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."[1] 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."[2] Revolution,

[1] Pillet, quoted in translation in Jeremy D. Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 76. Pillet's account, in manuscript form in the Historic New Orleans Collection, was first excerpted and translated into English in Althéa de Puech Parham (ed.), *My Odyssey: Experiences of a Young Refugee from Two Revolutions* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959). The author remained unknown until identified by Jeremy D. Popkin, "The Author as Colonial Exile: 'Mon Odyssée,'" *Romanic Review* 103/3–4 (May 2012): 367–80. Popkin's work has led to a complete scholarly edition, Jean-Paul Pillet, *Mon Odyssée: L'épopée d'un colon de Saint Domingue*, ed. Anja Bandau and Jeremy D. Popkin (Paris: Publications de la Société française d'étude du dix-huitiéme siècle, 2015). See also Madeline L. Zehnder, "Revolutions of Taste: *Mon Odyssée* and the Aesthetic Inheritance of Saint-Domingue," *American Literary History* 31/1 (2019): 1–23; Anja Bandau, "The Narrations of the Destruction of Saint-Domingue in the Late 18th Century and Their Reinterpretations after the Bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution," *L'Ordinaire des Amériques* 215 (February 22, 2013), https://journals.openedition.org/orda/688.

[2] Michel Etienne Descourtilz, *Histoire des désastres de Saint-Domingue, précédée d'un tableau du régime et des progrès de cette colonie, depuis sa fondation, jusqu'à l'époque de la révolution française; avec carte* (Paris: Chez Garnery, libraire, rue Serpente, no. 17, 1795), 13. The authorship of *Histoire des désastres* has been disputed.

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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

[3] Bryan Edwards, *An Historical Survey of the Island of Saint Domingo, Together with an Account of the Maroon Negroes in the Island of Jamaica* (London: Printed for J. Stockdale, 1801), 146, 223.

[4] Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 42. The language of such accounts was also quite flexible – "horrors," for example, could refer to slavery itself, to the violence of uprisings and reprisals, or to the dangers of dispossession, dislocation, and disease. Along with Popkin's *Facing Racial Revolution*, the reception of revolutionary horrors is thoroughly documented by James Alexander Dun, *Dangerous Neighbors: Philadelphia and the Making of the Haitian Revolution in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), and Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

[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

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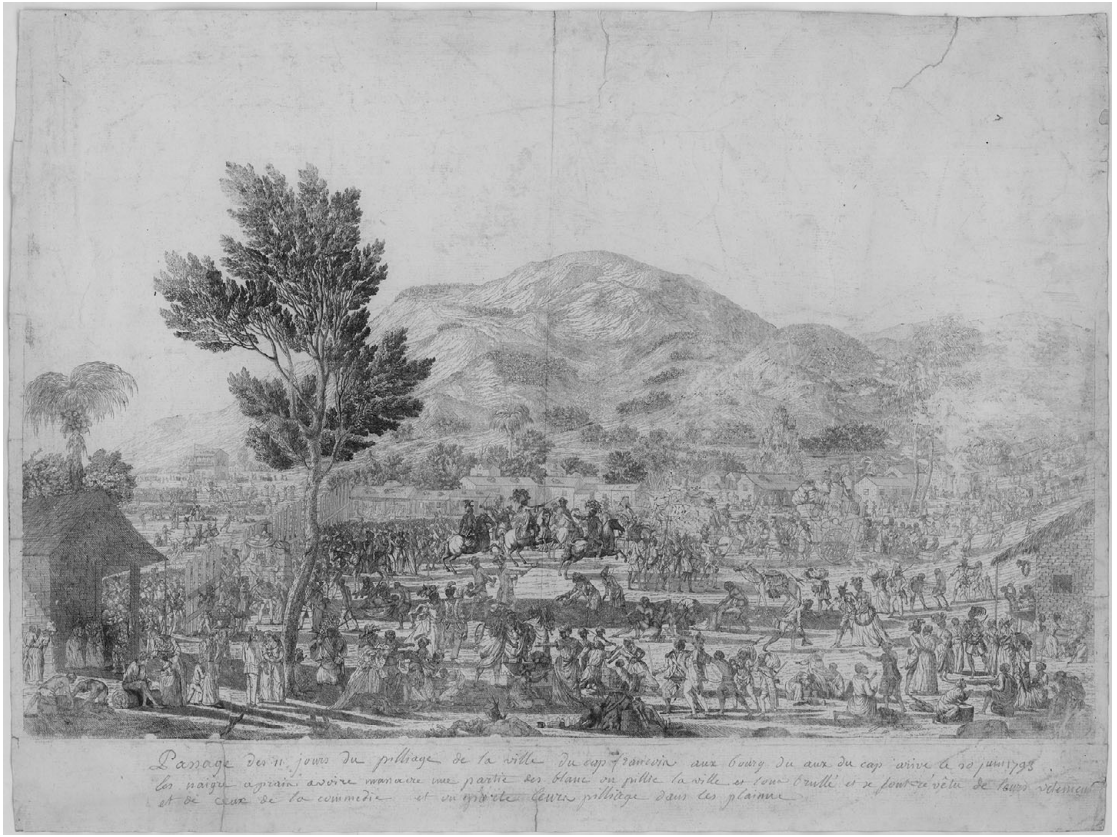

Figure 0.1. J. L. Boquet, *Pillage du Cap Français en 1793* (Paris, c. 1795). Image Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.

(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.[6] 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

E. Gómez, "Images de l'apocalypse des planteurs," *L'Ordinaire des Amériques* 215 (February 22, 2013), https://journals.openedition.org/orda/665.

[6] 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.

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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 new-found 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 pilliage de la ville du cap françois [sic] aux bourg du aux cap arive le 20 juin 1793 / les naigre [sic] aprain avoire massacre une partie des blanc on pillie la ville et loua[?] brullé et se fout vêtu de leur vetement / et de ceux de la commedie et on aporte leur pilliage dans le plainne." There does not seem to be any corroborating evidence for the story of plundering the Comédie's wardrobe.

[8] Lauren R. Clay, *Stagestruck: The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 202. For more on colonial Saint Domingue's theatre, see also Jean Fouchard, *Artistes et répertoires des scènes de Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Impr. de l'État, 1955); Jean Fouchard, *Le théâtre a Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Impr. de l'État, 1955); Bernard Camier, "Musique coloniale et société à Saint-Domingue dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIème siècle," Ph.D. dissertation (Université Antilles-Guyane, 2004).

[9] Clay, *Stagestruck*, 203.

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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 Wimpffen commented on the fashion, the dances, the rituals, and the festivities they observed among Saint Domingue's enslaved people.[10] The colonial theatre had begun representing Black characters (most likely in blackface makeup) by the middle of the eighteenth century. The Comédie itself was certainly a place where people of African descent gathered – to work, to spectate, and even in a few known cases to star as performers.[11] Boquet's *Pillage du*

[10] See, for example, Médéric Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie francaise de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (A Philadelphie: Chez l'auteur, 1797), 58–61; Alexandre-Stanislas Wimpffen, *A Voyage to Saint Domingo, in the Years 1788, 1789, and 1790*, trans. John Wright (London: Cadell & Davies, 1797), 114; P. J. Laborie, *The Coffee Planter of Saint Domingo: With an Appendix, Containing a View of the Constitution, Government, Laws, and State of that Colony, Previous to the Year 1789. To Which Are Added, Some Hints on the Present State of the Island, under the British Government* (London: Printed for T. Cadell & W. Davies, in the Strand, 1798), 181.

[11] On the first known creole blackface play, *Jeannot et Thérèse*, see Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux and Bernard Camier, "Jeannot et Thérèse de Clément: un opéra-comique en créole à Saint-Domingue au milieu du XVIIIe siècle," *Revue de la société Haïtienne d'histoire et de géographie* 215 (September 2003): 135–66; Bernard Camier and Laurent Dubois, "Voltaire et Zaïre, ou le théâtre des Lumières dans l'aire atlantique française," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 54/4 (2007): 39–69. On performers of color such as Lise and Minette, see Clay, *Stagestruck*, 221–24. Lise and Minette's story was recovered by Fouchard, *Le théâtre a Saint-Domingue*, and fictionalized brilliantly in Marie Vieux-Chauvet's 1957 *La danse sur le volcan* (Paris: Plon, 1957); *Dance on the Volcano*, trans. Kaiama L. Glover (Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago, 2016). On Chauvet's twentieth-century fictional treatment of Lise and Minette, see Christian Flaugh and Lena Taub Robles (eds.), *Marie Vieux Chauvet's Theatres: Thought, Form, and Performance of Revolt* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Curtis Small, "The Ambiguities of Agency: Marie Vieux-Chauvet's 'La danse sur le volcan,'" *Journal of Haitian Studies* 15/1–2 (2009): 239–55. Despite formally segregated entrances and seating, people of African descent could and did attend the theatre, and anyone attending a performance at the Comédie would have encountered Black musicians, stagehands, laborers, and other servants whose work was essential to the institution. See Clay, *Stagestruck*, 198–99. It

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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

is also worth observing that neither the ideological underpinnings nor the everyday use of racial categories in the eighteenth-century Caribbean align neatly with the way race was imagined and used in North America then or today. Descriptors like "white" and "black," as well as terms like *gens du couleur* and labels of racial mixing like "mulatto," must be approached, then as now, as terms that had real impact even as they could be ill defined and applied in flexible and shifting ways.

[12] See Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 1–22.

[13] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 3.

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governance.[14] 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.[15]

Despite such assessments, the Haitian Revolution's impact was, as David Geggus has observed, "richly ambiguous."[16] 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'

[14] David Brion Davis, "Impact of the French and Haitian Revolutions," in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. David Patrick Geggus (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 3–9 (at 4). Davis's essay stands among an impressive array of recent scholarly works that have transformed our understanding of Haiti's historical and cultural impact. Edited collections exploring Haiti's impact on the Atlantic world include David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus (eds.), *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Geggus (ed.), *Impact of the Haitian Revolution*; David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering (eds.), *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Michael Drexler (eds.), *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States: Histories, Textualities, Geographies* (Philadelphia:University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). In addition, a number of important monographs have explored Haiti's transnational connections and cultural contributions: David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Doris L. Garraway, *Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008); Julia Gaffield, *Haitian Connections in the Atlantic World: Recognition after Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Marlene L. Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789–1865* (Liverpool University Press, 2015).

[15] Michael Zuckerman, "The Power of Blackness: Thomas Jefferson and the Revolution in St. Domingue," in Zuckerman, *Almost Chosen People: Oblique Biographies in the American Grain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 175–218 (at 181).

[16] Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 2.

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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."[17] 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.[18]

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

[17] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 73.

[18] Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). In practice, as J. Michael Dash writes, the Haitian Revolution "has been either conspicuously consigned to the margins of modern history or simplified and romanticized as an inspiring narrative of black slave resistance." J. Michael Dash, "The Theater of the Haitian Revolution / The Haitian Revolution as Theater," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 9/2 (2005): 16–23 (at 18).

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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

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senses: most clearly, Americans played Haiti using theatre's conventional characters, plots, and themes. These conventional kinds of stage play, however scripted, also involved a degree of open-endedness, repetition, contingency, and incompletion, and playing Haitian often has the qualities of rehearsal rather than finished performance. As a ludic behavior, playing Haiti often seems connected to other kinds of offstage play, including competition, improvisation, joking, and spontaneous, undirected play. These forms of playing Haitian exemplify the anthropological definition of play as a disposition "intimately connected with a disordered world that, while of course largely reproduced from one moment to the next, always carries within it the possibility of incremental or even radical change."[19] The various forms of playing Haitian respond to, and tell us more about, the revolutionary kinds of "unpredictabilities and constraints" that Haiti could evoke in American culture.[20]

Playing Haitian was not always (or often) particularly benign, to be sure. Outsiders often conjured wild slanders of Haiti out of hearsay, rumor, and oft-repeated insult; at the same time, the very intensity and persistence of such dismissals suggests the high stakes of staging Haiti. When Americans played Haitian, even in wildly inaccurate, caricatured, and unjust ways, they invested themselves and their resources in acting out complex and contested performances of race, power, and freedom. Even in denigrating Haiti, Americans honed their collective sense of racial difference, of bondage and freedom, and of power and authority. Requisitioning memories of the Haitian Revolution for a wide variety of purposes, Americans revised and reconstituted Haiti, sending it back out into the world as a simulation of itself – a virtual, repeating, and (as Karen Salt has written) a persistently "unfinished" Haitian Revolution.[21]

As all this was happening, Haitians themselves, of course, actively invented and repurposed roles for themselves, roles that observers began to notice in the earliest moments of the revolution. Haiti's revolutionary

[19] Thomas M. Malaby, "Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience," *New Literary History* 40/1 (2009): 205–18 (at 210).

[20] Malaby, 208. In a concise and evocative discussion of anthropological approaches to play notes, Thomas Malaby observes that, despite the long-standing materialist tendency to understand play as "nonwork" or unproductive activity, studies such as Clifford Geertz's landmark "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412–53, have argued for the seriousness and the centrality of meaning-making in play.

[21] Karen Salt, *The Unfinished Revolution: Haiti, Black Sovereignty and Power in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Oxford University Press, 2019). My sense of a virtualized and performed Haiti owes much to Antonio Benítez Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

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and early national generations adapted and inhabited unwritten scripts of social performance, and where none would do, they invented new forms through which to present themselves to the world. So, even as Atlantic performance culture continually upstaged the young Black nation, Haiti itself remained an important source of distinctive and evocative performances. Haitian performances found their way into other acts, shaping the discourses and world-making practices of Americans playing Haitian. The persistent presence of Haitian performance points also to the ongoing cultural traffic between Haiti and the United States. As the result of such transnational exchanges, playing Haitian identifies not simply the US fabrication of Haiti, but rather something closer to contested, uneven, and complicated acts of cultural exchange. It's not too surprising, then, that performances of Haiti often highlight tensions between authenticity and imitation, between insider and outsider ways of being Haitian and knowing Haiti. Through these complex processes, performances of Haiti – its themes, characters, and plot lines, and even words, accents, and gestures – became intertwined with the ways Americans staged themselves. Playing Haitian reveals the revolutionary, independent Black nation as a fundamental part of the political and social worlds that US Americans understood as their own.

The performances of Haiti that this study examines begin in the revolutionary decade of the 1790s and continue through to the US Civil War – which, as Matthew Clavin has shown, some Americans feared as a potential re-enactment of the Haitian Revolution.[22] Between these moments of profound conflict, American actors and audiences explored the hopes and fears, the pleasures and desires centered on and projected onto Haiti. These performances appear in three distinct historical phases, tracing a decades-long arc from Haiti's first strange appearances on American stages to its eventual incorporation into late-antebellum popular entertainment culture. The first of these phases began in the 1790s with the arrival of Saint Domingue's refugees and the first appearance of Haitian themes on American stages. Among the many refugees, French troupes brought to the United States new stories, new stagecraft, and distinctive social performances. Those refugees confirmed and embodied the reports of distant slave revolt, their acts commenting obliquely but often unmistakably on the uprisings. Soon after the refugees began arriving, Anglo-American playhouse dramas also began to incorporate character types and plot lines borrowed

[22] See Matthew Clavin, "A Second Haitian Revolution: John Brown, Toussaint Louverture, and the Making of the American Civil War," *Civil War History* 54/2 (May 30, 2008): 117–45.

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from the distant Haitian Revolution. Plays such as John Murdock's 1794 *The Triumphs of Love*, for example, framed Haiti's revolution as a matter of sentimentalized refugees and unruly, imitative slaves. These scenes highlight the vexed legacies of Haitian revolution; profoundly shaped by the pro-slavery imagination, their sentimentalized vision of slave revolution installed an early "Lost Cause" ideology in American popular culture.

The second phase of performing Haiti occurred in the following decades as Haiti's impact broadened beyond those professional stage acts. Americans moved past the immediacies of the refugee acts to explore the political implications of a newly independent Haiti. In 1804, for example, two graduating Dartmouth students wrote and delivered a debate between Haitian leaders Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines that dramatized questions of revolutionary justice and governance. As performative Haitian political documents circulated in American newspapers, the two students transformed the politics of slave revolution into a performance of education and credentialing. In such acts, Americans reimagined and re-enacted Haiti in terms of their own political and social values. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Black actors also played Haitian in their own distinctive ways. The most famous of these actors, Ira Aldridge, established his fame playing the Haitian Emperor Henry Christophe in the 1820s. Aldridge's performances as Christophe were a rare opportunity for Black self-representation onstage, but as part of London's "illegitimate" theatre, the performances also portrayed Haiti's revolution as comic, illegitimate, and corrupt.

In the third phase, occurring from the 1830s to the 1850s, Haiti became a sort of electrified third rail in commercialized American popular entertainments, a site onto which performers and audiences could displace increasingly contentious questions of Black freedom, equality, and dignity. Blackface minstrelsy in the 1830s, perhaps predictably, took frequent shots at Haiti's revolutionary legacy and the inspiration it offered Black Americans. Despite its open scorn, however, blackface comedy also implicitly acknowledged the transformative power of Haiti's racial revolution. In rewriting Shakespeare's Othello as a Haitian upstart in Maurice Dowling's *Othello Travestie*, for example, the theatre reimagined Haitian aspirations within the conventions of Shakespearean drama. As the minstrel show's racial mockery came to dominate US popular culture, abolitionists countered by recruiting the Haitian Revolution to bolster performances of Black respectability politics. Abolitionist orators repeatedly invoked Haiti in the 1850s, using narratives of Haitian leaders such as Toussaint Louverture to argue for

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the dignity and right to freedom of enslaved Black Americans. Such strategies, perhaps predictably, came at a cost – even as they stood against the logic of minstrelsy, abolitionist acts were often problematically shaped by racialized celebrity culture and commercialized entertainment practices, and Haiti at times seems a mere prop used by celebrated northern abolitionists and their admirers.

Haiti remained a highly visible part of American culture after the Civil War, particularly with the American occupation of Haiti in the early twentieth century, but this account of Haiti's impact on American performance ends with a novella published on the eve of the US Civil War. Herman Melville's 1855 *Benito Cereno*, with its tale of masked shipboard slave revolt, continues the long tradition of theatricalizing Haiti even as it looks toward the iterations of playing Haitian that would emerge in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The novella imagines the Haitian Revolution as a free-floating stage of revolutionary performance, invoking in its famous shaving scene a hidden American fascination with Haitian fashion and style. Looking forward, *Benito Cereno* also anticipates some of the themes that would become Haitian clichés by the twentieth century – stories of zombis, cannibalism, and occult ritual, as well as the constant preoccupation with disaster, disease, corruption, and poverty.

Staging the "Horrors of Saint Domingue"

The habitual representation of the Haitian Revolution in and as theatre highlights some of its distinctive features. Imagined as theatre, revolution could feel like a vast historical pageant played out on the world stage, even as it could also produce intimate, personal performances. The colonist Jean-Félix Carteau, lamenting the burning of Cap Français, articulated the power of theatrical revolution when he asked, "if such a spectacle is terrible to any eye, even one with no particular stake in it, how much more devastating and horrible must it have been for us, who saw our last refuge and our only hope going up in smoke?"[23] Theatrical visions of Haitian revolution often turned on a tenuously maintained spectatorly distance, as if the colony's slave revolts, momentarily contained behind the proscenium arch of the stage, always threatened to engulf the audience. The theatrical language, moreover, suggests a subtle unease about these reported memories – as if retelling the events of the

[23] J. Félix Carteau, *Histoire des désastres de Saint-Domingue* (Bordeaux: Pellier-Lawalle, Imprimeur-Libraire, 1802). The text is translated and excerpted in Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 229.

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Haitian Revolution might compel survivors to revisit and re-enact those scenes.

This vision of Haiti as a theatre of revolution predated the uprisings; Caribbean colonists, for example, had long turned to notions of performance to understand slave uprisings, marronage, and potentially oppositional cultural practices like obeah or vodou. Slavery, too, had routinized extreme spectacles of suffering and punishment, showing, as Saidiya Hartman has argued, that the "exercise of power was inseparable from its display."[24] Even before its slave uprisings, Saint Domingue was known for open-air torture, executions, and the public displays that Vincent Brown has characterized as "postmortem humiliations."[25] Theatricals of death, dismemberment, and mortification appeared throughout the greater Caribbean, and such displays became a widely remarked-upon feature of the Haitian Revolution.

In the manner of playhouse dramas, narrative accounts of the Haitian Revolution often imagined slave revolts beginning in secret plots and ending in brutally violent spectacles. Key moments in Saint Domingue's revolution, including Vincent Ogé's failed 1790 coup attempt and the 1791 Bwa Cayiman (Bois Caïman) ceremony that allegedly signaled the beginnings of revolution, appear in the popular record as events defined by covert plotting and theatrical revelation.[26] As the Haitian Revolution

[24] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

[25] Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambrige, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 137.

[26] Ogé's detection and public execution returned to the stage decades later when the Haitian poet and playwright Pierre Faubert wrote his 1841 "drame historique" *Ogé; ou le préjugé de couleur*. Faubert (1806–68) served as Secretary to President Jean-Pierre Boyer; aside from *Ogé*, he is best known for his collection *Poésies fugitives*. See Anna Brickhouse, "The Writing of Haiti: Pierre Faubert, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Beyond," *American Literary History* 13/3 (2001): 407–44. Recounted by Antoine Dalmas in 1814 and Antoine Métral in 1818, the occult ceremony has become, in the two centuries after Haitian independence, one of Haiti's legendary founding events and a central part of Haiti's national mythology. Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue, depuis le commencement des troubles, jusqu'à la prise de Jérémie et du Môle S. Nicolas par les Anglais; suivie d'un mémoire sur le rétablissement de cette colonie* (Paris: Mame frères, 1814), 116–27; Antoine Métral, *Histoire de l'insurrection des esclaves dans le nord de Saint-Domingue* (Paris: F. Scherff, 1818), 15–20. Although Haitian *vodou* has certainly been an important part of Haitian religious practices, it was also recruited to bolster racist political arguments about Haiti. See Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 85–87; Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); Celucien L. Joseph and Nixon S. Cleophat (eds.), *Vodou in the Haitian Experience: A Black Atlantic Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016); Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth

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continued into the 1790s, issues of character, and particularly the problems of disguise and revelation, emerged as central to eyewitness accounts. Survivors, for example, described their shock at the unmasking of their slaves as murderous rebels; refugee colonists in turn disguised themselves as they fled to safety. The chaotic spectacle of the uprising's early days eventually produced distinct characters and types, but often in radically new configurations – the old dyadic binaries of paternalistic planters and rebellious slaves, Republicans and Royalists, even "black" and "white," no longer reliably predicted character or motivation. A few major figures such as Toussaint Louverture emerged in the historical record as leading actors of the revolution; the soldier and author Marcus Rainsford, for example, described Louverture as a melodramatic "hero," betrayed by the French in a scene "equal to the highest effort of the drama."[27]

Accounts of the revolution often invoked dramatic genres. The betrayal and death of Toussaint Louverture, the defeat of Leclerc's 1802 expedition, the Haitian Declaration of Independence in 1804, and the dramatic massacres of French colonists after independence all seemed to offer material ready-made for the stage. At the same time, the genre of revolution remained a complex and open question – "tragedy" in particular seemed a complex and powerful label. While one colonist sensed in 1791 that the "climax of the tragedy was approaching," the Black rebel leader Jean-François (to rather different effect) described the revolution as a "tragedy that has not yet reached its conclusion."[28] Tragedy, of course, did not necessarily center the white planter imaginary; the "black radical tragic," as Jeremy Matthew Glick argues, might reveal the potential and the limits of the "unfinished Haitian Revolution."[29] And Haiti's tragedy appeals in part, perhaps, because it was enfolded within what David Scott calls the "epic romance" of the

Paravisini-Gebert (eds.), *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

[27] Marcus Rainsford, *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti*, ed. Grégory Pierrot and Paul Youngquist (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 170.

[28] Anonymous manuscript entitled "La révolution de Saint Domingue, contenant tout ce qui s'est passé dans la colonie française depuis le commencement de la révolution jusqu'au départ de l'auteur pour la France, le 8 septembre 1792," in the Collection Moreau de Saint Méry, carton F 3 141, in the Centre des Archives de Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence. Excerpted and translated in Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 51. Jean-François's remark is in *Récit historique du citoyen Thibal*, published in *Récit historique sur les evénements qui sont succédés dans les camps de la Grande-Rivière, du Dondon, de Ste-Suzanne et autres, depuis le 26 Octubre 1791 jusqu'au 24 Decembre de la même année* (Cap-François: Chez Parent, 1793). Excerpted and translated in Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 166.

[29] On the relationship between C. L. R. James's 1938 dramatization of Louverture and his subsequent historical writing in *The Black Jacobins*, see chap. 2 of Jeremy Matthew Glick,

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Haitian Revolution, the "great progressive story of an oppressed and victimized people's struggle from Bondage to Freedom, from Despair to Triumph under heroic leadership."[30]

Into the nineteenth century, performance continued to offer a remarkably rich array of ways to imagine Haiti. In the early decades of its independence, Haiti (much like the United States) produced a rich theatre of civic ritual, and the newly independent nation's constitutions, proclamations, and declarations collectively projected something like a state performance of national character for Atlantic audiences.[31] For decades, the revolution remained central to the national imaginary, re-enacted in homegrown Haitian dramas such as Juste Chanlatte's 1817 *Néhri*, which presented "sublime tableaux" of military resistance to Leclerc's 1802 invasion.[32] Haiti often seemed caught in a dynamic of originality and imitation, understood as *sui generis*, "unforgettable and unrepeatable," as Seymour Drescher writes, but also working within a broad legacy of revolutionary traditions.[33]

By the 1830s and 1840s, as fewer people remained who had experienced Haiti's revolutionary era firsthand, American representations of Haiti seem caught between stultified old forms and novel new ones – the old-fashioned stage tropes of refugee nostalgia on the one hand and the popular performances emerging in a country increasingly divided by slavery and abolition. Particularly in the wake of Nat Turner's 1831 Southampton, Virginia uprising, Americans continued to imagine the danger of a North American re-enactment of Haitian revolution. As the Philadelphia author and playwright Robert Montgomery Bird

The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

[30] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 135. The "tragic narrative," as Scott argues, framed the revolution in terms of the "dramatic confrontation between contingency and freedom, between human will and its defining limits" (135).

[31] See Deborah Jenson, "Dessalines's American Proclamations of the Haitian Independence," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 15/1–2 (2009): 72–102; Julia Gaffield, *The Haitian Declaration of Independence: Creation, Context, and Legacy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016); Doris L. Garraway, "Print, Publics, and the Scene of Universal Equality in the Kingdom of Henry Christophe," *L'Esprit Créateur* 56/1 (2016): 82–100.

[32] From the dedication of Juste Chanlatte, *Néhri, Chef des Haytiens; Tragédie en 3 actes et en vers*, trans. and ed. and published online by Grégory Pierrot and Tabitha McIntosh at https://kingdomofobjects.wordpress.com.

[33] Seymour Drescher, "The Limits of Example," in Geggus (ed.), *Impact of the Haitian Revolution*, (10–14 at 13). The tension between uniqueness and its exemplarity continues to inflect our understanding of Haiti; as Laurent Dubois notes, the uprisings of the 1790s still stand as "a unique example of successful black revolution" (*Avengers of the New World*, 6).

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commented in 1831, "future generations will perhaps remember the horrors of Haiti as a farce compared with the tragedies of our own happy land!"[34] While many Americans, particularly those invested in pro-slavery political positions, continued to worry about the "slumbering volcano in the Caribbean," as Alfred N. Hunt has called it, Haiti also offered dramatic scripts for advocates of racial equality and opponents of slavery.[35]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Haiti seemed defined in many ways by recycled stage tropes. Eighteenth-century colonial fascination with Afro-Caribbean religious performance grew into notions of Haiti as an exotic, primitive place of savage customs and magical beliefs. The well-known scenes of Haitian "voodoo," zombis, and cannibalism, some based on early libels against Haitian revolutionaries, grew by the early twentieth century into a full-blown popular culture of Haitian atavism.[36] Reinforcing the long tradition of Haiti's spectacular difference, such tropes worked to exclude Haiti from Atlantic modernity. Even Haiti's political life came to seem a real-life melodrama, with powerful, deceptive despots endlessly oppressing a passive and sentimentally suffering people. Haiti's very environment continues to theatrically signify, and natural disasters appear to some as dramatic spectacles of divine judgment. Even in more recent decades, the trope of the "slumbering volcano" of the revolution seems to still haunt Haiti's present, locking it in an unending "drama of survival," as one socio-economic account of

[34] Robert Montgomery Bird, "Secret Record" (n.d.), 2–3, Folder 182, Robert Montgomery Bird Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

[35] On fears and anxieties of Haitian Revolution, see Dun, *Dangerous Neighbors*; Hunt, *Haiti's Influence*; Mimi Sheller, "'The Haytian Fear': Racial Projects and Competing Reactions to the First Black Republic," *Politics and Society* 6 (1999): 285–303.

[36] As pervasive as horror-film Haitian zombies would become after the US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, "it is surprising," as Rafael Hoermann points out, that the figure "scarcely appears in contemporary texts on the Haitian Revolution." Raphael Hoermann, "Figures of Terror: The 'Zombie' and the Haitian Revolution," *Atlantic Studies* 14 (2017), 152–73 (at 156). A rich body of scholarship historicizing such tropes also includes Katie Bray, "'A Climate … More Prolific … in Sorcery': The Black Vampyre and the Hemispheric Gothic," *American Literature* 87/1 (March 1, 2015): 1–21; Raphael Hoermann, "'A Very Hell of Horrors'? The Haitian Revolution and the Early Transatlantic Haitian Gothic," *Slavery & Abolition* 37/1 (January 2, 2016): 183–205; Michel S. Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1989); Sarah J. Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Elizabeth McAlister, "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85/2 (May 24, 2012): 457–86; Nick Nesbitt, "Haiti, the Monstrous Anomaly," in Millery Polyné (ed.), *The Idea of Haiti* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3–26.

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the 1980s puts it.[37] The spectacular chaos and performative violence of revolution, as this logic would have it, feeds a chain of dramatic re-enactment.

Such stage tropes, for all their clichéd qualities, also point to the ways performance can intersect with revolutionary politics. Haiti's theatrical revolution indexes what Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has characterized as the "virtualization" of the modern Atlantic commons, the long process in which political power came to be understood and exercised through performative modes of representation.[38] In the eighteenth-century virtual or performative commons, theatre became a means of collective expression and political action, and its techniques and forms became the tools with which Haiti's revolutionaries acted out the consequences of a powerfully upended racial order. This helps explain the political impact of performance, which has long been understood as central to the age of Atlantic revolutions, and particularly so in the Americas. As Jason Shaffer has observed, street performance was a defining feature of American Revolutionary theatre, and a wide range of performance practices wielded the "power to destabilize and rearrange individual identities and social structures" in the revolutionary moment.[39] Revolutionary oratory – the "originary utterances" that Christopher Looby has described in *Voicing America* – helped define the young United States, and similar forces played out in Haitian contexts as well.[40] As the age of Atlantic revolutions brought political acts into view, performance and its forms also infiltrated the practices of everyday life.[41] Playhouses themselves were deeply hierarchical and conservative, but also potentially open social spaces – high and low, free and unfree, light- and dark-

[37] Simon M. Fass, *Political Economy in Haiti: The Drama of Survival* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1988).

[38] Dillon, *New World Drama*, 4.

[39] Jason Shaffer, *Performing Patriotism: National Identity in the Colonial and Revolutionary American Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 11.

[40] Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16–28.

[41] The revolutionary politicizing of performance was, of course, not limited to the Americas. On performance in the revolutionary era, see Charlotte A. Lerg and Heléna Tóth(eds.), *Transatlantic Revolutionary Cultures, 1789–1861* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Odai Johnson, *Rehearsing the Revolution: Radical Performance, Radical Politics in the English Restoration* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000); Marvin A. Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680–1791* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Diana Taylor and Sarah J. Townsend (eds.), *Stages of Conflict: A Critical Anthology of Latin American Theater and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008). The hemispheric perspectives of Diana Taylor and others have also helped shift focus toward categories of performance like "creole" or "indigenous" that do not fit neatly into national and imperial categories.

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skinned people sat and stood in close proximity (if not in absolute equality) on the stage and in the audience. In the playhouses and public spaces of the Atlantic world, traditional performance forms and repertoires met the revolutionary energies of democracy, egalitarianism, and emancipation.

Enacting the Unthinkable

In arguing that performance became one of the central ways Americans understood and encountered Haiti and its revolutionary history, this study faces a methodological conundrum: American plays explicitly "about" Haiti – plays that dramatize its major events and characters – actually appear quite infrequently in archives. Despite the oft-remarked dramatic and spectacular qualities of the Haitian Revolution, and despite the popularity of Haitian themes in the twentieth century, there is no particularly rich vein of Haitian-themed plays hiding in the nineteenth-century American archive.[42] Onstage references and allusions to Haiti in the nineteenth century were often brief and sometimes cryptic, although presumably understood by some audience members. Drama, like many other modes of representation, often treated Haiti as an open secret, simultaneously suppressed and spectacular. Performance in particular traffics in such open secrets, occasionally making them spectacularly visible. This is one of the fundamental problems of searching out and interpreting representations of the Haitian Revolution – although Haiti's revolution may appear "unthinkable," as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued, it has also remained present, acted out, in a variety of lived, felt, embodied, material, and performed ways. Performance thus offered ways for Haiti to be repeated, embodied, and made material, even as it remained in other ways unthinkable. The tools of the theatre – the stage settings, costumes, masks, props, and acting bodies – could be deployed

[42] In the 1930s, for example, Langston Hughes helped write the libretto for the 1949 opera *Troubled Island*, and the Federal Theatre Project produced William Du Bois's 1938 play *Haiti*; Orson Welles' "Voodoo Macbeth" might count as a play that addressed Haitian themes and tropes. Caribbean drama has been particularly engaged with Haitian revolutionary themes; see Édouard Glissant, *Monsieur Toussaint: A Play*, ed. J. Michael Dash (Boulder, CO: Three Continents Press, 2005); Aimé Césaire, *The Tragedy of King Christophe* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015); Derek Walcott, *The Haitian Trilogy: Plays: Henri Christophe, Drums and Colours, and The Haytian Earth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002). Scholars have also given deserved attention to C. L. R. James's dramatic work; Rachel Douglas, *Making The Black Jacobins: C. L. R. James and the Drama of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Glick, *Black Radical Tragic*. See also Shannon Rose Riley, *Performing Race and Erasure: Cuba, Haiti, and US Culture, 1898–1940* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

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to put the inconceivable on display. Ultimately, performance shows how Americans knew and felt what they disavowed, how they acted out what they repressed, how they drew themselves into dialogue with Haiti, perhaps even despite themselves.

More broadly, performance also matters because it offers ways of imagining and displaying the problems and possibilities of identity, agency, and action. Theatre presents, orders, and directs masked and adorned bodies, dictating their words and actions while anticipating the frequent failure of that control. On the stage, personality becomes character and type, lived experiences become genres and plots, and social and political problems become dramatic conflicts. The theatre produces temporal regimes in its scripts and playbills, its nightly and weekly routines, its seasonal rhythms, its endless repetitions and reinventions. Performance marshals and deploys concrete material resources, from the building materials for playhouses to the cloth and everyday objects fashioned into costumes and props. In its "ontic" (as opposed to mimetic) function – most notably but not exclusively in formal, commercial playhouses – performance creates publics, drawing them together and conditioning their manners and mores.[43] In its content and its habitual forms, theatre acts out the political and social problems of its time, shaping how people, actions, and interrelationships were understood. It works through problems of identity, agency, power, and action; it classifies, orders, and ranks people and their affiliations (both onstage and in the audience). Bound to convention in a radically changing world, theatre endlessly repeats and projects, and it installs ethical regimes of passivity and action, of intimacy and distance, of experience and spectatorship.

The techniques used to stage Haiti's theatre of revolution produce mixed meanings; contempt and esteem constantly temper one another. Similarly, "acting" and "acting as" also overlap in complex ways – invented fantasies become authentic ways of performing independence and achieving respect. Performances of Haiti can appear at once radical and conventional, used both for emancipation and for further oppression. Playing Haitian can invoke authenticity or fakery, or both at once; it can simultaneously sanction self-expression and the utter silencing of Haitians. The theatricalization of Haiti reveals both resources and limitations, often at the same time. It appears fungible, deployed by insiders and outsiders, Haitians and non-Haitians, to a wide variety of ends. Performances of Haiti shaped a wide variety of tacitly learned and

[43] Dillon describes theatre's ontic side as "thingly, material, resolutely present" in *New World Drama*, 50.

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casually executed competencies, skills that range from the carefully trained modes of distinguishing taste that Pierre Bourdieu described to the sorts of implicitly learned behaviors that Simon During describes in *Modern Enchantments*.[44] Such competencies, too, often appear as unintended consequences and unforeseen side effects – playing Haitian injected subtle kinds of instabilities into the rehearsed, produced, and repeated world of performance. As the dominant framing of chaotic horror receded behind the production and enjoyment of a variety of everyday pleasures, the repetitive, performed troping of Haiti produced self-consciously and even ironically theatricalized notions of slave revolution and Black sovereignty. The aesthetic habits and cultural practices of performance became part of popular and literary culture, and the unspeakable and unspoken aspects of Haiti's revolution became part of the tacit underpinning of American culture.

Networks of Embedded Performance

Performances of Haiti came before audiences through transnational and intercultural networks. The traces of these acts appear in texts, material objects, and the ephemera left behind by a culture shot through with live performances. Descriptions of and prescriptions for performance appear in texts as scripts, playbills, advertisements, and announcements, and in the narratives of performance reviews, images, memoirs, and histories. Descriptions of social life, gossip columns, and literary texts can point to performance in action. At the same time, such performances often range outside the bounds of the linguistic and textual, highlighting what Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has characterized as performance's "a-linguistic" aspects.[45] In the music and dance of pantomime, for example, in the material and bodily signifiers of costumes and props, or even in the subtleties of accent, gesture, and style, performance was the lingua franca of an intercultural network that brought Haiti into spectacular view in the Atlantic world.

Historians of Haiti's impact on the Atlantic world have observed the power of networks and the performances they produced. Julius Scott's *The Common Wind*, for example, describes informal, clandestine, and widely dispersed communication networks that spirited information and

[44] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[45] Dillon, *New World Drama*, 116.

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inspiration around the Atlantic world.[46] Information about Haiti's slave revolts and eventual independence passed from sailor to longshoreman, offhand anecdotes and scraps of news conveyed from slave to master to laborer to servant and back again. These networks followed transnational paths of least resistance, skirting official control by opportunistically jumping from one national network to another. They outpaced official communication networks, often unconstrained by matters of reliability or factuality. The networks also circulated textual evidence of Haiti's slave revolts, a paper trail bearing witness to the facts of radical violence and societal change for those who could access and interpret them. In the absence of letters, pamphlets, and news items, scraps of text in handbills, headlines, and printed proclamations also hinted at the events. Outside the textual forms used by the free white master classes of the Atlantic world, speech often circulated in unregulated fashion. People told stories of revolution, and rumor, gossip, and braggadocio filled in information vacuums when facts were not available. The song lyrics, slogans, and names of revolution did not need narrative structure or official sanction to circulate.

Printed and spoken words mattered profoundly, of course, in the revolutionary Black Atlantic, but they also connected to a world of unspoken, and in many ways unspeakable, performance. Language itself, of course, can operate in what Paul Gilroy characterizes as "anti-discursive and extra-linguistic" ways – the social framing or the materiality of a text might matter as much as the content of a narrative.[47] In an Atlantic world of diverse literacies and communication competencies, texts often conjoined with images and acts, spreading through repetition and rehearsal. The materials of performance – props and costumes – could also communicate the signs of revolution. Dress and adornment – medals, cockades, and military uniforms – communicated the rearranging affiliations and even the values of a revolutionary world. Social performances spread the rituals of revolution, too, in oath-taking ceremonies and less formally structured festivities such as singing and dancing. More subtly, manners and gestures communicated new habits of deference or insolence in the wake of Haiti's revolution. A laugh, a smile at the wrong time, or even what one observer called the "squint of freedom" could convey something of revolution.[48]

[46] See Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2018), 118–20.
[47] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 57.
[48] Scott, *Common Wind*, 200.

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Most spectacularly, performative violence was imagined to spread in the wake of the Haitian revolution. The rebellious drive to burn plantations, to murder, and to escape bondage was met by official reprisals and public executions in escalating displays of revolutionary violence. And frequently, the anxieties about the spread of revolution betray anxieties about performance – a fear of imitation and re-enactment. Even when the imitation of revolution was only imagined, it produced tangible consequences. In the United States, particularly in the south, local governments passed regulations escalating slave patrols and banning the importation of "French Negroes," for example, following uprisings blamed on French and Franco-Caribbean agents. In Louisiana, one of the major destinations for colonists fleeing Saint Domingue's uprisings, the 1794 Pointe Coupée uprising and the 1811 German Coast uprising outside New Orleans were both regarded as attempts to imitate the Haitian Revolution.[49] Likewise, conspiracies in Virginia in 1800 and 1802 were alleged to involve French radicals and be "organized upon the French plan," as one commentator reported.[50] In Charleston, South Carolina, Haiti was implicated in the 1822 Denmark Vesey uprising.[51] Famously, in 1831, Nat Turner's Southampton, Virginia revolt was seen as inspired by and even aiming to gain the support of Haiti. Despite (or perhaps because of) the absence of legal proof, discourses of performance helped onlookers imagine disconnected events as part of a larger circulation and repetition of slave revolution with roots in Haiti. Although Americans often repressed or obscured their knowledge of slave rebellion, they nonetheless re-enacted and reproduced the Haitian revolution in a range of fragmented and disjointed forms. Performances of Haiti, like the "embedded narratives" of enslaved people that Nicole Aljoe finds hidden in plain sight in the texts of Caribbean slavery, bear witness to the impact of slave revolution in "structurally and formally elusive" ways.[52]

Performances of Haiti appeared in an early American theatre that was becoming more popular and commercially successful. Developing from the exclusive colonial social networks that Odai Johnson describes in

[49] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "The 1795 Slave Conspiracy in Pointe Coupée: Impact of the French Revolution," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 15 (1992): 130–41.

[50] Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 114–15.

[51] Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58/4 (October 2001): 915–76.

[52] Nicole N. Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies, 1709–1838* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 47.

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London in a Box, American theatre became more commercialized, capacious, and in some ways more inclusive, even if audiences remained often segregated by race, class, and gender. Distanced from the prestigious sources of tradition and the resources necessary to maintain them, the early American theatre replicated what it could and built new generic forms where it could not. In the hands of early American playwrights and performers, Haiti took on the popular and commercially successful forms of the playhouse. Haiti appeared, for example, in spectacle, pantomime, musical theatre, and melodrama – the popular theatrical forms that relied less on poetic scripts and more on visual and auditory effects. Scenes of Haiti were reshaped by the conventions of London's "illegitimate" theatre and later remade by blackface minstrelsy and what Bruce McConachie has characterized as the emergent theatre of "business-class respectability."[53] And although the performance practices and dramatic forms of the playhouse evolved, they also turned on repetition, reinvention, and self-reference – American theatre represented itself as much as it represented characters and events outside the playhouse.

At the same time, performance was popular and widely accessible, and it was part of a vigorous ongoing traffic between the formal stage and other sites of performance. Festive gatherings, civic rituals, social performances, and manners – the early national world of "perpetual fêtes" that David Waldstreicher examines, or the practices of politeness that David Shields describes as creating "communities of interest and fellow feeling" – all fed into the early American stage's forms and content.[54] In more abstract ways, performance offered widespread resources through which Americans acted out their various relationships to manners, aesthetics, and taste, bonding around those shared systems of performed value. Performance also, as Sandra Gustafson has pointed out, "permitted the staging of a variety of social and cultural relations" as different performance traditions of the Atlantic world "collided, merged, and polarized."[55]

[53] Bruce A. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820–1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), xiii.

[54] David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by University of North Carolina Press, 1997); David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by University of North Carolina Press, 1997), xviii.

[55] Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xiv–xv.

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The terms used to describe such acts reflect the variety and ambiguity of different kinds of performance. Most broadly, "performance" describes a wide range of ritualized forms of embodied re-enactment; each act is "live," ethereal, and unrepeatable, happening in a moment and disappearing. Performance, as Joseph Roach argues, is a stylized technology of memory defined by "substitution" and "surrogation" – what Richard Schechner has characterized as "restored behavior."[56] "Performance" can label what happens on a playhouse stage, but it can also identify the way everyday social interactions can be structured, stylized, ritualized, and audience-directed.[57] Traces of performance remain in what Diana Taylor has characterized as a "nonarchival system of transfer" that transmits "social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity."[58]

"Drama," as Raymond Williams has argued, names the intersection of performance event and literary codification.[59] Drama relies on its own conventions and highlights formal structures like genre, plot, and character. Texts can be "dramatic" insofar as they reflect the structure and format of performance, or can be understood as guiding the replication of performance – a script would be the most straightforward example, but other kinds of literary texts adopt the forms and formats of performance. The more colloquial use of "dramatic" to describe nonliterary events reflects general habits of thinking through literary form and structure.

"Theatrical" reflects the object relations, the social relationships, and the economies of the playhouse. Theatrical acts feature the institutional practices and tools of the craft, appearing before audiences in spaces reserved for leisure and entertainment. Theatrical tools and techniques such as stage settings and props, for example, are used to create the scene of performance, while masks, costumes, and stylized habits of declamation are used to represent characters onstage. Particularly in American culture, theatricality has long been disparaged as deceptive, false,

[56] Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2–4. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36.

[57] Erving Goffman's "presentation of self in everyday life," or Victor Turner's sense of social life as ritual, for example, inform this broadened sense of performance. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959); Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

[58] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), xvii, 2.

[59] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 109.

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immoral, or excessive.[60] At the same time, theatricality came to permeate the public and private social relations of Atlantic modernity, the term used to label the social world's artificiality, its constructedness, and even its inescapable emplottedness. Key terms like "performance," "drama," and "theatre" remain difficult to pin down partly because they are subject to near-constant re-evaluation and reclamation, but also because they describe related, overlapping, and competing phenomena. They name different aspects of the ritual repetition of symbolic action, how such events happen, and their relationships to the evidence left behind. Ultimately, as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon reminds us, performance happens "at the crossroads of the ontic and the mimetic," where doing and showing, being and representing meet.[61]

This critical vocabulary of performance, drama, and theatre is also an invitation to think through the problems of print archives and their relationships to the traces left behind by live performances. Print culture in the Atlantic world, at least in theory, abstracts and regulates bodies. Print reifies, commodifies, and reproduces expressions, and materializes and archives those words in physical libraries and textual canons – all of which profoundly affected access, recognition, and evaluation for the written expressions produced by people of color in the Atlantic world.[62] While performance, of course, had its own profoundly racialized constraints, it also allowed a variety of characters, voices, and actions to compete for attention. Performative or scriptive texts – the kinds of texts that can show evidence of playing Haitian – often balance delicately between the capacity to arrest or regulate performance and their ability to invoke or provoke a range of diverse, lively, disorderly, and even unfettered performances. And while institutionalized theatre is a relatively tradition-bound and regulation-oriented site of performance, it also points toward the diverse performance-centered multicultural practices that Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o characterizes as "orature."[63] Not

[60] See Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

[61] Dillon, *New World Drama*, 3.

[62] *Letters of the Republic* is the classic study of the ways in which print is imagined to work in the American bourgeois (and implicitly racialized as white) public sphere. Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). More recently, American cultural historians have returned to print culture to reckon with the ways in which the texts and material culture of early American literature were racialized. Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein (eds.), *Early African American Print Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

[63] Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, "Notes towards a Performance Theory of Orature," *Performance Research* 12/3 (November 30, 2007): 4–7.

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restrained by print culture's regimes of literacy and property acquisition, theatre, drama, and performance offer opportunities for reimagining the range of cultural expressions in use in the revolutionary Black Atlantic.

Ultimately, the performance archives of Haitian revolution point to routings of revolutionary desire throughout the Atlantic world. Ill-defined, partly repressed, and often at cross-purposes with themselves, playing Haitian acts out revolutionary desires despite persistent denial and disavowal. Performances of Haiti might illustrate what Raymond Williams characterized as "structures of feeling," but they also seem less structure and more feeling – unarticulated, complex, and fleeting. Coming in ambivalent, "knotted and condensed" forms, as Sianne Ngai points out, affect involves non-narrative ways of encountering the world.[64] Importantly, performances of the Haitian Revolution resonated in ways other than political; revolutionary acts were not simply about subversion and resistance, but also about the more ambiguous and pervasive drives of pleasure and profit. Audiences "felt" Haiti, for example, in subtle adjustments to dramatic genres, in the construction of new plot lines and in the satisfaction of conventional resolutions or unexpected plot twists. Haiti made itself known in the invention of new kinds of characters and in the pleasures or failures of identification and interconnection, of empathy and sympathy. Performances of Haitian revolution often provoked extravagant feeling, amplifying brutality and pleasure, decadence and deprivation. Such scenes heightened the sense of Haiti's alterity even as they inoculated audiences against the strangeness of those experiences, regulating and diminishing the affective impact of racial revolution. Embedded within the conventions of American drama, performances of Haiti could evoke radically different aesthetics and social sensibilities. At the same time, performances of Haiti gradually found institutional homes and audiences, stabilizing into comprehensible plots with familiar characters.

Revolutionary Performances, Revolution as Performance

Ultimately, performances of Haiti's revolution show how revolution *becomes* performance and, in the process, how the meanings of both revolution and performance can change. Performance practices articulate crucial aspects of revolution, and revolution is in turn remade in the image of performance. The effects, of course, can vary widely.

[64] On structures of feeling, see Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2001). On affect, see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

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Performances of Haiti could also underwrite a general sense that radical events should or must happen in recognizable generic forms – that history must fit neatly into a relatively limited set of categories with predictable features. Even the radical formlessness of Haiti's early "horrors" could become a genre of sorts, paving the way for the eventual reinstallation of conventional expectations. The traditions and conventions of theatrical performance, in effect, frame revolution as a thing of repetition and revision. In performance, revolution shows its reliance on acts of commemoration, repetition, and reiteration – as a thing often tied to the past, even when it comes in the guise of the radically new. Commingling violence and play, horror and pleasure, performances of revolution can work like a carnivalesque social safety valve, their disorder only temporary and ultimately conservative. At the same time, performances of revolution might genuinely further the upending of social hierarchies.[65] Performance can trivialize revolution, making play out of profoundly radical change. Even so, such play can itself be quite troubling when it entices the audience to imagine itself as the revolutionary other.

Theatrical acts can subtly reorganize revolution around questions of truthfulness and deception – a persistent countercurrent of antitheatricality that seems not just antitheatrical, but inherent to performance itself, as if the stage itself were always trafficking in duplicity and insincerity. The stage often imagined Black revolution as false, a matter of subterfuge and betrayal, or more subtly, as imitative, derivative, or unoriginal. At the same time, performances of Haitian Revolution sometimes staged revolution as a process of mutual imitation and self-reflexive performativity. Apparent opposites such as black and white, slave and free, privileged and abject, could seem onstage built out of mutual mimicry, complicating the very concepts of genuine and fake, original and imitative.

In more concrete terms, performing Haiti makes revolution into a matter of acting bodies. As Jeremy Glick has observed, theatre's "vocation of arranging bodies on stage" allows it to address questions of leadership, authority, power, and democracy.[66] Performance proceeds by literally dispensing and disposing of bodies throughout a scene. In the process, it produces and regulates foreground and background,

[65] The overall function of the carnivalesque has been debated by, for example, Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968); Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York University Press, 1978); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford University Press, 1975).

[66] Glick, *Black Radical Tragic*, 2.

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distinguishing major events and characters from minor ones – all questions that Haiti's revolution posed for its participants and onlookers alike. Performance can also self-consciously foreground the ways that characters and actors are constructed and deployed, and further, how people are construed *as* characters and actors – as types, but also as participants in a plot or as doers of action. Theatre also highlights the tensions or problems of regulated and unregulated action. The difference between revolutionary conflict and mere disorderly riot is the difference between scripted and unscripted acts, rehearsed or improvised performance. Performance can also offer ways of exploring the questions of free will and independent action that became central to representations of Haiti's revolution.

And in order to manage the dispensation of acting bodies, the theatre marshals material resources, and the tools of theatre – the masking, costumes, and props of the theatre, and even the spaces or stages on which theatre happens – can uncover the socially constructed practices of identity and affiliation that revolution suddenly destabilizes and denaturalizes. More broadly, the institutions of performance make visible the kinds of economies created or leveraged by revolution, and the kinds of publics convened and conditioned by performance. Theatricalizing the Haitian Revolution also brings to the fore the problematic dynamics of viewer and performer, watcher and watched that can shape the ways revolutions are seen and understood. The performed scene of revolution can position the witness as distant audience while still leaving open the possibility of vicarious participation in the disorderly scene, for example; it can show revolution as masked, displayed, or hidden in plain view. The presence of audiences also highlights the importance of spectatorship and surveillance as both a feature of and a response to revolution. Revolution, and particularly slave revolt, becomes subject to the regulating but also pleasurable practices of spectatorship. The theatre of revolution implicitly recruits audiences to keep watch, to stand guard, to judge and condemn.

It also imagines revolution in an arena defined by publicity, fame, and celebrity. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, theatre became a central site of celebrity cultural production, in which participants conjured a heightened sense of distinctive public figures as intimately known by a largely anonymous mass audience. As Bonnie Carr O'Neill has argued, "both celebrities and celebrity culture register the uncertainties that come with democracy," and Haitian characters transformed into

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celebrities made for an even more ambiguous business.[67] The emergent practices of celebrity culture in the 1790s, for example, made the unfamiliar, exotic, and previously anonymous refugees of Saint Domingue feel eminently knowable to American theatregoers. And later, in stage versions of Henry Christophe or oratorical celebrations of Toussaint Louverture, the practices of celebrity began to supplant and redefine older measures of character like fame, with its connotations of enduring greatness.[68] Staging Haitians as celebrities, of course, also highlights the "spectacular opacity" that Daphne Brooks has identified as a condition of public visibility for racialized bodies in the nineteenth century.[69]

As all these aspects suggest, "looking at" Haiti from the vantage point of American performance culture presents a range of conceptual limitations and problems. Observing Haiti through and in the American theatre runs the risk of attending primarily to outsider hopes and fears that were invented and projected onto Haiti. As Marlene Daut has pointed out, such approaches can reinforce the notion that Haitians "seem only to matter insofar as they affect American lives, American slavery, American politics, American history, and American literature."[70] Such performances highlight the need to be ethically responsible to Haiti, to remain mindful of the many problematic ways that popular and academic cultures have instrumentalized Haiti. Such performances also confirm that visibility is contingent and conditional. Being watched is never neutral, and visibility was hardly the only or inevitable end goal of Haitian strivings. Examining performance means always acknowledging

[67] Bonnie Carr O'Neill, *Literary Celebrity and Public Life in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 11.

[68] Bonnie Carr O'Neill usefully distinguishes celebrity as a "temporary appeal to a mass audience" from concepts like fame, "the durable reputation for greatness." In addition, she points out, "fame is always approbatory and fixed, a stable public reputation for virtuous achievement. Celebrity, by contrast, is an unsettled public identity, and it flourishes in controversy, scandal, and debate." O'Neill, *Literary Celebrity*, 1, 6.

[69] See Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). Brooks characterizes "spectacular opacity" as "a kind of performance rooted in a layering and creating a palimpsest of meanings and representations" (8 n.13). As Britt Rusert elaborates, where racialized discourses "made bodies hyper-visible onstage, in visual images and in print, black performers challenged this regime of forced visibility, refusing … attempts to make race fully transparent – and knowable – through the display of black bodies." Britt Rusert, "The Science of Freedom: Counterarchives of Racial Science on the Antebellum Stage," *African American Review* 45/3 (2012): 291–308 (at 295).

[70] Marlene L. Daut, "The 'Alpha and Omega' of Haitian Literature: Baron de Vastey and the U.S. Audience of Haitian Political Writing," *Comparative Literature* 64/1 (2012): 49–72 (at 52).

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the problems of seeing and being seen as well as the social relations that performance can make and unmake.

Even as American audiences watched, invented, and projected Haitianness, Haitians too built and acted out their own performances, and not necessarily for the viewing pleasure of non-Haitians. Haitian self-performances show the Black nation's active role in addressing some of the nineteenth century's most pressing political and cultural questions. Haiti's presence onstage prodded people to work through the problems of identity and difference, of national and racial affiliation and disaffiliation. It condensed questions of independence, freedom, and democracy, offering alternative political forms and practices. On American stages, Haiti presented a dramatic, if often unacknowledged, condemnation of the United States' persistent failure to live up to its own revolutionary principles. While Haiti and its revolution were ignored or repressed in some senses, in other (and equally profound) ways, Haiti remained very present in American culture – embodied, materialized, and acted out on American stages.

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