

# An analytical account of the historical background to the Haitian Revolution in the years 1789–1794

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MHPG856 The World Since 1750

## Forward

The term “Haitian Revolution” is a relatively recent way of cataloguing the extraordinary events of the years from 1791 to 1804.<sup>1</sup> These events led to the creation of two nations with very different futures: France and Haiti. In what follows, the focus is not on Paris but rather on Saint–Domingue/Haiti and Guadeloupe.

In 1793, the only successful slave revolt in history liberated about half a million of the Caribbean slave population, and perhaps an additional 110,000 the following year, when the French Republic (temporarily) emancipated the slaves of Guadeloupe.<sup>2</sup> The protean meanings expressed in the earliest years of the revolution years are a complex and contradictory tangle of Enlightenment intellectual currents which allow for a variety of historical interpretations.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of this paper is best denoted by these questions: What identifies as the French/African/Kreyol concept of *liberté/libete*? In what ways did African Caribbean metaphysics shape and engender a radical anti–slavery ethos in the mental/cognitive universe of the enslaved? Who can know? Hence, who has cognitive agency?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (West Sussex: Wiley–Blackwell, 2012), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> David Geggus, ‘The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution’ in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840*, ed. David Armitage and Sanjay Subramanian (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010) p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Clinton Hutton, “The Creative Ethos of the African Diaspora: Performance Aesthetics and the Fight for Freedom and Identity.” *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 1/2, Returning the Gaze: Reclaiming the Voice–Post-Colonialism and its Implications for Drama and Education (March - June 2007), p.128

## The plantation economy

The French Caribbean of the late eighteenth century has been described as a collection of “five island colonial units”—Martinique, Guadeloupe, and the three provinces of Saint-Domingue. At the moment when the Haitian Revolution began, Saint-Domingue, the French half of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, had nearly 500,000 slaves and produced almost half of the entire world’s supply of sugar and coffee, as well as valuable crops of cotton and indigo.<sup>5</sup>

The colonies may have been on the periphery of French political consciousness, but they were central to its economy.<sup>6</sup> More than a million of the French were reliant on colonial commerce for employment.<sup>7</sup> In the single year of 1787, the slaves of Saint-Domingue had produced 131 million pounds of sugar for the North Atlantic world’s consumption.<sup>8</sup> Sugar cane, of course, depended upon large plantations based upon Black slavery.<sup>9</sup> As a result, imports of slaves soared to an average of nearly 30,000 a year in the late 1780s.<sup>10</sup>

The centripetal cohesive force of sugar, coffee and cotton was well reflected in slave-ship activity in the Channel and Atlantic ports of Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Nantes, Saint Malo, Le Havre, and Honfleur.<sup>11</sup> In turn, this rising plantation economy, and the traffic in humans

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<sup>5</sup> For an economical analysis of the French Antilles see Laurent Dubois, ‘The price of liberty: Victor Hugues and the administration of freedom in Guadeloupe, 1794-1798’ in *The French revolution: recent debates and new controversies*, ed., Gary Kates, (Routledge: New York, 2006), p.254; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: revolution and slave emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p.47; Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, pp. 10–13.

<sup>6</sup> Laurent Dubois, ‘The price of liberty’, p. 254.

<sup>7</sup> David Geggus, ‘Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly’. *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (Dec., 1989), p. 1291.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Laurent Dubois, ‘The price of liberty’, p.254.

<sup>10</sup> Imports of slaves to the island averaged over 15,000 a year in the late 1760s; after an interruption caused by the American War of Independence, they soared to nearly 30,000 in the late 1780s, Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, pp. 2 & 10.

<sup>11</sup> Yves Benot, “In the Antilles, ‘Liberty for all.’” *The UNESCO Courier*, Vol. 42, No. 6, (June 1989), p. 20. See also Franklin W. Knight, “The Haitian Revolution,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 1 (Feb., 2000), p. 106; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: revolution and slave emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804*, p. 47.

that sustained it, urged into being a social and economic transformation that was essential to the rise of a wealthy and powerful bourgeoisie, and to a pride which needed liberty.<sup>12</sup>

### **The declaration of the rights of man and citizen**

The global European slave-making/colonial project directly claimed the lives of some ten to thirty million Africans.<sup>13</sup> However, on 26 August 1789 the *volte-face* National Assembly passed its famous Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, whose first article declared that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” Article 17, however, proclaimed property an “inviolable and sacred right,” begging the question of which right was more important—the right of a slave to equality, or the right of a master to his human property.<sup>14</sup>

The historic leap that Jean-Jacques Rousseau took in the *Contrat social* was to reason that human rights are not natural, an unassailable fact of being, but are rather a man-made invention that can only exist in human society<sup>15</sup>—Rousseau’s was a remarkable ideal, but completely general and therefore entirely abstract.<sup>16</sup> New World plantation slavery, on the other hand, was a real and existing world, not of the enlightenment, but its antithesis, its nemesis—its only contemporary analogue being the mechanical bestialization of Enlightenment reason recorded in the theatrical world of the marquis de Sade.<sup>17</sup>

There is nothing tangible about universality.<sup>18</sup> But the *Declaration* had, nonetheless, been declared universally applicable, yet its application in the colonies still seemed unimaginable.<sup>19</sup> In effect, the ideals of the French Revolution laid bare a profound tension

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<sup>12</sup> Brian Meeks, “Re-reading The Black Jacobins: James, the dialectic and the Revolutionary conjuncture,” *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3, New currents in Caribbean thought (September 1994), p. 83. See also David Geggus, ‘Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly’, p. 1291; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: revolution and slave emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804*, pp.46–47.

<sup>13</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Yves Benot, “In the Antilles, ‘Liberty for all’”, p. 22. See also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: revolution and slave emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804*, p.99; François Furet, “An idea and its destiny.” *The UNESCO Courier*, Vol. 42, No. 6, (June 1989), p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> Nick Nesbitt, “Troping Toussaint, Reading Revolution.” *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Haiti, 1804-2004: Literature, Culture, and Art (Summer, 2004), p.20.

<sup>16</sup> François Furet, “An idea and its destiny”, p. 52. See also, Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4. See also Clinton Hutton, “The Creative Ethos of the African Diaspora: Performance Aesthetics and the Fight for Freedom and Identity”, p.131. See also Clinton Hutton, “The Haitian Revolution and the articulation of a modernist epistemology”, p. 538 & p. 544.

<sup>18</sup> François Furet, “An idea and its destiny”, p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p. 3 & 99.

which precipitated an impasse in the moral, ethical and empathetic ethos of whiteness: practice what you preach.<sup>20</sup>

### **Saint-Domingue and the Atlantic world**

The newly integrated Atlantic community of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the catalyst for a symbiotic relationship between colonial Saint-Domingue and its metropole.<sup>21</sup> On the eve of their revolutions, overseas France of the ancien regime consisted of three distinct castes: approximately 465,000 slaves, 30,000 whites, and 28,000 gens de couleur.<sup>22</sup> For nearly three centuries, European greed had kidnapped annually from the coasts of Africa and condemned its victims to perpetual captivity in an occidental and dystopian landscape.<sup>23</sup> Quite simply, the lives of the majority in the French Antilles were governed by contracts not of their own choosing, and administered by official policy.<sup>24</sup>

While the size, and origins, of African populations varied from island to island, at the time of the revolution, *bossales* (African-born slaves) made up about 60 percent of the Saint-Domingue population; of those, half again may have been sold out Kongo Kingdom in Central West Africa, a fact of profound importance to the course of the fight for independence.<sup>25</sup> Many of these slaves were captured and sold as a result of the civil wars that had divided their nation in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

When the *bossales* revolted in Saint-Domingue, the transcultural nature of their ideology was paralleled in an on-going African conflict on the nature of political sovereignty and

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<sup>20</sup> François Furet, "An idea and its destiny", p. 52. See also Clinton Hutton, "The Haitian Revolution and the articulation of a modernist epistemology", p. 544; Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, p. 18; Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Franklin W. Knight, "The Haitian Revolution", p. 106.

<sup>22</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.50. See also Franklin W. Knight, "The Haitian Revolution", p. 108; Valentina Peguero, "Teaching the Haitian Revolution: Its Place in Western and Modern World History," *The History Teacher*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Nov., 1998), p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, p. 17

<sup>24</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.53.

<sup>25</sup> Deborah Jenson, "Jean-Jacques Dessalines and the African Character of the Haitian Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (July 2012), p. 617. See also Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, pp. 43-44; Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, p. 44.

kingship.<sup>27</sup> The rebels' devotion to the French and Spanish monarchies in 1791–93, John Thornton has argued, reflects a Kongolese political philosophy which centred on an ameliorative and gradualist reform of African monarchy. Indeed, the war-time ideological discourse of the Kongolese never broached the possibility of overthrowing a king; nor, for that matter, did it ever address the question of universal human rights.<sup>28</sup>

### **Grand blancs and petits blancs**

The colonial whites were subdivided into three distinct and highly antagonistic classes: European bureaucrats, *grands blancs* and *petits blancs*.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century, Saint-Domingue was France's land of opportunity, a new frontier where *grands blancs*, or wealthy planters and merchants, could escape the restrictions of aristocratic society and make their fortunes.<sup>30</sup> The *grands blancs* associated hirelings—low rank employees, plantation overseers and poor whites in general—referred to, even by the slaves, as *petit blancs*, "little whites"—aspired to become *grand blancs*.<sup>31</sup>

The *petit blancs*, at the same time, opposed the *grand blancs* who lauded it over them and to whom they were often indebted. Both factions, however, were united in their common proslavery position and in their loathing of their mulatto competitors.<sup>32</sup> In turn, mulattos reviled the free black inhabitants and both loathed the slaves, who, of course reciprocated this enmity.<sup>33</sup> The patriots/*petits blancs* (and, later, Jacobins), composed mostly of white artisans and professionals centered in the towns, for a variety of reasons—notably, different interests in trade policy with France—coalesced in opposition to the *grands blancs* and the royalist bureaucracy, who were counter revolutionary.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, pp.110–111.

<sup>28</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, p. 44. See also Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p. 5; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, pp.110–111.

<sup>29</sup> Valentina Peguero, "Teaching the Haitian Revolution: It's Place in Western and Modern World History", p.

34. See also Franklin W. Knight, "The Haitian Revolution", p. 108.

<sup>30</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20. See also Valentina Peguero, "Teaching the Haitian Revolution: Its Place in Western and Modern World History", p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Yves Benot, "In the Antilles, 'Liberty for all'", p.20.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Meeks, "Re-reading The Black Jacobins: James, the dialectic and the Revolutionary conjuncture," *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3, New currents in Caribbean thought (September 1994), p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84. See also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p. 116.

## Gens de couleur

The policing of the prevailing social structure of the plantocracy depended on a group that occupied a paradoxical place within it: the *gens de couleur* (mulattos). This “intermediate” category between free whites and the enslaved was made up of those of African descent who were no longer enslaved. Although their liberty guaranteed them many of the legal rights denied to the slaves, they were also subject to a battery of discriminatory legislation.<sup>35</sup>

Until 1793, debates about the colonies in France would be focused on the issue of the rights of the free men of colour, rather than on slavery itself.<sup>36</sup> For the royalist planters, if people of African descent gained equality with white colonists, the enslaved would come to believe that they too could, and should, be equal and free. It was therefore vital to keep the class of *gens de couleur* in a legally and politically inferior position to humiliate and exclude them. Any other course would open the door to revolution.<sup>37</sup>

However, as their numbers and wealth increased, members of this group increasingly resented laws that condemned them to second-class status. Despite this both the royalists and the patriots soon came to realise the value of their numerical significance in any frontal struggle.<sup>38</sup> When the French Revolution broke out, the *gens de couleur* would be quick to seize on its promises of liberty and equality to demand the abolition of these restrictions.<sup>39</sup>

## Royalists and patriots in the French Antilles

In the French Antilles, the symbolic choreography of Patriots/Royalists carried with it the aggressive subtext that existed in metropolitan France, impelled by the fact that counterrevolutionaries throughout Europe were preparing to contest the revolutionary

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<sup>35</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.54 & pp. 110–111.

<sup>36</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p.28.

<sup>37</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.101.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Meeks, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>39</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p.24 & 28.

change.<sup>40</sup> As colonial policy-making increasingly tracked the leftward ebb of metropolitan politics, and then its retreat, it precipitated splits among the whites on the islands.<sup>41</sup>

The increasingly firm hold on local power by the patriots provided a dangerous source of egalitarian propaganda; for the patriots, the planters represented a defence of the ancien regime.<sup>42</sup> The Dominguan colonists had begun to realize the danger that the new national legislature, in which they were only a small minority, might pass laws that would endanger the institution of slavery.<sup>43</sup>

Both of these groups sought advantage by making alliances with the *gens de couleur*, who despite being outnumbered by whites four to one still constituted a political entity on the island. The various colonial factions, then, vied for control of local decisions in ways that identified them with the larger political schism in metropolitan France between differing visions of the Revolution.<sup>44</sup>

### **The ceremony of Bois Caïman**

Bois Caïman/*Bwa Kayiman* is the site of the Vodou ceremony that launched the 1791 insurrection of 22 August 1791 in Saint-Domingue.<sup>45</sup> It stands in relation to the Haitian revolution in much the same way as do 14 July 1789 and the storming of the Bastille to the French Revolution.<sup>46</sup> When the insurgents arose, the white colonists' racist occidental ontological complex convinced them that the slaves had been incited to rebellion by abolitionist propaganda and echoes of the French Revolution's debates about liberty.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.97.

<sup>41</sup> Jenny Shaw, "Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment", p. 521. See also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, pp.89-90 & 98; David Geggus, 'The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution', p.92.

<sup>42</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: revolution and slave emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 116.

<sup>43</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p.27.

<sup>44</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: revolution and slave emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: The university of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 116.

<sup>45</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, pp.35-37.

<sup>46</sup> Carolyn E. Fick, "Dilemmas of Emancipation: From the Saint Domingue Insurrections of 1791 to the Emerging Haitian State." *History Workshop Journal*, No. 46 (Autumn, 1998), p.2. See also, Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.27.

<sup>47</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p. 36, Clinton Hutton, "The Haitian Revolution and the articulation of a modernist epistemology", p.531.

However, an ‘internal perspective’ on the insurrection—one that downplays the ‘contagion’ of the French influence—tends to evoke a rather different history of African agency through proto–revolutionary forms of resistance such as *marronnage*, (escape from plantations), or abortion induced by slave women through the use of plants and herbs.<sup>48</sup> The central theme in dispute relate to the rate of recurrence and dimensions of resistance and how it infused the slave uprising of 1791.<sup>49</sup>

The Bois-Caiman exhortation took as self–evident that the slaves, as subjugated human beings, had the inalienable right to resist their condition as property.<sup>50</sup> It was a communitarian, intersubjective socio–political act of resistance intended to destroy the abjection of the community of suffering.<sup>51</sup> The slaves did not reside in an atheoretical world of passive mimicry, which was devoid of ideas and political concepts. They made definite political analysis of the power structure they encountered and resisted in ways that made them central protagonists in the demolition of slavery.<sup>52</sup>

## **Vodou**

*Vodou* transformed African commercialized bodies—bodies possessed and desecrated by slave holders—into bodies (re)possessed and (re)consecrated by African ancestral deities.<sup>53</sup> In nocturnal rituals of repossession the slaves coped, resisted and, ultimately, obviated the daily rituals of possession/ownership performed on them by the agency of slave making in the day.<sup>54</sup> The emerging culture of reverence, control, cohesion, reliance, kinship, faith (in self), possibility and organisation coalesced into the radical anti–slavery ethos in the agency of the enslaved that became an organisational basis of their Revolution.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> David Geggus, ‘The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution’, pp. 93-94. See also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, pp.110–111; Yves Benot, “In the Antilles, ‘Liberty for all’”, p. 21.

<sup>49</sup> David Geggus, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>50</sup> Carolyn E. Fick, “Dilemmas of Emancipation”, pp. 3–4.

<sup>51</sup> Clinton Hutton, “The Creative Ethos of the African Diaspora”, p. 129. See also Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, p. 30; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.58

<sup>52</sup> Laurent Dubois, “An enslaved Enlightenment: rethinking the intellectual history of the French Atlantic.” *Social History* Vol. 31 No. 1 (February 2006), pp. 2-3.

<sup>53</sup> Clinton Hutton, “The Haitian Revolution and the articulation of a modernist epistemology”, p. 547.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.545

<sup>55</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p. 432. See also Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p. 18 & 35.



In the same way, African–Caribbean metaphysics rituals of burial—literally rituals of freedom by transmigration, releasing the spirit person from the physically enslaved body to return to ancestral Africa—also denoted the genesis and cognitive basis of freedom. The making of real freedom in African Caribbean cosmology, then, began with death and enslaved Africans began to die long before the 1780s, that is, long before the light of Occidentalism had penetrated African darkness.<sup>56</sup>

It is important to note that insurgents did not have a politically–formulated model for restructuring—through revolution—the island in their own interests. Their agenda was one of deliverance from slavery, not bourgeois liberalism or even, in 1791, political sovereignty.<sup>57</sup> Bois Caïman was a manifestation of a complex historical matrix, including vernacular remnants of African human rights charters, the brutal experience of New World slavery, and Afro–American religious experience.<sup>58</sup> It tells a story of the pre–revolutionary intellectual life within slave communities—a life that involved movement between ideas and action, between the abstract and the particular, between past, present and future.<sup>59</sup>

### **The Trois-Rivieres revolt**

By way of contrast, Guadeloupe, which was economically marginal in the French Caribbean and supplied by only a small number of French slave ships, had a less Africanized population, of which only a fifth was African–born—the contrast to Saint Domingue is striking.<sup>60</sup> Slave–owners preferred slaves born in the colony, known as *creoles*, for creole slaves tended to be more docile/easier to manage than the *bossales*; the *creole* slaves grew up speaking the local language and had never known any life outside of the slave system.<sup>61</sup> In Guadeloupe slave insurgents at various moments voiced their claims in terms of

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<sup>56</sup> Clinton Hutton, “The Haitian Revolution and the articulation of a modernist epistemology”, p. 549.

<sup>57</sup> Carolyn E. Fick, “Dilemmas of Emancipation”, pp. 3–4.

<sup>58</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, p. 20.

<sup>59</sup> Laurent Dubois, “An enslaved Enlightenment”, p.3.

<sup>60</sup> In a survey of about 10 percent of Guadeloupe’s enslaved population between 1770 and 1789, 20 percent were identified as African-born, whereas nearly 60 percent were born in the colony itself. The remaining 20 percent had no origin indicated, possibly because they had been purchased through a contraband trade. This means that less than a third of the island's population were African, Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.52.

<sup>61</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p. 16-17. See also Brian Meeks, “Re-reading The Black Jacobins”, p. 83.

Republican rights.<sup>62</sup> The differences between Africans and Creole blacks, who drew on different experiences in developing their strategies, emerged most clearly during the early phase of the Haitian Revolution.<sup>63</sup>

During the night of Saturday, April 20, 1793, hundreds of enslaved blacks revolted in the area surrounding the village of Trois-Rivieres, Guadeloupe, killing twenty-two whites. Under interrogation, the rebels explained that their royalist masters had armed them as part of an anti-Republican conspiracy. Rather than betray the republic toward which they felt loyalty, they rose up against their masters and killed them.<sup>64</sup> Instead of punishing them, however, Republican whites and *gens de couleur* accepted their version of the events and called for the formation of a slave army to defend the island from royalist threat.<sup>65</sup>

Ultimately, these insurrections made necessary and conceivable the alliance between slave insurgents and Republican officials.<sup>66</sup> The slaves, in the case of the Trois-Rivieres made a correct calculation based on observation of the political conflicts in the region in the previous years. In doing so, they effectively intervened in this conflict; resisting slavery as they resisted enemies of the Republic linked their fate to that of a nation that still excluded them.<sup>67</sup> The brilliance and uniqueness of the Trois-Rivieres insurgents was that they unpredictably intervened in the conflict between Republicans and royalists in Guadeloupe, ultimately pre-empting the mechanisms of justice among the fragmented white population.<sup>68</sup>

### **Prophetic rumour**

Fernando Ortiz's term "transculturation" encapsulates the multifaceted process through which new communities were forged in the fires of empire.<sup>69</sup> The events in France—and therefore new laws, constitutions, and symbols—could take more than three months to

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<sup>62</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.6.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.110–111.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>65</sup> Laurent Dubois, 'The price of liberty', p.256.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.256.

<sup>67</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p. 135.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-130.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

arrive in the Antilles, which meant that political struggles in the colonies were often based on conjectures about the state of things in France.<sup>70</sup>

The transnational Atlantic flow of newspapers, pamphlets, engravings (particularly dangerous, since slaves had only to open their eyes) provided information about events and enlightenment philosophies in the metropole to the enslaved.<sup>71</sup> The rumours that emancipation had been (or would soon be) decreed in the metropole, but that the governors and the colonists were opposed this fact, often stirred up revolts.<sup>72</sup> Spreading and mobilizing around rumours of imminent emancipation, they invoked as-yet-unmade decisions on the part of the metropole and in so doing infused themselves into the political conflicts between metropole and colony.<sup>73</sup>

### **The anglophile separatist movement**

From the point of view of the distant authorities in Versailles, Saint-Domingue existed in order to enrich the mother country. On all levels, France's navigation act, the *exclusif*, controlled the economic choices of planters—from the purchasing of plantations and labourers to the maintenance of mills, to the sale and shipment of sugar and coffee.<sup>74</sup> They were opposed to the French colonial state, which they denounced as an example of metropolitan "despotism."<sup>75</sup> With limited colonial representation and separated from France by the Atlantic Ocean the white colonists resented the metropolitan government's attempt to regulate their lives.<sup>76</sup>

The *grands blancs* envied the home-rule and better terms of trade of their British colonial counterparts.<sup>77</sup> British commerce, of course, would greatly benefit if the whites, from the

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.92–93. See also Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p. 37.

<sup>71</sup> Jenny Shaw, "Universal Emancipation", p. 521.

<sup>72</sup> Yves Benot, "In the Antilles, 'Liberty for all'", p. 20. See also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, pp. 89-90 & 98.

<sup>73</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.9.

<sup>74</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p.21. See also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.33.

<sup>75</sup> Brian Meeks, "Re-reading The Black Jacobins", p. 82. See also Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p. 26. See also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: revolution and slave emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p.33.

<sup>76</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *op. cit.*, p.21. See also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.33.

<sup>77</sup> David Geggus, 'The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution', p.94. See also Jeremy D. Popkin, *op. cit.*, p. 21 & p.29.

richest prize in the Antilles, sought a foreign protectorate, and there is evidence of communication with secessionist elements as early as May 1791.<sup>78</sup> As news of the gestures made by certain white planters toward the British filtered to Paris, the forgers of colonial policy became convinced that there was a severe danger of counterrevolution among the whites of the Caribbean. Granting political rights to the *gens de couleur*, it was believed, would both consolidate the reaction to the slave insurrection and strengthen the Republic in the face of defecting white.<sup>79</sup>

In Paris, January 21, 1793, the execution of the Louis XVI hardened the political conflicts of the previous years—both in the metropole and in the colonies—into an all-out war between Republicans and royalists.<sup>80</sup> As the Republic expanded citizenship in order to preserve its hold on the colonies many white planters increasingly distanced themselves from the Republic, becoming traitors to the nation in an attempt to save their rapidly disintegrating world.<sup>81</sup> The on-going devastation of this commercial giant and its threat to the colonial status quo converged with separatist tendencies in Dominguan society<sup>82</sup> and in 1793, reacting to the granting of political rights to the *gens de couleur*, the royalists signed a pact forging an alliance with the British and handing over the colonies to them.<sup>83</sup>

### **The black Jacobins**

In 1793, as war broke out among the colonial powers, the Dominguan slave insurgents allied themselves with the counter-revolutionary Spanish, who offered freedom to soldiers and their families.<sup>84</sup> In June 1793, pressured by slave insurgents and threatened by an English invasion made more likely by the increasing defection of white planters, the

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<sup>78</sup> Brian Meeks, “Re-reading The Black Jacobins”, p. 87. See also David Geggus, *op. cit.*, pp. 290–291.

<sup>79</sup> Laurent Dubois, *op. cit.*, p.112.

<sup>80</sup> Jean Lessay, “Thomas Paine: The antimonarchist who tried to save a King.” *The UNESCO Courier*, Vol. 42, No. 6, (June 1989), p. 18-18. See also Laurent Dubois, *op. cit.*, p. 118

<sup>81</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p. 114.

<sup>82</sup> David Geggus, ‘The British Government and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt 1791-1793’, p. 285.

<sup>83</sup> Laurent Dubois, *op. cit.*, p. 114

<sup>84</sup> David Geggus, ‘The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution’, p. 96. See also, Carolyn E. Fick, “Dilemmas of Emancipation”, p.6.

Republican commissioner Leger Felicite Sonthonax offered liberty and citizenship to those slaves who would serve as soldiers of the Republic.<sup>85</sup>

Thus it was these slaves, officially Royalists though they may have been, rather hurriedly integrated into the colonial Third Estate, who fought to make the Declaration of Rights a reality in the Tropics.<sup>86</sup> The Jacobin project had taken root: enslaved blacks had become citizens and formed legions that were turned against the internal and external enemies of the Republic.<sup>87</sup> The famous decree of the Convention of 16 Pluiose of the year II (4 February 1794) abolishing slavery was in fact playing catch-up with the onrush of events in the Caribbean, and it merely ratified a *fait accompli*.<sup>88</sup>

## Conclusions

In 1794 the National Convention in Paris ratified a local decision made in Saint-Domingue in 1793, abolishing slavery throughout the French Empire.<sup>89</sup> The Revolutions, which evolved in symbiosis with each other, were, then, a dialectical negation of slavery, violence and global capital.<sup>90</sup> However, the original abstract concepts of *liberat * and * galit * were rather unfixed and novel—Did they include the poor? Free *gens de couleur*? Slaves? Women?<sup>91</sup> As *gens de couleur* and then slaves inserted themselves into the political conflicts between metropole and colony, a purely Eurocentric revolution, albeit with universalist pretensions, was borrowed from, moulded, challenged, and concretized Enlightenment philosophies to

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<sup>85</sup> Brian Meeks, “Re-reading The Black Jacobins”, p. 86. See also Laurent Dubois, ‘The price of Liberty’, p.256. See also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.156. See also, David Geggus, ‘The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution’, p.92.

<sup>86</sup> Yves Benot, “In the Antilles, ‘Liberty for all’”, p.21.

<sup>87</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, p.26.

<sup>88</sup> Yves Benot, , *op. cit.*,, p.22. See also David Geggus, *op. cit.*, p.92.

<sup>89</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: revolution and slave emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: The university of North Carolina Press, 2004), p.10.

<sup>90</sup> Jenny Shaw, “Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment *Journal of World History*, Volume 21, Number 3, (September 2010), p. 521. See also David Geggus, ‘The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution’ in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840*. ed. David Armitage and Sanjay Subramanyan (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010) p. 100.

<sup>91</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, p. 30. See also Clinton Hutton, “The Creative Ethos of the African Diaspora”, p.129.

realise universal emancipation.<sup>92</sup> In this sense, we can speak of convergent revolutions in France and Saint Domingue.<sup>93</sup>

The concept of equality, or even the notion of human rights, are abstract notions; they do not pre-exist their formulations in the human mind.<sup>94</sup> Thrown together without regard for cultural and geographic origins, cut off from much of the substance of their ancestors' traditions and moral communities, the slaves of Saint-Domingue were obliged to move beyond the moral desolation of their world to undertake creative acts of judgment.<sup>95</sup> Only a radical fidelity to the lived experience of slavery could motivate the transformation of a pre-existing social order.<sup>96</sup> The invention of decolonization was precisely the project that Haitian Revolution implemented.

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<sup>92</sup> Jenny Shaw, "Universal Emancipation", p. 521. See also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, pp.89-90 & 98; David Geggus, 'The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution', p.92.

<sup>93</sup> Jenny Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 521. See also David Geggus, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>94</sup> Nick Nesbitt, "Troping Toussaint, Reading Revolution", p.22. See also François Furet, "An idea and its destiny", p. 52.

<sup>95</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, p. 30 & 43.

<sup>96</sup> Nick Nesbitt, "Troping Toussaint, Reading Revolution", p.22. See also François Furet, "An idea and its destiny", p. 52.

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