the free mulattoes were comparatively few, and where some free blacks actually supported and helped organize the provinewide insurrectionary movement. In the West and South, it was a three-way war in which the whites, divided in opposing camps between the patriot autonomists and the wealthy, counterrevolutionary, conservative planters, were literally destroying themselves, and in which the free coloreds were fighting for political equality and legal recognition of their rights. None of these groups represented the interests of the slaves, but they would each in turn use slave unrest to further their own aims by enrolling the slaves, under various pretenses and promises of freedom. Out of this confusion and conflict, in which slaves participated in urna (doubtless with notions of their own), but in which they were also fighting and killing one another, they would learn soon enough that their emancipation depended ultimately upon their own efforts and the capabilities of their own leaders.

Since July, the free coloreds had been organizing meetings and assemblies in an effort to break the intransigence of the government and to secure their right to participate in the elections of that summer. The white planters, with Blanchelande on their side, had done everything in their power to sabotage the application of the May decree, and the new Colonial Assembly was as planned, elected without a single mulatto or free-black vote. The whites had enlisted the dangers of extending full rights of citizenship to the mulattoes and free blacks by claiming that, since civil equality would remove the "indissoluble" and "insurmountable" barrier of color separating them from whites, it would thus destroy the buffer separating master and slave and open the way for slaves to seek an end to their subjection, as well. The aversion of slave rebellion and the maintenance of slavery therefore depended, they argued, upon the continued subordination of the free coloreds. But once slave insurrection had already broken out in the North, the mulattoes and free blacks in the West and South, using the same justification of containing slave rebellion, argued that only if they obtained their full rights peaceably could the slaves in these two provinces be kept tranquil and the maintenance of slavery guaranteed. So, although both the free coloreds and whites claimed the same motive for fighting each other—to avoid slave rebellion—the foundations of slavery, either way, reposed on thin ice.

In August, the mulattoes and free blacks held a mass political assembly in Mirebalais, where they elected as their president and leading spokesman Pierre Pinchinat, a man of outstanding political talent and finesse who, like many others of his caste, had been formally educated in France. A council of forty delegates was also created with full powers to represent their claims, either by formal address or by direct delegation, before the National Assembly in France, the king, the colonial assemblies, the governor-general and, upon their arrival, the civil commissioners. Moreover, they swore upon the last drop of their blood to protect the elected representatives against any attack or harassment while exercising their functions. Upon hearing of this assembly and the position it had taken, some of the local whites tried to incite opposition among the free coloreds, but this failed, they resorted to their habitual tactics of intimidation and lynching to block the execution of the law. On 11 August, the council of forty sent to Blanchelande a copy of their constituted aims, along with a judicious and respectful letter recognizing him as the sole legal authority in the colony, reminding him of the harsh injustices they had already suffered, and requesting, for the peace and prosperity of the colony, that he execute the 15 May law in its entirety. On the twenty-second, as the slaves in the North began to set their torches to the plantations and to massacre their masters, Blanchelande sent his reply to the mulattoes in the West. In the letter, he made clear his displeasure of their conduct and especially of their "illicit" assembly and deliberations. His reply further ordered them to dissolve, to return to their homes and wait peacefully and patiently. In due time, their white benefactors would decide upon their future condition.

The anger and frustration of the mulattoes were further exacerbated by
the additional news of violent assaults, arbitrary arrests, and killings that were being committed by the whites against their compatriots in Port-au-Prince. A general assembly was immediately called and a second letter sent to Blancharande, the time declaring their intention to arm themselves and to take responsibility for their collective security. Meanwhile, the mulattoes in Port-au-Prince had organized themselves and had remained in constant communication with those of Milcecabac, with whom they now joined forces to establish a camp in the Charbonniere mountains outside Port-au-Prince, there to devise a common plan of action.

Their military leaders were Bauvais and Rigaud. Born in Port-au-Prince, Bauvais, like Pinchinat, had received the privilege of an education in France, where he spent his early years as a colo内在. He returned to the colony to teach until the revolution. During the course of which he served the cause of his people with stern but impeccable character; Rigaud, born in Les Cayes in the South and educated at Bordeaux, was the most prominent of the mulatto leaders. He had learned the trade of goldsmith in France and practiced it in the colony, but his real vocation was military. He was a trained and experienced soldier, who had already proven his military capabilities as a volunteer in the French army under the Comte d'Estaing during the North American war for independence. Like Bauvais, he had fought at Savannah. Now, as commander of the mulatto forces in the South, he joined with Bauvais and Pinchinat.

Lambert, a free black born in Martinique, was placed second in command of the army in the West. In addition, there were nearly three hundred slaves from the Cul-de-Sac plain known as the Suisses, or auxiliaries, who were incorporated into their ranks. Among these were the Fortin-Bellantien and other slaves who, in their own interests, had deserted their plantations earlier in July to form independent gatherings in the woods. Having remained in murmurage after they were attacked, they now joined the mulattoes who armed them and promised them their freedom, which was their evident motive for rising in July. Also among the Suisses were a number of black and mulatto domestic slaves recently freed by their masters to fight the effronsarts; they also had desired to join the confederates.

In the meantime, the white patriots in Port-au-Prince were amassing their forces in armed opposition to the mulattoes. They had already launched one attack against them, but were severely defeated and quickly dispersed. Now, a group of sailors, adventurers, mercenaries, and other declassé elements, organized under the name of fidélistes, combined with a contingent of the national guard in Port-au-Prince and set out on 2 September with cannon and other artillery to crush the mulatto army in the Charbonniere mountains. Earlier, the mulattoes had received word of the military pressures being mounted against them at Port-au-Prince and decided to move their camp beyond the Cul-de-Sac plain. As the confederate army of mulattoes, free blacks, and Suisses neared Croix-des-Bouquets, they were attacked by the troops from Port-au-Prince, whereupon they set fire to the Petion plantation, blocking off any possible escape route for their aggressors, and, with a few rounds of well-aimed shots, totally decimated the enemy troops.

At this point Hano de Jumecourt, a wealthy conservative planter at the head of a group of white royalists in Croix-des-Bouquets, provoked an alliance with the mulattoes. Jumecourt, himself a member of the former Saint Marc assembly, had deserted that party when it decided in the summer of 1790 to stage its mini-revolt and jump aboard the Leopold to plead its case in France. The royalists, bitterly opposed to the Saint Marc patriots who dominated Port-au-Prince, hoped to use the support and capabilities of the mulattoes to defeat a common enemy and then reestablish the Ancien Régime. The confederates wanted neither a return to the old regime nor the continuation of the present one as it stood. Bauvais and Pinchinat had repeatedly sworn an unyielding respect for France and her laws in all their dealings with the colonial authorities; however, their one political imperative was to conquer their rights, and to do this they needed troops, arms, and allies, even if these were royalist.

On 7 September, a concordat was signed between the confederates and the two municipalities of Croix-des-Bouquets and Milcecabac. Both sides agreed to abide by the duly-sanctioned laws and decrees of the French National Assembly; the antipatriot whites therefore accepted unconditionally the execution of the 15 May legislation. The municipality of Port-au-Prince, having already suffered two crushing defeats by the mulatto army— and a third with the signing of this concordate—had become more alarmed by reports of emerging insubordination among the slaves on the plantations. Several plantations around the city had already been burned, and rumors were spreading of a slave conspiracy to burn the city itself. Under these circumstances, the municipality sent a commission to Croix-des-Bouquets to negotiate with the mulattoes.

On 11 September, a second concordat was signed between the confederates and Port-au-Prince which, in addition to continuing the earlier accord, went even further by guaranteeing political equality for all free persons of color, regardless of the status of their parents. So the 15 May decree would be executed in advance of its arrival in the colony. Primary electoral assemblies would be held in conformity with Article 4 of the March 1790 law. The concordats also guaranteed their right to elect deputies to the Colonial Assembly, recognized the legality of the municipal and provincial assemblies, annulled all prohibitions and sentences rendered against them, and guaranteed freedom of the press. The confederates would remain armed until these articles were executed, but both sides would proceed to an immediate
exchange of prisoners. A few days later, the municipality of Cape-Verte signed a similar accord with the mulattos and free blacks.

Yet no sooner were the 11 September agreements signed than certain factions within the patriotic party began to subvert them. Caradeux, commander of the national guard in the West, the Provincial Assembly, and diverse groups of white citizens in Port-au-Prince refused to accede to the concordat. The Colonial Assembly, the municipality of Port-au-Prince, as well as the Provincial Assembly of the West, had already sent requests to Jamaica for military aid, shipment of the food supplies stipulated in the concordat, and destined for the mulattos at Canne-des-Bouquets was also blocked. Caradeux demanded as a condition for negotiation with the mulattos and free blacks that they support his project for independence. It was an obvious trap, and the mulattos refused.

Blanchelande, whose weak and malleable personality in politics was indeed among his most outstanding features as governor, fell prey to the pressures and manipulations of the patriots and refused to sanction the 11 September concordat. In the wake of the slave revolt sweeping the North, the Colonial Assembly had originally revoked its unconditional refusal to accept mulatto rights. Now, informed of what was happening in the West, the assembly declared it would openly oppose the 25 May decree upon its arrival. Blanchelande issued a proclamation ordering all persons of color who had taken up arms to disperse, return to their respective districts, and help defeat the common cause by cutting down insurgent slaves. He ended by reminding them of the respect and obedience they owed to the militia, the national guard, and other all-white law enforcing bodies. Jumecourt publicly protested the proclamation, persuaded in the end that the maintenance of a colored armed corps may be a more effective means of preventing generalized slave insurrection, later rescinded the proclamation. But the entire administration of the colony was now in shambles and its government politically bankrupt, making one inert decision after another. The civil commissioners, whose job was to restore order and a proper respect for the laws of France, had not yet arrived. At this point power belonged to the more frightened as they received reports of the progress and devastation of the slave revolt in the North that continued to spread at an alarming pace. In the West, the slaves were becoming dangerously rebellious. Some had
taken up arms in open rebellion, while others deserted to join the confederates. Although the mass of the slaves had not yet entered the revolution as a collective, autonomous force, they nonetheless remained in a constant state of agitation and unrest. The free coloreds were in no means abolitionist, and it was not their own intention to facilitate the road to slave emancipation by provoking insurrection among the slaves. But their further argument that the whites' treatment of Oge and the whole question of political equality for mulattos and free blacks had contributed to the slave revolt in the North, now seemed to be more straightforwardly obvious here in the West and the South. Already, a contingent of the national guard had been sent to Leogane in anticipation of a possible slave uprising. Some twenty-five slaves accused of stirring up the plantations around the area had been arrested and thrown into prison. The slaves from the various plantations organized to demand their release. The municipality refused and, with the protection of the national guard, proceeded to execute the arrested slaves. Toward the end of September, the Port-au-Prince authorities arbitrarily arrested and hanged a few slaves nearly every day.

The whites had no alternative now but to come to terms with the mulattos on a province-wide basis. While the patriot factions in Port-au-Prince were still maneuvering to subvert the September concordat, a commission from Canne-des-Bouquets arrived to convince the municipality of the importance of respecting the agreement it had signed. The envoy brought back only a vicious and bloodthirsty reply. Caradeux, who had been violently opposed to the concordat from the beginning, made another unsuccessful bid for the mulattos—acceptance of their demands in exchange for acceptance of independence. When the mulattos sent a delegation to Port-au-Prince requesting the food supplies promised them in the concordat, the soldiers, the "small" whites, and other city rabble, always ready to Lynch and burn the mulattos, rose up in the streets against them. They proposed that the municipality hang them and send the others bullets in place of bread. The city was in a state of near-total anarchy.

Finally, on 17 October a meeting of the commune assembly was held at Port-au-Prince, and delegates were chosen to meet with the mulattos to work out a new agreement. On the nineteenth, representatives of the province's fourteen parishes met with the confederates on the Darien plantation near Canne-des-Bouquets, and after three days of negotiations, both parties signed a new treaty. All of the provisions of the 11 September concordat were renewed. The local all-white police forces were to be dissolved immediately, and a new militia formed, irrespective of racial origins. Although new municipal elections would not be held until the following month, the mulattos and free blacks could send delegates to these bodies immediately, and armed with full powers. The Provincial Assembly was to be dissolved.
without delay. A week after the port of the West were to recall their deputies from the Colonial Assembly and request its dissolution; on the twenty-eighth of May, a special assembly was convened in the city of Port-au-Prince, composed only of persons of color, to discuss the matter, the mutually signed agreements would be sent to the National Assembly for its approval and to the king for sanction. The following day, the whites, mulattoes, free blacks, and the Suisse took part in Port-au-Prince to celebrate the new accord with military festivities, and to solemnize the occasion, a Te Deum was sung at the main church.

While things seemed for the moment to have reached a stage of conciliation and at least temporary tranquility, there remained two problems. The first was an immediate one—the Suisse, the second, an apparent one of which the colonists were not yet aware, was that the National Assembly in France had just passed a law that, in light of the recent outbreaks in the colony, restrained the 15 May festival.

For the Suisse, there was no mention of them anywhere in the concordat. They had fought as equals alongside the mulattoes and their allies, the royalists. They had been promised their freedom and belief, as did most of the mulattoes, that the provisions of the concordat at least implicitly included them, as well. For the municipality of Port-au-Prince, the mere presence of the Suisse meant trouble. They had marched into Port-au-Prince as an integral part of the confederate army to join in the festivities along with everyone else, so when the slaves on some of the plantations saw their black comrades in arms pass by, their reaction nearly provoked a general uprising. Slaves around this area were already agitated and, to an increasing degree, rebellious; insubordination and talk of revolt were now becoming rampant among the slaves of the city, and especially among the domestics.

The white authorities of Port-au-Prince had initially considered sending the Suisse back into slavery on their respective plantations. Realizing, however, that this would have produced upon the other slaves, they maneuvered to have the Suisse deported from the colony and shipped to the island of Guadeloupe, "where even the devil could not have survived." They were to be given three months' provisions and a few tools with which to keep themselves alive. When the Suisse got word of this pernicious plan, a few managed to escape, but the rest, over 240, were sent off to meet their fate. Instead of taking the Suisse to Guadeloupe, where the mulattoes could possibly have rescued them, the captain of the ship, under the pretext of bad weather, sailed to Jamaica, where he dumped them along the shore. The Jamaican government, wishing to obfuscate itself of all responsibility for this mortifying human cargo, sent the Suisse back to the Le Cap. When they arrived, the authorities in Port-au-Prince proposed to have them all sentenced to death. Finally, the Colonial Assembly had them put in chains and left them to the mercy of the French Saint-Vincent harbor at the mercy of the English privateers. Sixty of the strongest and healthiest among the Suisse were brutally murdered, their heads cut off and thrown to the sea. The rest died of starvation and sickness, with the exception of about twenty, who were spared and sent back by the whites to the West to convince the blacks that the mulattoes had betrayed them.

A few of the local mulatto leaders in the South had foreseen that the whites would use this affair such as this one to prejudice the blacks against them, and had already written to Pinchebut opposing, at all costs, the deportation of the Suisse. And in general, most of the mulatto and free black leaders were opposed to the deportation of their slave allies. But their own interests were not at stake here, and the freedom of a few hundred slaves was not an issue over which they were politically prepared to reopen armed hostilities. They did, nevertheless, present numerous proposals for alternative solutions, each categorically rejected by the whites. Finally, Baudouin, Pinchebut, Rigaud, and Lambert, as well, in the interest of peace and the preservation of their newly won rights under the concordat, surrendered their position. Their concession was, in the end, a grave and inexcusable mistake. The concordat had been signed by the whites as an inactive measure; with no military reinforcements, they had little chance of defeating the confederate army and made a bid for time. Before long, the Provincial Assembly, Carabesque, and one Pratille, a Maltese deserter, profiteer, agitator against the mulattoes, and now head of the national guard artillery, all began maneuvering to break the treaty.

To further inflame the situation, news of a new law, the 24 September decree, had just arrived from France. The decree was pushed through the National Assembly by Beaume, the Massico Club, and the remaining members of the old Saint Marc assembly, and revealed that of 15 May, once again leaving the political status of the free persons of color in the hands of the colonial assemblies. News of its adoption had in fact arrived just as the October concordat was concluded, and by now most of the planters in the West had already recalled their deputies from the Provincial Assembly in anticipation of the new elections prescribed by the concordat. A few remaining members, however, refused to acquiesce and swore, as a legislative body, to remain in permanent session and to obey no law other than that of armed resistance. At the same time, the situation in Port-au-Prince had taken another turn. The date for the ratification of the concordat by this municipality had been set for 21 November. On that day the vote was taken, and by noon three of the four municipal sections had voted almost unanimously in favor of ratification. This meant a near-total win for the patriotic faction, which sought only to subvert the concordat by whatever means or pretext it could find.
Once the city was known, a quartet broke out in the streets between a black member of the Confederate army, Scam, a former drummer of the National Guard who had joined the Confederates, and one of Praloots men. To provoke the incident, the later had insulted Scam, who returned in kind, and the quartet rapidly turned into a street brawl. The maraboutians arrived on the spot, arrested Scam, and took him directly to the municipal authorities. All of this in contravention of the treaty the city had just ratified. The mulatto representatives vigorously protested these arbitrary and illegal procedures and provided proof that the black was, in fact, a free citizen, only to learn that he had already been tried summarily by the military and hanged from a lamp-post. The mulattoes were furious, and their indignation reached the breaking point when they saw another of Praloots men approach the town hall in front of which they were still gathered. They demanded of him an explanation for the treachery of justice that had just occurred; he lashed back with an arrogant, menacing reply and was shot down. This was all the patriots needed to declare the concordat null and void and to reopen armed aggression against the mulattoes. Cadoreens and Praloot lost no time in advancing their troops toward the mulatto headquarters, where they opened fire. The mulattoes were considerably outnumbered as most of them had already returned to the countryside following the October celebrations. Taken by surprise and overwhelmed by the whites, they were forced back into their quarters after two hours of sustained but unsuccessful defense and made their retreat through the mountains toward Croix-des-Bouquets that night.

Next morning, however, fire broke out in several parts of the city simultaneously, and particularly in the affluent commercial districts. Within a few hours, the whole of Port-au-Prince was in a state of total chaos. Praloot and his gang of profiteers plundered and ransacked the homes of rich whites as the peace-attackers occupied hurriedly fled for their lives. On the pretext that the blacks might be necessary to the consolation, they began indiscriminately to murder black and mulatto women and children, and the few aged or infirm who still remained in the city. As the fire spread swiftly from one section of the city to another, a crowd of over eighty mulatto women and children fled toward the shore, seeking shelter aboard the boats in the harbor. Praloot opened fire on them with cannons, and all who would have persisted were not for the timely aid of a charitable person who directed them away to another shore. Praloot had become one huge scene of horror and devastation. The fires lasted nearly forty-eight hours, and within the first twenty-four, all but four of the lucrative merchant houses along the bay, rue des Capitaines, were consumed by flames. When it was over, two-thirds of the city had been completely destroyed and the value in damages and financial losses estimated at some 500 million livres.
of all the assembled citizens. In this capacity, he issues orders to all white
and persons of color... and it is in virtue of his orders alone that the
slaves work and are led to abandon their masters’ plantations to join the
squad that he established near Jacmel.\footnote{14}

Under cover of the treaty, Romaine and his troops in fact continued their
subversive activities virtually unopposed, spreading insurrection throughout
the countryside from one plantation to the next. They would gain pro-
tection by liberating those slaves detained in prison or condemned by their
masters to chains, and by threatening to kill and sometimes even killing,
those slaves who would remain loyal to their masters.\footnote{15} The white
residents of Leogane had all been disarmed and were now virtual prisoners.\footnote{16} During
the raids on the plantations, the rebels had seized horses, mules, cows, and
whatever other work animals they could lay their hands on, while sabotag-
ing sugar mills and plantation equipment. Production had ceased; all commu-
nication and transportation routes were blocked, and the port closed.

In addition, the whites were required to send munitions, clothing, and food
supplies to Camp Bizoton, near Port-au-Prince, where Rigaud and his army
were stationed. The city was helpless, and famine now began to take its
toll.

The civil commissioners having finally arrived at the end of November, the
citizens of Leogane, despite the blacks, did manage to get a petition through
to Saint-Léger with a desperate plea for aid. He transmitted the petition to the
Provincial Assembly, which replied, adding derision to its habitual con-
descension, that surely the commissioner’s wisdom would provide him with
the means which the Assembly lacked.\footnote{17}

Such was the Saint Domingue to which the civil commissioners, the offi-
cials having returned from France and the National Assembly, were to restore
some semblance of order and tranquility. Stripped of all effective authority
by the colonial and provincial assemblies which jealously concentrated
power in their own hands, the commissioners were reduced to little more
than titular ambassadors from the mother country. By the time they arrived,
not only had insurgent slaves destroyed and taken control of most of the
North, the concordats had been broken, Port-au-Prince reduced to ashes,
and the struggle of the mulattoes and free blacks for political equality pushed
forward into open warfare, in which slaves in the West and South were now
participating, as well. And so with no effective opposition, Romaine and his
allies maintained control of Leogane and the surrounding region until the
following spring, during which time the slaves continued to desert in alarming
numbers. By February, not a single white was left on the plantations in the
area.\footnote{18}

In the South, the struggle of the mulattoes and free blacks had been co-
ordinated and integrally linked with that of their companions in the rest of
the colony from the very early beginnings, in 1788-89, of the movement
for political equality, and subsequent events in 1791 followed a roughly parallel course. With the news of the first concordat at Croix-des-Bouquets in September, the mulattoes and free blacks of les Cayes and Terrebonne, in the South, demanded of the municipal authorities a similar treaty to implement and safeguard the rights accorded them by the 15 March decrees. In the event of a refusal they threatened to provoke a general slave insurrection.41 Fearing a repetition of the troubles that beset the West, the two municipalities acquiesced, and a number of others followed suit. By November, the Provincial Assembly of the South had accepted a provincial concordat modeled on the one in the West, a concordat which for the whites was merely a temporary agreement signed out of fear, and one that they had few intentions of keeping.42 They needed a mere pretext to break it, and when, as in the West, a quarrel broke out between a white and a mulatto in les Cayes, the whites recommenced their traditional hostilities and aggression against the mulattoes, forcing them to leave the city. They retreated en masse to the Prou plantation, owned by a free mulatto, where they formed a camp in the mountainous region behind the Plaine-du-Fond. From there they marched on to Saint Louis, joined with the mulattoes and free blacks of Caravelle and Saint Louis d’Aquin, disarmed the whites, and took over the city of Saint Louis.43 Here they learned of the November events at Port-au-Prince and of the massacres committed by Frazier and his party against their comrades of color. At Aquin, Rigaud’s brother issued a call to arms. Like the proclamation of Charlotte in the West, it called for vengeance. In spite of the recent concordat, there was no security to be found anywhere. The proclamation urged mulattoes and free blacks to leave the cities and, at the least sign of aggression, to arm and organize themselves, to kill, pillage, and burn if need be. They must fly in aid to the cause of their slaughtered brothers.44

If anything, hostilities between the free coloreds and the whites in the South tended to assume a degree of rapacity that was at least partially attenuated in the West by the countering influence of wealthy conservative whites, allied in convenience with the free coloreds against patriot machinations. In the South, as Robert Stein has shown, the relative absence of a large class of wealthy white planters precluded the possibility of an anti-royalist alliance as had been helpful in the West in bringing about the concordats. Lacking this “moderating” grand blanc element, then, the South witnessed the struggles between two relatively equal groups in which massacres, lynchings, and acts of retribution were commonplace, and in which both sides readily invoked arguments about averting slave insurrection in order to further their own ends.45 In either case, social upheaval and slave rebellion, in one form or another, were almost inevitable.

The mulattoes and free blacks had induced these arguments in the early days of the Octobre rebellion when they had, with circumstantial, shunned slave participation in the revolt. However, if the tranquility of the slaves in the South and West depended upon the provable ascension to political equality of the mulattoes and free blacks, it was only to the extent that, should they not obtain civil equality through negotiation, the evolution of the troubles was well turn into open warfare. This would then provide the conditions that were lacking in the South and West to provoke the mulattoes to leave the city. And in this sense, the mulattoes were mistaken in events eventually proved if they believed they could ultimately manipulate the slaves as maroons in an increasingly complex web of power struggles.

Earlier in 1790, the mulattoes had feared that slave enrollment during the Octobre rebellion would jeopardize their movement for civil rights and perhaps even permit white colonists to cast emancipationist aspersions upon them; thus they refused slave support. Now, however, with rampant slave insurrection ravaging the North and their own struggle pushed incessantly toward civil warfare, they actively engaged rebellious slaves into their own ranks. But if these slaves fought alongside the mulattoes and free blacks, it was in many cases with hopes and unarticulated aims of their own. Romaine Riviere notwithstanding, no indigenous slave leaders had yet emerged from the masses to coordinate and organize, as they did in the North, their independent struggle for emancipation. In the West, slave participation had begun with the incorporation of the Croix-des-Bouquets maroons, who had armed themselves and deserted their plantations in July just prior to the outbreak of slave insurrection in the North. In August, they were joined by a group of slaves who had deserted the white planters, by whom they had been armed to fight the mulattoes. These slaves, collectively known as the Suvaites and numbering a few hundred, were the first to have joined the concordates and, with goals of their own in mind, to fight a common adversary. In general, however, throughout the summer and early fall, most of the slaves in the West and the South, although agitated, restless, and often dangerously insubordinate, did not flock in great numbers to join the mulattoes and free blacks, but werereticent and chose, for the moment, to remain on the plantations. And given the treatment meted out to the Suvaites, their retention was well placed. However, the November events in Port-au-Prince had dramatically accelerated the mulatto and free-black movement in both the West and the South, and had pushed the situation into openly declared warfare. It was under these circumstances that slaves increasingly became involved in armed struggle, and on both sides.

Following the Port-au-Prince massacre and similar occurrences in the South, the recruitment methods of mulattoes and free blacks on the plantations became proportionately more rapacious and violent. Slaves were told, on the one hand, that they were free and that they must no longer work
for the whites: they were to join the mulattoes and free blacks, from whom they would hereafter take orders and arms. On plantations where confederate troops wished to establish a military camp, they might burn the slaves’ quarters and steal their belongings, or seize and cut to pieces the whip of the commandant, who was to convince the other slaves they must follow. If the commandant refused, he was shot. These tactics were not necessarily systematic, nor were they necessarily practiced by all mulattoes and free blacks in every parish. But there is ample evidence of these occurrences in the correspondence and official reports, as well as in declarations made by slaves themselves, to conclude that they were far from uncommon.

The reactions of the slaves witnessing these events were mixed. In the first place, these men were not their own leaders, but they were promising them their freedom, and many a slave may have perceived the opportunity to join the ranks of the confederate army, where, as equals in arms, they took as an accomplished fact the freedom they were promised. For other slaves, as in the case of André, commandant on one of the Laborde estates near les Cayes in the South, attachment to the master cost them their lives. André belonged to the third and most recently established of the three Laborde plantations. He was forty, a creole slave, and second commandant on this plantation, formed in 1775 when the owner purchased the credited atelier from the Champigny estate to which André belonged. As was so often the case, one of the influential factors determining whether the slaves would rebel or remain loyal seems here again to have been the pivotal role of the commandant and his relationship to the slaves in his charge.

In this case, however, the scales were tipped toward the side of the master. When a brigade of mulattoes and free blacks came and threatened to kill the Laborde commandant if he did not unite with them to turn the slaves to revolt, he told them they were all vile brigands and that he would never follow them: nothing could shake the loyalty he felt toward the whites. Moreover, he had a master and, even though he did not know him, would nevertheless remain faithful. Finally, he told them they need not bother him: the whites had no need to fear the slaves. When a mulatto caught with arms in hand was tortured and even burned alive, a horrid atrocity was committed on both sides. The whites cut off the heads of their mulatto prisoners and sent them to the Provincial Assembly: mulattoes caught with arms in hand were tortured and even burned alive. The mulattoes retaliated in kind. The Provincial Assembly and the military of the South had repeatedly requested the Colonial Assembly to send troops and provisions to defend the province, always to no avail. In desperation, they freed their own slaves. At Jérémie, where the whites were in a position of strength and where, in October, they had deserted the mulattoes and free blacks, they reportedly herded scores of mulattoes onto boats installed with smallpits, under the notorious pretext of sheltering them against these armed slaves, who would otherwise massacre them because of the atrocities the mulattoes had committed.

The decision of the whites to arm their slaves was a perilous one that they would come to regret. In colonial times, the institution of slavery was reinforced by the rule of white supremacy and the existence of an intermediate caste of mulattoes and free blacks who, because of their racial origins, were to remain inferior in status and serve as an immutable barrier between the slave and the white master. Now, in the midst of revolution, that barrier had rapidly and violently broken down. One colonist, writing from les Cayes earlier in July 1791, had foreseen this eventuality: "It is feared that the slaves, seeing that the mulattoes and free blacks will have gained [their rights] by insurrection, will themselves come to regard insurrection not only as the means by which to be freed of slavery, but as the most sacred of their duties." Here the argument of setting slave insurrection was expressed again, this time by a white colonist apprehending the dangers of acquiescing in the free coloreds’ demands for equality, especially as those demands were taking the form of open rebellion. By now, the white planters of the South had little choice, and to fight the mulattoes and free blacks they had only their own slaves. On 25 December, a free day for the slaves and one on which marronage habitually plagued the masters, the Provincial Assembly approved a decree from the towns of Torbeck and les Cayes to arm one-tenth of their slaves to defend the whites and fight the mulattoes and free blacks. Also to be fought were rebel slaves who had already deserted their plantations to join the mulatto camps in the mountains. Between the Grande and the Salée rivers had risen, and in less than two months, slave participation throughout that province became a generalized occurrence. From Cap-Haïtien, across the Plaine-du-Fond, to Tiburon and Cap Dame-Marie at the western extremity of the province, as well as around Jérémie and Petit Trois, slaves were abandoning the plantation to join mulattoes and free blacks in arms against a common enemy.

So slaves in the South were now fighting each other in enemy camps, and at the same time were acquiring valuable military skills and political experience. Here was a situation in which slaves were either freed or promised their freedom by others to help wage an armed struggle that, in either case,
did not aim at their own liberation, but rather more significantly caused them to kill each other. It was only a matter of time before they would break with both sides to lead an independent struggle, organized in their own interests, on their own terms, and directed by their own popular leaders. In this, the slaves of the Plaine-du-Fond in the area around les Cayes and Torbeck had taken the lead.

PART THREE

The South