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**RACE AND LABOR IN SAINT DOMINGUE:
“LET US DIE RATHER THAN FAIL TO KEEP THIS VOW”**

by

MONET MASSAC

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR FORSTER
PROFESSOR DENISE-SHELTON
PROFESSOR ROBERTS**

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Introduction

My thesis explores the development of racial capitalism in Saint Domingue, today's Haiti, and how different sectors of colonial society handled and worked with the tools they were given by their oppressors. By "tools," I mean the ideology of race that devalues and degrades Blackness and gives value to whiteness. Though I am using terms of race, it is impossible to separate racial politics from economics. The scope of my thesis is within the early modern period starting with European and specifically French travel writers from the 1500s on until right after the Haitian Revolution. The investigation is relatively chronological starting from how elites, the maritime bourgeoisie and French bureaucracy, developed an ideology that promoted racialized difference and hierarchy. I then go into how different sectors of colonial Saint Domingue worked to maintain this ideology, even if it worked against their own interests. Finally, I discuss the distinct ways in which the post-revolutionary government and formerly enslaved people shaped their freedom.

In my first section, I explore how the development of race was intrinsically tied to the changing economic systems on the island. With the coming of the plantation, indentured servitude of poor Europeans came to present more disadvantages than advantages which the European enslavement of Africans seemed to solve in the minds of the colonists. I end my first section with an investigation into the economic policy established on the colony, the *exclusif*, that ensured the metropolis extracted the maximum profit from the colony, which was achieved on the backs of enslaved people. My second section deals with the ideology of racial difference and hierarchy and how it played out in colonial Saint Domingue with a focus on the divided white population and free people of color. I explore how racial ideology divided those with similar class interests which worked to maintain *grands blancs*' supreme in their minority rule.

The second section closes with an exploration of revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture's initiation of *caporalisme agraire* or "militarized agriculture" which functioned in a similar manner as the previously established plantation system discussed in the first section. In my third section, I focus on the largest sector of Saint Domingue society, the Black masses, and how their reformulation of race and Blackness was always subversive in the colony's economic system and hierarchical structure, in which they of course found themselves violently degraded. Marronage is a large focus in this section due to how it allowed for a rival culture to develop outside and in opposition to the plantation context. The last section explores the peasant labor process, which developed among the enslaved while they were still dominated by the brutal plantation regime, before and after the revolution. I present this process as an alternative, and as the preferred one for the majority of the previously enslaved as well as maroons. They preferred farming their own land over salaried work on large land holdings initiated by Louverture and his generals after the revolution.

Essentially, I explore three different groups and three different economic systems. The first was the monstrous invention of the elites, the *grands blancs*, and their orientation of Saint Domingue into an export economy based on slave labor. The second group I examine consists of the intermediary sectors of the colony, *petit blancs*, free people of color and revolutionary leaders who became propertied after taking over lands of fleeing French planters. The economic system I assign as the one of most interest for this group, or most aligned with their goals, is the re-initiation, after the revolution, of a "slave-type" plantation regime, except that the land was to be cultivated by wage-laborers instead of enslaved people, so that the newly emancipated nation could produce for an export economy. Their intentions were different from the colonial elites as the new revolutionary government desired the republic to regain some sense of economic

stability after the revolution in order to maintain their newfound sovereignty. The last and the most revolutionary group is that of the Black masses. I delve into their preferred economic system, that had persisted during the slavery era, of small land holdings for subsistence and local markets. It was through this peasant labor process, that had stood in stark contrast with the dominant plantation economy first created by elites and then adopted by the revolutionary state, that the formerly enslaved masses were able to resist proletarianization.

Elite Creation of Race

French philosopher René Descartes famously concluded “I think, therefore I am” in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637) after ideologically dismembering himself: “I recognized that if a foot or arm or any other part of the body is cut off, nothing has thereby been taken away from the mind.”¹ Nearly 50 years later, the *Code Noir* or *Edict Regarding the Government and the Administration of the French Islands of America, and the Discipline and the Commerce of Blacks and Slaves in the Said Countries* recognized what had been going on for half a century on the Western part of Hispaniola: slavery.² French travel writers in the early modern period did the intellectual work to legitimize access to African labor. The process of making man into slave took the reverse of Descartes’ ideological project. As he severs different parts of his body, he realizes that he is, “I am,” because he thinks. The mind is elevated as he realizes parts of the body are not what make him truly himself, it is his mind: “I am a thing which is real... a thing which doubts, understands, [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels.”³ On the other hand, French travel writers observed the living bodies of those they encountered on the African continent and made conclusions that worked to justify the slave trade. Their fixation on the body, instead of the mind, leads them to the opposite inference of Descartes: they don’t think, therefore they are not. The maximum alienation of “am nots,” from their home and social community, humanity, and the products they create allowed for others to make maximum profit from their labor. The creation of a racialized body that was less than human worked to legitimize the enslavement of “others” which served as the basis of the system in Saint Domingue, allowing the colony to reap huge profits for the metropolis, France.

¹ Dayan, "Codes of Law and Bodies of Color," 286.

² Ibid, 285.

³ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 15.

Previous to established racial slavery, indentured servants, known as *engagés*, met the need for labor before the establishment of Saint Domingue's plantation economy. *Engagés*, who came from European peasant and working class origins, were partly motivated to come to the colonies due to the conditions in their labor contracts: they would be granted land and tools after completing agreed upon years of service. Even as the servants were "white," it was not rare that the colonial lower class, which they occupied, was often described in racial and national terms.⁴ They fulfilled the early needs for labor when colonists cultivated small plots of land with mixed crops and tobacco. African labor became increasingly used over *engagés* with the coming of the plantation economy that began with indigo. Racially based slavery became further entrenched with the expansion of sugar plantations in Saint Domingue starting around 1699.⁵

Ultimately, indentured servitude was abandoned as Saint Domingue started to develop more of a plantation-based economy. The system was incompatible with the colony's developing economy on multiple levels. The sugar plantation required a "multi-stage process... [that] necessitated both a large and highly diversified labor force."⁶ Along with these plantations came the *grand planteur* or "large planters" with substantial starting capital.⁷ The labor demands of the sugar industry necessitated a permanent labor force. Working indentured servants indefinitely was not an option. They voluntarily came to the colonies, as opposed to being forcefully deported from their origin countries, motivated by basic protections and compensation outlined in their contracts. After fulfilling the terms of their contract, *engagés* would end up landed and thus could escape becoming proletarianized.⁸ The system did not set up *engagés* to need to work

⁴ Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 79.

⁵ Trouillot, "Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue," 335.

⁶ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 22.

⁷ Dupuy, "French Merchant Capital and Slavery in Saint-Domingue," 89.

⁸ Giovannetti, "Grounds of Race," 27.

on sugar plantations for wage-labor. Instead, upon becoming small landowners, they came to represent yet another obstacle to sugar planters as their industry necessitated large amounts of land. The slave trade France had been involved in presented the solution for the labor needs of the burgeoning plantation economy in Saint Domingue. The transformation of Saint Domingue into a sugar colony, “[signaling] a transition to new forms of property ownership and new relations of production,” led to the departure from the indentured system in favor of African enslavement.

The demise of indentured servitude in the face of the changing economic system of the island was due to the fact it came to present more disadvantages than advantages as the plantation system took root in Saint Domingue. African slavery resolved the needs of a new mode of production which required a permanent labor force. The kind of work involved on the sugar plantation caused colonists to prefer race-based slavery because the planter could exert total control. Racial slavery met the needs of large-scale production which required strictly imposed discipline and the myth of race solved problems of control that came with the institution. According to Alex Dupuy, the enslavement of indentured servants “raised the danger of popular revolts” considering the expectations they came with. Maintaining people to work indefinitely without any social rights or status in order to extract the most profit required more than ruthless force, “[t]here had to develop some kind of myth, like race, which not only those who ruled but those who are ruled accepted.”⁹ This is not to suggest enslaved Africans “accepted” their lowly place and it would be incorrect to do so. Rather, the ideological work to create racial difference and inferiority served to legitimize involvement in the slave trade for Europeans, for the benefit of governmental and mercantile elites. The myth of race allowed those

⁹ Ibid.

who ruled to force those who were ruled to accept their place by any means necessary however brutal. Between the American and French Revolutions, Saint Domingue produced close to one-half of all the sugar and coffee consumed in Europe and the Americas.¹⁰ It became increasingly important to associate “inferiority and degradation with the most obvious distinguishing mark of the slave—the black skin”—as their subjugation was the source of massive amounts of wealth.¹¹

The creation of Blackness and orienting it in a way that normalized exploiting those marked “Black,” to access their labor power, was a centuries long process. The European “gaze” as it observed African bodies that were yet to be Black was already informed by a long-standing tradition of gender ideology, as race, in the contemporary sense, did not exist in Europe’s understanding of human difference.¹² Jennifer Morgan in *‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder:’ Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology* argues that gender and sexual difference played a significant role in the development of a racist discourse. She looks to travel narratives written by English travel writers in the early modern era when they recorded their first impressions of people they encountered in places new to them. Their accounts made conclusions solely based off bodies they observed. This activity serves as the antithesis of Descartes’ exercise. Instead of dismembering the body to elevate the soul and mind, their gaze would create meaning out of the body, imagining one that best fit their needs: “The gaze ‘fixes’ the black female in her place, steadies her, in order to decode and comfortably recode her into its own system of representation.”¹³ Morgan’s analysis shows how some English travel writers’ perceptions worked to present how African women were ideal candidates for enslavement. For

¹⁰ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 5.

¹¹ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 39.

¹² Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder:’ Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770,” 170.

¹³ Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*, 6.

example, travel writers connected their unfounded belief that African women experienced ease in childbirth and their observation that their saggy breasts conveniently allowed them to feed their child as they worked to "...their ability to produce both crops and other laborers" under slavery.¹⁴ This emphasis on the capability of African bodies to produce for European gain facilitated their transformation into commodities to be bought and sold, solidifying their place as "am nots." This kind of transformation was necessary in order to ideologically naturalize what was not yet so.

Trends of the "lazy African" characterization in French travel narratives reveal a glimpse into the kind of ideological work necessary to legitimize access to African labor. French travel writers participated in the "trans-European ethnohistoriographical tradition of depicting the imagined native."¹⁵ In general, early modern travel narratives and the race-making project they engaged in, consciously or not, were significant in developing the notion of an inferior "other" and linking this inferiority with immutable physical "differences." The "other" would be "always in the process of reinvention to suit Eurocentric truths."¹⁶ Although not all recorded observations in travel narratives were intended to justify the slave trade, trends of how Africans were written about were linked to the observers' changing needs. It's important to consider that slave crews were "the most frequent European visitors to Africa."¹⁷ The Europeans most often arriving to African coasts were allied with and therefore had a stake in the slave industry. This aligns with how descriptions of Africans changed in tandem with France's increased slave trade. Economic historian Klas Rönnbäck situates the development of the "lazy African" trope within a long

¹⁴ Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder' Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," 168.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 7.

¹⁷ Cohen, *The French Encounter with African: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880*, 62.

historical perspective.¹⁸ He concludes that the trope was not actively made to be a justification of African exploitation as it had older origins preceding the slave trade. While Jeffer Daykin, in “‘They Themselves Contribute to Their Misery by Their Sloth,’” observes a correlation between the expansion of the slave trade and a more intensified account of African laziness. Though the “‘lazy African” trope was observed previous to the beginning of the slave trade, as Rönnbäck concludes, the characterization proliferated along with France’s growing reliance on enslaved people. It comes as no surprise that the “‘lazy African” trope was one that became further promulgated once France had a significant stake in the slave trade: “‘Nothing could better justify the colonizer’s privileged position than his industry, and nothing could better justify the colonized’s destitution than his indolence.”¹⁹

The invention of the “‘lazy African” is related to the creation of the “‘Negro” as they are both constructed to fulfill the economic needs of the white ruling class. Though my discussion on the “‘lazy African” is more specific to French colonialism and the situation in Saint Domingue, the notion of the “‘Negro” came as a result of centuries of trans-Atlantic exploitation from the sixteenth century onwards.²⁰ The ideological construct of the “‘Negro” functions similarly to the “‘lazy African” in that “‘a fiction of a dumb beast of burden fit only for slavery” was created. The construct of the “‘Negro” is most distinct from the “‘lazy African” in that it “‘suggested no situatedness in time, that is history, or space, that is ethno- or politico-geography.”²¹ By dehistoricizing African identity, enslaved people were not only stripped of their culture and traditions but also dehumanized, justifying their exploitation. At least the “‘lazy African” was

¹⁸ Rönnbäck, “‘The Men Seldom Suffer a Woman to Sit Down’: The Historical Development of the Stereotype of the ‘Lazy African,’” 211.

¹⁹ Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 123.

²⁰ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 81.

²¹ *Ibid.*

African. Regardless of how much ideological work is done to reject the African's humanity, of course, no amount of conceptual invention can remove the African's personhood. So, in reality, instead of those who are enslaved, the slaveholders are the ones who become dehumanized by committing the inhumane act of enslavement.

Formulations of the "lazy African" and the "Negro" obscure the true ethnic and linguistic diversity of people Europeans enslaved. On the slave ship, enslaved people "constituted a novel social formation" where the "most evident commonality [between them] was their isolation from the kin and ethnic communities of origin that determined both individual and group identity."²² Upon arriving to the colony deeply traumatized by the journey, enslaved people were subjected to the planters' attempts to structure the plantation to reflect their vision of an ideal slave society. The plantation was a "race-making institution" that expanded upon the intellectual work initiated by European travel writers: "It was within the plantation, in that space of control, that the white masters implemented, practiced, and reproduced their acquired racial knowledge."²³ Saint Domingue had over seven thousand plantations by 1789.²⁴ The work routine on sugar plantations in particular "demanded an exacting and ceaseless labor."²⁵ Planters organized the ideal "society" with whites, with a monopoly on violence and power, at the top and Blacks at the bottom, working for the former: "[T]he socioeconomic structure of the plantation marked the slave as a non-human racial entity in a degraded position."²⁶ The long process of ideologically orienting Blackness to extreme labor was put in practice on the plantation. White planters dominated and put to work enslaved Black people, with such harshness that the work killed one-

²² Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 121; *Ibid*, 120.

²³ Giovannetti, "Grounds of Race," 27.

²⁴ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 26.

²⁵ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 10.

²⁶ Giovannetti, "Grounds of Race," 15.

third to one-half of them in the first year after their arrival in the colony, in other words, they held no social place of worth in the colonial context. In the ideal world for planters and ruling elites, this was all that Blackness, and their attempt to inextricably bind it with labor exploitation, was and would be. In the third section of my thesis, I will discuss how enslaved people transformed and recreated Blackness differently and in opposition to this degrading ideology.

Code Noir (Black Code), created by Jean-Baptiste Colbert who served under King Louis XIV, represented “the official recognition of both the growing importance of the slave economy and a desire for it to be regulated by the government.”²⁷ Enacted in 1685, it came at a point in time when indigo plantations started to become more established. It codified the making of “am nots” by moving away from the meaning of those marked as “Black” as people and investing them with the sole quality of slaves.²⁸ The *Code Noir* should be read as more a “philosophy of denaturalization” than as strict legislation as in practice, colonists usually did as they pleased, and the laws could never be enforced.²⁹ One of the intentions of the Code was to delimit the excessive tortures waged against enslaved people. Though this might sound like a humanitarian measure because enslaved people were considered property, any limits on bodily harm stated in the Code were in fact a way to dissuade property damage and ensure that profits stayed high. What might seem like “humane” aspects of the Code were related to the plantation economy and “...the assurance of servile ‘pieces of the Indies,’ bodies intact, healthy, and young enough to labor.”³⁰ Article XLII (42) of the Code reveals how the laws that “protected” slaves were actually the ones that protected profits:

²⁷ Daykin, “‘They Themselves Contribute to Their Misery by Their Sloth,’” 629.

²⁸ Dayan, “Codes of Law and Bodies of Color,” 288.

²⁹ Ibid, 286; James, *The Black Jacobin*, 22

³⁰ Dayan, “Codes of Law and Bodies of Color,” 290.

The masters may also, when they believe that their slaves so deserve, chain them and have them beaten with rods or straps. They shall be forbidden however from torturing them or mutilating any limb, at the risk of having the slaves confiscated and having extraordinary charges brought against them.³¹

Physical abuse was permitted but not the kind that mutilated limbs as they were necessary for enslaved people to successfully work on the plantation. In analyzing the allowance of certain abuses over others, it's clear that the Code valued the maintenance of profits over morality. It's also important to note that they did not consider chaining and beating enslaved people "with rods or straps" as torture, as that is said to be forbidden in the next sentence. The vagueness of this Article, and the entire Code, could be one reason why colonists felt they had free rein to do as they pleased. But they were explicit when it came to delineating the "am not" status of enslaved people in Article XLIV (44): "We declare slaves to be property (furniture)..."³² The status of enslaved people as inheritable property was certain.

The economic policy France set up in Saint Domingue was to exclusively benefit the metropolis. The mercantilist policy that characterized the economic relationship between Saint Domingue and France was called the *Exclusif* (or *le régime de l'exclusif*). The *Exclusif* was a restrictive policy that prohibited Saint Domingue from all forms of trade between nations other than France.³³ Colonists were compelled to buy and sell all necessary manufactured goods from the metropolis. The goods themselves had to be transported in French ships manned by French captains and sailors. The *Exclusif* ensured France reaped maximum profits from her colony. It fashioned the colony's planter class to remain in a state of "political and economic dependence

³¹ Louis XIV, "The 'Code Noir' (1685)."

³² Ibid.

³³ Trouillot, "Motion in the System," 368.

upon the metropolis” while it “encouraged and sustained the economic growth of the merchant bourgeoisie.”³⁴ Merchants enjoyed the freedom they had to engage in trade and looked to the state to protect them from foreign competition. The restrictive nature of the *Exclusif* for the colonists gave metropolitan merchants assurance that they would eventually restore the loss they incurred through the advance sale of enslaved people to planters, a common form of credit.³⁵ Credit was an integral part of the commercial relationship between France and Saint Domingue. Essentially all plantation owners “ran on debt, which made their creditors co-owners of the plantation and of its most valuable asset: the slaves.”³⁶ Creditors had to see that the plantation workforce was maintained, well enough to labor, so that they could at least be paid back, usually in the form of raw materials. This further explains certain provisions in the Code Noir that allowed certain physical abuses over others that would “[diminish] the value of slaves,” a value affixed to their ability to produce.³⁷

The economic system established in the colony built up the metropolis tremendously in various ways. The land itself was extremely fertile and was able to support various profitable crops: “...[in] no portion of the globe did its surface in proportion to its dimensions yield so much wealth as the colony of San Domingo.”³⁸ Above all other crops, sugar was crucial to the colony’s development. Previously I discussed how the island’s shift to a more plantation based economy necessitated the use of enslaved Africans over *engagés*, indentured servants. Historian Carolyn Fick in *The Making of Haiti* speculates that the process of sugar cultivation itself, which required a regimented large labor force, “invariably brought about dramatic increases in the

³⁴ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 24-25.

³⁵ Trouillot, “Motion in the System,” 367.

³⁶ Voss and Weber, “Their Most Valuable and Most Vulnerable Asset: Slaves on the Early Sugar Plantations of Saint-Domingue (1697–1715),” 233.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 227.

³⁸ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 46.

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.”³⁹ The *Exclusif* policy, though constraining and exploitative according to the colonists, ensured high profits to the metropolis. At Saint Domingue’s height in 1789, it was the wealthiest of the slave colonies in the Caribbean.⁴⁰ The colony generated “two-fifths of France’s overseas trade, a proportion rarely equaled in any colonial empire.”⁴¹ On the backs of enslaved people, colonial planters and the French maritime bourgeoisie built their fortunes. The land’s richness is developed by those who work it, but the workers are not the ones who enjoy the wealth: “The source of all value is labour; the value of the New World, the fabulous wealth of St. Domingue, Brazil, Jamaica and Cuba, created by slaves, was enjoyed not only by planters and in colonies, but by the mother country.”⁴²

Delusions of Whites and Free People of Color

Over time, enslaved people developed a keen awareness of the colony’s social structure. They related whiteness not only to color but to political and economic status with the vocabulary they used to describe different kinds of people. They referred to wealthy sugar planters as *blancs-blancs* while whites who worked for a salary were known as *faux blanc*.⁴³ Though *blancs-blancs* translates to white whites or real whites, the term was used to mean “whiter than white.” The usage of these terms reveals enslaved people were aware of the intense class divisions that existed between the white colonists of Saint Domingue.⁴⁴ In connecting whiteness

³⁹ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 22.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 15.

⁴¹ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 5.

⁴² McDonald, “The Williams Thesis: A Comment on the State of Scholarship,” 65-66.

⁴³ Dupuy, “Class, Race, and Nation,” 303; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 18.

⁴⁴ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 6.

to status, the masses perceived racial categorizations as being intertwined with class—the higher one was on the economic scale, the “whiter” they were. Black American novelist and activist James Baldwin stated in an interview while he had been residing in Paris, “I cannot fool myself about some things that I could fool myself about, if I were white.”⁴⁵ This quote could be applied to the aforementioned thought process of the enslaved masses in their consciousness of Saint Domingue’s social hierarchy compared to the *petits blancs* who bought into white solidarity against their own class interests.

As observed by the masses, the white sectors of society were very divided along class lines. Enslaved people were referring to *grands blancs*, meaning big whites, when using *blancs-blancs*, who were the minority class holding the majority of power. Absentee planters, representatives of the French maritime bourgeoisie, and French-born bureaucrats were part of this categorization. Appointed by the king, the Governor and the Intendant headed the bureaucracy and “represented the absolute authority of the king, against which there was no recourse.”⁴⁶ The *faux blanc* or the fake whites were the *petits blancs*, meaning little whites, who were the lower- and middle-class whites on the island. They were the plantation managers/agents, or *procureurs*, subordinate to the absentee planter, and in the towns *petits blancs* worked as “...lawyers, shopkeepers, retail merchants, grocers, and tradesmen.”⁴⁷ According to West Indian Marxist scholar and writer C.L.R. James, they did not play a significant role in the colony’s economy and the activities they were involved in could have been done by free people of color or enslaved people.⁴⁸ However, they were significant in upholding white supremacy—a necessary requirement of the economic system of the French colony. It was

⁴⁵ Dixon, director. *Meeting the Man*. Solus Enterprises, 1970..

⁴⁶ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 17.

⁴⁸ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 36.

particularly important for *petits blancs* to invest in the myth of race created by *grands blancs* and this point will be elaborated upon in the next paragraph. Many *petits blancs* were descendants of *engagés* who had worked alongside enslaved Africans until racialized slavery proved to be a better system for the elites. Tense class divisions between *grands blancs* and the *petits blancs* were obscured by fictive racial unity, necessary for the former's continued dominance as a tiny minority. This created racial solidarity elevated all whites regardless of class above all enslaved peoples, of course, and free Blacks and mulattoes of any class.

As the myth of race worked to first legitimize access to Black labor and subsequently psychologically enslave Africans in an attempt to resolve issues of total control under slavery, it also gave all whites a stake in maintaining the system of slavery by making “whiteness” something of value. Observing as an outsider, Alexandre-Stansilas, baron de Wimpffen, a German-born explorer who lived in Hispaniola, writes in *A Voyage to Saint Domingo*:

The natural consequence of the order of things which prevails here, is, that all those titles of honour which are elsewhere, the *pabula* of emulation, of rivalry, and of discord; which inspire so much pride, and create so many claims in some; so much ambition and envy in others; shrink to nothing, and entirely disappear before the sole title of *white*. It is by your skin, however branded it may be, and not by your parchment, however worm-eaten, that your pretensions to gentility are adjusted.⁴⁹

He describes how white skin had the power to mask one's status. Sometimes newcomers on the island would go to the extent of “inventing a fictitious past, laying false claims to their ancestry, and thereby hiding their lowly origins.”⁵⁰ This was unnecessary as all those who were deemed white were able to access advantages of racial privilege. Barron de Wimpffen also captures the

⁴⁹ Wimpffen, *A Voyage to Saint Domingo, in the Years 1788, 1789, and 1790*, trans. J. Wright; emphasis added.

⁵⁰ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 16.

unifying nature of such a general term as “white” such that it made other identifiers, such as nationality, not as important on the island. Among *petits blancs* were “vagabonds, fugitives from justice, escaped galley slaves, debtors unable to pay their bills...men of all crimes and all nationalities” but arriving in Saint Domingue, becoming white, they became “a person of quality.”⁵¹ The systematically enhanced value of whiteness was particularly important for *petits blancs*: “In defense of [whiteness] they would bring down the whole of their world.”⁵² This was because for *petits blancs*, as opposed to *grands blancs* who enjoyed class privilege, whiteness was perhaps the only privilege they could draw from. As a result, it prevented *petits blancs* from forming a broad-based alliance with free people of color, who usually shared their class interests, thus strengthening the dominant position of *grands blancs*.⁵³ The superiority complex of *petits blancs*, derived from whiteness, was imposed over the mass of Black slaves, who were approximately fifteen times as numerous as all whites, as well as the free people of color, also known as the *gens de couleur* or *affranchis*.⁵⁴

Due to the widespread practice of concubinage and eventual grants of freedom to the resultant offspring, a lot of free people of color emerged at the beginning of the 18th century as a recognized caste. Sexual relations between people of African and European descent were more prevalent in Saint Domingue than in other French colonies.⁵⁵ Enslaved women, after toiling on the plantation alongside men and others during the day were often raped by slave masters come nighttime. During the 1700s, *gens de couleur* increased almost fiftyfold to an almost equal balance with the white population.⁵⁶ They exceeded the number of free people of color present in

⁵¹ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 33.

⁵² *Ibid*, 36.

⁵³ Dupuy, “Class, Race, and Nation,” 9.

⁵⁴ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 16.

⁵⁵ Nelson, *Making Men: Enlightenment Ideas of Racial Engineering*, 1364.

⁵⁶ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 18.

the rest of the British and French Indies combined.⁵⁷ It was unique to Saint Domingue, compared to other island colonies, that mulattoes born on the island in relations of concubinage became and remained free in succeeding generations, to form a surprising majority among non-enslaved sectors.⁵⁸ Due to their identity as neither white nor Black but rather both white and Black, they had to be carefully incorporated into the system as to not disturb it. In a race-based slave society like Saint Domingue, it was important for the elite to consistently degrade Blackness as it was the labor of the people who were made “Black,” the enslaved people, that was responsible for high colonial profits. To continually convince the masses of enslaved people of the racial inferiority of Blackness, and continue to promulgate the myth of race, *affranchis* had to systematically suffer discrimination through various means. For example, they were not allowed to take the last name of their white parent, which was usually the paternal side.⁵⁹ All free people of color had to defer to all whites in any instance under the threat of punishment if they failed to do so. They were limited in what kinds of jobs they could get in the towns. Ironically, it was the discrimination in the towns they faced, both systemic and interpersonal, that pushed them to the hills and mountainsides where they would engage in work that allowed them to become a substantial property owning class.

Before going further in my discussion on the *affranchis*, I wanted quickly to make a note on race in Saint Domingue/Haiti. There were free Blacks among the *affranchis* but not as many as mulattos. Haiti today has distinct ideas about color from North America and being from the latter, I am limited in fully understanding the former according to white American anthropologist Sidney Mintz.⁶⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Haitian academic and anthropologist, asserts that

⁵⁷ Ibid,19.

⁵⁸ Trouillot, “Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue,” 352.

⁵⁹ Dayan, "Codes of Law and Bodies of Color," 296-7; Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 162.

⁶⁰ Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*, 299.

besides skin color, “income, social origin, level of formal education, customary behavior, ties of kinship, of marriage, and more” influence how one is categorized: “The kind of social discrimination that operates in Haiti is not exclusively based on physical features, even when phenotype plays a role in the application and description of this discrimination.”⁶¹ A combination of factors including skin color work to determine one’s place in the social hierarchy. Skin color alone does not simply reflect one’s socioeconomic class. Racial terms are used to imply what class one might belong in and other factors besides skin color could shift how one is characterized: “a rich black *becomes* a mulatto, a poor mulatto *becomes* black.”⁶² In the colonial era, however, the Black skin was so degraded “and so despised...that even a Mulatto slave felt himself superior to the free black man.”⁶³ It had to be as it was the basis for the slavemasters’ economic system.

Coffee plantations, or *caféière*, were easier to set up than sugar plantations in that one did not have to have a lot of starting capital or laborers in order to start off. Between 1767 and 1787, coffee exports from Saint Domingue quadrupled.⁶⁴ Thanks to their frugality, *affranchis* who entered the “Coffee Revolution” managed to amass wealth: “...by some fortunate chance, the amount of property they could hold was not, as in the English islands, limited.”⁶⁵ By 1789, free people of color owned one-third of plantation property, a fourth of all enslaved people, and a fourth of Saint Domingue real estate property.⁶⁶ The combination of their precarious racial background and rising economic status alarmed whites on the island, triggering increased systematized discrimination after the 1760s. The *Code Noir* was revised to limit racial mixing, it

⁶¹ Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation*, 113.

⁶² *Ibid*, 125.

⁶³ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 43.

⁶⁴ Trouillot, “Motion in the System,” 331.

⁶⁵ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 38.

⁶⁶ Dayan, “Codes of Law and Bodies of Color,” 297.

was now a punishable offense to blur the “demarcation line.”⁶⁷ The previous work of creating racial difference had to be expanded upon. It was important for the Blackness of the free people of color to remain an obstacle, so that no matter how far removed they were from slavery, they would not imperil the logic of racial slavery. Anyone with a Black ancestor would be subject to humiliating legal discrimination.⁶⁸ Racial discrimination also worked in the interests of *grands blancs* by dissuading *petit blancs* from any alliance with *affranchis* coffee planters. White coffee growers and free people of color were both marginalized by the sugar plantocracy. Their unifying potential was revealed during the “White revolt” of 1769.⁶⁹ *Grands blancs*, particularly those in the sugar plantocracy, were the most threatened by the rapid growing numbers and wealth of the *affranchis*. The plantocracy of the sugar estates rejected claims of *affranchis* coffee growers who regarded themselves as their natural allies since both groups had stakes in the plantation system.⁷⁰ Sugar planters rightly believed that “racism was necessary to contain the slave population and that the economic and demographic growth of *gens de couleur* threatened their plantations.”⁷¹ Dealing with racial discrimination, the *affranchis* appealed to France.

A 1765 petition by the *affranchis* reveals their tendency to outwardly appeal to the metropolis for equal rights in Saint Domingue. Free mulattoes and *négres* were compelled to write a petition when their dreaded mandatory militia service was expanded upon in 1763. In the petition, the writers decisively proclaimed their allegiance to France describing themselves as “very obedient and very faithful subjects of his majesty the King of France.”⁷² Furthermore, free

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 6.

⁶⁹ Trouillot, “Motion in the System,” 364.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 370.

⁷¹ Ibid, 361.

⁷² “Petition from the Free Mulattos and Nègres in the Prisons of Fort Dauphin to the Superior Council of Cap Français (1765),” 19.

people of color were often educated in France as were their children.⁷³ Compared to the enslaved masses, the *affranchise* were clearly more immersed in the culture of their colonizer. Fanon's observation in regard to the national bourgeoisie is applicable to the *affranchis*: "We find intact in them the manners and forms of thought picked up during their association with the colonialist bourgeoisie."⁷⁴ This is perhaps why the *affranchis* were unable to realize that their goal of racial equality could not be met without the abolition of slavery. Their original demands did not include the liberation of enslaved peoples. The class privilege of *affranchis* worked to alienate them from the enslaved masses although among the latter, most likely, were their family members: "Being so rich they imitated the style of the whites and sought to drown all traces of their origin."⁷⁵ Since a sector of the *affranchis* in Saint Domingue was a substantial property owning class by the 1790s, they had a stake in the plantation system and defended slavery until they realized joining forces with enslaved people was the only way to win their own freedom from racial oppression.⁷⁶ For example, Julien Raimond, an activist for the rights of free people of color, believed racial equality and abolition were separate goals. In his mind, the world was "divided between an elite of propertied men and a servile mass of labourers."⁷⁷ He did not desire a radical change of the system and instead wanted well-to-do *affranchis* to have the opportunity to join the ranks of the elite. Raimond "dreamed of a world where the line between the privileged few and the exploited majority was drawn by access to wealth and property rather than by race."⁷⁸ Revolutionary generals under Toussaint Louverture through trying to reinstall the

⁷³ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 19.

⁷⁴ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 48.

⁷⁵ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 39.

⁷⁶ Dupuy, Alex. "Class, Race, and Nation," 9.

⁷⁷ Smith, Blake. "What If 'prejudice' Isn't What Causes Racism? – Blake Smith: Aeon Essays."

⁷⁸ Ibid.

plantation system post-emancipation almost worked to create this kind of world if only the masses had not refused to be proletarianized.

As revolutionary leaders such as Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines became part of a Black propertied class by taking over lands left by French planters, they came to align with the goals of other elite *affranchis*. In fact, during slavery, though Louverture, who was known as Toussaint Bréda then, was not a free person, he was part of the small more “privileged” caste of enslaved people and worked as a coachman to his master and eventually became a steward to livestock which was usually a position occupied by a white person.⁷⁹ Though more “privileged,” as an enslaved person, he was blocked from fully participating in the greater community and still faced exceptionally difficult times. To the Black, African, and workers revolution, Louverture and other revolutionary leaders brought both their “superior knowledge and the political vices which usually accompany it.”⁸⁰ After liberating the enslaved population of the Spanish colony Santo Domingo in January of 1801, generals under Louverture’s regime tried to bring plantations that had been abandoned by white owners back to cultivation. They attempted to continue the plantation system of large holdings left by white colonists that previously enslaved people, who were now emancipated, but were compelled to work on the land as wage-laborers. Louverture believed this existing system, developed and previously maintained by colonialist white elites, would make the colony produce enough to place it back on the road to economic prosperity.⁸¹ Although those working on the plantation were legally no longer slaves, “Toussaint’s system, like that of the civil commissioners before him, deprived them of any means by which to give substance and real meaning to their

⁷⁹ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 19.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 95.

⁸¹ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 207.

freedom.”⁸² Louverture’s regime was reminiscent of the previous slavery system. For example, former enslaved people did not have the option to change plantations once their labor contracts ended. Incredibly, one of his goals to increase the labor force was to “import” more workers from the African continent. The few white planters remaining in the former colony were encouraged to stay and those who had fled were even invited back to repossess their plantations. Some Haitian historians call this repressive labor system instituted by the revolutionary state *caporalisme agraire* or “militarized agriculture.”⁸³

Perhaps Louverture’s inability to imagine a system other than the plantation system is due to his more colonized psychology, a result of being closer to the colonists from his more “privileged” position-as an enslaved person, in comparison to the majority of the Black masses. It is hard to blame Louverture completely as he was acting within the confines of the existing world order as even after the revolution “the colony still [remained] in the grips of foreign powers [and] potential alternatives to the plantation mode of production could not be considered.”⁸⁴ The late eighteenth-century Atlantic world was dominated by the European imperial powers and Louverture desired to re-establish a stable economic base for Saint Domingue so that they could retain their newfound sovereignty. It was clear also that warfare had taken its toll on the decimated population as well as on the island’s landscape. Regardless of his intentions, the Black masses thought the work regime initiated by Louverture and his generals was comparable to the slavery they thought they had left behind. Thus, they reacted in different ways to make their thoughts known as they had during the revolution. Some escaped to the mountains and most formerly enslaved people who remained on the plantation stopped

⁸² Ibid, 208.

⁸³ Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation*, 43.

⁸⁴ Fick, “Emancipation in Haiti: From plantation labour to peasant proprietorship,” 22.

working completely. As discussed in my first section, large-scale plantation labor worked to develop racial slavery. Plantation labor worked to maintain Blackness at a degraded level, and it was incompatible with the formerly enslaved people's vision of liberation which I will go into in my next sections. During the slavery era, enslaved people had developed a new definition of Blackness unrelated to extreme labor exploitation.

(Re)Creating Blackness in Marronage

The enslaved masses constituted the largest sector of Saint Domingue society. The “Negro” designation, discussed in my first section, allowed colonists to view enslaved people simply as Black laborers, convincing themselves that they were devoid of any place and time. In reality, enslaved people were captured from all different homelands and “[o]n a typical sugar estate of 200 slaves, there could be Africans from twenty or more different linguistic groups.”⁸⁵ Enslaved people came from different regions of the African continent in varying numbers proportions over time. In the early sixteenth century, arrivals were mainly from the region of Senegal, and its peripheries, and in the seventeenth and particularly the eighteenth century arrivals were from along the west coast, towards the Gulf of Guinea, which consisted of roughly today's Togo, Benin and part of western Nigeria. A significant regional grouping of enslaved people also came from the kingdoms of the Congo and Angola.⁸⁶ The African dimension of the enslaved population is not to be disregarded as it played a significant role in shaping their worldview and behaviors as their memories remained “anchored firmly, like an umbilical cord, to the entrails of Mother Africa, always alive in their spirit.”⁸⁷ Only one third of the enslaved

⁸⁵ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 7.

⁸⁶ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 28.

⁸⁷ Aristide, *Haiti-Haitii: Philosophical Reflections for Mental Decolonization*, 30.

population was creole meaning that they were born on the island and raised in slavery.⁸⁸ Creole enslaved people had certain advantages in being more accustomed, than newly arrived Africans, to the local environment and creole vernacular and some even knew French and could read and write in that language. They constituted the upper ranks of enslaved people and held positions as domestics, artisans, and “slave drivers.”⁸⁹ Louverture and other revolutionary leaders such as Henri Christophe, who later became Emperor of Haiti, belonged in this group. The other two-thirds of the enslaved people were from different regions of the African continent as well as other Caribbean colonies; the population never reproduced itself as the island had an excessive mortality rate. Slave masters often deliberately pushed enslaved people to work to death as it was considered cheaper to buy more enslaved people rather than to support them just enough so they could eventually propagate more laborers.⁹⁰ Enslaved women’s low fertility rate, in part intentionally created by infanticide or abortion as resistance to slavery, was a result of exhaustion from extreme work and malnutrition, and the brutal punishments and tortures employed in extracting labor and disciplining workers under slavery.

Furthermore, the high mortality rate among enslaved people is tied to the whites’ creation and simultaneous debasement of Blackness. Fick lists the overarching factors at play: “It was a matter of overwork, undernourishment, and the absolutism of the masters.”⁹¹ The despotism of the slaveowners, and what comes of it such as illness and exhaustion from extreme exploitation, is tied to the Blackness that the masters apply to the people they enslave. As described, a centuries-long process worked to ideologically transform Africans from different regions into a category that was uniformly Black. Treated as Black, and therefore as people with no history or

⁸⁸ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 7.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 8.

⁹⁰ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 146.

⁹¹ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 27.

space to which they belonged, their exploitation becomes justified for colonists and elites involved in the slave trade and slavery on the island. The unspeakably cruel treatment of enslaved people and the inhumane conditions under which they toiled were in line with the logic created around Blackness. As people deemed Black, they had one main function: to produce goods to sell for a profit. My discussion on the kind of physical abuses allowed and not allowed under the *Code Noir* makes it clear that nothing else mattered in regard to enslaved people than their ability to labor. Rendering their humanity as insignificant, planters and colonists felt they were justified in forcing Black people to carry out their one purpose through brutal means. These qualities also characterize the transition to capitalist thinking, that is to say, the positioning of profit above all else. C.L.R. James states how the “planters deliberately worked them to death rather than wait for children to grow up.”⁹² The low mortality rate is part of the longer process of divesting from the humanity of people deemed Black.

Though enslaved people were the largest group on the island, the colony had a low population density overall, in relation to the physical size of Saint Domingue, “which meant slave discontent was most easily channeled into fleeing into the mountains and forests.”⁹³ To overlook marronage is to overlook a key feature of the experience of Saint Domingue slavery.⁹⁴ Marronage existed as one of the many ways enslaved people resisted their condition. Enslaved people, either collectively or individually, removed themselves from slavery by escaping to and then residing in “secluded, inaccessible areas, or on the fringes of plantation society.”⁹⁵ *Petit marronage* refers to individual absenteeism while *grand marronage* refers to the creation of

⁹² James, *The Black Jacobins*, 14.

⁹³ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 8.

⁹⁴ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 55; Roberts, *Freedom As Marronage*, 3-4.

⁹⁵ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 49.

group settlements outside the plantation space.⁹⁶ Sometimes the former can also mean a temporary absence while the latter implies a more permanent absence.⁹⁷ It's important to note that while my description of marronage suggests a separateness from the plantation and slavery, more accurately, the practice is one that happens in tandem. Marronage is a response to extreme exploitation and cruelty under slavery. Regardless of punitive laws versus "humane" or paternalistic treatment to discourage flight, enslaved people consistently engaged in marronage. Over time, small maroon communities and larger more established communities developed within heavily wooded mountains and worked to entice more to join their ranks.

The act of marronage is significant because it resists the material and psychological conditions of enslavement. Among other acts of resistance, such as suicide, abortion, and infanticide, marronage worked to hurt the planter's economic base directly: "Although other considerations may have played an additional role in the motivation of such acts...in all instances, the net result was the near decimation of a potential work force."⁹⁸ Through removing themselves from the plantation space, by death or escaping, enslaved people took the most valuable asset of the planters. Another way marronage worked to materially resist slavery was through the activity of organized raids to secure supplies needed to subsist as maroons. Sometimes these bands would completely devastate the targeted plantation and often terrify planters to the point that they sold or abandoned the land. Marronage itself worked to deplete the number of laborers toiling on the plantation, disrupting the system's overall efficiency. This is particularly significant for sugar plantations as the method to harvest the crop relied on timing; any disturbance to the workforce would have implications for the entire sugar making process.

⁹⁶ Roberts, *Freedom As Marronage*, 10.

⁹⁷ Trouillot, "Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context," 23.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 48.

Upon becoming maroons, they posed a threat to the plantation for planters and the very distribution of the crop to markets that achieved profit. The true threat of marronage lay in its ability to allow enslaved people to reach psychological liberation.

The institution of slavery extends further than the bondage of the body and seeps into the furthest crevices of the mind of an enslaved person. Colonists vehemently despised the practice of marronage as observed by their punitive measures against it. Marronage undoes a lot of the ideological work erected to justify the hereditary enslavement of people deemed Black. In carving out an existence separate from the debilitating routine of being a slave, enslaved people seized back “the right to be a free person.”⁹⁹ The ability to act as an autonomous person, although as one in a constant state of war as simply being a maroon makes one a wanted person, was a radical shift from their forced status as enslaved people: “[Maroons cultivate] freedom on their own terms within a demarcated social space that allows for the enactment of subversive speech acts, gestures, and social practices antithetical to the ideals of the enslaving agents.”¹⁰⁰ Much of the first section of this thesis dealt with how Blackness was oriented to fit elite interests. The promulgation of the elite version of Blackness was expanded upon on the plantation. Later in this same section I describe how the elite measures to incorporate *affranchis*, free mulattos and Blacks in the colonial social structure, continued to regress Blackness, shaping it to fit the context’s changing needs. I now turn to how maroons—through the practice of marronage—redefined Blackness as utterly distinct from the ideals of the ruling elite.

Stephanie M. Camp, a North American feminist historian, adapts the term “rival geography,” coined by post-colonial theorist Edward Said, to fit the context of her study in *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. She

⁹⁹ Ibid, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 5.

defines it as: “alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern space that conflicted with planters’ ideals and demands.”¹⁰¹ Camp’s adapted term of “rival geography” applies to the context of Saint Domingue after replacing “southern space” with the words “island space.” Maroon settlements as “rival geography” allowed maroons to define Blackness outside the context of deadly labor. Marronage allowed enslaved people to develop a new collective culture, informed both by their memories and current situation, developed under and against the conditions of enslavement. For the whites, “Afro-Caribbean cultures came to life unexpectedly, [as] unforeseen developments of an agenda set in Europe.”¹⁰² Collective forms of marronage, or *grand marronage*, usually consisted of African-born enslaved people. In addition, it was common for those who previously lived near the border of different linguistic communities to be bilingual.¹⁰³ Therefore in marronage, “the various African languages constituted in themselves a form of cultural protest against the colonial order, as well as a means of reinforcing a self-consciousness and a cultural identity independent of the white masters.”¹⁰⁴ The colonial order positioned the “Negro” and the “lazy African” at the bottom whereas enslaved people, in their “rival geography,” initiated a new kind of self-identity. Upon arriving as “ragtag collectives” of supposedly socially dead people on the island, enslaved people were then violently organized as laborers in the regimented plantation system.¹⁰⁵ But in marronage, and other forms of creative “rival geographies,” enslaved people transformed what it meant to be Black through the development of a culture that contradicted the goals of elites outside or on the fringes of the plantation.

¹⁰¹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, 7.

¹⁰² Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 10.

¹⁰³ Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 118.

¹⁰⁴ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 57.

¹⁰⁵ Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 119.

Maroon leaders were often vodou priests or vodou devotees. Marronage allowed enslaved people to freely practice and sustain vodou as it was rigidly forbidden by the master class. Its intense prohibition by planters and colonists speaks to the nature of its power. Though it was primarily a religion, it served important political and cultural functions. Vodou allowed enslaved people to reach personal psychological liberation as it also worked to develop a collective consciousness between them. As marronage created a “rival geography” for enslaved people to exist outside the plantation context, vodou “further enabled the slaves to break away psychologically from the very real and concrete chains of slavery and to see themselves as independent beings.”¹⁰⁶ A song enslaved people used to sing in vodou celebrations went like: “Eh! Eh! Bomba! Heu! Heu!/Canga, bafio té!/ Canga mouné de lé!/Canga, do ki la!/Canga, li!” which translates to “We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow.”¹⁰⁷ These lyrics, presented in *The Black Jacobins*, are significant in revealing the kind of subversive ideology being developed through marronage and the practice of vodou. For example, the subject “we” implies a collective kinship. Africans arrived in the colony coming from different social, kinship, and ethnic groups and had the primary commonality of being “socially dead” in the eyes of the whites. The “we” implies a developing collective identity of enslaved people as a community. The “we” also suggests a “them” of those not included in the collective subject. It’s clear that the “them” in this case are the “whites” who they swear to destroy. The promise of death reveals maroons’ awareness of their own self-value in the same vein that enslaved people used suicide as resistance. Marronage, and the subversive activities it opened up to enslaved people, was a crucial prerequisite to the coming revolution.

¹⁰⁶ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 45.

¹⁰⁷ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 18.

Marronage is directly related to economic freedom in the sense that the enslaved person removed themselves from the order of the plantation. Their flight, being considered both property and a laborer, challenged the propertied class as the enslaved freed themselves from possessive domination. Marronage worked as a means for enslaved people to withhold their valued labor and sometimes they did so decisively to negotiate better conditions.¹⁰⁸ Although they are not “free” as they are actively living as outlaws, in the eyes of the planters, by taking refuge in a space not controlled by ruling authorities or other repressive forces, the maroon “could escape the control of the colonial power and the plantocratic establishment.”¹⁰⁹ In *grand marronage*, and even *petit marronage* on a smaller scale, maroons exercised their economic freedom from the plantation system as they had to come up with self-sustaining modes of production and consumption as a response to their isolation. These methods of survival, as mentioned before, included directly hurting planters at their economic base through “theft.” In my next section, I will go into how the garden plots of enslaved people also worked to develop subversive ideology, corrosive to the institution of slavery, in a similar manner as marronage except within the plantation system.

Land as Liberation

The motivations of the different groups on the island—*grands blancs*, *petits blancs*, *affranchis*, and enslaved people—played out in very different ways during the Haitian Revolution. In March of 1791, a general insurrection of ten to fifteen thousand slaves broke out in the Cul-de-Sac plain. Masses of enslaved people made their thoughts on the plantations loud and clear through their actions of burning them down. Free people of color wanted the

¹⁰⁸ Thornton, “In Resistance, Runaways, and Rebels,” 275.

¹⁰⁹ Manigat, “The Relationship between Marronage and Slave Revolts of Revolution in St. Domingue-Haiti,” 421.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen to be fully extended to them only. A May 15th Decree enacted by the French National Assembly had granted *affranchis* limited political rights in 1791 and they wanted to see through its application. White colonists intensely pushed back on the decree in the form of violent assaults, arbitrary arrests, and lynchings. They feared increased rights to all free people of color would chip away at the vital institution of white supremacy in the colony. In the view of the whites, expanding rights to all *gens de couleur* "...would thus destroy the buffer separating master and slave and open the way for slaves to seek an end to their subjection."¹¹⁰ Both players, *affranchis* and the whites, recruited enslaved Black masses to fight for their respective goals. The state of unrest bred by the Black masses allowed the *affranchis* to receive a major victory with the arrival of the April 4th decree in 1792 that finally restored the rights they had been granted by the May 15th decree.

The position of the enslaved masses, as propertyless and Black, made them the ideal vanguard of a revolutionary movement. Since the status quo subjugated them to an extreme degree rendering the Black masses as nonhuman entities, they were most likely to reject it. Their positionality made them the best equipped for the "complete calling in question of the colonial situation," a necessity in the decolonization process according to Fanon.¹¹¹ Their increased militancy lay in their degraded status. Their intersecting oppressed identities is what compelled them to have a higher level of awareness of the connectedness of injustices. Unlike *affranchis*, they could never separate out issues of racial injustice from the larger economic model of slavery which necessitated the plantation system. The limited extent of the radicalization of the *gens de couleur* can be observed through their actions, which revealed their objectives during the Haitian Revolution. After the April 4th decree, the *affranchis* were able to admit allegiance to France and

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 119.

¹¹¹ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 37.

hostility between them and the whites had temporarily stopped so that they could deal with the rebellious enslaved masses. A mulatto military leader, André Rigaud, was sent from France to carry out the disarmament of the insurgent slaves. The enslaved masses, as their fight for independence in their definition was far from over, refused to surrender their arms. Notably, rebelling enslaved people at first did not demand an end to slavery but rather more days to cultivate their subsistence plots.¹¹² This is not to say that the masses did not want to be free as that is exactly the case as their conceptualization of liberation was tied to these garden plots: “Freedom of the mass of insurgent slaves, if it was to be realized at all, was fundamentally intertwined with an independent claim to land.”¹¹³

In Saint Domingue, and other Caribbean societies, planters allowed them to cultivate their own gardens to relieve themselves of the duty of feeding enslaved people. It also worked to save money for planters considering the high cost of imported food due to the *exclusif*.¹¹⁴ Because of the uneven landscape of the colony, large-scale plantation agriculture could not be supported on a large portion of arable land which could instead be used as subsistence plots tended by enslaved people. Though these garden plots are within the larger plantation space, they worked to create a “rival geography” for the ideological significance they played in the minds of enslaved people. These garden plots were distinct spaces from the plantation fields of sugarcane, coffee, and cotton. These provisional grounds “represented a striking exception to the domination of the slave by the system.”¹¹⁵ Though enslaved people could only cultivate their gardens during Sundays and holidays, what they did during this allotted time was up to them which contrasts with the strictly regimented schedule of the sugar plantation. Trouillot in

¹¹² Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation*, 39.

¹¹³ Fick, “Emancipation in Haiti,” 15.

¹¹⁴ Trouillot, “Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context,” 25.

¹¹⁵ Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation*, 38.

“Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context” characterizes the importance of the controlled time of enslaved people in the following excerpt:

It was time to develop new practices of labor cooperation, reminiscent of—yet different from—African models of work. Time to talk across the fences to a passing neighbor. Time to cross the fences themselves and fish in the adjacent rivers. It was time to create culture knowingly or unknowingly. Time to mark the work tempo with old songs. Time to learn rhythm while working and to enjoy both the rhythm and the work. Time to create new songs when the old ones faded way. Time to take care of the needs of the family. Time to meet a mate. Time to teach children how to climb a tree. Time indeed to develop modes of thought and codes of behavior that were to survive plantation slavery itself.¹¹⁶

Article XXVIII (27) of *Code Noir* made it so enslaved people had no right to any personal possessions and that anything they had actually belonged to the slave master. The products they reaped from the soil were among the only things they owned. Their subsistence kitchen gardens advanced the developing notion among enslaved people that “the land belonged to those who cultivated it.”¹¹⁷ This notion was subversive to the entire colonial structure set up by elites. The plantation system, dependent on race based slavery, alienated enslaved people marked as Black from humanity and the products of their labor. Themselves and the products belonged to someone else and therefore the metropolis was able to extract the most profit which worked to build up different cities and industries. The garden plots, in contrast, made it so enslaved people directly benefited through their own labor either through subsistence or market sales. Sometimes enslaved people would sell part of their produce at urban markets and soon others on the island came to “depend on the agricultural and craft product of slave families,” especially considering

¹¹⁶ Trouillot, “Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context,” 26.

¹¹⁷ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 32.

the previously mentioned high costs of imported foods, a consequence of the *exclusif*.¹¹⁸ Kitchen gardens were not a separate entity from the plantation economy, rather, “a peasant labor process, equally oriented toward subsistence and the market” had in fact emerged in its center.¹¹⁹

In a previous section I discussed the decision of the new revolutionary state under Toussaint Louverture to maintain a similar system of large holdings, except with wage-based labor instead of slavery, to make the colony produce for an export market. The rural masses expressed their dissatisfaction in myriad ways including an organized uprising at the end of October in the year 1801 in the North: “...this popular consciousness reflected a profound cleavage between the policies, the economic orientation, and general philosophy of a supreme revolutionary leader and the deep-rooted aspirations of his people.”¹²⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot observes that this disjuncture between the state represented by the government and nation represented by the peasantry, serves as the origin of what he calls the Haitian malaise in his book *Haiti, State Against Nation*. General Hyacinthe Moïse, commonly referred to as just Moïse, embodied the aspirations of the masses. Moïse was Louverture’s adopted nephew and a military commander who was famous for his bravery during the revolution and governing the Northern province of Haiti. Described as the “idol of the black workers,” he, like the majority of the formerly enslaved, also believed Toussaint’s efforts moved towards some kind of restoration of the previous slavery under French colonists.¹²¹ The October 1801 uprising, of which he was a leading spokesperson although it was not clear that he actually joined or led the decision to return to arms, consisted of formerly enslaved people who were now farm workers, who had been reorganized back onto the plantation by revolutionary generals. Toussaint, to reinforce

¹¹⁸ Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation*, 39.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 210.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

control, quelled the rebellion and executed Moïse along with dozens of local leaders, and thus repressed the unfulfilled goals of the rural masses and further alienated himself from them.

The vision of liberation of the formerly enslaved had been established during the colonial era through their “rival geographies” of marronage and small land holdings. The October 1801 uprising represented an overt expression of growing disillusionment among formerly enslaved people in their newfound “freedom.” Prior to this uprising, they had taken matters into their own hands during a period “characterized by administrative chaos” in the transition from slavery to the new system of wage-based labor.¹²² Now legally free, Black workers imposed their own will and attempted to transform themselves into free smallholding peasants by expanding their personal plots of land they had cultivated during the slavery era. In the situation where a manager or plantation owner was present, it was common for workers to refuse to work altogether or to sabotage their work implements to lighten the workload. It was clear that “work and labour for the profit of another or for the production of export crops on which the colony’s existence depended was profoundly antithetical to their own vision of things”¹²³ They would rather, as they had done during the slavery era, produce for subsistence and/or for limited local markets.

Even as Louverture consolidated power and “a politico-military power structure dominated by indigenous black leadership” emerged in 1801, these Haitian rulers in post-revolutionary Haiti were not able to establish the system of *caporalisme agraire* they desired.¹²⁴ As the rural masses had been semi-independent producers during the slavery era through their small-holdings, though of course they were overwhelmingly dominated by the brutal plantation regime,

¹²² Fick, “Emancipation in Haiti,” 19.

¹²³ Ibid, 15.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 21.

it was difficult for the state to transform them into dependent workers. They had the ability to survive “without being forced to work for their [neo-]masters who could not offer them a decent wage...[thus] ex-slaves were not integrated into capitalist relations of production where their proletarianization would strip them of their control over their immediate needs.”¹²⁵ The peasantry had successfully resisted their proletarianization at least for the moment.

¹²⁵ Gerlus, “Revolution and Nation-State Formation,” 248.

Conclusion

While the development of racial capitalism clearly characterized the colonial period of Saint Domingue, it is incredibly important that the narratives of resistance which helped achieve the psychological liberation of the enslaved black masses are remembered. At the same time that class solidarity was more or less destroyed as a mode of resistance which could have potentially unified free people of color, the *petits blancs*, and the enslaved masses, nevertheless the masses of enslaved people continued to stand in solidarity with each other, resisting the codification of white supremacy at every step of the way. This liberation was often achieved through the use of land in a way which challenged the hegemony of the colonial planter class. As much as conditions in Haiti have changed, the land question remains an urgent issue on the minds of the Haitian masses, one which for now remains unresolved.

Problems have evolved and become more complicated but neo-colonial power relations are still a dominant factor in the struggle for justice in Haiti. Some Haitians call neo-liberalism *plan lanmó*—the ‘death plan’—due to the social and economic devastation caused by neo-liberal policies. But as the masses had under slavery, rival cultures and economies of their own creation allow them to persist under such domination. A Madan Sara represents this kind of rival economy. A Madan Sara is a Haitian woman who buys, distributes, and sells food and goods in markets throughout the country.¹²⁶ Haitian Filmmaker Etant Dupain describes the utmost importance of the Madan Sara simply: “‘If the Madan Sara does not go to work, the city does not eat. If the Madan Sara does not go up into the mountains and back down into the neighborhood, the market will not operate. Without those women, there is no market, without the market there is no economy, and without economy, there is no country.’”¹²⁷ As UN occupation, free trade

¹²⁶ Cuttone, "Raise Awareness to Madan Sara."

¹²⁷ Ibid.

agreements, debts, wage slavery, and privatization of lands attempt to destroy Haitian self-determination, the Madan Sara continue a legacy of exercising autonomy against all odds.

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