

Seeds of Liberty: The Proliferation of Natural Imagery during the Haitian Revolution

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IN 1775, TWO DECADES BEFORE THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION would shake the world, Guillaume-Thomas Raynal published a treatise on the history of the French Indies.¹ In this book, Raynal included a print that shows a six-breasted feminine Nature nursing both a black and white child. She looks upon a scene depicting the harsh violence of racial slavery in the American colonies, with white masters mercilessly beating their black slaves. Seventeen years later, three leaders of the Saint-Domingue slave insurrection, Biassou, Jean-François, and Toussaint L'Ouverture, would write a letter to the colonial government:

We are black, it is true, but tell us... what is the law that says that the black man must belong to and be the property of the white man?... Yes gentlemen, we are free like you... and we can neither see nor find the right that you pretend to have over us... set down on the earth like you, all being children of the same father created in the same image. We are your equals then, by natural right...²

Viewed in tandem, these sources reveal the infusion of appeals to natural imagery in French colonial discourse. Slave leaders, in arguing for equal rights, employed the increasingly common Enlightenment philosophy that mankind is one race. In Raynal's image, the illustrator transformed this discourse into an emotional appeal using images of femininity and violence to affect the viewer. This dual use of philosophical and emotional entreaty based on nature provided the discursive framework that defined how the conflicting sides of the Haitian Revolution described themselves and their opponents. This shared nature-based rhetoric allowed individuals to understand and effectively participate in the dialogue of revolution, even if their immediate economic, political, and social circumstances had more influence on their positions than any cultural trait they held in common.

Appeals to nature served as the foundation for the eighteenth-century discursive structure surrounding slavery. All parties that participated in the Haitian Revolution, whether they were for or against political equality and the abolition of slavery, drew on cultural images of nature to reinforce their positions. Rousseau furnished an argument against slavery that rested on man's natural state of freedom. Yet the cultural baggage that his words carried provided ammunition for defenders of slavery in their support of the colonial order. While Rousseau's place in Enlightenment thought was ambiguous, his works were unarguably influential, and his ideas spread throughout the whole Francophone world.³ By the beginning of the Haitian Revolution, his thinking represented an integral part of Francophone intellectual culture. But philosophy was not powerful enough to sway opinions. Polemicists also drew on evocative natural imagery to drive home their message. Despite opposing positions, because partisans in Saint-Domingue shared the same Enlightenment and colonial culture, their differing arguments resembled each other more often than not.

Throughout this essay, I use phrases such as "nature," "natural man," and "mankind." By "nature" and "natural," I am referring to the land, plants, and/or wild animals. These terms also refer to physical forces and disasters, such as fire or flood. The word "nature" often carries with it the connotation of being wild or unblemished by human contact. Natural man, then, is man untouched by civilization. He is man in his base form, purely an intelligent animal. While I am aware of the current preferred substitution of "human" for "man" so as to include all segments of the population, I have decided to keep with the nineteenth century usage of "man" as a referent to all human peoples. This necessarily excludes other genders, but I believe that this is more faithful to the original

¹Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 243.

²Biassou, Jean-François, and Toussaint L'Ouverture, "Letter to the General Assembly from Biassou, Jean-François and Toussaint L'Ouverture," in *Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Haitian Revolution*, ed. Nick Nesbitt (London: Verso, 2008), 6.

³Robert Wolker, *Rousseau: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11-12.

language surrounding the perceived nature of humanity at the time. Also, given the importance of masculinity and femininity in this hermeneutical framework, to use “humankind” would diminish the gendered implications that certain descriptions have for their subjects. “Natural man” more closely evokes the image of the brutish savage than does “natural human” or “natural man/woman” because of the continued association of gender with physical and mental characteristics. Thus in discussions in which the distinction between man and woman is important, “man” shall refer to the male portion of the human species; otherwise, “man” or “mankind” will be a synecdoche for the whole human race, with the obvious implication that men are the default humanity to the exclusion of all other genders.

Historiographically the French Revolution often represents a new era of European government, but nowhere did its influence establish a greater break from the past than in the Francophone colony of Saint Domingue. From 1791 to 1804, the French slave colony of Saint-Domingue went through a series of bloody and complex wars that resulted in the abolition of slavery, the independence of a new Haitian nation, and the Americas’ first black republic. Such a change was staggering, but the speed and violence of the collapse of French colonial power in Saint-Domingue created the need for specific discourses that explained the ever-shifting situation. Enlightenment rhetoric often informed each interest group’s justifications for its own veracity and legitimacy. Yet the extreme nature of the Haitian Revolution required more than just intellectual interpretations to explain its events. Passions had to be stirred, fear and bloodshed justified, pain and death vindicated. The combination of the staid philosophy of natural man with vehement exhortations to nature provided each side with similar propaganda. Rousseau’s discussion of man’s natural state illuminates the central ideological battle of the wars in Saint-Domingue: who could be called a man and what rights should a man possess? Partisans chose the most suitable parts of Enlightenment ideology to support their cause, and they augmented its emotional power with impassioned images of human nature and natural phenomena.

Tracing the possibility of a direct Rousseauian influence on any writers during the Haitian Revolution is difficult and unnecessary to this investigation.⁴ Instead of exploring whether leaders in Saint-Domingue actually read Rousseau, which, although interesting, is outside the scope of this study, it is more useful to acknowledge the general permeation of Rousseau’s political philosophy within Francophone culture during the late seventeenth century, and to explore how that influenced the Haitian Revolution.

The significance of Rousseau in colonial Saint-Domingue did not lie in any direct appeal made to his arguments concerning natural man. Instead, Rousseau’s work, specifically his treatises *The Social Contract* and *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality Among Men*, presented in crystallized form the debate between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces. In colonial Saint-Domingue, those educated enough to read and write would have had some idea of Rousseau’s argument concerning the natural equality of man, even if they were not able to attribute it to Rousseau himself. Because Rousseau did not influence either interest group directly, but rather by the diffusion of his ideas within Francophone society, any dissonance that appeared between competing statements did not create a philosophical dilemma. Proponents of colored equality and abolition could draw on the tenet that all men were naturally equal and free. Opponents could point to discourse painting coloreds and blacks as closer to the natural human state of savage barbarity. Rousseau should not be thought of as the direct antecedent of any one philosophy during the Haitian Revolution but as a useful lens through which to view the French ideological currents surrounding natural man at the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution.

In relation to natural man, Rousseau offered two theses pertinent to the discussion of race

⁴Scholars have long debated whether revolutionary leaders actually read any key Enlightenment texts. For a list of references to this historiography, see Marlene Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 10-11.

relations and rebellion in Saint-Domingue: that slavery was wrong, and that a large gulf separated the natural man from the civilized man. Although in his discourse, Rousseau used the word “slave” liberally to apply to all men who surrender their free will to any outside institution, his comments can be extended to the ultimate form of this practice, slavery. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau explicitly stated his disdain for slavery: “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.”⁵ Certain men were not born to be servile to other men. All were free at birth, and only later did they acquire restrictions on this freedom. Indeed, Rousseau claimed that in becoming a slave, one “renounce[s] one’s humanity. . . such a renunciation is contrary to man’s very nature...”⁶ Slavery was not a natural state; it had no justification in natural or divine law.⁷ The only basis for slavery was an inherited strength of the master and the cowardice of the slave.⁸ Given Rousseau’s promotion of the social contract as an agreement willingly entered into by both parties, his discourse surrounding slavery amounted to a powerful denunciation of the profitable trade in human bodies. In no terms can one argue that Rousseau supported the continuation of slavery.

Yet in *The Discourse on Inequality*, one can find the roots of a potential justification for the continuation of human bondage. While Rousseau never endorsed slavery, the wording he used to describe slaves portrayed them as inferior beings. According to Rousseau, slaves were not natural men. Natural men valued their freedom above all else.⁹ Slaves, on the other hand, “do nothing but boast of the peace and repose they enjoy in their chains. . . It is not for slaves to deliberate about freedom.”¹⁰ In effect, Rousseau argued that slaves like being enslaved, a glaring stain on their character. If to be human was to love freedom, the state of a slave was lower than that of a “true” man. While slavery itself was wrong, slaves were a lower form of human than the free man, as many slaveholders maintained.

Civilized man was as inherently distinct from natural man as natural man was from the enslaved.¹¹ He had different values, different abilities, and different purposes for living.¹² Rousseau viewed the condition of natural man as a more desirable state than submission to the corrupting influences of civilization.¹³ Yet Rousseau was writing in the European intellectual tradition; although he ostensibly favored natural men, the language he used implied unconscious racial prejudices. In several passages in the Second Discourse, Rousseau characterized the Carib and other American peoples as closer to the state of savage natural men.¹⁴ While Rousseau viewed natural man as the preferred state, other Europeans exalted civilization’s refining and enlightening effects on man’s mind. In identifying American peoples as natural men, Rousseau distinguished and excluded them from the world of sophisticated European thought to which he belonged, and inadvertently paved the way for the racist dichotomy of civilized white man and primitive Indian savage. Rousseau himself condemned slavery, but the roots of an inherited stratified society could be found in his work. In effect, he left open the race question of whether blacks or coloreds could be considered equal to whites.

Pro-slavery French writers drew on this discourse of difference to justify human bondage. Blacks were different than both white and colored people; in Saint-Domingue, those of mixed African and European ancestry were termed “colored”. Inferior, blacks were destined to be slaves. A

⁵Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1968), 49.

⁶Ibid, 55.

⁷Ibid, 58.

⁸Ibid, 52.

⁹Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, trans. Franklin Philip (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72.

¹⁰Ibid, 73.

¹¹Ibid, 83.

¹²Ibid, 83-4.

¹³Ibid, 62, 68-9, 74, 84.

¹⁴Ibid, 49-50, 84.

French priest in Saint-Domingue described blacks as “‘the opprobrium of mankind’ and the ‘dregs of nature.’”¹⁵ In his account of the Haitian Revolution entitled *Mon Odyssée*, an anonymous Saint-Domingue planter explained why slaves were whipped: “This method of chastisement was adopted because the African, barely civilized, is considered a child and treated as such.”¹⁶ Another chronicler of the war, M. Gros, described blacks as “naturally suspicious and bloody minded.”¹⁷ In a play written by a white author shortly after the war, the main black character delivered a disparaging monologue of his own race: “Our color, our primitive senses, the deep ignorance of the rules and habits of civilization, even the form of our bodies, everything encourages them to deprive us of the benefits that nature gives to the human species.”¹⁸ These accounts portrayed the black slave as primitive, ignorant, and uncivilized and were used as a justification for their slavery. The unknown Saint-Domingue planter went so far as to bemoan the freedom of the “submissive African. . . made to be a slave.”¹⁹ Employing a discourse that echoed Rousseau’s dichotomy between natural and civilized man, this racial dialogue painted the African as biologically inferior to the European.²⁰ Rousseau used the same language to describe natural man as “primitive,” as “a child,” and as having no sense of right or wrong.²¹ While Rousseau would not have considered this description of natural man as a valid justification for slavery, his writing was informed by a social hierarchy that could be merged with a more violently racial one.

Colonial writers employed this racial discourse of biological inferiority to argue for the continued disenfranchisement of colored people in Saint-Domingue. Despite the fact that a considerable proportion of free colored people owned property and slaves, white politicians still denied them political power. Their reason was that colored people “would never be able to rid themselves of the ‘original stain’ of their barbarity.”²² Marlene Daut’s monograph on the representation of colored people during the Haitian Revolution provides ample evidence of the disdainful rhetoric surrounding colored people. Daut terms one of the tropes that emerges from this period the “monstrous hybrid.”²³ Colored people, because they were of mixed race, were unnatural sub-humans who, according to one French priest, were “composed of all that was bad in Europeans and Negroes.”²⁴ Another contended that even “nature was horrified at the view of this monster.”²⁵ The planter naturalist, Moreau de Saint-Méry, praised colored people for their intellect and beauty in his first-hand description of Saint-Domingue. But he also characterizes them as indolent and pleasure-oriented. Colored women were also dissimilar to white women; their “entire being. . . is dedicated to sensual pleasure. . . nature has given her charm, appeal, sensitivity, and, what is far more dangerous, the ability to experience more keenly than her partners the sensual pleasures. . . .”²⁶ In treating colored people as inherently different, and in many ways worse, than whites, writers reduced them to second-class citizens while still maintaining their position above the black slave. They argued that these sensual, pleasure-

¹⁵Daut, *Tropics of Haiti*, 76.

¹⁶“A Poet in the Midst of Insurrection: ‘Mon Odyssée,’” in *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*, Jeremy Popkin, ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 85.

¹⁷Gros, “Inside the Insurgency: Gros’s *Historick Recital*,” in *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*, Jeremy Popkin, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 137.

¹⁸“Imagining the Motives behind the Insurrection,” in *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*, Jeremy Popkin, ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 85.249.

¹⁹“Poet in the Midst,” Popkin, 74.

²⁰For a brief discussion of the change between race as a biological factor and a sociological factor, see Daut, *Tropics of Haiti*, 21.

²¹Rousseau, *Inequality*, 45, 51.

²²Daut, *Tropics of Haiti*, 83.

²³Ibid, 7.

²⁴“Cette race est composée de tout ce qu’il y a de mauvais dans le Européens et dans les Nègres.” Ibid, 74.

²⁵“La nature, épouvantée d’horreur à la vue de ce monstre. . . .” Ibid, 74.

²⁶Médéric-Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, “Description. . . of the French Part of the Island of Saint-Domingue,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 58-59.

driven humans were not fit to participate in the governing of a colony. Although they were part white, their ancestry blemished them with the sub-human quality of the Saint-Domingue black.

Abolitionists had a less complicated connection with Rousseau than slavery proponents did due to Rousseau's explicit rejection of human bondage. Because Rousseau believed slavery was against the nature of man, many polemicists painted slavery as a crime that nature would avenge. Mercier's prophecy of a slave revolt had nature producing the slave rebellion's leader.²⁷ Both Abbé Grégoire and Marat spoke of slave rebellion as the natural outcome of the violation of slaves' rights as men.²⁸ Ostensibly, Rousseau's ideas supported abolitionist discourse over pro-slavery rhetoric. Rousseau was unequivocal in declaring that freedom was the preferred state of the natural man.²⁹ However, against the vested interests of French slaveholders and the merchant class, intellectual argument was not enough to make progress; those fighting for colored equality and eventually abolition needed to inflame the righteous passions of the public.

Each interest group realized that only through intense emotional appeals would they win the war, both physically and ideologically. The first political question that arose with any seriousness was the equality of colored peoples, especially those with economic power. The polemic used by white planters against equality painted colored people as too close to the inferior slave state of the blacks. Because of their biology, blacks "are addicted to their pleasures, flighty, sly, mean, and capable of the greatest crimes."³⁰ To discredit the push for colored equality, white planters not only created the "monstrous hybrid" rhetoric of an indolent and pleasure-loving race, they transplanted the discourse into war reports to show colored peoples as violent savages, inhuman in their actions. Their "monstrous hybridity" was blamed for the worst violence of the Revolution³¹:

The Mulattos have generally more finesse and guile than the Negroes; they have above all a barbarous and ferocious character that is everywhere apparent. . . almost all of the atrocious actions that have taken place in Saint-Domingue since the Revolution were guided, ordered, and more often than not, executed by the Mulattos. . . There are very few acts of kindness and humanity that one could attribute to them...whereas we could cite plenty of them with respect to the Negroes towards their masters of towards the Whites.³²

Colored people were perceived as worse than black slaves, being unnatural in their mixed race birth. During the war, the foundation of natural difference between colored people and all other "pure" races switched from a focus on the sensuousness of colored people to their barbarous, unfeeling nature. The "monstrous hybrids" truly became monsters, less than human for their violence and savagery. Designated as "beasts," they were unfit for political life.

Yet the demonization of the hybrid colored race did not preclude a similar vilification of blacks. Writers depicted blacks as violent sub-humans, a justification for the quashing of slave rebellion. Often, these images compared slaves to ferocious and bloodthirsty animals, including tigers and birds of prey. The author of *Mon Odyssée* used a particularly harrowing phrase that encapsulates this sort of rhetoric: "I will tell you of the conditions among these men. . . of these unchained tigers

²⁷Louis-Sébastien Mercier, "Prophesies of Slave Rebellion," in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 54.

²⁸Abbé Grégoire, "Letter to Those Who Love Mankind," in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 73-4. Jean-Paul Marat, "The Friend of the People," in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 112.

²⁹Rousseau, *Inequality*, 72-3.

³⁰Daut, *Tropics of Haiti*, 75.

³¹Ibid, 95-98.

³²Ibid, 97.

whose roots in barbarism cause Nature to shudder.”³³ M. LeClerc, a Creole witness of the 1791 war against slave insurrection, Michel-Etienne Descourtilz, a naturalist planter taken hostage by black troops, and the aforementioned M. Gros all equated blacks with tigers.³⁴ Descourtilz called them “wild beasts” and “hungry vultures” who “[enjoy] these scenes of desolation in cold blood.”³⁵ In opposition, he characterized himself as a “lamb bound for slaughter.”³⁶ In evoking biblical imagery, Descourtilz associated whites with the innocent Jesus and blacks with his oppressors. Painting blacks as uncontrollable beasts or bloodthirsty tyrants allowed planters to justify both their original enslavement and the war to put down the abolitionist cause.

Along with the beastly comparisons that vilified blacks, planters used violent metaphors that evoked their “inhuman” state. Sometimes, blacks were portrayed as cannibals. In a lamentation of dead whites, Le Clerc vowed to “measure himself against one of the man-eaters and . . . to run the iron through his innards.”³⁷ Descourtilz also described them as blood-loving cannibals.³⁸ The term barbarian often surfaced in white accounts of the war, painting the slaves as ungovernable, uncivilized desecrators. Other times, slaves were purely inhuman monsters. Although this discourse was different from that surrounding colored people because it did not focus on any inherently unnatural state of being, the propagandistic results were the same. LeClerc described how the blacks and coloreds “glutted themselves by shocking our eyes with the mutilated carcasses of our brethren” and “compelled [prisoners] to assist” when they “butchered [other prisoners], trussing [them] like a fowl ready prepared for the spit, toad-fashion, and drinking their blood.”³⁹ One of the commanders was a “monster, whose thirst for human blood could not be allayed.”⁴⁰ Descourtilz called his opponents “vampires thirsty for blood and plunder.”⁴¹ These violent representations of blacks, coloreds, slaves, and partisans served to further reinforce, along with the animal imagery, the general trope of the savage, wild subhuman who, when not controlled, would destroy all living beings in his path. Blacks, colonialists believed, were inherently different from and worse than whites, and here was the evidence to prove it. A completely different species from both natural and civilized man, they could not be treated as humans.

The repeated emphasis on the insurgents’ barbarity was only one method to defend the blacks’ unfitness for rule. Another, less common approach was to connect them with the feminine and sensual. Descourtilz described Toussaint’s officers as “caricatures of affected dress and self-importance.”⁴² He spoke of one man, Gingembre-Trop-Fort, whose sword was almost as tall as he was. Gingembre wore “large and heavy rings” and added a pillow to his saddle already “covered in velours with gold fringes.”⁴³ He described other men who looked ridiculous in fancy collars, gaudy jewelry, and “women’s earrings.”⁴⁴ Even Toussaint L’Ouverture, for whom Descourtilz had more respect, was prone to pleasure-seeking and arrogant, arbitrary decisions.⁴⁵ These details combined to create a picture of a foolish, vain, and sensual black and colored race. True rulers were manly; rational

³³“Poet in the Midst,” Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 84.

³⁴LeClerc, “An Expedition against the Insurgents in November 1791,” in *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*, Jeremy Popkin, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 99. Michel-Etienne Descourtilz, “A White Captive in the Struggle against the Leclerc Expedition,” in *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*, Jeremy Popkin, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 284. Gros, “Inside the Insurgency,” 125.

³⁵Descourtilz, “A White Captive,” 297.

³⁶Ibid, 309.

³⁷LeClerc, “Expedition,” 98.

³⁸Descourtilz, “A White Captive,” 282.

³⁹Leclerc, “Expedition,” 126-7.

⁴⁰Ibid, 127.

⁴¹Descourtilz, “A White Captive,” 283.

⁴²Ibid, 278.

⁴³Ibid, 279.

⁴⁴Ibid, 279.

⁴⁵Ibid, 270-80.

and able to control their passions; they did not care for silly trinkets or self-serving flattery. These traits were reserved for women, who, as irrational creatures, were largely excluded from the political sphere. And as nature was often associated with femininity in opposition to masculine civilization, this characterization of blacks and coloreds further reinforced the racial hierarchy of natural and civilized man. By ascribing feminine traits to insurgent commanders, Descourtilz underlined their unsuitability for self-government already established by the violent, savage imagery of other authors.

The last major articulation of the unnaturalness of black power evoked Nature herself, as a woman offended by their barbarity and bloodiness. The *Mon Odyssée* planter, in addition to his description of the blacks as tigers horrifying Nature, described the insurgents' violence as "crimes at which Nature would cringe."⁴⁶ In his narration of a fellow prisoner's cold-blooded murder, Descourtilz contended that, "all Nature shuddered at this act of cruelty, even the animals. The birds broke the silence with plaintive songs, while the animals seemed to react to the dismal event with low and broken moans."⁴⁷ With this dialogue, the black and colored insurgents were not just untamed beasts; they were reduced to worse than beasts, unnatural beings that Nature could not understand. They were not just unfit for self-rule. They had to be annihilated for the sake of humanity.

Yet invocations of nature and the use of natural imagery were also used to justify the insurgency and slave rebellion. Partisans of colored and black people often used the ethos of Nature personified to justify abolition. As stated in Mercier's prophecy, Nature was the mother of the slaves' avenger. A later prophecy asked, "Where is he, this great man that Nature owes to its vexed, oppressed, tormented children?"⁴⁸ Both predictions established her as a female and mother figure, one who would give birth to the savior of her other children. A nineteenth-century Haitian politician provided an account of a slave meeting. Boukman, a slave leader, was seen encouraging insurrection: "Nature stirred. . . Three centuries of slavery outraged her clemency, dirtied her august presence with its crimes. . ." ⁴⁹ Here was the female Nature, violated by the slavers who dared to abuse her children. In a world fraught with sexual tension, especially between races, this metaphor made powerful propaganda.

Partisans also used images of natural disaster, such as fire and explosion, to justify slave rebellion. Fire is unpredictable, and when enough heat and pressure builds up, an eruption is likely to happen at any point. The metaphoric potential to relate the heat and pressure of fire to the harsh reality and oppression of slavery was too rich to ignore; this kind of imagery was prolific in Saint-Domingue writings. In October 1790, Grégoire predicted that, "the volcano of liberty that had been lit in France will soon bring about a general explosion. . . in the two hemispheres."⁵⁰ In a speech on the Haitian Revolution, Étienne Laveaux, a French politician, also painted the French Revolution as having lit the fuse for the rebellion in Saint-Domingue: "Liberty has lit an electric blaze among these inhabitants; it consumed the rebels and fired the others with a desire to be worthy of the motherland."⁵¹ Mercier's and Raynal's prophecies also drew on the imagery of natural disaster but evoked more than just fiery explosion. Mercier stated that, "so many slaves oppressed by the most odious slavery seemed to be awaiting only [a savior's signal] to become as many heroes. The torrent that breaks dikes and the lightning that strikes have a less immediate and violent effect."⁵²

⁴⁶"Poet in the Midst," Popkin, 76.

⁴⁷Descourtilz, "A White Captive," 289-290.

⁴⁸Abbé Raynal, "Prophecies of Slave Rebellion," in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 56.

⁴⁹Hérard Dumesle, "Voyage to the North of Haiti," in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 87.

⁵⁰Grégoire, "Letter," 74.

⁵¹Étienne Laveaux, "A Celebration of the Anniversary of Abolition," in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 157.

⁵²Mercier, "Prophecies," 54.

Raynal, in describing “two colonies of fugitive Negroes,” characterized them as “bolts of lightning” that “announce the thunder, and all that the Negroes lack is a leader courageous enough to carry them to vengeance and carnage.”⁵³ Just like nature’s unleashing of natural calamity, slavery created an irrepressible and unstoppable force. The burning of large tracts of Saint-Domingue land and property by insurgents during the rebellion only reinforced this image. The prophecies of a storm to come became true; man would not be chained for long in a state antithetical to his nature.

Grégoire provided the abolition metaphor that spanned the distance between these destructive images of explosions and fires and the more positive picture of the growth of liberty throughout the colony. His same paragraph that described the “volcano of liberty” promised “our islands harbor the seeds of their own destruction, which are sending out roots.”⁵⁴ This metaphor also dealt with the natural and inevitable dismantling of slave-holding colonial society. But unlike fire imagery, seeds promised the growth of something new: a land of liberty. Dubois notes that a “tree of liberty” was symbolically planted in Le Cap in 1793 to symbolize the new order.⁵⁵ Toussaint L’Ouverture said of his imprisonment by Napoleon, “In overthrowing me, you have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep.”⁵⁶ Liberty had taken root in Saint-Domingue during the Revolution. The natural growth of the tree paralleled the recovery of man’s natural state of freedom. From the ashes of the inevitable fire, nature nourished the seed of liberty.

The flexibility of nature-evoking rhetoric during the Haitian Revolution is evident in the reversal of the dominant discourse surrounding colored peoples at the beginning of the Revolution. At the outbreak of rebellion in Saint-Domingue, the conflict was largely between colored people who wanted political rights and whites who denied them representation. White polemicists focused on the mixed, unnatural constitution of colored people. As aforementioned, many of these descriptions painted colored people as sensual, lazy, and corrupt. Colored planters, including Julien Raimond, rebutted this racist view of mixed people. In 1791, Raimond published a treaty in metropolitan France that argued for the political rights of colored people. In order to support his position, he deliberately separated colored people and slaves. He claimed that white planters, in their jealousy of colored economic power, conflated the slave and the free colored position to keep their own political power.⁵⁷ According to Raimond, a bid for colored equality was not a bid for abolition. He explicitly stated “the basic idea of everything you have just read is that the majority of the free colored class was born free, of free parents, and in legitimate marriage, and those who are illegitimate were born of free mothers.”⁵⁸ Slaves and black men were largely excluded from his vision of change. Raimond was not trying to disturb the reigning economic order. Instead, he wanted to create a space for colored people in the class formerly reserved for white planters.

The conflict over colored equality was therefore not one designed to establish equality as a principle. Instead, the debate centered on whether colored people were closer to their black or white ancestors. Were colored people tainted by the uncivilized man, or was this stain sufficiently diluted to allow them rights? As the political situation rapidly changed in Saint-Domingue, the answer to this question shifted. The conservative position dominated at the start of the Revolution. When metropolitan France passed a decree on March 8, 1790 that left open the possibility for colored

⁵³Raynal. “Prophecies,” 56.

⁵⁴Grégoire, “Letter,” 74.

⁵⁵Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 162.

⁵⁶C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980).

⁵⁷Julien Raimond, “Observations on the Origin and Progression of the White Colonists’ Prejudice against the Men of Color,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 79-81.

⁵⁸*Ibid*, 81.

power, an assembly in Saint-Domingue denounced the mandate: “they would never share political power with a ‘bastard and degenerate race.’”⁵⁹ The execution of the insurrectionist colored planter Vincent Ogé reinforced the message of the white Saint-Domingue planters.⁶⁰ Yet, as the slave insurrection in the North and the colored agitation in the West and South progressed through the early 1790s, some metropolitan and Saint-Domingue whites began to reconsider their position. Fighting the abolitionist slaves alone would be impossible for the whites. They would need allies to uphold slavery.⁶¹ Some politicians also recognized the inconstancy of inequality between white and colored men under the new Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.⁶² By April 1792, Paris had declared full equality for colored peoples, and the decree was accepted with relatively little protest by the white planters in Saint-Domingue.⁶³ Faced with the very real possibility of complete abolition, white planters changed their ideological position on colored people. Those who before were hopelessly contaminated by black blood were now regaled as whiter allies against the threat of African slave insurrection. Economic desperation had tipped the scales between the two Rousseauian philosophies, changing colored people’s status from natural barbarian to civilized ally.

An ideology of natural imagery was used to justify policy after the abolition of slavery and the establishment of a new government in Saint-Domingue. The introduction of forced agricultural labor to replace slave workers on plantations required propaganda to convince citizens to conform to the government’s will. Politicians took ideas from Rousseau that articulated property ownership to justify the new method of production. Rousseau stated “labour alone gives the grower the right to the crops from the land he has tilled and this consequently gives him the right... to the land itself.”⁶⁴ By tilling the land and conquering nature, the citizens of Saint-Domingue proved themselves civilized men and legitimate owners of the land. The establishment of black ownership of property was so important to the new regime that the writers of the 1801 Constitution of Saint-Domingue included a whole section on “Cultivation and Commerce.”⁶⁵ Its first article evoked the primacy of agricultural production: “Since the colony is essentially agricultural, it cannot be allowed to suffer even the slightest interruption in the work of cultivation.”⁶⁶ The continuity of agricultural production was also important for Saint-Domingue within the international sphere. Plantation agriculture was the most expedient way to convince other countries that Saint-Domingue was a legitimate colony by appealing to their economic interests.⁶⁷ In the European eyes, the intellectual legacy of Rousseau and the Enlightenment, along with their continued economic cooperation with foreign powers, gave Saint-Domingue intellectual and political validity.

To further persuade the world that the black citizens of Saint-Domingue had a right to their colony, political leaders portrayed the land as a natural extension of the Saint-Dominguan people before the Revolution even started. Indeed the best examples of this rhetoric came not from Saint-Domingue, but from the mother country itself. In both of their prophecies concerning slave rebellion, Mercier and Raynal depicted the land of Saint-Domingue as intimately tied to both the pain and the ancestors of the slaves. Mercier described how “the soil of America avidly drank the blood it has been awaiting for so long, and the bones of their ancestors, murdered by cowards, seemed to stand

⁵⁹Dubois, *Avengers*, 86.

⁶⁰Ibid, 87-88.

⁶¹Ibid, 118-19.

⁶²Ibid, 89.

⁶³Ibid, 137-8.

⁶⁴Rousseau, *Inequality*, 64.

⁶⁵Toussaint L’Ouverture, “Constitution of the French Colony of Saint-Domingue,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 169.

⁶⁶Ibid, 169.

⁶⁷Dubois, *Avengers*, 225-6.

up and shake with joy. . .”⁶⁸ Raynal copied almost word for word Mercier’s prediction, prophesying that “the American fields will be intoxicated by the blood that they have been awaiting for so long, and the bones of so many unfortunates, piled up for three centuries, will shake with joy.”⁶⁹ The land, thirsty for vengeance against the oppressors of its people and composed of the remains of the wronged, was an extension of the oppressed slaves. Spilling the slavers’ blood acted both as a symbolic remedy of past wrongs and as a method to fertilize the soil for its future owners. This land-human connection was further evinced in the language connecting blacks with Native Americans or calling blacks natives of the land. The commander Dessalines, in the war against Napoleon, named his army the “Army of the Incas” and later the “Indigenous Army.”⁷⁰ Dubois posits that this title acted as a referent to the past injustices of the Europeans against the Native Americans and connected the blacks’ oppression with that of the island’s earlier inhabitants.⁷¹ Makandal, a rebellious slave who led resistance against whites before the Revolution, was purported to have given a speech in which he used colored scarves to symbolize the owners of the island. The first scarf was yellow, for the natives, the second, white, for the Europeans. Then Makandal pulled out the third scarf, black, predicting that it symbolized “those who will remain masters of the island.”⁷² With these scarves, Makandal traced the legitimacy of land ownership from those who inhabited Saint-Domingue before colonization to those who would inherit Saint-Domingue in the future. While not explicitly natural imagery, Makandal’s speech, combined with discourse that portrayed Nature thirsting for the blood of the wronged and rhetoric that connected oppressed blacks with oppressed natives, subtly intimated that Nature gave herself to the side of the persecuted. The land itself chose its rightful owners, transferring political legitimacy from the island’s natives to its black and colored inhabitants.

The final piece of land imagery used to support the new political regime was again one of feminine Nature. This time she was a fertile woman made to be plowed. Descourtilz, writing in the European tradition of land as female, lamented the destruction of the old order in the account of his captivity: “Any reasonable man must suffer to see nature herself saddened by not being able to show her generosity, made impotent by devastation. . .”⁷³ However, in exultations of the new regime and its agricultural program, commentators described Nature as joyful in the new righteousness. The sympathetic Saint-Domingue journalist rejoiced that “cultivated by free hands, the soil of Saint-Domingue will compensate its generous inhabitants.”⁷⁴ And in abolishing slavery, French politicians claimed “we are hurling liberty into the New World; she will bring abundant fruits and establish deep roots there.”⁷⁵ This rhetoric legitimized the new regime of freed slaves by stating that liberty, not slavery, was the condition for Nature’s fertility and happiness. Without someone to plow her, however, she would be barren and distraught. L’Ouverture’s policy of forced labor could be placed into the framework of the natural relationship between men and the land. While the regime was not the only source of propagandistic appeals to nature, by the end of the Revolution, it played a prominent role in the production of natural pathos as a revolutionary tool.

Yet, philosophical justifications and natural imagery were not used in any systematic way to

⁶⁸Mercier, “Prophesies,” 55.

⁶⁹Raynal, “Prophesies,” 56.

⁷⁰Ibid, 299.

⁷¹Laurent Dubois, “Avenging America: The Politics of Violence in the Haitian Revolution,” in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. by David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 121-22.

⁷²Dubois, *Avengers*, 56.

⁷³Descourtilz, “A White Captive,” 276.

⁷⁴H.D. de Saint-Maurice, “The Destruction of Cap Français in June 1793,” in *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*, Jeremy Popkin, ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 208.

⁷⁵“The Abolition of Slavery,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 132.

support the position of one or more interest groups. Organizations and governments did not produce this propaganda by methodically taking Rousseau's ideas and transforming them into passionate emotional entreaties. Instead, Enlightenment philosophy and natural imagery were part of the way that literate French and Haitian peoples viewed the world. They used Rousseauian ideology and appeals to the natural world to justify their interests and positions. This intellectual strain should therefore not be viewed as directed or intentional. Instead, it was a product of eighteenth-century French colonial society, one that permeated political thought and common speech. Although the people of Saint-Domingue were invested enough in their different ideological positions to start a bloody, ten-year war, their shared culture heritage ensured that the same rhetoric was used in their intellectual and physical battles.

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