



PROJECT MUSE®

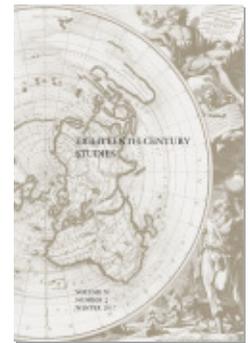
---

## Mobility and the Enunciation of Freedom in Urban Saint-Domingue

Annette Joseph-Gabriel

Eighteenth-Century Studies, Volume 50, Number 2, Winter 2017, pp. 213-229  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/646373>

# MOBILITY AND THE ENUNCIATION OF FREEDOM IN URBAN SAINT-DOMINGUE

*Annette Joseph-Gabriel*

---

In 1796 the Martinican-born lawyer and philosopher Méderic-Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry published his three-volume account of life in Saint-Domingue prior to the Haitian Revolution.<sup>1</sup> The *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* has received much attention in recent decades, with a particular focus on its descriptions of plantation life and the early manifestations of slaves' subversion and resistance that would culminate in the Haitian Revolution in 1791.<sup>2</sup> Yet Moreau's narrative also describes the vibrant urban life of Saint-Domingue. Its largest city, Cap-Français (Le Cap), was a thriving cosmopolitan space, bustling with the activity of traders at ports and in markets.<sup>3</sup> Theatergoers showed off the latest fashionable dresses and literary salons served as spaces for exchanging news on recent political events in France, North America, and other parts of the Caribbean.

Other historical texts corroborate Moreau's descriptions of Le Cap as a significant urban center. For example, in his account of life in Saint-Domingue on the eve of the revolution, Baron de Wimpffen described Le Cap as the only real city on the island. Although Wimpffen did not visit Le Cap, its reputation led him to conclude that it was a uniquely cosmopolitan space, particularly when compared to Port-au-Prince or Jacmel, which he described as "une centaine de baraques de planches répandues sur la grève ou éparpillées sur le talus et le plateau d'un monticule rocailleux" [about a hundred wooden shacks spread along the shore or scattered on the slope and the plateau of a rocky hill].<sup>4</sup> In this description, Wimpffen juxtaposes the seemingly temporary nature of haphazardly placed houses in Jacmel

---

Annette Joseph-Gabriel is Assistant Professor of French at the University of Arizona. Her research specializations include contemporary Caribbean literatures and the Enlightenment in the French Atlantic world.

with the stone buildings of Le Cap that had until then withstood earthquakes.<sup>5</sup> His comparison suggests that it was both the opulence of the city's buildings and the deliberate organization of the city streets in a grid that made Le Cap a truly urban space [figure 1].

Throughout Moreau's account of the bustling life in Le Cap, colonial administrators, nuns, sailors, and merchants all jostle for space as they navigate the city on their way to the courthouse, the church, a hospital, or sometimes even prison. Moreau allows many of these actors to speak through his text: in the *Description* we not only see bodies walking the streets—we hear them articulate their thoughts and desires as they go about their everyday activities. We hear administrators' voices in the laws they passed governing the use of market spaces on weekends (*D*, 441), and we hear dissenting public opinion on how much tax citizens would pay for the construction of a new bridge (*D*, 453–54). Enslaved inhabitants of Le Cap, however, are conspicuously visible yet noticeably silent. This silence is deliberate; according to Moreau, there is little to say about the slaves who lived in urban Saint-Domingue, particularly in comparison with those in the rural plantation setting: “On serait peut-être surpris de mon silence relativement aux esclaves, si je ne faisais pas observer que ce n'est pas dans une ville qu'ils peuvent offrir des observations particulières” [One would perhaps be surprised at my relative silence on the slaves, if I did not make it known that they have little to offer by way of observations in a city] (*D*, 534). Here Moreau both acknowledges his silence on a significant majority of the city's population and seeks to justify it by suggesting that the urban setting is not ideal for observing the lives of slaves.<sup>6</sup> For Moreau, in the larger context of Saint-Domingue, slaves in the city were out of place.

Moreau's silencing of slaves, relative to other groups in Le Cap, takes multiple forms. He describes, for example, a market in the city's harbor where captains sell the goods they have brought from distant shores: “On croit parcourir un [*sic*] peu d'instant la France entière, quand à l'accent gascon on entend succéder le normand & le provençal, au dunkerquois. . . . des nègres vigoureux, armés de morceaux de bois ronds & pesans, frappent, en cadence” [One has the impression of travelling throughout all of France in an instant when the Gascony accent gives way to the Norman and the Provençal to the Dunkirk accent. . . . sturdy negroes, armed with heavy, round pieces of wood, strike rhythmically] (*D*, 322). Moreau portrays Le Cap as a cosmopolitan city in which France is represented in the sights and sounds of imported goods and merchants' accents, and where blacks, in contrast, do not speak but simply carry out backbreaking work. In another example, Moreau describes the sound of the church bells in Le Cap: “Les nègres aiment, eux à les casser, en les sonnans avec violence, et en les faisant servir à des carillons assourdissans” [The blacks like to break them by ringing them violently, and by using them to create deafening chimes] (*D*, 342). Moreau goes on to recount that as blacks ring the church bells, they claim to hear the bells singing the song “Bon blanc mouri: mauvé rété” [a good white is dead, the bad ones remain] (*D*, 342). This passage in particular has been heralded in scholarship on the Haitian Revolution as expressing the ominous whispers of the forthcoming violence that ex-slaves would mete out to their former masters.<sup>7</sup>

Especially noteworthy in these two examples is the curious interplay between silence and speech for the black inhabitants of Saint-Domingue's most



Figure 1. Ville du Cap dans l'Isle de St Domingue, 1764. Jacques Nicolas Bellin. Image courtesy of the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

prosperous port city. Whereas French merchants speak, expressing their various regional identities through their accents, the black population is largely denied speech in this account. Rather, they are given expression through myriad other sounds that serve as a proxy for the verbal communication that the historical account denies them. They strike pieces of wood in a rhythmic fashion and ring the church bells in a manner that conveys meaning, as shown in their interpretation of the bells' melody. On one hand, the indecipherability of the rhythm produced by the pieces of wood is potentially strategic as a form of communication in the years leading up to the revolution. On the other hand, the possibility of decoding these sounds and gestures today raises important questions about how we might hear what remains unspoken, unspeakable even, in these historical accounts of life on the eve of the explosive revolution in which slaves and *gens de couleur* [free people of color] wrested control of this most prosperous colony from France.<sup>8</sup> In *Haitian History: New Perspectives*, Alyssa Sepinwall notes that recent scholarship has increasingly examined questions of voice and agency in documenting and revising Haitian history. Questions such as “*Whose history is recorded in the archives? How can historians try to uncover the ideas and experiences of non-elites?*” invite critical reflection on what it means to foreground the voices of those who have largely remained marginalized in historical narratives.<sup>9</sup> Thus in the absence of their direct or reported speech, how might we attempt to hear the slaves who moved about Le Cap in the years preceding the revolution?

M. NourbeSe Philip, in her essay “Dis-place: The Space Between,” provides a theoretical framework for decoding this silence imposed on black subjects as they navigate the city. In her examination of the strategies through which black women resist their marginalization from public spaces in Trinidad’s capital city, Port of Spain, Philip asks, “When a text goes missing in the computer, it is not completely

lost—another language is needed to translate the language of the ‘missing’ text so that it becomes readable once again. . . . When the missing text is silence, what is the language with which you read the silence? What is the grammar of silence?”<sup>10</sup> She concludes that it is through transgressive movements in space, as prostitutes and stick fighters, that the *jamettes* of Port of Spain resist the silencing mechanisms of black female respectability politics imposed on them by figures of authority such as the police.<sup>11</sup> Mobility, for Philip, is the key to decoding the silence of black bodies. It is the language through which we may read the missing text of their voices, stories, and experiences. Mobility becomes the grammar of silence.

The insight that movement through urban space is a purposeful and productive act that overcomes externally imposed silence is developed by Michel de Certeau in “Walking in the City,” in which he asserts that walking is a space of enunciation.<sup>12</sup> Certeau describes the acts of walking through urban space, surmounting or circumventing obstacles, and charting one’s own path as rhetorical practices by which pedestrians activate the city.<sup>13</sup> Walking realizes the city, calling it into being through the walker’s active engagement with the urban space. Applying the work of Certeau and Philip allows us to begin to decode the messages conveyed by the black pedestrians of Le Cap, at least as they were heard by white observers and commentators at the time. If grammar is the vehicle through which language is produced or articulated, then walking-as-grammar can constitute a set of “pedestrian speech acts,”<sup>14</sup> an amplification of the muted speech of slaves in historical accounts of slavery in Saint-Domingue’s urban spaces. A careful examination of the mobility of slaves and free people of color in Le Cap, then, allows us to better hear the contestation over space, race, and power that was ongoing in Saint-Domingue’s most prosperous city on the eve of revolution.

Le Cap’s uniquely cosmopolitan nature, as described by Moreau, Wimpffen, and others, presents the rare opportunity to examine what slavery and resistance looked like in the eighteenth-century urban context in a way that few other spaces can.<sup>15</sup> I argue that the mobility of Le Cap’s nonwhite population was perceived as an act of enunciating freedom by the city’s white inhabitants. Navigating Le Cap as an urban space, with its spoken and unspoken rules of racialized access, necessitated acts of subversion in order to exercise limited freedoms and imagine freedoms to come. I examine mobility for three groups of people in Le Cap: black prisoners for whom the simple act of walking meant negotiating limited freedoms; free black property owners whose ability to walk the city was predicated on their ownership of the spaces they navigated; and the buyers and sellers in racialized market spaces, the *marchés des nègres* [black markets] and the *marchés des blancs* [white markets], who both produced and consumed the city through their economic activity. Each of these groups shows that the slaves and *gens de couleur* in Le Cap spoke through their mobility in order to lay claim to the city in which they lived in various states of freedom.<sup>16</sup>

Attempting to read the acts and voices of enslaved people and *gens de couleur* as they are filtered through the narratives of white writers such as Moreau necessarily involves a set of limitations. The documents analyzed in this paper were heavily invested in representing Saint-Domingue in particular ways to advance their respective political goals. Consequently, each text’s representation of the mobility of black bodies is mediated by its intended purpose. Laurent Dubois has

described Moreau's *Description* as a nostalgic "walking tour of a vanished world," motivated by its author's desire to preserve the image of the island's splendor and prosperity prior to the Haitian Revolution.<sup>17</sup> Moreau's text seeks to call into being an idealized Saint-Domingue in which the violence of slavery remained an unspoken necessity for maintaining an ordered racial hierarchy. In this sanitized history of the colony, Moreau attempts to cast an omniscient gaze that would make the island in its entirety decipherable.<sup>18</sup> As Jonathan Glover argues in his study of the *Description*'s extensive racial categorization of the inhabitants of Saint-Domingue, Moreau uses documentation as "a technology of capture," a means to render visible all that might be beyond the view and control of those in power, who could restart the colonial project that had gone awry in 1791.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, a letter written by Le Cap's attorney general, François de Neufchateau, and a report prepared by the Chamber of Agriculture were both motivated by the desire to represent what their authors viewed as the troubling and subversive nature of the mobility of enslaved people. Their authors hoped to further curtail the kinds of movement that they argued were signs of the impending destruction of the social and political order.

It is imperative, therefore, to read these commentators' representations of the subversive potential of black mobility against the backdrop of the obsessive desire to maintain colonial control, to hold on to an order that seemed always in jeopardy. The impossibility of excavating the authentic voices of slaves and *gens de couleur* untouched by the mediation of white authors, however, does not detract from the goal of working to better understand the experiences of those whose stories have often been marginalized in archives. By analyzing representations of black mobility in light of the motives for these representations, this essay attempts to uncover not the unfiltered voices of slaves and *gens de couleur*, but rather the ways in which their mobility was "heard" by white commentators in the tense climate of the years preceding the revolution.

It is worth noting, too, that while Certeau's reading of walking provides a useful framework for the present analysis of slave mobility in Le Cap, the stakes of this reading are markedly different when applied to the eighteenth-century city. Certeau's walker in New York City exercises a far greater measure of control over his movements than the slave in Le Cap. For Certeau, the pedestrian makes deliberate choices about how to navigate the city and is able to "condemn certain places to inertia or disappearance" through these choices.<sup>20</sup> Le Cap's slaves and even free people of color, in contrast, had less agency in choosing where and even how they walked. The limitations placed on their mobility made the city space the terrain of engagement for a constant negotiation of power and, ultimately, of freedom.

### INCARCERATED BODIES AND FREEDOM UTTERANCES

To claim walking as an act of enunciating freedom assumes that it is possible to define, understand, or at the very least recognize freedom. Slaves in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue worked toward freedom in many ways. As Carolyn Fick has shown, of the myriad forms of resistance to slavery, including suicide and infanticide, "marronage proved in the end to be the most viable and certainly the most consistent. . . . Slaves defied the system that denied them the most essential of social and human rights: the right to be a free person. They claimed that right

in marronage.”<sup>21</sup> Mobility was at the heart of this move toward freedom through flight. In *Freedom as Marronage* Neil Roberts encourages us to move away from “narratives of inertia” that articulate “slavery as a state into which agents are locked without any mobility, and . . . freedom as a motionless attribute of agents who are simply in a condition antithetical to the unfree.”<sup>22</sup> Roberts shifts the emphasis from freedom as a state of being (one is free) or a possession (one has freedom) to freedom as an action, as *marronage*, a constant act of flight through myriad forms of escape. Placing mobility at the heart of freedom in this way emphasizes slave agency in moving along what was in reality a spectrum between slave and free. Given Roberts’s focus on the plantation as the space of enslavement in the Caribbean, flight becomes the primary lens through which to examine movement toward freedom. Expanding the spatial dimensions of slavery to include urban spaces, as I do here, demands an expansion of the different forms of movement possible: mobility comes to encompass purposeful acts—such as walking, laboring, and engaging in various forms of economic activity—by which freedom unfolds and shifts for urban slaves in Le Cap.

If movement along the spectrum from enslavement to freedom takes on different forms in the city and on the plantation, it is because each of these spaces presents possibilities for and obstacles to movement that are specific to the racial and spatial order in place. In the urban setting, slaves sometimes did not live with their masters but rather rented their own rooms, usually in the Pétite Guinée [Little Africa] community of Le Cap.<sup>23</sup> Slaves who were artisans could also hire out their labor for wages that they then turned over, in full or in part, to their masters. The possibility to live on one’s own and to work for pay allowed slaves in the city to exercise or at the very least to approximate freedom in ways that remained impossible for slaves on the plantation. If, as Jeremy Popkin argues, slaves in Le Cap “enjoyed greater freedoms than the more numerous workers on the plantations,” it is precisely because of the greater opportunity for mobility that the urban space offered.<sup>24</sup> As Popkin asserts, Le Cap’s nonwhite population could “circulate on their own, and the fact that it was difficult to distinguish slaves from free blacks allowed runaway *maroons* to blend into the city population.”<sup>25</sup> Freedom in urban spaces was therefore intricately linked to whether and how one could walk through the city—from home to work site, for example. Walking amounted to the quotidian expression of these limited freedoms.

The close ties between freedom and mobility are nowhere more evident than in the case of the black chain gangs in Le Cap. Known in Saint-Domingue as “la chaîne des nègres déserteurs” [the chain of negro deserters], chain gangs were composed of slaves who after three unsuccessful escape attempts had been sentenced to death or life imprisonment.<sup>26</sup> In 1741 the colonial administration commuted those sentences to time served in a chain gang (*D*, 397). The prisoners were assigned domestic duties in administrators’ homes and could walk the city from their work sites during the day to the prison at night. The description “chain gang” was in fact somewhat misleading since, according to Moreau, many of the prisoners were relieved of their chains in order to better carry out their domestic duties. During this time the prisoners occupied a nebulous position in the social and economic order of Saint-Domingue’s slave society. They were no longer owned by their former masters, nor were they considered to be owned by the state because

their work did not generate revenue for the state's coffers. As the attorney general of Le Cap, Neufchateau described them in a 1787 letter: "les nègres à la chaîne sont perdus pour leurs Maîtres pendant qu'ils y demeurent, et sont également perdus pour le Public" [the negroes in the chain gang are a loss for their masters while they remain there, and are equally a loss for the public].<sup>27</sup>

Neufchateau's and Moreau's narratives both express the colonial anxiety surrounding the terms of black mobility in the urban space. For both commentators, it was less the prisoners' ability to walk through Le Cap and more their power to circulate autonomously through the city, unchained, that subverted the purpose of a chain gang as punishment and deterrent. Moreau in particular found it disorienting that prisoners seemed to enjoy greater freedoms than slaves: "Presque tous ces nègres jouissent-ils d'une liberté digne d'être enviée par l'esclave" [Nearly all these blacks enjoy a level of freedom worthy of envy by the slave] (*D*, 398). It was not the fact that the prisoners were allowed to work beyond the prison walls that presented a challenge to Moreau's understanding of the clear-cut lines between freedom and slavery or imprisonment. After all, their visibility outside the prison, duly chained and serving out their sentences through hard labor, was exactly the deterrent that Moreau and Neufchateau envisioned for slaves who might also entertain notions of flight.<sup>28</sup> Rather, it was the chain gang's ability to be visible walking the city autonomously that blurred the boundaries between slave/prisoner and free. As Moreau laments: "Quelle doit être la sensation du juge qui rencontre dans un état de liberté celui qu'il avait envoyé aux galères? Celle du maître qui trouve de même l'esclave qu'il avait été forcé d'accuser pour un délit grave?" [How must he feel, that judge who meets the one he sent to prison now in a state of freedom? Likewise the master who finds free the slave he had been forced to accuse of a serious crime?] (*D*, 398). Moreau's word choice here is significant. He uses the verbs "rencontrer" [to meet] and "trouver" [to find, to come upon], both of which suggest an encounter that is the result of one or both parties' mobility. He also employs rhetorical questions that exhort the reader to imagine the surprise and dismay of the judge and the slave owner as they encounter the former slave in the street, at a market, or, in Moreau's experience, at the home of an acquaintance. In Moreau's reading of the mobility of Le Cap's chain gang, the judge and the slave owner no longer enact their power over the slave-turned-prisoner. The former slave inhabits spaces that, while not completely beyond the reach of the colonial administration as in the case of some maroons, remain outside of the strictly circumscribed spheres of the plantation or the prison.

Neufchateau pressed for reforms that would ensure that the chain gang would serve as a deterrent to other slaves who were contemplating escape. Notably, he proposed stricter sentencing, involving "les besognes les plus pénibles et les plus périlleuses" [the most arduous and perilous tasks] such as dredging swamps and flooded areas, in order to make the chain gang a more frightening example to slaves. He argued in his letter that "la crainte seule de quitter leurs habitudes et leurs cases, pour être en proie à ces travaux et aux privations dont ils seroient accompagnés, cette seule crainte . . . suffiroit vraisemblablement à contenir dans leur devoir la majeure partie des Nègres" [the fear alone of leaving their routines and their huts, to find themselves in the grip of this work and these deprivations, that fear alone . . . will be enough to keep the majority of the Negroes bound to

their duty].<sup>29</sup> Neufchateau's language is particularly telling of the ways in which space and mobility formed the terrain of engagement on which power was contested between slaves and the colonial administration. He believed that the fear of leaving their huts, which he imagined to be a protected space, as well as the dangers associated with their controlled mobility through swamps and flooded terrain, would deter potential maroons.

The attorney general's goal, above all, was to keep slaves "contained" and "bound" to spaces where their mobility would be profitable to the colony. He therefore proposed that the colonial administration pay the masters of each slave in the chain gang for the work they undertook in serving their sentences. Fick aptly articulates the relationship between the violence of punishment and the profit motive of slavery as a capitalist venture. She argues that "profit was, if not the sole, at least the dominant motive for owning slaves, and where profit depended not merely upon maintaining a constant flow of production but upon expanding it, the uses and refinements of terror took on ghastly proportions."<sup>30</sup> Neufchateau's goal in monetizing the chain gang's mobility was to restore order to the slave economy that was destabilized by any form of *marronage* that successfully moved slaves outside their sanctioned roles in this economy. In his vision for legal reform, the chain gang would become "(une) heureuse idée fiscale" [a fortuitous fiscal idea] and "(un) projet de finance" [a financial project] that would place black mobility within the bounds of production and profit.<sup>31</sup>

Moreau's and Neufchateau's calls for greater restrictions on the mobility of the chain gang stemmed from their anxieties about the lack of a clear demarcation between slave and prisoner, and between prisoner and free person. Their response suggests that as the members of the chain gang walked through the city unchained, their pedestrian speech acts were read by figures of authority as challenges to their power. To say that Le Cap's chain gang enunciated a larger degree of freedom by walking the city is not to say that urban slavery was any less egregious or any less a denial of the slave's humanity. Nor is it a reiteration of the colonial angst that led observers such as Moreau to contrast the simple, docile field slave with the rebellious urban slave corrupted by close proximity to the white population. Rather, understanding freedom as continuous shifts along a spectrum illuminates the slippery nature of urban slavery and the possibilities for resistance. Moreau's observations on the uniqueness of Le Cap's prison system show that in the face of race-based surveillance for slaves, freedom for blacks in urban settings was predicated on their ability to walk the city unhindered.

### TRANSFORMING (IN) THE CITY

For Le Cap's nonwhite population, enunciating freedom depended upon not just walking the city but also the way in which they walked. For those *gens de couleur* who purchased their freedom and a plot of land in Le Cap, enunciating freedom was first and foremost a question of ownership. By 1789 *gens de couleur* owned a quarter of the property on the island and were viewed as a significant threat to the economic hegemony of Saint-Domingue's white population.<sup>32</sup> The intertwined roles of land ownership and mobility in the transition from *esclave* [slave] to *affranchi* [freed slave] are especially evident in the case of Alou Kinson,

a former slave who later became a doctor in Le Cap.<sup>33</sup> Kinson's story illustrates the ways in which the acquisition of freedom and its attendant identity transformations depended on the possibility to own and transform, through construction and walking, portions of the city in which to perform these new identities. It is important to note, however, that Moreau's *Description* is the only historical record of Kinson's life and work (*D*, 416–22).<sup>34</sup> This brief biography must therefore be viewed through the lens of Moreau's project: to have Kinson's philanthropic work recognized by the French state.

According to Moreau, Alou Kinson was born in the Gold Coast in 1714 and sold into slavery in Le Cap by a Captain Bertrand. His first master, M. Thomaseau, trained Kinson to be a mason and baptized him Jean Jasmin. On his deathbed Thomaseau implored Jasmin's new master, M. Louis, to look into freeing Jasmin. Kinson, now Jasmin, continued his work as a mason and was charged by his new master to build prisons and an armory. Here Moreau informs us that through his intelligence and good behavior, and for a fee of 150 livres donated to charity, Jean Jasmin obtained his freedom from M. Louis, whereupon he rebaptized himself Jasmin Thomazeau, with a slight spelling variation from his first master's name. Thomazeau's first construction project as a free man was a hospice for poor and ailing *gens de couleur* in Le Cap. He worked there as a doctor alongside his wife and twelve slaves. The large numbers of people needing care soon made it necessary to add an additional wing, so Thomazeau constructed a wall to demarcate the limits of the new wing and requested a building permit from the colonial administration. His request was denied and the wall was demolished. By the time Moreau met Thomazeau and began to advocate for administrative support and recognition for his work, another request that would ultimately be denied, Thomazeau was already a seventy-five-year-old man uncertain of the fate of his hospice after his death.

Thomazeau's story illustrates the racialized hierarchy of access to city spaces and the ways in which that access could be predicated on freedom that is defined as ownership of the self and of the spaces one walks.<sup>35</sup> Thus Thomazeau's multiple identity transformations at different stages of his freedom are closely linked to his construction in and of the city. In his first incarnation as Jean Jasmin, his training as a mason gave him more mobility, both physical and economic. This movement is most evident in his work building prisons, spaces designed to restrict and control the mobility of prisoners. Although not yet free, he was at least able to walk the streets between his home and construction sites. Jasmin, read as an example of Certeau's urban walker who produces the city, undertook his own acts of production both by walking and by building prisons that became a part of Le Cap's architectural, social, and legal order.

In Jasmin's final transformation as Thomazeau, his ability to inhabit his new identity as a free man was again dependent on the possibility of walking in the city. As a doctor and hospice administrator, Thomazeau's map of the city was at once expansive and limited. He lay claim to different portions of Le Cap by purchasing land for construction and farming.<sup>36</sup> In addition to his thirty-six-by-twenty-four-foot hospice (*D*, 417), Thomazeau owned an eleven-square-foot farm and five small plots of land scattered throughout the city. His spaces in Le Cap, while small, were many, thus giving him access to a larger portion of the city.<sup>37</sup> Walking from one of his possessions to another would take him from his home on Rue du



Figure 2. Rue St. Joseph runs parallel to Rue du Cimetière in the center of the city. Plan of the City of Cape François as it existed before the Revolution. Plan de la ville du Cap François, 1785. J. Barlow, engraver. Image courtesy of the Digital Library of the Caribbean, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

Haha to Rue Saint-Joseph, then to Rue du Cimetière, and finally to Morne Rouge (D, 421). As a free man and a landowner, Thomazeau could walk a larger stretch of Le Cap than he could as an enslaved mason whose engagement with the city was confined to the prisons that he built. To walk the city for Thomazeau was to enunciate the different stages of his freedom by claiming an ever-expanding urban geography. With each transformation of his status in Le Cap came not only a name change but also an expanded ability to walk the city [figure 2].

Freedom, however, as Thomazeau and Moreau both learned, was tenuous and, even when acquired, could be difficult to maintain. This was especially evident in Thomazeau's interactions with the colonial administration. The administration's building permits symbolized its recognition of his freedom to claim the city through land ownership and to build the city through construction projects. Thomazeau's act of constructing of an eighty-foot-long wall demarcating an extended portion of land for his hospice articulated his claim to a significantly larger portion of the city, as well as his confidence that his freedom to make this claim would be recognized. Consequently, the administration's act of demolishing the wall undermined not only his act of enunciation but also his very freedom by denying him this recognition. Significantly, the demolition caused fallen rocks and earth to block a portion of the land on which the existing wing of the hospice stood, leaving Thomazeau to have to pick his way through the debris. The demolition altered the way he walked this portion of the city by placing new obstacles in his path. It placed limitations on his

freedom to claim more of Le Cap for himself and the *gens de couleur* in his care, and it rolled back some of his freedom to walk the city by rendering the existing hospice space less navigable. Thomazeau's story is important for understanding the racialized hierarchy of access to urban spaces in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue because it highlights the ways in which walking and ownership were inextricably intertwined. White administrators could use their power to grant or restrict land ownership and mobility to preserve the racial order, in which mobility for *gens de couleur* was predicated on the administration's recognition of their freedom.

Yet Thomazeau in some sense had the last word by living on Rue du Haha, a street whose name expressed its noncompliance with the spatial order imagined by Le Cap's urban planners. Rue du Haha was the only street in the city that did not intersect with another at a right angle, but was rather masked by the position of two prominent buildings: the nunnery and the barracks. Moreau describes the surprise of the pedestrian who, familiar with the carefully laid out grid of the city streets, unexpectedly encounters this odd street for the first time (*D*, 432). The element of surprise leads the walker to exclaim "ha! ha!" at the sight of this short street abruptly cut off by a building on each end. Rue du Haha presents a new dimension to Certeau's idea of enunciation. Here it is not the walker who deliberately speaks by navigating the city but rather the space that elicits an unplanned reaction from the walker, a speech act that expresses the incongruity of this little space in the otherwise uninterrupted grid of Le Cap. Rue du Haha's spatial orientation is antithetical to the imagined order of the urban space, and it is tempting, though of course conjectural, to read Thomazeau's choice to make his home there as an implicit rejection of the racial and spatial order of the city [figure 3].

That slaves' mobility threatened the hierarchy of power on the plantation is evident in the Code Noir and other laws that sought to restrict movement and meeting possibilities for slaves on the plantation. But Saint-Domingue's white population did not perceive the greater mobility of urban slaves and *gens de couleur* as any less dangerous. Their mobility raised a different kind of anxiety: not the specter of slaves meeting to organize a revolt, but rather the fear of blacks' reclamation, appropriation, and ownership of the city space. A report prepared by the Chamber of Agriculture in 1785, six years before the Haitian Revolution, presented some examples of "the acts of insolence" that, according to the report, signaled the coming disruption of the colonial order.<sup>38</sup> These examples are worth reproducing here because they reveal clear connections among walking, ownership, and freedom:

Monsieur Dufour, walking along Rue Espagnole at five o'clock in the evening, found his way blocked by a group of blacks. He had a lady on his arm. As none of them thought it his duty to step aside, he said to them, "Let Madam pass." One of them replied, "M-r F-r, if it was one hour later, you wouldn't dare say anything. You'd step aside yourself."  
 . . . On Rue Royale, a man told a group of Negroes making a noise in front of his house to go away. He received the reply, "The street doesn't belong to you; it belongs to the king!" He went to raise his cane and someone threw a large stone at him just missing his chin. . . . Seeing a slave woman pass by who had just been whipped in the jail, one of M. Fouché's slaves, shouted out, "Well now! Isn't it right for slaves to kill whites? Just look what they did to this woman!"



Figure 3. Rue du Haha, not visible on the map, runs between the nunnery (“les religieuses”) and the new barracks (“les nouvelles cazernes”). Plan of the City of Cape François as it existed before the Revolution, detail. Image courtesy of the Digital Library of the Caribbean, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

Many Negroes in Le Cap never go out without a large stick, and on holidays you find 2,000 of them gathered at La Providence, La Fosette, and Petit Carénage all armed with sticks, drinking rum, and doing the ka-linda. The police do nothing to prevent these parties and they never end without quarrels and fighting.<sup>39</sup>

Each of these examples illustrates the fears of whites engaged in a struggle over power, presence, and legitimacy in the city. They reveal that public spaces held distinct possibilities for enunciating freedom through direct confrontation over white and black ownership of these seemingly neutral spaces. In the first anecdote, this struggle played out in a neutral zone, on a sidewalk that was the property of neither M. Dufour nor the blacks he met during his walk. In this encounter, the act of stepping aside in the presence of whiteness in general, and white womanhood in particular, would symbolize black acknowledgement of a racial and gendered hierarchy and acquiescence to M. Dufour’s and his companion’s ownership of the city street. In that moment, M. Dufour and the lady on his arm would claim ownership of the sidewalk, thus delegitimizing the presence of blacks by obliging them to walk differently or to chart a different route. In short, M. Dufour sought to remind the black pedestrians that they were not free to walk where and how they wanted. They responded with a clear warning to M. Dufour that in the near future they would no longer tolerate these limitations placed on their freedom.

The second anecdote serves as a reminder of the links between ownership, mobility, and freedom, that elusive trio of factors that Kinson-turned-Jasmin-turned-Thomazeau sought to navigate as he walked Le Cap. Here the struggle for ownership played out on the street in front of a man’s house, a space that functioned as the boundary between private and public. Who owned this space? For the blacks engaged in this confrontation, Rue Royale was aptly named. Belonging neither to them nor to the homeowner, Rue Royale became fair game for anyone who invoked the name of the King in order to legitimize her presence on the street. Uttering the King’s name as they took up public space became a way for Le Cap’s black

inhabitants to enunciate their freedom to be on the street on their own terms, even when white inhabitants viewed their presence as noisy or disruptive. In the third anecdote about the woman who had been whipped, the city streets functioned as the space where the violence and brutality of Le Cap as a slave society was put on full display.<sup>40</sup> Even more importantly for the coming revolution, the streets also became a space where formerly silenced blacks became public commentators on this brutal system and the possibilities for its overthrow. In framing his disgust with the public spectacle of the whipped woman as a question rather than as a statement, M. Fouché's slave turned the street into a forum for public debate on slave agency and counter-violence.

Applying M. NourbeSe Philip's work on mobility and the grammar of silence to these examples foregrounds the intersecting forces of racial and gendered oppression at work. Notably, the examples above, while seemingly disconnected, share two important narrative threads. The first is the interconnectedness of ownership, mobility, and freedom, as enunciated through walking the city streets. The second is the positioning of both white and black womanhood in this contest over public space. M. Dufour's white lady companion stands in for the fragile racial and gendered order that is in danger of being overturned by rebellious blacks. In M. Dufour's command to "Let Madam pass" is the notion that both white womanhood and the very order of Le Cap are under attack. The white woman's presence on the street as a dual symbol of power and fragility is interestingly reflected in the positioning of the black woman in the debate opened up by M. Fouché's slave. The black woman too stands in for that which must be protected, but in this case protection would come through the counter-violence of slaves killing whites. Yet unlike her white counterpart, the black woman does not face the specter of imminent violence, but rather violence itself. She has already been brutalized. If black and white women serve similar rhetorical functions in the speech acts of white and black pedestrians in Le Cap, as represented by the Chamber of Agriculture report, they nonetheless occupy different social positions that make their experiences similar in rhetoric only and not in the everyday practice of walking the city streets.

The black subjects represented in these examples sought to destabilize and resist these intersecting oppressions through their transgressive movement—movement that whites found threatening. For example, the image of two thousand blacks, armed with sticks, singing, dancing, and fighting in the city streets was the Chamber of Agriculture's attempt to frighten the whites of Saint-Domingue with the image of uncontrollable black masses. The stick fighters and dancers in Le Cap, like Philip's *jamettes* of Port of Spain, challenged the spatial, racial, and gendered order of the city by moving through the streets in a disorderly manner.

### CONSUMING THE CITY

The pedestrian speech acts of slaves and *gens de couleur* were not always a matter of walking in spaces from which the colonial administration would bar them. Walking as a form of resistance was also very much a question of how one walked even in authorized areas. These resistive modes of occupying sanctioned spaces played out most clearly in the city's racialized markets. Le Cap had several markets. White merchants, many of them sailors, sold pottery, shoes, and trinkets

in the *marchés des blancs*. Their primary customers were women of color looking for the latest treasures from Europe. Several of these “white markets” convened on government-approved streets throughout the city on Sundays and holidays. The use of these streets as market spaces became so central to their function in the city that these two identities (street and market) often merged into one. Rue Neuve, for example, soon came to be rebaptized Rue du Marché des Blancs (D, 317).

There were also markets where slaves and *gens de couleur* bought and sold produce and artisanal goods. The largest of these *marchés des nègres* at Clugny Square attracted, by Moreau’s estimates, about fifteen thousand buyers and sellers each Sunday. The limits of this market were defined by law and also very heavily policed. The market was enclosed within a set of gates to which only the inspector of police had keys. It was patrolled by the inspector and a brigade of policemen under his command, as well as by a troop of soldiers. Given the fear and anxiety conveyed in the Chamber of Agriculture report, it is no surprise that a weekly gathering of fifteen thousand slaves and *gens de couleur* would cause the colonial administration some worry. Indeed, in addition to the extensive external surveillance, the government also sought to recruit black merchants into its policing efforts on market days. According to Moreau, these merchants, tasked with ensuring that their neighbors sold only foodstuffs as mandated by law, were often lax in their policing, allowing sellers to use the space for unsanctioned activities (D, 441). The colonial surveillance apparatus incorporated agents who were able to undermine the very surveillance they were charged to enforce, thus creating unexpected possibilities for appropriating public space.

It is significant that this act of reclaiming public space through lax surveillance took place in Le Cap’s largest *marché des nègres*, a legally sanctioned space in which the transactions between urban and plantation slaves empowered them as economic actors. Navigating the market offered enslaved blacks and *gens de couleur*, as merchants and buyers, a unique opportunity to enact some measure of resistance to the spatial order that the increased surveillance and policing sought to enforce within the parameters of the enclosed market space. In addition, therefore, to undermining colonial surveillance, slaves and *gens de couleur* also resisted the government-imposed narrative of orderliness by walking transgressively through the marketplace. Notably, Moreau describes the strictly regimented layout of merchant stalls in a clear order that reminds the contemporary reader of supermarket aisles. He then juxtaposes these “vendeurs symétriquement disposée [*sic*]” [symmetrically arranged vendors] with “la cohue des acheteurs & même des simples troqueurs” [the melee of buyers and even of simple barterers] (D, 443–44). In this setting of economic exchange—itsself an empowering space for slaves who were routinely objects of sale rather than active subjects making a profit from their labor, produce, and artisanal goods—the disorderly, or rather counter-orderly, conduct of buyers and informal hawkers allowed slaves to articulate their freedom to inhabit the public market on their own terms.

Reading walking as an act of enunciating freedom for blacks in Le Cap invites us to reconsider the spatial dimension of resistance in Saint-Domingue. It was by no means limited to the plantation setting or to marginal spaces such as the hills inhabited by maroons. The shifting nature of freedom for slaves and *gens de couleur* in the city reveals the possibilities for decoding the acts and performances

of freedom filtered through white fears of an impending loss of power and control over the colony. The silence of those denied speech in the archives demands a new set of reading practices. It demands that we pay attention to nonverbal forms of communication and to how those gestures and performances were heard and read. To simply accept the silence of black actors in Moreau's account and elsewhere as an inevitable gap in the archives, rather than as a lost text to be recovered (to borrow again from Philip's phrasing), is to perpetuate the silencing of those who, in the absence of direct speech, continue to speak through the archives in different ways.

---

NOTES

I am grateful to Kathleen DeGuzman, Julian Ledford, and Petal Samuel for their feedback on drafts of this work.

1. Méderic-Louis-Elie Moreau de St. Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue*, 3 vols. (Paris: Société de l'Histoire des Colonies Françaises, 1958), henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as "D." All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2. See, for example, Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004); Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1990); and Paul B. Miller, *Elusive Origins: The Enlightenment in the Modern Caribbean Historical Imagination* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2010).

3. Two exceptions to the focus on Saint-Domingue's plantation economy are studies by David Geggus and Susan Socolow on, respectively, slaves and women of color in Le Cap. Although Geggus often refers to Le Cap as a town, he also describes it as a bustling city that was home to forty-five percent of Saint-Domingue's population. See Geggus, "The Slaves and Free People of Color of Cap Français," in *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade*, ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Matt D. Childs, and James Sidbury (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 101–21; and Socolow, "Economic Roles of the Free Women of Color of Cap Français," in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1996), 279–97.

4. Alexandre-Stanislas, baron de Wimpffen, *Saint-Domingue à la veille de la révolution: Souvenirs du baron de Wimpffen, annotés d'après les documents d'archives et les mémoires* (Paris: La Michaud, 1911), 42.

5. *Ibid.*, 170.

6. Moreau estimates that in 1788 there were ten thousand slaves out of a total population of fifteen thousand people. Slaves made up sixty-seven percent of Le Cap's inhabitants (D, 492).

7. Dubois, *Avengers*, 11.

8. Moreau published his account in 1796, yet remained curiously silent about the ongoing revolution. As Laurent Dubois argues, Moreau's fervent hope in telling the story of Saint-Domingue was that the island would return to what it once was: France's most prosperous colony. Any other outcome was unimaginable (*Avengers*, 10).

9. Alyssa G. Sepinwall, ed., *Haitian History: New Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 7, emphasis in the original.

10. Marlene NourbeSe Philip, "Dis-place: The Space Between," in *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1997), 83.

11. A pejorative slang term used in Trinidad to describe women who are considered to be of loose morals and who are vocal about their sexual choices.

12. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 98.

13. *Ibid.*, 97–98.

14. *Ibid.*, 97.

15. Further research might compare urban slavery in Le Cap to other Atlantic cities in the eighteenth century such as New Orleans and Kingston.

16. The Haitian Revolution began with slaves setting fire to plantations in the parishes surrounding Le Cap. The city also played an important role in this larger narrative of the plantation origins of the revolution. On June 20, 1793, Le Cap went up in flames. An eyewitness rushing through the city on his way home from the port recounted hearing a group of blacks and *mulâtres* in the streets proclaiming freedom for all. This initial public declaration of freedom catalyzed a bloody battle and, ultimately, the city's destruction by fire on that day. Jeremy Popkin argues that the events of this day "set the emancipation process in motion, first in Saint-Domingue, . . . and then in France." As blacks rushed through the streets and frightened whites congregated at the doors of their homes, contesting public space was central to the process of claiming freedom for Le Cap's nonwhite population. See *Extrait d'une lettre sur les malheurs de Saint-Domingue en général, et principalement sur l'incendie de la ville du Cap Français* (Paris: Jardin égalité pavillon, 1793); and Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 15.

17. Dubois, *Avengers*, 11.

18. For a more extensive evaluation of Moreau's *Description* as a historical source, see Jonathan Glover, "Moreau avec Cuvier, Kant avec Sade: Saint Domingue, Sara Baartman, and the Technologies of Imperial Desire," in *Race and Displacement: Nation, Migration, and Identity in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Maha Marouan and Merinda Simmons (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2013), 165–80; Christopher P. Iannini, *Fatal Revolutions: Natural History, West Indian Slavery, and the Routes of American Literature* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2012); and Doris Lorraine Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2005).

19. Glover, "Moreau avec Cuvier," 168.

20. Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 99.

21. Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 49.

22. Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), 9.

23. Geggus, "Slaves and Free People of Color," 115.

24. Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 22.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Nicolas Louis François de Neufchateau, *Lettre de M. François de Neufchateau, procureur-général au conseil souverain du Cap, à M. le P. Dup: Sur quelques réformes à faire dans la législation criminelle: suivie de lettres de M. le P. Dup* (Cap Français, 1787), 5.

27. Neufchateau, *Lettre*, 5.

28. See Moreau, *Description*, 398, and Neufchateau, *Lettre*, 8.

29. Neufchateau, *Lettre*, 9.

30. Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 34.

31. Neufchateau, *Lettre*, 4.

32. Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 19.

33. Yvan Debbasch parses out the shifting legal categories that sought to classify the populations of France's colonial subjects in the Caribbean by race. *Affranchi* and *libre de couleur* were used interchangeably in the later part of the eighteenth century. See Yvan Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté: Le jeu de critère ethnique dans un ordre juridique esclavagiste* (Paris: Dalloz, 1967), 38.

34. Charles de la Roncière reproduces Moreau's account of Kinson's work in his writings on the slave trade and slavery. See Charles de la Roncière, *Nègres et négriers* (Paris: Éditions des Portiques, 1933), n.p.

35. According to John D. Garrigus, "many colonial laws separating whites from free people of color were first issued on a city or regional level by the *conseil* [council] of Cap-Français." These laws governed economic and social activity, including mobility. Garrigus, "Vincent Ogé 'Jeune' (1757–91): Social Class and Free Colored Mobilization on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution," *The Americas* 68 no. 1 (2011): 39.

36. Thomazeau's experiences of freedom through land ownership may be read as a precursor to blacks' demands for land ownership for subsistence farming during the Haitian Revolution and into the nineteenth century. Fick reads these aspirations for land ownership as "manifest expressions of what freedom meant." See Carolyn Fick, "Emancipation in Haiti: From Plantation Labour to Peasant Proprietorship," *Slavery & Abolition* 21 (2000): 21.

37. Because ownership played a central role in determining how one walked through the city, Thomazeau would necessarily have navigated his plots of land differently from public spaces. Thomazeau's enunciation of freedom as a free man and former slave likely sounded different when he walked his private property as a landowner than when he walked through public spaces like the city streets. Did the racial hierarchy in Le Cap mean that he was obliged to show deference in public (stepping aside for white pedestrians, for example) that was unnecessary once on his own property? Moreau's text does not provide enough information to distinguish Thomazeau's pedestrian practices in private and public spaces.

38. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, F3/126, fols. 408–10, Chambre d'Agriculture report, 2 June 1785, quoted in and translated by Geggus, "Slaves and Free People of Color," 119.

39. *Ibid.*, 119–20.

40. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, Caribbean societies were slave societies. Slavery was not incidental to their formation but rather fundamental to their existence and organization. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 17.