Introduction
Performing the Haitian Revolution

In late August of 1791, Saint Domingue’s enslaved people rose up, burning plantations in the north of the French colony of Saint Domingue. The revolts eventually organized into what would become the Haitian Revolution, and the self-emancipated people of Saint Domingue defeated a French expeditionary force, abolished slavery, and created a new nation. From the beginning, observers sensed a vast drama unfolding in the French colony. Some of the loudest voices, of course, were the dispossessed colonists; in a sudden surge of alarmed newspaper reports and eyewitness accounts, survivors described the events as an enthralling and unnerving theatre of revolution. In a poetic account, the French colonist Jean-Paul Pillet, for example, called the uprisings a “baneful pageant” and a “theater of a terrible combat.”

Likewise, the 1795 *Histoire des désastres de Saint Domingue*, one of the many French eyewitness histories of the revolution, described the ongoing revolution as a “théâtre d’horribles convulsions.”

Revolution,

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it seemed, was theatre – a horrifying but fascinating spectacle. Such responses were not limited to French survivors; English pro-slavery writer Bryan Edwards, for example, condemned revolutionary Saint Domingue as a “theatre of anarchy and bloodshed” and, even more vividly, a “blood-stained theatre.”3 North American newspapers reprinted and enlarged upon such language, and prominent figures such as Thomas Jefferson worried that Saint Domingue’s revolution would spread to the United States, the original act inspiring imitation. In these accounts, Haiti’s revolution appears, again and again, a phenomenon built out of theatre’s raw materials – refugees fled in stagey disguises, farm implements became the bloody props of slave uprisings, and freed slaves found themselves playing new roles as generals and emperors, improvising new scripts in a world-historical drama.

The language and logic of performance seemed to articulate something distinctive about the “horrors of St. Domingo,” as they were often called. Perhaps it identified the unreality of it all, but it also brought it directly into view. Such rhetoric conjured up a sort of revolutionary theatre in print, imagining the slave revolts as a playhouse drama and positioning readers as witnesses to its chaos and violence.4 Seemingly ready-made for the stage, Haiti’s fight for freedom also in turn shaped actual theatre and popular entertainments. As both a metaphor for and a means of representing Haiti, the theatre of revolution placed Haiti at the intersection of democratized political movements, popular cultures, and commercialized entertainments.

One contemporary image, J. L. Boquet’s *Pillage du Cap Français en 1793*, exemplifies this tendency to imagine the Haitian Revolution as performance (Figure 0.1).5 Illustrating the 1793 capture of Cap Français

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5 The engraving, now held in the John Carter Brown Library, is an unfinished proof based on now-lost paintings finished after Boquet’s return to France. See also Martin Lienhard, *Disidentes, rebeldes, insurgentes: resistencia indígena y negra en América Latina: ensayos de historia testimonial* (Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2008), 13–14; Alejandro...
(now Cap Haïtien) by rebellious slaves, the scene depicts slave revolution as a literal eruption of performance. A crowd of Black figures fills the image’s foreground, a stage-like space fenced in by buildings at the feet of Saint Domingue’s steeply sloping mornes. Among the crush of bodies, signs of revolution’s violence appear – soldiers ride past ill or wounded figures, and refugees retreat, possessions piled high in wagons. Lighter-skinned figures, presumably French colonists, pose in attitudes of dejection and defeat. Black soldiers brandish swords and whips while others march a captive white soldier in chains; nearby, the hilt of a dagger visibly protrudes from a supine body. Revolution has left its traces everywhere.

Although attending to the violence of revolution, Boquet’s scene also betrays a telling fascination with play, and particularly with Black performance and revelry. The scene’s Black figures play musical instruments and carouse; they eat, drink, and smoke with visible gusto. They recline and gesticulate, they pose and promenade, one by one and in couples. Juxtaposing violence and play, Pillage du Cap implicitly asserts a connection between the two, as if the slave revolts have unleashed a deluge of animated play – or, perhaps, as if revolution has become indistinguishable from play. Slave uprising becomes a massive carnivalesque performance, a spectacle of antic violence and playful disorder, but also mannered gestures and embodied spectacle.

Boquet’s image pointedly highlights self-conscious theatricality, in particular costuming and role-playing. Black soldiers wear European-style wigs and uniforms in what might be ironized displays of cultural and military power. Similarly, Black civilians present a striking contrast with the forlorn white figures at the image’s margins. Strolling through the scene in European-style finery, the scene’s Black figures perform the rituals of civility and respect that the revolution had made newly available to them. Notably, some of the scene’s figures seem drawn directly from the stage: a lone (and somewhat puzzling) figure in the foreground wears a suit with a diamond pattern reminiscent of Harlequin’s theatrical costume. Other darker-skinned characters in headdresses or tribal garb seem plucked from one of the eighteenth century’s indigenous or New


According to Jeremy Popkin, the captive is most likely “César Galbaud, brother of the French governor François-Thomas Galbaud, who describes being marched up to Haut-du-Cap in one of his letters” (personal correspondence with Jeremy Popkin). Popkin also argues that General Galbaud and his brother were instrumental in both the emancipation of Saint Domingue’s slaves and the destruction of Cap Français; Jeremy D. Popkin, You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 155.
World dramas. The image suggests that the colony’s formerly enslaved people have begun to act out the scripts and codes formerly reserved for Saint Domingue’s white planters, merchants, and political elites. Slave revolts have, in effect, reshaped even the mundane acts of everyday life, down to costuming and social interactions.

A handwritten inscription on the print offers an intriguing backstory for the scene. The note claims that the rebelling former slaves, after massacring a party of whites, had plundered clothing from the wardrobe of the Comédie du Cap, the city’s prestigious theatre.7 The sumptuous articles of clothing worn by rebelling former slaves – the garb of newfound independence, status, and respectability – are, according to the inscription, the actual costumes that the town’s colonial theatre had used in the years leading up to the Haitian Revolution. Saint Domingue’s rebelling slaves, the story goes, had repurposed the resources of the colonial theatre in support of anti-slavery revolution. The theatre of Cap Français probably had an unguarded, easily pilfered stash of surplus garments, so the inscription seems at least plausible, but the scenario also resonates on a symbolic, almost mythological level. Established in 1766, the Comédie du Cap was, as Lauren Clay writes, the “most active theatre in the colony,” one of the centerpieces of French colonial theatre in the Americas.8 The Comédie’s playgoers paid for the privileged experience of enjoying metropolitan culture transported to the colonies. The demand for the trappings of urbane, sophisticated Parisian culture was so strong, as Clay observes, that Saint Domingue’s theatres offered high salaries and multiyear contracts to entice Parisian performers to the colonies.9 The Comédie’s costumes – the clothing supposedly taken in the slave uprisings – would have been easily recognizable as the sort of prestigious garments worn by French actors and audiences alike in fashionable gatherings in the theatre and elsewhere. Such costumes were both signs of status and objects of desire, markers of colonial prestige and

7 The inscription reads, with some difficult-to-decipher handwriting: “Passage du 11 jours du pillage de la ville du cap francois [sic] aux bourg du aux cap arive le 20 juin 1793 / les naigre [sic] aprain avoire massacre une partie des blanc on pille la ville et loual?[?] brulé et se fout vêtu de leur vetement / et de ceux de la commedie et on aporte leur pillage dans le plainne.” There does not seem to be any corroborating evidence for the story of plundering the Comédie’s wardrobe.


9 Clay, Stagestruck, 203.
ambition. And the seizure of costuming by Black revolutionaries represents a complex act, both a continuation and a radical revision of colonial social performances. The image advances an ambivalent narrative about the theatrical nature of slave rebellion: on the one hand, the island’s people of color seize the means of theatrical production, presenting their own characters and taking control of the plot. On the other hand, their rebellion can only be imagined through pre-existing dramas of colonial power and insecurity.

Boquet’s image, of course, draws on a long history of imagining Black performances in Caribbean colonial spaces. The plantation had long been imagined as a space of performance, for example, and white observers had speculated about the nature and function of performances in Black social life. Writers such as P. J. Laborie, M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, and Alexandre-Stanislas, baron de Wimpfen commented on the fashion, the dances, the rituals, and the festivities they observed among Saint Domingue’s enslaved people. The colonial theatre had begun representing Black characters (most likely in blackface makeup) by the middle of the eighteenth century. The colonial theatre would have encountered Black musicians, stagehands, laborers, and other servants whose work was essential to the institution. See Clay, Stagestruck, 198–99. It


Cap thus imagines slave revolt as an extension, perhaps an amplification, of the everyday performances of race that colonists observed on Saint Domingue’s city streets and plantations. Even if the scene is an elaborate fantasy, it recognizes revolution’s impact on and through everyday social performances. It visualizes the capacity of performance to gather people together in collective acts of subtly scripted play. The image also shows the potential of performance to complicate the boundaries between labor and leisure, order and disorder, and even to invert or undercut social hierarchies. And not least, the scene indexes the striking – but also in many ways quotidian – presence of Black performance in the colony’s social life. Even if Boquet’s image is largely colonial fantasy, it nevertheless imagines performance as a central tool in the struggle between the coercive regimes of slavery and the people’s self-emancipatory energies. The Haitian Revolution emerges as the radical unleashing of pleasurable performances by the newly self-emancipated, who stage new scenes with carefully constructed character types. The scene gestures toward a Black revolutionary “performative commons” – a world in which the shared practices of performance, as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon explains, had become tools for wielding and contesting power.12

Boquet’s striking image is hardly unique in linking performance and revolution; to many commentators in the decades after the 1790s, Haiti’s revolts did indeed seem dramatic, at least in the colloquial sense. Rebelling slaves defeated a French imperial expedition, declared independence, abolished slavery, and declared racial equality on the island; the Haitian Revolution still stands as the only successful slave revolution in history. As Laurent Dubois has written, Haiti’s revolution “represented the most radical political transformation of the ‘Age of Revolution’.”13 It was surely, as David Brion Davis has observed, a “turning point in history,” presenting the world with radically new possibilities for anti-colonial politics, race relations, and democratic

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Although the French Revolution’s political ideals certainly influenced the course of Saint Domingue’s uprisings, Haiti’s abolition of slavery and declaration of racial equality far surpassed European ideals. Likewise, while some in the US saw Haiti as an emerging fellow democracy and a model of democratic equality, just as many early Americans quickly retreated from revolution’s more radical implications, leaving Haiti the “most unequivocally democratic” of the age’s revolutions, as Michael Zuckerman has written.

Despite such assessments, the Haitian Revolution’s impact was, as David Geggus has observed, “richly ambiguous.” Contemporary observers tried to comprehend Haiti’s ambiguities in a wide variety of ways, calculating its impact in shipping reports, immigration records, governmental petitions, and insurance claims. Survivors tried to make sense of what seemed the chaos of racial revolution in letters, diaries, and newspaper reports, and even in literary fiction, poetry, music, and visual arts. These attempts to comprehend Haiti’s Revolution seem often caught in ambivalence, unsure of whether to fear, admire, or dismiss Haiti’s revolution. Commentators in the 1790s, for example, could minimize the revolution as disorganized banditry in nearly the same breath as they sensationalized it as an unstoppable conspiracy. Eyewitness accounts seem torn among conflicted impulses to lament refugees’...
misfortunes, condemn the violence of slavery, admire the rebels’ self-emancipation, and fear the violence and chaos of revolution. As leaders such as Toussaint Louverture rose to positions of authority in the late 1790s, observers grappled with new characters and plot lines, often unsure of whether to celebrate or demonize Haiti’s novel figures and acts. This ambivalence persisted for decades after Haitian independence, as outsiders repeatedly returned to the characters, narratives, and themes of the Haitian Revolution to reckon with the long-term impact of the new Black nation in the Caribbean. This ambivalence results, in part, from Haiti’s profound challenge to the racial, political, and economic foundations of Atlantic modernity. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued, the revolutionary nation “entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened.”

Stymied by this unthinkability, observers and commentators also “disavowed” Haiti’s revolution, as Sybille Fischer argues, diminishing its accomplishments and relegating the new nation to the margins of western modernity.

At the same time, Haiti was never fully expelled from the modern cultural imagination – rather, Haiti seems made of the raw materials of Atlantic popular culture, and particularly of popular performance. For its part, performance stands out from other ways of representing Haiti. Where writing or visual art might attempt to capture and define Haiti from a distance, performances brought Haiti, after a fashion, into close proximity with American audiences. Not content simply to tell stories of a distant troubled land or to illustrate scenes of long-ago violence, performances placed embodied characters before audiences and re-enacted plots in real time. Imagined as performance and staged in playhouses, Haiti became part of the most broadly accessible, popular, and profitable entertainment practices of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Performance built its scenes of Haiti out of repetition and invention, conjured memories and embodied presences, material objects and transporting fantasies. Theatrical forms, in turn, seem distinctively suited to working through the deep ambivalence of Haiti’s historical impact. Offstage, informal social acts conjured up Haiti’s presence in

gesture, accent, and style, while professional theatres marshaled the resources of a community and the techniques of an institution to build entire Haitian playworlds before enthralled audiences. Performance could certainly be used to disavow Haiti as unthinkable, but actors and audiences – thinking or not – also engaged Haiti as a real, material, performed and performing presence. On some level – if only temporarily and imaginatively – actors embodied Haitianness, and audiences, following the tacit rules of performance and spectatorship, were invited to respond as if in the presence of Haiti.

_Staging Haiti in Nineteenth-Century America_ examines some of the most important ways that Americans performed Haiti in the first half of the nineteenth century. These acts offer a distinctive view of Haiti’s impact on American culture while helping account for the role of popular culture in shaping the representation of Haiti. The history of these acts begins in the 1790s, when an influx of French refugee performers brought Haiti’s characters and themes for the first time into American theatre. Over the next half century, the basic elements of these acts evolved and disseminated into forms such as melodrama, blackface minstrelsy, and abolitionist oratory; they percolated into unscripted social acts and literary depictions of performance. Appearing in active dialogue with acts emerging from Haiti itself, these performances insistently remade polarized or politicized responses to slave uprising (the refugee horror of the 1790s, for example, or the abolitionist admiration of the 1850s) into aestheticized pleasures. The political implications of Haiti’s revolution were refracted through a wide variety of meanings, affects, and competencies, sometimes only tangentially related to the content of the performance. Performance made diverse and often disorderly uses of Haiti, often with unintended consequences and surprising effects. These acts frequently betray a profound ambivalence – a double-mindedness about Haiti itself, certainly, but also about America’s own relationship to race, slavery, freedom, and independence. Americans seemed fascinated by racial revolution even as they tended to diminish and deflect the Black nation’s challenge to slavery, colonialism, and white supremacy. In the theatre, nineteenth-century Americans could face, if only in brief moments and always with mixed feelings, the dangerous open secret of Haiti’s revolutionary independence.

In its more intriguing moments, the sanctioning space of the theatre even allowed Americans to role-play, to act as Haitians, temporarily identifying with Haiti across lines of profound difference. This phenomenon, which I’ll call “playing Haitian,” represents a complex and multifaceted process in which different actors invented and embodied “Haitianness” in a wide variety of ways. This was “play” in various