

1 Rebels and Refugees

Sentimental Suffering and Antic Revolt in the 1790s

On May 22, 1795, audiences at Philadelphia's Chestnut Street Theatre encountered the Haitian Revolution onstage in the unlikely form of John Murdock's sentimental comedy *The Triumphs of Love; or, Happy Reconciliation*.¹ Murdock's play addressed the social issues and politics of the day, and advertisements announced its treatment of "several interesting subjects, such as Negro Slavery, and our glorious Revolution."² Although the ads did not say so specifically, it also dramatized the impact of the Haitian Revolution in the form of refugees who had begun to arrive in Philadelphia in increasing numbers during the 1790s. Presenting Saint Domingue's refugees as unfortunate but admirable sufferers, the play also imagined a new variation on a conventional Black character – the comically rebellious slave, now inspired by the songs and slogans of the French Revolution, who entertains even as he embodies the spreading threat of revolutionary sentiment.

While Murdock's play focuses on Philadelphia characters such as Quaker patricians and Irish servants, it also turns centrally on the arrival of a French brother and sister who have fled the Haitian Revolution. The brother, Beauchamp, who has befriended the young Quaker George Friendly, finds himself called back to revolutionary Cap Français, the "very jaws of death."³ As he departs for Saint Domingue, his sister Clementina makes the journey in the opposite direction, leaving Saint Domingue and arriving in Philadelphia. Clementina, declaring herself "wretched and unfortunate," quickly captures George's affections.⁴ At play's end, George marries the lovely refugee as Beauchamp returns to Philadelphia. In including this refugee plot line, *The Triumphs of Love*

¹ *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser*, May 22, 1795; Murdock's script was printed with the support of "a number of gentlemen," and advertised for sale beginning September 25, 1795. John Murdock, *The Triumphs of Love; or, Happy Reconciliation. A Comedy in Four Acts* (Philadelphia: Printed by R. Folwell, no. 33, Arch-Street, 1795).

² *Gazette of the United States*, September 25, 1795.

³ Murdock, *Triumphs of Love*, 71.

⁴ Murdock, 70.

adapts the conventions of sentimental comedy to accommodate the far-reaching effects of Caribbean slave revolution. While white characters dominate the play, it also stages the impact of slave revolution in the antic misbehavior of francophile Black characters. After the Black character Sambo is freed in what Heather S. Nathans has identified as American drama's first manumission scene, he returns to the stage inebriated and chanting French revolutionary songs.⁵ In a garbled but recognizable rendition of the French revolutionary anthem "La Carmagnole," Sambo drunkenly repeats "liberty and quality for eber and eber."⁶ Sambo's radical slogans suggest the frightening impact (real or imagined) of the French Revolution on Black Americans. At the same time, the scene betrays a certain ambivalence about Black revolution, implying that Saint Domingue's "Black Jacobins," as C. L. R. James called them, were merely servile imitators of the French Revolution.⁷

Ambivalent as it may be, the play's acknowledgement of the Haitian Revolution is a significant moment in American theatre.⁸ Murdock's drama "played Haitian" in a variety of ways: it highlighted the presence of French refugees who repetitively played out their own experiences during and after the revolts. It also reimagined the revolution in and as imitative and improvisational play, as the actions of Sambo suggest; and it transformed the entire scene by bringing the revolution's themes to the professional stage in an attempt to partake in new opportunities for profit and status in a rapidly changing US entertainment industry. While avoiding scenes of revolutionary violence, the play nevertheless reckons with some of the new characters, backstories, and social relationships that Caribbean slave revolts had introduced to the United States. In observing current events, the play makes a significant departure from typical Anglo-American theatre, which relied largely on a traditional repertoire of recycled scripts and conventions. American theatres of the 1790s, recently reopened after the US war for independence, seemed

⁵ Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 95. See also George Overcash Seilhamer, *History of the American Theatre*, vol. III (Philadelphia: Globe Printing House, 1888), 176–78.

⁶ Murdock, *Triumphs of Love*, 67.

⁷ C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1989). On the French and American historiography of the Haitian Revolution, see Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, "The Specter of Saint-Domingue: The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the United States and France," in Geggus (ed.), *World of the Haitian Revolution*, 317–38.

⁸ Murdock's treatment of characters from Saint Domingue certainly exceeds the vague references to revolutions in "other climes" that appear from time to time in American plays such as William Dunlap's revolutionary tragedy *André: A Tragedy, in Five Acts* (New York, 1798), 73.

open to a degree of innovation and experimentation. Philadelphia's "New Theatre" (later the well-known Chestnut Street Theatre) produced a limited number of American-authored plays, and John Murdock, a hairdresser with theatrical ambitions, could garner support from local patrons as an aspiring "native genius."⁹ Although it only saw a single night of performance, Murdock's fictional refugees register a turn toward local characters and current events that would position Saint Domingue's refugees to become admired celebrities and purveyors of cultural prestige in the decade to come.

The Triumphs of Love also reflects broader changes that the Haitian Revolution worked subtly in American culture. The characters and stories arriving in the wake of Saint Domingue's slave uprisings shaped discourses of racial identity, national belonging and exclusion, and freedom and bondage. Murdock's play, staging displaced white refugees alongside mischievous Black servants, reflects the ways that Americans broadly reimagined the harrowing, large-scale vision of Saint Domingue's uprisings as comic visions of individualized misbehavior. It also reflects the ways that the revolution's white refugees reclaimed centerstage, figuratively and sometimes literally, in the United States. Staging their sufferings in America's public spaces, Saint Domingue's refugees reclaimed and reinvented the colonial privileges they had lost in the uprisings. Their suffering generated solidarity and even celebrity even as they implicitly and repeatedly invoked the scene of rebellion they had just fled.

On stage and off, Saint Domingue's refugees integrated their perspectives on slave revolt into the existing conventions of sentimental comedy and racial performance. The Haitian Revolution became part of everyday entertainment culture, adding an exotic frisson of racial revolution to the typical playhouse fare. Saint Domingue's refugees also point to performance itself as central to the ways Americans encountered Haiti's revolution. Their characters were revealed in, even defined by performance, as

⁹ Wignell's troupe put on regular seasons of conventional English dramas, recycling Shakespearean favorites, Restoration comedies, and occasionally, the work of local and homegrown playwrights such as Royall Tyler, William Dunlap, John Daly Burke. On Murdock and *Triumphs*, see Heather S. Nathans, "Trampling Native Genius: John Murdock versus the Chestnut Street Theatre," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 14/1 (2002): 29–43. Murdock's script circulated in print the year before its stage production, supported by subscribers including Charles Wilson Peale, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin West, and even Pennsylvania governor Thomas Mifflin. For more on the early American stage and its social contexts, see Nathans, *Early American Theatre*; Odai Johnson, *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli's Plaster* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Odai Johnson, *London in a Box: Englishness and Theatre in Revolutionary America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017).

if being a refugee required continually re-enacting trials and dramatizing anticipated triumphs. Black rebelliousness also became a matter of performance – the violent revolt of the enslaved became imitative play that balanced delicately between menacing and pleasurable. The on and off-stage acts of rebels and refugees in the 1790s suggest that the politics of revolution became matters of casting and genre – performing refugees helped define the leading roles of revolution, reshaping plot lines and fitting what might have been tragedy into the generic conventions of comedy. And, of course, the dramatized rebels and refugees of Saint Domingue helped transform the historical experiences of slave revolution into appealing, entertaining, and potentially profitable performances.

Acting Refugees, Refugee Actors

The refugees dramatized in Murdock's *Triumphs of Love* gave human shape to anxieties and aspirations provoked by news of the Haitian Revolution. In the early 1790s, American knowledge of the Haitian Revolution had been mediated primarily through brief, sporadic textual accounts. As vividly as newspaper reports and letters might describe the “horrors of St. Domingo,” widespread slave revolt remained largely abstract. By 1793, however, refugees began to arrive in greater numbers, and Americans began to experience Saint Domingue and its slave revolts in ways that must have felt more immediate, embodied, and theatrical. “Visual and dramatic,” as Julius S. Scott has observed, the “sudden arrival of thousands of refugees from the revolution in the French colony communicated a sense of rebellion which printed accounts could not provide.”¹⁰

The unrest in Saint Domingue propelled between 15,000 and 20,000 French Caribbean islanders to North America during the revolutionary decade. Their numbers increased dramatically after June 1793, when the burning of Cap Français forced many of its residents to evacuate, sometimes in complete destitution. Murdock's Philadelphia became one of the epicenters of refugee arrivals, receiving around five 5,000 Caribbean exiles – a substantial addition to its 45,000 residents.¹¹ Many among this

¹⁰ Scott, *Common Wind*, 188.

¹¹ See White, *Encountering Revolution*. The estimates appear in Ashli White, “A Flood of Impure Lava: Saint Dominguan Refugees in the United States, 1791–1820,” Ph.D. dissertation (Columbia University, 2003), 37. Philadelphia's passenger lists, only a partial enumeration, identify 3,084 refugees between 1791 and 1794, of whom 848 were enslaved or free black people. Gary B. Nash, “Reverberations of Haiti in the American North: Black Saint Domingans in Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania History* 65/5 (1998): 44–73 (at 50).

brief but spectacular wave of refugees eventually returned to France and the Caribbean, but those that stayed achieved long-lasting notoriety.¹² Even so, the historical record leaves many questions about the specific identities and stories of these refugees. Those identified (explicitly or not) as free, white, and of the master classes seemed to have garnered the lion's share of attention and sympathy, but the refugees probably included significant numbers of nonwhite, passing, or racially ambiguous people. Passenger lists of landings in Philadelphia from 1791 to 1794 suggest that nearly a third of Saint Domingue's 3,000 newcomers were, as Gary Nash has shown, "of African extraction," both enslaved and free.¹³ Identifying the people of color in these historical records remains difficult for various reasons. Anglo-American and French colonial racial and legal categories did not overlap cleanly. Some among the master classes may have begun passing as white despite having been previously identified with some nonwhite category, and some may have arrived with enslaved and formerly enslaved people who were also family members. Enslaved people themselves could be held in various and changing states of freedom and unfreedom, and racial categories could be manipulated accordingly – after arrival in the US, some enslaved people, for example, became subject to gradual emancipation, others to periods of indentured servitude. Some masters simply failed to report enslaved people, inadvertently or in evasion of American laws.

Despite the lack of precision in the record, people of color from Saint Domingue must have represented a noticeable presence in the early national US. Imported slaves from Saint Domingue, Nash argues, increased Philadelphia's Black population noticeably, by some 25 percent.¹⁴ And the impact was not felt simply through numbers; as Shane White points out, Black people arriving from the colony, "often marked with the ritual scarifications of Africa and mutilated by the brands of their Saint Dominguan masters," may have appeared "an alien sight."¹⁵

¹² According to Gary Nash, by the "spring of 1794, the exodus of French islanders to North America tapered off and by the late fall of 1795 had nearly ended" ("Reverberations of Haiti," 67 n.14). Saint Domingue's refugees joined pre-existing French communities in Philadelphia, and their impact was perhaps greater than the numbers would suggest. The ambiguity of identifying the different Franco-Atlantic populations should remind us that contemporary Anglo-Americans used "French" loosely to designate a diverse assortment of francophone or Franco-Atlantic people. As a marker of identity, "French" could modify or overwrite other political, geographical, cultural, religious, and racial labels. Such relaxed usage habits reflected the revolutionary era's rapidly changing and often ambiguous identity categories.

¹³ Nash, "Reverberations of Haiti," 49–50.

¹⁴ Nash, 47.

¹⁵ Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770–1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 31.

Speaking in unfamiliar accents, newcomers from Saint Domingue represented a distinctive and heterogeneous assortment of free and enslaved people with various skin tones, accents, and styles of social presentation, tied together primarily by the shared experiences of Haiti's slave revolts.¹⁶

In the face of the ambiguities of Caribbean race and slavery, many of Saint Domingue's refugees worked to deliberately display themselves as white and as dispossessed colonists. They went public in print, producing an array of scholarly monographs, newspapers, broadsides, gazettes, songs, poems, speeches, and advertisements.¹⁷ One anonymous refugee even published the first collection of creole-language poetry in 1804, *Idylles, ou, essais de poésie créole par un colon de St. Domingue. Idylles*, executing the characteristic move of the educated, relatively privileged refugees, excuses creole language and culture as a bastardized corruption while in the same breath asserting its poetic refinement.¹⁸ In such documents, refugees parlayed their misfortunes into an ambivalent sort of celebrity, betting that Americans' sympathy and admiration would outweigh their alarm over reminders of Saint Domingue's slave revolts. Published accounts of the revolution appeared in French and in English, translated, reprinted, and summarized in newspaper reports. Many were submitted to the French government as evidence to bolster

¹⁶ On the influence of these refugees, see Frances Sergeant Childs, *French Refugee Life in the United States, 1790–1800* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1940); Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migration and Influences* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007); Susan Branson and Leslie Patrick, "Étrangers dans un pays étrange: Saint-Dominguan Refugees of Color in Philadelphia," in Geggus (ed.), *Impact of the Haitian Revolution*, 193–208. The differences seem to have been particularly noticeable in terms of racial practices. French Caribbean immigrants, for example, brought different social categories and understandings of race, and the considerable numbers of people of color they brought to Philadelphia augmented the city's Black population by about 25 percent. Nash, "Reverberations of Haiti," 47.

¹⁷ Philadelphia, for example, saw more than 110 francophone publications during the 1790s. Catherine Hébert, "French Publications in Philadelphia in the Age of the French Revolution: A Bibliographical Essay," *Pennsylvania History* 58/1 (January 1991): 37–61 (at 38). Anglo-American newspapers made figures such as Genêt, Talleyrand, La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, and M. L. E. Moreau de St. Méry household names during the 1790s. Childs, *French Refugee Life*, amply describes the celebrity French refugee social scene of diplomats, intellectuals, aristocrats, religious figures, and merchants of both creole and European origins.

¹⁸ *Idylles, ou, essais de poésie Créole par un colon de St. Domingue* (New-York: De l'imprimerie par Hopkins & Seymour, 1804). A second edition was published in the US as *Idylles et chansons, ou, essais de poésie Créole* (Philadelphie: De l'imprimerie de J. Edwards, 1811). For a discussion of creole poetics, see Deborah Jensen, *Beyond the Slave Narrative: Politics, Sex, and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution* (Liverpool University Press, 2012), 245–71.

legal and political arguments.¹⁹ Through these accounts, the experiences of enslaved people receded and the perspectives of the master classes came to dominate American narratives of the Haitian Revolution. Survivor bias, of course, meant that the refugees were, by definition, both unfortunate victims and fortunate survivors, and they often narrated the Haitian Revolution as a series of unfortunate accidents and heroic escapes. Heroes of their own oft-repeated tales, the refugees must have seemed ready-made for the American stage's sentimental comedies and tragic melodramas, distressed damsels and chastened French gentlemen acting out their fortunate falls and refined misfortunes.

American responses to Saint Domingue's refugees were of course complexly overdetermined by a variety of factors. Attitudes toward Saint Domingue's refugees could be influenced by class and national antipathies, by domestic political alignments, and by attitudes toward race and slavery. Moreover, it might have been difficult at times to comprehend the refugees themselves, who did not always fit into neatly aligned, oppositional categories of "white" and "black" or even "free" and "enslaved." Accordingly, Americans expressed a shifting sense of solidarity and difference, their reactions "rife with inconsistency and hairsplitting logic," as Ashli White has observed.²⁰ In response, the refugees acted out a gradually stabilizing characterology. They emphasized their French origins, their lost wealth and prestige, and their racial commonalities with US audiences. Their public acts seem calculated to evoke a kind of racialized sympathy by way of an early "Lost Cause" mythology. Their demonstrations of cultured refinement also reinforced the logic of economic and civilizational superiority. These elaborate social performances did not always acknowledge the colony's rebelling slaves, but neither did they entirely disregard them – the protagonists of revolution needed antagonists, and so the refugees, in reiterating their experiences, kept the scenes of slave revolt always near at hand, in the wings, waiting to emerge in theatrical display.

The refugees performed, and onlookers understood their plight as intensely dramatic. Thomas Jefferson, for example, declared that the

¹⁹ A number of these accounts are collected and translated in Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*.

²⁰ Ashli White, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees and American Distinctiveness in the Early Years of the Haitian Revolution," in Geggus (ed.), *World of the Haitian Revolution*, 248–60 (at 249). See also Simon P. Newman, "American Political Culture and the French and Haitian Revolutions: Nathaniel Cutting and the Jeffersonian Republicans," in Geggus (ed.), *Impact of the Haitian Revolution*, 72–89. For a fuller picture of Saint Domingue's French creole culture, see Doris L. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

“situation of the St. Domingo fugitives (aristocrats as they are) calls aloud for pity and charity.” “Never,” he continued, “was so deep a tragedy presented to the feelings of man.”²¹ The francophone newcomers marketed their theatrical skills and talents, offering lessons in language, music, art, and dance. One Philadelphia newspaper notice, for example, announced the 1794 arrival of a “young married Man,” his wife, and three brothers, whom “the disturbances of St. Domingo have driven to America for an asylum.” Hoping to recover “those comforts to which they have been accustomed,” he offered music, dancing, and drawing lessons, advertising access to the “fruits of his education.”²² Performances of talented refinement seem bound inextricably to the narrative of revolutionary misfortune. The marketing of refined refugee performance, of course, did not always result in profit, and the unfortunate sometimes resorted to more extreme measures – the same advertisement, for example, offers for sale two dozen silver-handled knives, the “remnant of his fortune.”²³ In selling his cutlery, the advertiser performed elegant destitution, coupling cultured refinement to material want. The knives themselves appear as props in the refugee performance, simultaneously “handsome” emblems of former wealth and reminders of Caribbean violence, material reminders of the refugees’ narratives of loss and refinement.²⁴

To many onlookers, such acts suggested a certain refugee resilience, the ability to adapt their performances to the audiences they found in a strange land. Leonora Sansay, fictionalizing her experiences in revolutionary Saint Domingue in the 1808 novel *Secret History, or, the Horrors of St. Domingo*, noted with interest the refugees’ persistent urge to reproduce the “expensive pleasures” of Saint Domingue.²⁵ In fictionalizing her experiences in Saint Domingue during the revolution, Sansay herself self-consciously replicates the refugee move of transforming loss and misfortune into resources for transcultural exchange. Author James K. Paulding, in his 1817 *Letters from the South*, admired the refugees for “accommodating themselves with a happy versatility” to their new

²¹ Jefferson to Monroe, July 14, 1793, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. John Catanzariti, Reprints edition (Princeton University Press, 1997), 503. Quoted in Nash, “Reverberations of Haiti,” 45. See also Zuckerman, “Power of Blackness.”

²² Philadelphia *General Advertiser*, April 18, 1794.

²³ Philadelphia *General Advertiser*, April 18, 1794.

²⁴ Philadelphia *General Advertiser*, April 18, 1794. The unnamed advertiser gives his address as “No. 248, North Front-Street, near Callowhill-Street”; city directories suggest that the neighborhood was populated by a relatively transient population of laborers, artisans, and shopkeepers in 1794.

²⁵ Leonora Sansay, *Secret History, or, The Horrors of St. Domingo*, ed. Michael J. Drexler (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, 2007), 118.

circumstances.²⁶ A former resident of Saint Domingue, Jean-Paul Pillet, saw such performances as part of a trendy American craving for Francophile refinement. In a creative prose-and-poetry account later published under the title *Mon Odyssée*, Pillet observes that:

in America, to everyone from the Senator to the cobbler, a pianoforte is as indispensable as a china cupboard. They owe this fad in part to the wives of the French emigrants, who, to aid in combating their poverty, offered their services as music teachers.²⁷

“Unfortunately,” he added, the “passion for harmony in this country only extends, as yet, to six or eight months of lessons.”²⁸ Trafficking in sentimentalized refinement allows for a profitable and empowering manipulation of popular culture markets – but it also means venturing into the fickle and superficial world of monetized fad and fashion. Such refugee performances participated in ready-made markets of cultural exchange that linked Caribbean plantations to North American cities by way of an alluring francophilia. The refugees peddled access to French refinement, allowing American clients to re-enact prestigious performances of Caribbean gentility. For the refugees, of course, selling lessons or fine household goods promised a partial recovery of lost wealth, and perhaps even the distant possibility of reconstructing their lost colonial lifestyles. All the while, such bids for wealth and prestige meant selling one’s own exclusive cultural refinement to the nearest bidder, subjecting the cherished emblems of inherited privilege and status to the uncertainties and indignities of the marketplace.

The Haitian Revolution’s refugees also took these acts into professional playhouses. Theatres took up their cause in charity performances; Philadelphia theatres, for example, offered benefit nights for the refugees in the 1790s, donating proceeds of the performances to the “unfortunate St. Domingo sufferers.”²⁹ More intriguingly, a troupe led by Alexander Placide (who was once billed as the “first rope dancer to the king of France” before arriving in Saint Domingue) brought French colonial performance to Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and

²⁶ James Kirke Paulding, *Letters from the South, Written during an Excursion in the Summer of 1816* (New York: Published by James Eastburn & co., at the Literary rooms, Broadway, corner of Pine-street. Abraham Paul, printer, 1817), 184–85.

²⁷ Translated in Parham, *My Odyssey*, 203. Pillet’s prose-poetry account has been published in full as Pillet, *Mon Odyssée: L’épopée d’un Colon de Saint Domingue*. See also Popkin, “Author as Colonial Exile”; Zehnder, “Revolutions of Taste.”

²⁸ Parham, *My Odyssey*, 203.

²⁹ Philadelphia *General Advertiser*, August 9, 1793, boasts of donations collected from theatres, circuses, and the “French patriotic Society” in excess of \$10,000.

Charleston.³⁰ Placide's refugee actors became some of Saint Domingue's most visible exiles, and their performances condensed the refugee ethos performed in so many everyday ways in American culture. Appearing night after night before American audiences, the refugees' stage acts evoked misfortunes at the hands of Saint Domingue's rebelling slaves as well as their sophisticated, cosmopolitan ability to perform across language and cultural boundaries.

Americans often met the refugee actors with sympathy and admiration. Announcing the actors' arrival in Charleston, the *City Gazette* argued that the twin titles of "French" and "unfortunate men" ought to "recommend them to the public benevolence."³¹ Such responses suggest that audiences felt a sense of economic and racial solidarity and shared fears of slave revolt. Not all of these actors, however, presented as white. In a 1796 letter, a playgoer in Baltimore remarked on the "dusky skin" of the unnamed actress in the (white) lead role of *Guerre Ouverte; ou, Ruse Contre Ruse*.³² Farther south, two of colonial Saint Domingue's most famous actresses of color, the sisters Lise and Minette, were possibly among the refugee performers that starred in New Orleans's francophone theatre for almost two decades.³³ These actors, circulating along the diasporic routes of refugee performance, shaped what Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has called a "creole cultural commons," acting out their vexed relationships to both the European metropole and New World blackness.³⁴

³⁰ *New-York Journal, & Patriotic Register*, January 25, 1792. O. G. Brockett, "The European Career of Alexandre Placide," *Southern Communication Journal* 27/4 (1962): 306–13. Brockett surveys Placide's two decades of English and French success before his arrival in America. Placide and his troupe settled in Charleston, South Carolina from 1794 to 1797; after those years as an independent troupe, many of Placide's performers and staff integrated into Anglo-American companies, becoming regular attractions in American theatres. For more on Placide's career and French theatre in the US south, see Richard Phillip Sadders, "The Theatre Management of Alexandre Placide in Charleston, 1794–1812," Ph.D. dissertation (Louisiana State University, 1983), 10–11; William Stanley Hoole, *The Ante-Bellum Charleston Theatre* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1946); Julia Curtis, "John Joseph Stephen Leger Sollee and the Charleston Theatre," *Educational Theatre Journal* 21/3 (1969): 285–98; Eola Willis, *The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century* (Columbia, sc: State Company, 1924).

³¹ *Charleston City Gazette and General Advertiser*, February 8, 1794.

³² Alexander J. Dallas, letter to an unidentified recipient, likely May 29, 1796. Richard B. and Agnes Irwin Papers, University of Michigan William L. Clements Library.

³³ See Juliane Braun, *Creole Drama: Theatre and Society in Antebellum New Orleans* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 16–17, 21–22.

³⁴ The creole cultural commons featured an a-linguistic, intercultural repertoire of scripts and styles imported, invented, and adapted by the French refugee performers. Dillon, *New World Drama*, 25–26.

Saint Domingue's acting exiles had a significant impact on Anglo-American theatre, popularizing a conventional repertoire of French dramas and performance styles.³⁵ Philadelphia audiences, for example, witnessed one of the more evocative productions of Saint Domingue's refugees when they performed *Mirza and Lindor*, a French opera dramatizing competition for the affections of a creole woman against a background of Caribbean violence. First produced in 1779, the opera predates Saint Domingue's slave uprisings, but its themes might have appeared newly evocative when enacted by exile actors in the 1790s.³⁶ Placide introduced the play to Boston in 1793, and his growing troupe had developed the play into a pantomime extravaganza by 1794. Set on Martinique, the "Grand, Historical, and Tragi-Heroic Pantomime" staged colonial conflicts among French soldiers, Spanish privateers, and Caribbean "savages," some "dressed in the real custom of those in South-America." Under the direction of a French dancer and choreographer Jean-Baptiste Francisqui (or Francisquy), the actors performed a "Military Evolution with the savages, to remind the Governor of the manner the Europeans and the Savages formerly went to War." The play featured numerous blackface roles and dances in character, relying for effect on racial mimicry and performances presented as authentically Caribbean. Advertisements listed a "minuet de la nation," three "savage" dances (one a "pas de cinq" including a child actor), a "Negro dance" and a "Creole dance."³⁷ When Lailson's circus troupe brought the play to Philadelphia in 1797, it carried the subtitle "The First Adventurers in America."³⁸ The play still featured blackface roles; former Philadelphia actress (and author of the bestselling transatlantic novel *Charlotte Temple*) Susanna Haswell Rowson, for example, played Zoé, a (possibly darker-skinned) servant, while some of the French actors appeared as six "Negro

³⁵ Oscar Sonneck offers useful detail and commentary on the French influences on American opera, in *Early Opera in America* (Boston: G. Schirmer, 1915), 197–219.

³⁶ The earlier versions of *Mirza and Lindor*, one choreographed by Maximilien Gardel in 1779 and a shortened 1781 *Fête de Mirza*, staged lurking Black "assassins," although American performances do not specifically indicate their presence. See Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 128–30; Joellen A. Meglin, "'Sauvages, Sex Roles, and Semiotics': Representations of Native Americans in the French Ballet, 1736–1837, Part One: The Eighteenth Century," *Dance Chronicle* 23/2 (2000): 87–132.

³⁷ When the play appeared first in the Boston, it was simply billed a "military pantomime" and featured a demonstration of swordsmanship (Boston *Argus*, April 16, 1793). Beginning in June 1794, a more elaborate version appears in Charleston; detailed descriptions began appearing in the Charleston *City Gazette* of June 6, 1794.

³⁸ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 18, 1797.

musicians.”³⁹ In the hands of French refugees, the pantomime seems a wishful mythology of French Caribbean colonial conflicts. Dancing servants and Spanish corsairs stand in for rebelling slaves; only the “Savages,” now cowed by the ceremonial exercises of French soldiers, represent the distant memory of island unrest. The scenes seem an evocative stage fantasy – as revolts drove slaveholders from their Saint Domingue plantations, actors in exile celebrated the supremacy of colonial masters over rebellious islanders and threatening outsiders.

The refugees also altered Anglo-American plays to feature Caribbean conflict with threatening dark-skinned characters. In 1796, for example, they acted in a New York City production of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s pantomime version of *Robinson Crusoe*, in which French actors arranged and performed “Negro” and “Savage” dances. In scenes that must have resonated with the refugees’ estrangement from both France and Saint Domingue, the pantomime staged the “deplorable situation” on Crusoe’s island and ended by celebrating the hero’s “return to his native country.”⁴⁰ Along with Jean-Baptiste Francisqui, Victor Pelissier, a musician from Cap Français composed new music and dances for the pantomime Crusoe, transforming the English colonial adventure into a transcultural, trans-imperial display of Caribbean unrest and triumphal homecomings. In effect, French refugees re-enacted nostalgic and reactionary revisions of the revolutionary Caribbean they had just fled.

The Triumphs of Love’s Sentimentalized Refugees

Anglo-American theatre did not miss its chance to adopt and adapt such compelling characters. Murdock’s play, like the refugee performers appearing on American stages, reframes and restages the experiences of Caribbean insurrection and refugeeism.⁴¹ *The Triumphs of Love* also

³⁹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 18, 1797. A number of local amateurs also appeared as supporting cast alongside the French refugees.

⁴⁰ *New York Daily Advertiser*, June 13, 1796.

⁴¹ Although no French refugees appeared in Murdock’s play, they had performed in close proximity. The year before *The Triumphs of Love* premiered, for example, French actors had appeared at Philadelphia’s Cedar Street Theatre, a seasonal competitor of the New Theatre. Anna Gardie, a well-known dancer and pantomime performer from Saint Domingue, had performed at the New Theatre itself in 1794. And in June 1794, Gardie had shared her season-ending benefit with Miss Willems, the Anglo-American actor who played Clementina in *Triumphs of Love*. For more on Gardie, see Lynn Matluck Brooks, “A Decade of Brilliance: Dance Theatre in Late-Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *Dance Chronicle* 12/3 (1989): 333–65; Marian Hannah Winter, “American Theatrical Dancing from 1750 to 1800,” *Musical Quarterly* 24/1 (January 1938): 58–73; Anne Dhu Shapiro, “Action Music in American Pantomime and Melodrama, 1730–1913,” *American Music* 2/4 (Winter 1984): 49–72; Peter P. Reed, “The Life and

dramatizes its audiences' profound ambivalence about the impact of Saint Domingue's refugees. The play's French characters complicate the typical concerns of sentimental comedy – the problems, as Lisa Freeman puts it, of “good breeding” in changing social contexts.⁴² Murdock's refugees find themselves embroiled in a local struggle over the character of America's rising youth, and the play's early scenes center on the youthful follies and eventual reform of its Quaker protagonist, George Friendly, Jr., who has been led astray by Beauchamp, a French planter from Saint Domingue. While George's elders worry that “the rank weeds of vice will overgrow the seeds of virtue,” George celebrates his attachment to Beauchamp, remarking that he is, of “all the young foreigners I am acquainted with, that youth I most esteem.”⁴³ George's affection, firmly cemented by “an hour in young Beauchamp's company,” models the profound and immediate – but also troubling – attraction to Saint Domingue's refugees, a transcending of cultural and national differences through the bonding power of privileged male fraternization.⁴⁴ At times, their youthful sport sounds boisterously homoerotic, as when George poses as a “damn'd great Frenchman,” brandishing a sword while wearing a suggestively long-nosed mask.⁴⁵ George's attraction to Frenchness provokes a sort of moral panic within the play – Saint Domingue represents an alluring, rakish, and alien culture of dissipation that leads George away from traditional Quaker ideals. Such transgressive play appears fundamental to Murdock's drama, conjured for the audience's pleasure and only reluctantly disavowed as immoral.

As if unable to resolve these tensions, *The Triumphs of Love* turns away from such dangerous fun, temporarily dismissing Beauchamp back to the Caribbean. “Cruel necessity” – presumably Saint Domingue's revolutionary disorder – compels Beauchamp to “sail direct for the Cape.”⁴⁶ The play's absent prime mover, slave revolt, then enables the drama of George Friendly's moral reform, as Beauchamp's sister Clementina arrives in the US after fleeing the revolution. First appearing in the fourth

Death of Anna Gardie: American Theater, Refugee Dramas, and the Specter of Haitian Revolution,” *Early American Literature* 51/3 (November 17, 2016): 623–52.

⁴² Lisa A. Freeman, *Character's Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 196–97.

⁴³ Murdock, *Triumphs of Love*, 14, 38.

⁴⁴ Murdock, 38.

⁴⁵ Murdock, 48–49. The mask's nose is “as big as the man of Strasburgh,” an apparent allusion to Book 4 of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, in which an enormous, phallic nose inspires comical curiosity and desire.

⁴⁶ Murdock, 37–38.

act, Clementina tearfully claims the “privilege of the wretched and unfortunate,” to relate her journey to Philadelphia:

I was in the full enjoyment of all the luxuries of life – and in one day, obliged to fly my country and possessions, with some few hundred dollars: thought myself fortunate in getting a passage for this famed country of liberty and tranquility. But was arrested by the way, by cruel pirates, and stripped of the remnant of my fortune, save a few dollars the relentful [*sic*] savages left me: and here I am, a wretched refugee; reduced almost to the last extremity.⁴⁷

Alone, impoverished, and victimized by rebellious slaves and then pirates, Clementina tells the audience a gripping (if entirely conventional) tale of suffering. “Oh, who is like unto me,” she asks rhetorically, “in so short a time to experience such a reverse of fortune?”⁴⁸ In Clementina, the play feminizes the refugee dilemma, turning its attention from the edgy enjoyment of masculine cosmopolitan debauchery to the sentimental pleasures of observing helpless, destitute women. Those pleasures, of course, have complex social consequences. George’s friend Trifle, for example, enthusiastically pursues an apparently mixed-race francophone woman, presumably one of the slaves or servants recently arrived in Philadelphia. Galvanized by fantasies of attractive white refugees like Clementina, Murdock’s play also stages erotic visions of racialized Caribbean women, nonwhite characters whose complexion, as Trifle announces, appears “superior to all our boasted fair whites and reds.”⁴⁹ Trifle, as his name suggests, merely trifles, occupying the stage for only a short time, and the play does not in the end bother to realize such a low-status interracial marriage. Nevertheless, his illicit version of George’s attraction to Clementina suggests the potential ambiguities of race and interracial desire brought to the US by Saint Domingue’s refugees.

Murdock’s refugee siblings, in contrast, embody the beautified and whitened (or at least neutrally raced) faces of slave revolt. They draw attention to themselves and away from the offstage horrors they have escaped. Beauchamp and Clementina stand out as different and distinctive, the victims of extraordinary hardships. As the focal points of transnational creole identifications and sympathies, the siblings help convert the horrors of Saint Domingue into the pleasures of cosmopolitan American francophilia. By play’s end, the refugee siblings allow Anglo-Americans – both on and off the stage – to imagine the United States as

⁴⁷ Murdock, 69–70.

⁴⁸ Murdock, 70.

⁴⁹ Murdock, 19–20.

itself proudly exceptional, a haven from slave revolt, a “great asylum of the unfortunate and persecuted of all the earth!”⁵⁰

The final act of Murdock’s play returns to the conjugal plot with an almost manic energy, resolving in marriage the dual problems of George’s youthful dissipation and the refugees’ penury. George has fallen in love with Clementina sight unseen, before she arrives in Philadelphia. Upon meeting her, he declares himself “caught in love’s trap, at last.”⁵¹ Pressing ahead despite – or because of – Clementina’s impoverishment, George engages in an accelerated courtship. The marriage seems remarkably rushed; George’s offers of brotherly kindness and monetary assistance transform into ecstatic hand-kissing and longing looks with almost satirical speed. George’s union with Beauchamp’s sister becomes the ready-made solution to the corrupting influences of slavery and French rakishness. Clementina’s embodiment of “suffering virtue” and “honor” eclipses the play’s earlier concern with transgressive desires.⁵² As a “young lady of most extraordinary beauty” whose race never comes under scrutiny, her match with George carefully avoids any insinuations of miscegenation.⁵³ Clementina thus becomes the play’s single antidote to the double problem of Saint Domingue – racially unmarked, virtuous, and heterosexually available, she solves the twin problems of Saint Domingue, rebellious blackness and dissolute homosociality, which had earlier troubled the play.

In the end, Murdock’s Philadelphia hosts the offsite reconciliation of the problems and tensions of the Haitian Revolution. In the course of his reform, George has freed his slaves, and his marriage to Clementina allies the reformed American slaveholder and the dispossessed French Caribbean planter, imagining their hemispheric union as a magical solution for slave revolt. Of course, the ending has everything to do with the power relations durably structured by slavery even in the absence of slaves. As Lisa Freeman argues, such sentimental comedies revolve around “the relations that sustain the public and private spheres, that is, who will breed with whom, on what basis, and with what prospects ensured for future offspring.”⁵⁴ Rescuing Clementina from refugee hardships, marriage also transforms George’s French-inspired dissipation

⁵⁰ Murdock, 56. The patriotic turn also helps Murdock’s play deploy Saint Domingue refugees in a for-profit display that supports his claim to “native genius” as an American playwright. That American exceptionalism is also the subject of White, “Saint-Domingue Refugees and American Distinctiveness.”

⁵¹ Murdock, *Triumphs of Love*, 71.

⁵² Murdock, 74.

⁵³ Murdock, 74.

⁵⁴ Freeman, *Character’s Theater*, 194–95.

into a newly virtuous francophilia. The scene does not erase all reminders of Caribbean origins, however. When Beauchamp returns from revolutionary Saint Domingue in the closing moments of the play, Clementina – who, at least on page, has spoken unaccented English to this point – bursts into accented English (“my broder, my broder”) before declaring her happiness in French.⁵⁵ Beauchamp echoes her vocal performance, declaring his own gratitude in French accents. With those lines of dialogue, francophone accents return to the play for the first time since Sambo had raucously departed the stage singing French revolutionary anthems in the third act. The siblings’ reappearing French accents recall the strangeness of the strangers sent to America by the Haitian Revolution, emphasizing the very differences Saint Domingue’s refugees worked so hard to stage and manage. Despite this accented declaration of difference, Saint Domingue’s slave revolts remain in the realm of implication and rumor throughout the play. Celebrating the conjugal alliance of reformed slaveholders in a conventional dramatic form, the play ultimately turns away from the troubling forms of racialized violence that lurk on its margins. Even so, the play has accomplished a nimble piece of cultural work, not simply unthinking slave revolt, but repurposing sentimental comedy to imagine how slave insurrection might produce a transnational, hemispheric, and decidedly white extended family.

Black Performance and Rebellious Play

The Triumphs of Love’s white refugees and Philadelphia friends do not, however, entirely eclipse what Simon Newman has called “the specter of black insurrection.”⁵⁶ Haiti’s slave revolt haunts the scene in the form of unruly Black play. Unruly antics, ludic rebellion, and performative misbehavior are deeply ambiguous – such acts can reflect radical politics, but they can also be nothing more than fun. Performance-as-play can obscure, evade, or deny politics, but at the same time, play reformats rebellion, remaking the serious business of emancipatory politics into jokes, entertainment, and the pleasures of the playhouse. In turn, performance comes to have its own politics, operating in instinctively felt moments of laughing at and laughing with characters onstage.

In *The Triumphs of Love*, the Black rebelliousness appears primarily in the actions of Sambo, a character adapted from the traditional Anglo-Atlantic figure of the insouciant servant. Low-comic types had animated

⁵⁵ Murdock, *Triumphs of Love*, 82.

⁵⁶ Newman, “American Political Culture,” 78.

the Atlantic stage since the early modern period, but those servile roles became blackened (and newly popular) in the eighteenth century, most notably with the downtrodden but resourceful Mungo, in Isaac Bickerstaff's 1768 comic opera *The Padlock*.⁵⁷ The role of Mungo was a star-maker in American theatre; most famously, Lewis Hallam, Jr., one of the founding figures of American theatre, won accolades for playing the role with a "truth derived from study of the negro slave character."⁵⁸ Murdock's Sambo was closely connected to the performance tradition of Mungo – William Bates, the white actor who played Sambo in blackface in the Philadelphia production of *Triumphs of Love*, had earlier written the successful pantomime adaptation *Harlequin Mungo*, which premiered in 1787 at the Royalty Theatre in London's East End.⁵⁹

Murdock's comic slave takes on edgy, tense overtones in the decade of the Haitian Revolution. Sambo pursues a revolt of imitation and mimicry, and his theatrical behavior becomes for a time the play's primary joke as well as its overwhelming problem. Sambo takes various cues from his Quaker master, radical French republicans, and other freed slaves, threatening to hijack the plot. In his first scene, for example, he plays the trickster servant, scheming to take over his master's role and become a "rogue among fair sex too."⁶⁰ Later in the first act, Sambo imitates George's rakish song celebrating the pleasures of elite misbehavior, declaring his desire (in characteristic stage dialect) to "trife [trifle] time away" just as his master does.⁶¹ If Sambo's rebelliousness were limited to laughable malapropisms, of course, any real social critique might be lost in the script's obvious derision. Sambo's act, however, repeats with a difference – he does not simply aspire to a life of unattainable white privilege; he imagines freedom from slavery. His mimicry is

⁵⁷ Lewis Hallam, Jr. acted Mungo to great acclaim, reportedly after making a study of African American character. Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 217.

⁵⁸ On the early assessments of Hallam's act by William Dunlap and Charles Durang in their memoirs of eighteenth-century American theatre's origins, see Christian DuComb, *Haunted City: Three Centuries of Racial Impersonation in Philadelphia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 51. See also Jenna M. Gibbs, *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760–1850* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 43–51; Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), chap. 1.

⁵⁹ For a detailed discussion of the London context of Mungo, see David Worrall, *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality, 1787–1832: The Road to the Stage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 68–106. See also Julie A. Carlson, "New Lows in Eighteenth-Century Theater: The Rise of Mungo," *European Romantic Review* 18/2 (2007): 139–47.

⁶⁰ Murdock, *Triumphs of Love*, 19.

⁶¹ Murdock, 19.

unsupervised, occurring after George's exit, and Sambo dominates the brief scene. Supplanting his master onstage, Sambo transforms servile imitation into kinetic, celebratory, and unruly blackness.

Murdock's script presents Sambo as a counterfeiter mimicking an imitation – George's rakishness is itself a mannered re-enactment of Beauchamp's roguishness. Sambo's mimicry thus answers his master's act in kind, compounding it with threatening and racialized sexuality. And as audiences would have been aware, Sambo was played by a white actor in blackface – itself an act of stylized racial mimicry. Sambo performs in a chain of imitations with no discernible original, a hall of mirrors invoking the long Atlantic history of racial masquerade. Of course, Murdock's play does not present racial counterfeit as self-consciously as would blackface performances of the 1820s and 1830s, with their knowing jokes about burnt-cork makeup and genuine imitations.⁶² Nevertheless, *The Triumphs of Love* revels in its mutual cross-racial mimicry, taking some apparent delight in the self-consciously doubled racial masquerade emerging on the American stage.

After introducing Sambo's mimic misbehavior, *The Triumphs of Love* works to control its unruly knot of imitations. In one of the play's more sentimental and serious scenes, Sambo enacts a profoundly virtuous performance, prompting George to grant him his freedom. Sambo delivers an "untutored, pathetic soliloquy" that George overhears in the third act – a soliloquy both imitative and original, leveraging the conventions of blackface and performed blackness to produce what seems an expression of genuine feeling.⁶³ Sambo's desire for improvement appears anti-revolutionary – freedom must be earned or deserved through good behavior – but the speech also points to the complex ways Black Americans could appropriate theatrical conventions. Sambo declares himself "handsome" and "berry complish'd" in singing, dancing, and fiddling; his performance provides proof that "we negro improbe berry much."⁶⁴ Observing that he can "tink so, so, pretty well," he goes on to wonder in the third person "why he slave to white man? Why black foke sold like cow or horse?"⁶⁵ Slavery, he asserts, opposes the will of "de great somebody above"; certainly, his bondage runs counter to the

⁶² Paul Gilmore describes the "type of imitation and repetition staged by the minstrel show" that rendered race "simultaneously a mask and an essential identity." *The Genuine Article: Race, Mass Culture, and American Literary Manhood* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 50.

⁶³ Murdock, *Triumphs of Love*, 52.

⁶⁴ Murdock, 52.

⁶⁵ Murdock, 52.

emergent abolitionism of the late eighteenth century.⁶⁶ If Sambo's act represents the Black imitation of blackface, it also points to the possibility of original, emancipatory performance. Sambo can think, he confirms, and he rationally opposes racial enslavement. Although favored with the "bess massa in e world," Sambo laments his continued dependence and vulnerability to the harsh contingencies of a slaveholding society. Sambo's ruminations "sensibly" affect George, and he grants Sambo his freedom, offering him the option of remaining on wages or leaving.⁶⁷ Sambo's habitual mimicry, despite its unruliness, seems the prototypical sort of "stylized repetition of acts" that defines Judith Butler's performative behavior.⁶⁸ The play imagines Sambo producing authenticity by acting imitatively, virtue by acting viciously, and ultimately, winning freedom by performing slavery.

Even as it imagines Sambo's manumission, *The Triumphs of Love* clearly balks at the possibilities of freedom. George's friend Careless, for example, opposes manumission, declaring that slaves, "after they are set free, become vicious."⁶⁹ Although the more enlightened George rejects this argument, he still declares Sambo in "want of education" and guidance.⁷⁰ Such sentiments were common among contemporary abolitionists, including the prominent Philadelphia doctor and public figure Benjamin Rush, who supported the publication of Murdock's play with a subscription for six copies.⁷¹ Late eighteenth-century abolitionists such as Rush often held that slavery produced "habits of vice" which freedom would only exacerbate.⁷² And just as the play imagines the careful chaperoning of Sambo's mimicry, it also shepherds white enjoyment of his comedic acts in morally edifying directions. Repeating abolitionist platitudes, Sambo's soliloquy offers a sentimentalized and moralized alternative to the diverting play of drunken singing, dancing, and fiddling. In turn, George describes the act of manumission – the reward for Sambo's "Black-in-blackface" performance – as one of the

⁶⁶ Murdock, 52.

⁶⁷ Murdock, 52.

⁶⁸ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40/4 (1988): 519–31 (at 519).

⁶⁹ Murdock, *Triumphs of Love*, 69.

⁷⁰ Murdock, 69.

⁷¹ In what might be a sign of Murdock's regard for his patron's views, the list of subscribers displays Rush's name prominently, out of strict alphabetical order at the top of the names beginning with "R."

⁷² Rush, letter to Nathanael Greene, September 16, 1782, quoted in Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 3.

most “luxurious gratifications” imaginable.⁷³ Sambo in turn riffs on George’s pleasure, declaring himself full to bursting with emotion. It is a fantasy of patronage and performance, the master rewarding the enslaved for his act and both participants finding equal pleasure in the exchange.

Sambo’s performances, however, are not completely controlled by his white benefactors. In another of the play’s proto-minstrelsy scenes, the former slave declares his desire to “dance and sing,” now “more happy dan a king.”⁷⁴ Elevating slave above king, Sambo’s lyrics imagine emancipation as a carnivalesque inversion of social hierarchies. Starting off as mere mimicry, Sambo’s act seems to celebrate freedom, power, and the allure of Black performance. Sambo’s unruly performances escalate in the third act as he celebrates his freedom, drunkenly chanting French revolutionary slogans and songs. The newly freed Sambo brings friends, too – he celebrates his manumission with Caesar and Pompey, two other Black characters. Entering “with two candles, reeling and singing,” he sings a garbled but recognizable rendition of “La Carmagnole” and drunkenly repeats “liberty and quality for eber and eber.”⁷⁵ At face value, the scene mocks Black imitators of the French Revolution. The scene reiterates a common criticism of the Haitian Revolution, imagining its “Black Jacobins” as merely servile imitators of the French Revolution. At the same time, Sambo’s misbehavior appears part of a northward-creeping contagion of theatrical slave revolt. And, just in case audiences might have missed the point, a prologue delivered before the play (probably by Wignell, who in the play that followed performed the role of Peevish) made it explicitly, ominously declaring the slave “caught” by the flames of revolt spreading to the United States.⁷⁶

Such reiterations of anxieties about French-inspired Black radicalism had appeared on other American stages as well. In a 1797 Boston production of John O’Keefe’s *The Poor Soldier*, for example, “Bagatelle,” a white character satirizing French revolutionary republicanism, sparked the ire of Bostonians sympathetic to the cause. Managers rewrote him as the Black valet “Domingo,” the reference to Saint Domingue explicitly naming the object of satire as the Black imitation

⁷³ Murdock, *Triumphs of Love*, 53.

⁷⁴ Murdock, 53.

⁷⁵ Murdock, 67.

⁷⁶ The text of the prologue is included in some, but not all, printed versions of the play, and does not indicate who spoke the prologue.

of republicanism.⁷⁷ As do Murdock's characters in *The Triumphs of Love*, the 1797 rewrite of *The Poor Soldier* suggests the ease with which Black radicalism could be put on the American stage as light comedy. At the same time, although a drunken slave may not appear very revolutionary, Sambo's antics implicitly acknowledge the radical potential of Black fraternization. Exercising their newfound freedom, Sambo and his inebriated cohort become "mischievous rogues," dangerously uncontrolled, literally intoxicated with revolution.⁷⁸ Sambo's crowd-pleasing mischief, however veiled its political messaging, energetically rebuts the white characters' sedate, sentimental ideals. When George orders him quieted, Sambo resists, violently hiccupping his right to liberty and equality. As one reviewer noted with a telling turn of phrase, Sambo seemed "calculated to irritate the risible muscles" – his antics, both exasperating and laughable, aimed to provoke as much as to please, or (alternately) to please by provoking.⁷⁹ Sambo's rebellious presence, however, is short-lived; he perpetrates comic misbehavior until the play no longer requires (or tolerates) his presence. At the end of the third act, Sambo disappears without explanation, shepherded offstage by the prerogatives of a theatre primarily responsive to the sensibilities of white people. Sambo's disappearance indexes the play's anxieties – like contemporary advocates of African colonizationist schemes, Murdock's plot seems unable to imagine freed and possibly politically radicalized Black people remaining onstage alongside the drama's white protagonists.

The scene's alarm over the French radicalization of America's own enslaved people was almost certainly heightened by the Haitian Revolution, which had brought such scenes to the forefront of the public imagination. "No sooner had the tri-colored cockade appeared in the French colonies than slaves began to piece together its meaning," as Julius S. Scott writes.⁸⁰ Certainly, white observers quickly understood the import of revolutionary symbols for enslaved people. In the United States, Black people could be called "impudent" when they adopted the

⁷⁷ Sonneck, *Early Opera in America*, 145; Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity*, 70–71. Notices of performances of *The Poor Soldier* featuring Domingo appear in the *Polar Star and Boston Daily Advertiser*, January 2, 1797, and in the *Boston Columbian Centinel*, April 12, 1797, "for the last time this season." The next year saw a return to Bagatelle, the original white character, "as originally written"; *Boston Gazette, and Weekly Republican Journal*, June 4, 1798.

⁷⁸ Murdock, *Triumphs of Love*, 68. Murdock recycled this theme in his 1798 play *The Politicians*. In that play, which never appeared onstage, Caesar, Pompey, and Sambo debate the relative merits of French and English allegiances. *The Politicians; or, A State of Things. A Dramatic Piece* (Philadelphia: Printed for the author, 1798), 19–20.

⁷⁹ *Gazette of the United States*, May 25, 1795.

⁸⁰ Scott, *Common Wind*, 113–14.

French Revolution's Phrygian caps and liberty poles to promote "FREEDOM TO AFRICANS" in the 1790s.⁸¹ Into the nineteenth century, Americans continued to hear of Black celebrations of French radicalism and Haitian independence, and observers (with or without credible evidence) often saw Haiti's influence in the politicized public acts of Black Americans.⁸² In a mix of real and invented fears, onlookers imagined so-called French Negroes plotting revolt, spreading unrest, and modeling general bad behavior for other Black Americans.⁸³

The images of radicalized Black Francophiles, of course, heightened and concentrated fears of misbehavior on a largely imagined group. The reality in early American cities was, of course, much more complex. Philadelphia – the city where Murdock's Sambo celebrates his freedom with radical French songs – was also home to one of early America's most visible free Black communities, a community that persistently struggled to establish its respectability and at some points had worked to distance itself from associations with the Caribbean.⁸⁴ Moreover, the enslaved people of color brought to the US during the Haitian Revolution were not always easy to distinguish as a group. They may have been sometimes

⁸¹ Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 157–60. Newman describes white support and celebration of the French Revolution alongside the increasingly diminishing possibilities of Black political expression during the 1790s. In response to such shifts in political culture, Black Americans performed their own celebrations of Haitian independence and the end of the slave trade.

⁸² See Mitchell A. Kachun, "Antebellum African Americans, Public Commemoration, and the Haitian Revolution: A Problem of Historical Mythmaking," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26/2 (2006): 249–73; Maurice Jackson, "'Friends of the Negro! Fly with Me, The Path Is Open to the Sea': Remembering the Haitian Revolution in the History, Music, and Culture of the African American People," *Early American Studies* 6/1 (2008): 59–103.

⁸³ For a nuanced account of French-speaking people of African descent and formless fears of francophone blackness, see Sara E. Johnson, *The Fear of French Negroes: Transcolonial Collaboration in the Revolutionary Americas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Newspaper reports associating Black people with Saint-Domingue often used the label to signal vaguely threatening, exotic, or foreign characters. The xenophobic designation broadly associates threatening outsiders with radical revolution and slave revolt. See also White, *Encountering Revolution*, 138–54.

⁸⁴ During Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic, for example, the Black community had to defend itself against suspicions of misconduct based in part on assumptions that their vague associations with the Caribbean made them immune to the disease. See Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793* (Philadelphia: Printed for the authors, by William W. Woodward, no. 41, Chesnut-Street, 1794). See also Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African American and Native American Literatures* (Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 5; Jacquelyn C. Miller, "The Wages of Blackness: African American Workers and the Meanings of Race during Philadelphia's 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129/2 (2005): 163–94.

discernible by distinctive clothing or bodily marks such as scarring or branding, but it remains challenging to identify people of color from Saint Domingue or to imagine how they acted and presented themselves.⁸⁵ Visibility, it would seem, was not always beneficial for or desired by people of color from Saint Domingue, and archival records reflect such complexities. At the same time, some of the evidence suggests that enslaved people from Saint Domingue did resist slavery and escape bondage. At least forty-three advertisements appeared in Philadelphia newspapers for runaway francophone slaves between 1791 and 1797. During the same years, francophone slaves and servants made up 90 of the 244 runaways listed in the city's Vagrancy Dockets.⁸⁶ With the disruption of mastery through gradual emancipation as well as immediate escapes, Philadelphia's francophone Black population seemed to some onlookers increasingly insubordinate. When they do show up in the official record, "French Negroes" often appear as fugitives, running and dodging early American regimes of racial policing.

Although official records may offer a partial picture, anecdotal evidence shows how enslaved people could leverage the disorder and confusion of revolution to stage clever and potentially emancipatory performances. A young enslaved person named Tower, for example, escaped from Baltimore in 1793 and headed toward Philadelphia. Wearing a "striped jacket, with sleeves, in the fashion of a sailor's" and walking "with a considerable swing" in his "somewhat bow legged" [*sic*] gait, Tower either had some maritime experience or could fake it – either would do, it seems, especially if Tower intended to travel the same nautical routes that shuttled Black sailors and news of revolution to and from Saint Domingue. The owner also presumed that Tower, having absconded with some cash, would not only play the sailor, but also likely change his appearance to blend in with the refugees. He apparently spoke "a little French" and was "known to have put a striped ribbon round his hat," and his owner speculated that Tower would "attempt to pass as one who lately came in the fleet from Cape Francois."⁸⁷ Tower could play multiple roles, posing as a sailor, or even perhaps blending in with ambiguously raced refugees, and his tricolor ribbon might signal political fellow feeling in order to garner assistance. Tower's theatrical escape suggests that everyone involved – runaway, erstwhile master, and bystanders – presumed him willing and able to manipulate theatrical

⁸⁵ White, *Encountering Revolution*, 39–40.

⁸⁶ Nash, "Reverberations of Haiti," 57. Of course, Black Caribbean francophone people could come from other places besides Saint Domingue.

⁸⁷ Baltimore *Evening Post*, September 18, 1793.

forms of social presentation. It also suggests the extent to which the Haitian Revolution and its refugees had disrupted racial surveillance and policing in the United States. Tower played his part on a public stage – before an audience partly composed of spectators trained to detect runaways – and the arrival of Saint Domingue’s refugees had multiplied and complicated the range of available roles.

One of the more spectacular and apparently alarming performances of Haitian revolution appears in an 1804 newspaper account of Black Philadelphians who transformed Fourth of July festivities into a dramatic re-enactment of revolution. The report furthers the idea that unrestrained Black people might enact violent imitations of Saint Domingue, confederating under the sign of Haiti and causing trouble in US cities. The account observed “a considerable number of strange black people” loitering about, blaming the disturbance on intrusive outsiders. As the celebrants gathered in the streets, they allegedly threatened white bystanders and became physically violent. Reaching an outraged fever pitch, the account culminates with the Black celebrants’ alleged threats to “shew them *St. Domingo*.”⁸⁸ The report (to the extent that we may trust it) describes a clearly theatrical event – the “actors” in this scene assumed the roles or character types conjured by the distant Haitian Revolution. The threat of violence made real – and rendered explicit – by the scripts of slave uprising, the Black Philadelphians enacted their own version of July Fourth celebrations, to the alarm of white onlookers. The threat of revolutionary re-enactment indicates Haiti’s real or imagined power to inspire imitative violence. It may also indicate Haiti’s power to inspire white fears of underground networks, illicit associations, and secret acts that could erupt into public violence at any moment.

The newspaper report positions its audience as witnesses and survivors, implicitly allowing readers to imagine themselves as refugees from the spreading and replicating violence of Haiti. Even so, the hailing of audiences is a complex thing. The account also ventriloquizes the threat of Haitian violence, imitating and projecting the warning in its own (printed) voice. The report reproduces – and potentially encourages readers to imaginatively reproduce – the Black threat of theatrical violence. In order to ward off the threat, the threat must be made manifest, and the report vocalizes, embodies, and renders Haiti’s revolutionary

⁸⁸ *New-York Spectator*, July 14, 1804. There has been significant debate over the nature and the extent of African American awareness of Haiti. As a reprinted anecdote, this particular account might say more about white anxiety over Black unruliness than it says about the actual actions of Black people and their reference back to Haiti.

violence with as much immediacy as print allows. If Black rebellion spreads by imitation and reiteration, alarmed readers also perpetuate the performance dynamic, helping to reproduce the imagined performances of revolution that have stoked their fears. The report does not decisively show a seething underworld of performative Black rebellion in American cities, although something like that may have existed. Rather, these acts show the anxieties of distant slave revolt coming home to roost for an American public defined by both distance from and vulnerability to Haiti's slave revolt.

Such anxious reports also presuppose an ever-besieged whiteness as their subject and as the actors responsible for crafting and replicating the performance of racial rebellion. In similar fashion, the sentimentalized victimhood of Saint Domingue's refugees turned on the staging of playful but threatening Black unruliness. Well-worn conventions of character and plot intersected with novel social performances, simultaneously performing and obscuring slave revolt and its consequences. In the process, such acts installed performance itself as a key way of understanding mastery, slavery, and revolutionary acts. Theatrical performance worked to embody formless fears while spectatorial practices offered ways of identifying, surveilling, and controlling the aftereffects of slave revolution. Suggesting that theatre could help police Black rebelliousness and assimilate Saint Domingue's refugees into an extended American family, the acts of Saint Domingue's refugees also show the persistent desire to reproduce such scenes. Playfully insubordinate Black characters and sentimentalized white refugees appear entangled in acts of mutual and often pleasurable imitation. In the repetition and reiteration, refugee acts manifested the Haitian Revolution as a thing to be observed from afar as it was carried into local playhouses, a thing to be embodied onstage, a provocation for song and dance, for poetry and sentiment, for comedy and ridicule. And ultimately, these refugee acts used the stage to gather what pleasures and profits could be had from the characters and conflicts of revolution's refugees.

American narratives of slave revolt remained profoundly tethered to such self-interested spectacles of sentimental suffering and playfully rebellious slaves. At the same time, Americans also encountered Haiti's refugees in very different, and for some, more troubling, scenes. An abolitionist pamphlet published in 1803 by the pseudonymous "Humanitas," for example, recounts the striking, and final, public performance of an enslaved man named Romain.⁸⁹ Romain had been

⁸⁹ Humanitas, *Reflections on Slavery; with Recent Evidence of Its Inhumanity. Occasioned by the Melancholy Death of Romain, a French Negro* (Philadelphia, PA: Printed for the author by

carried from Saint Domingue to New Jersey by his master, Anthony Salaignac, during the revolution. Salaignac brought from Saint Domingue seemingly submissive, if not loyal, enslaved people. In November 1802, however, after seven years living in the United States, Salaignac began the process of transporting Romain and some other enslaved people back to Saint Domingue. In 1802, a French expedition led by Napoleon's brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, seemed on the verge of finally restoring slavery and full French control over the colony, and Salaignac must have judged the moment auspicious for returning slaveholders. He almost certainly hoped to recover the wealth and standing that he had lost in the uprisings.

After arriving in Trenton, however, Salaignac's repatriation plans ran aground. Romain's wife and child escaped with some of Salaignac's other slaves, and Romain found himself alone and facing a forced return to slavery in Saint Domingue. "Maddened" by the prospect of being taken back to Saint Domingue and "rendered desperate by the complicated misery of his situation," the account continues,

but still determined to be free, he adopted his dernier resort, took a pruning-knife from his pocket, and dreading a spark of life should remain, whereby he might be restored, he three times cut his throat across, and fell dead on the pavement, thereby emancipating himself from the grasp of avarice and inhumanity."⁹⁰

Romain's final act was certainly a moment of determined human desperation, but it also takes the shape of a purposeful, if not consciously crafted, public performance. Escaping the obscuring confines of the carriage, Romain took to the street and in a very public manner demonstrated his refusal to return to Saint Dominguan slavery. The act of suicide, with its triple slash of the blade, seems deliberately calculated, perhaps even purposefully sensationalized.

Romain's performance of self-inflicted violence seems shadowed by the violence of both slavery and the Haitian Revolution. Romain's final dramatic act runs starkly counter to both the sentimental nostalgia of white refugee narratives and the triumphalist narrative of Haitian independence. Even more poignantly, the French defeat and the declaration of Haitian independence – presumably bringing freedom for Romain and his family – were all, historically speaking, very near at hand. Romain's despair, and the fact that his master could look forward to re-establishing the forced-labor relations of a plantation colony, serve as reminders that

R. Cochran, 108, *Race-street*, 1803). Johnson sensitively reads Romain's story in historical context, in *Fear of French Negroes*, xvii–xix.

⁹⁰ Humanitas, *Reflections on Slavery*, 14.

the liberatory achievements of the Haitian Revolution were hardly inevitable. Despite the ongoing successes of revolutionary struggle, freedom must have often felt unattainable, perhaps until the very moment of its achievement.

As the account relates, Romain's audience seemed stunned, struggling to understand the scene. In the theatrical language of the pamphlet, it immediately became a "tragical" event, a "melancholy catastrophe" that "excited in the breasts of the spectators a considerable degree of commiseration."⁹¹ The pamphlet's frontispiece illustrates those onlookers, watching from the margins of the scene. A figure who might be Romain's wife, carrying a child, looks backward over her shoulder as she flees the scene; white men surround Romain with gestures of alarm, on the brink of intervening, just a moment too late to become themselves actors in the drama. An indistinctly outlined figure crouches in a doorway near Romain, close enough to touch him. Everyone appears caught in gestures of problematic spectatorship – figures watch Romain, unable to stop his suicide, caught between watching and participating, part of the performance but also separated from it. The act immediately became evidence of Romain's character. His suicide, *Humanitas* wrote, showed that he "yet had still virtue sufficient to prove to the world" his love of freedom and hatred of slavery's abuses.⁹² Virtue becomes the key ingredient of a performance appearing to the world. Romain had not simply killed himself; he had "rushed uncalled into the presence of the Almighty, with a confident hope of receiving that mercy which sinful man denied him."⁹³ Romain's fear and desperation become in the retelling a confident turn toward the afterlife, toward divine justice, toward the imagined redress of higher law. In the same way, the account appeals to Romain's audience as moral readers turned witnesses and judges.

Romain's body, so recently and violently acting, seems both animated body and animating prop, and the onlookers immediately found themselves compelled to act in response to the suicide. Their sensibilities excited, "mingled expressions of horror and compassion were mutually exchanged."⁹⁴ In the wake of Romain's suicide, ripples of performance move outward as the spectators on the street act out their own complicated, mixed reactions to the event. Reprinted inquests follow, as if onlookers found themselves prompted to perform further acts legally confirming the details of Romain's death. And ultimately, the

⁹¹ *Humanitas*, 12.

⁹² *Humanitas*, 15.

⁹³ *Humanitas*, 15.

⁹⁴ *Humanitas*, 14.

pseudonymous “Humanitas” re-enacts the event as a didactic performance, commenting in the pamphlet on the “instructive lesson” that Romain’s death “presents to our view.”⁹⁵ Transformed from desperate street performance to didactic abolitionist pamphlet, Romain’s suicide reveals a complex texture of layered, embedded, and interanimating performances. As shocking and tragic as it was, the suicide might have also worked as a practical distraction, drawing attention away from his wife and child to enable their escape. As Sara E. Johnson writes, Romain’s final act certainly “falls within the long tradition of slave suicide,” re-enacting and redirecting the violence of slavery.⁹⁶ Romain’s act also, at least for a moment, refocuses the tragedy of the Haitian Revolution, asserting his prerogative to reframe the dominant scenes of revolution and refugeism. His act ultimately becomes a prompt for the audience to feel, and perhaps to act on, feelings other than sympathy for the victims of slave uprisings or amused indignation at Black misbehavior. Filtered through the sensibilities of various onlookers and commentators, Romain’s death also reminds us that the more visible character types and plots of revolution often obscured a wide variety of other complex and ambiguous performances.

⁹⁵ *Humanitas*, 17.

⁹⁶ Johnson, *Fear of French Negroes*, xvii.