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# An Anatomy of Disbelief: Discussions of Slavery Before and After Rebellion and the Ways Power Reinforces Narratives of Impossibility

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## *Thesis Summary*

This paper is a historiographical exploration of freedom and the notion of thinkability through the lens of the Stono Revolt and Haitian Revolution. This paper builds upon extension scholarship of the thinkability of the Haitian Revolution and adds a transnational comparative element by looking for similarities with the earlier Stono Revolt. By exploring two historical events that are often ignored or misrepresented, this paper aims to analyze the ways in which slavery and enslaved individuals were viewed before and after such events. Such changes in perspective and rhetoric can aid in ascertaining the various ways these isolated moments of resistance had an ideological impact on colonial powers. This paper aims to provide an overview of attitudes and ideology concerning methods of slavery and enslavement and discuss the lived experiences of those who were enslaved, highlighting the methods of rebellion and resistance. This information can also be used to inform current-day decisions about the ways we educate ourselves on and discuss these topics, as well as the general importance of elevating the history of these events so they are no longer viewed as unthinkable or impossible.

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## **Introduction**

There are ways to ensure parts of history never get told. The adage “history is written by the victors” rings true, but behind this platitude is the reality of hundreds of years of intentional silencing of marginalized voices by a dominant power. These dominant powers were typically— if not always—colonial powers, many of which are still powerful today because of the legacy of enslaved labor. This silencing has resulted in a variety of factors, including a lack of availability of diverse sources, inherent biases within academia, and remnants of this ideology of dominance and dehumanization. These factors frame discussions of slavery from the dominant perspective, which normalizes slavery or makes the development of this economic system of exploitation seem natural, inevitable, or necessary. In no area is this silencing effect as noticeable as it is in discussions of rebellion and resistance. Comparative analysis of public ideology and discussions of slavery before and after two notable moments of resistance, the Stono Rebellion, and the Haitian Revolution, provide an overview of attitudes and ideology concerning methods of slavery and enslavement. This analysis will also discuss the lived experiences of those who were enslaved, highlighting the methods of rebellion and resistance. Finally, this analysis also raises questions about whether this silencing effort had the impact colonial powers at the time wished it would, and how this impact is still experienced today.

This paper explores the ideas of freedom, resistance, and slavery within colonialism. The argument builds upon scholarship by Suzanne Miers, Neil Roberts, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, discussing their conceptions of slavery, freedom, and thinkability. In addition, this paper makes use of primary sources detailing experiences of and reactions to the Stono Revolt and the Haitian Revolution, as well as the legal and economic ramifications of these events. It does so in a transnational context by building upon a long historiography of thinkability of the Haitian

Revolution by adding a comparative element to the Stono Revolt in colonial South Carolina.

This paper is organized by discussing ideological conceptions of freedom, reactions to the Stono Rebellion, and discussions of the Haitian Revolution and their historiographical impact.

### **Ideas about Freedom**

To understand what it is to be free, one must first understand what the opposite of freedom is. Of course, freedom is a difficult and amorphous concept to define, as Neil Roberts outlines in his chapter discussing *Freedom as Marronage*. In this chapter, Roberts defines slavery as the opposite of freedom and highlights marronage as an often overlooked “form of flight from slavery.”<sup>1</sup> Marronage means “flight” and its condition is defined as a group of persons isolating themselves from a surrounding society to create a fully autonomous community. However, in this liminal space between freedom and slavery, there is always the threat of returning to one’s prior condition of enslavement. In that sense, marronage must be considered a consistent, repeated assertion of one’s freedom *from* oppression that places the agent in a position to *do* and create an active life of their own choice.<sup>2</sup> Understanding marronage as a powerful declaration of freedom highlights the lived experiences and agency of the enslaved, creating a better understanding of the forces driving these decisions. However, to understand against which forces people are rebelling, one must understand the dominant ideology of a time.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Roberts, “On Slavery, Agency, and Freedom,” in *Freedom as Marronage*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, “On Slavery,” 13-15. See chapter for a more detailed demarcation between positive and negative freedoms. In short, negative freedom is about non-interference, whereas positive freedom is about agency.

In the vein of Roberts' definition, historian Suzanne Miers also argues that a definition of slavery cannot begin without a definition of freedom, slavery's antithesis.<sup>3</sup> In this historiographical text, Miers defines different versions of slavery that existed throughout time in different areas and to serve different purposes. Outlining these different versions is not meant to argue any form of slavery was preferable to the other, but to detail the long history of slavery as a form of curtailing personal liberty.<sup>4</sup> Using Miers' text, the distinctions made between these historical forms of slavery reveal a transformation of slavery through European colonialism. This social system transformed and racialized these early forms of slavery, resulting in a thingification that arose around the same time as early modern capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Many historians of Black Studies and similar fields have long argued that the commodification of slavery and enslaved individuals directly influenced the development of American economic, political, and cultural structures.<sup>6</sup> These forces hint at the long-term impacts of such a societal structure. However, understanding these impacts and trends at the time they occurred requires analysis of reactions to moments of armed resistance, including both the Stono Rebellion and the Haitian Revolution.

## Slavery in Colonial America

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<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Miers, "Slavery" *A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 24, issue 2 (2003): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01440390308559152>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Aimé Césaire, "Between Colonizer and Colonized," King's College, <https://staff.kings.edu/sites/cristoferscarboro/HNRS%20204/Cesaire.htm>. See Césaire's discussion on how colonization was essentially thingification and operated on the commodification of the colonized human beings.

<sup>6</sup> Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, "Introduction: Slavery's Capitalism," in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (University of Pennsylvania Press: 2016), 1. See chapter for more on the development of the unique "slavery's capitalism" system within American society.

Colonial American society developed alongside the intensification, commodification, and legalization of enslaved labor. Only twelve years after the founding of Jamestown—the first permanent English settlement—1619 marks the year that twenty captive Africans arrived at the colony and were sold into servitude in exchange for goods.<sup>7</sup> This event marks the beginning of an economy based on enslaved labor, which would become the dominant economic force through the founding of the United States of America. Furthermore, after this date, various laws were put in place that created a distinction between indentured servants—usually white people—and enslaved Africans, illustrating the newly racialized form of this slavery.<sup>8</sup> In fact, by 1664, Maryland and several other states passed *durante vita* laws that legalized lifelong slavery for anyone of African descent in the colony.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of resistance to these laws, the earliest moment of mass uprising occurred in 1676 during Bacon’s Rebellion. Nathaniel Bacon was a wealthy white landowner who organized a militia of Black and white indentured servants to attack Native American groups near the Virginia Colony; the militia also included enslaved people who joined with the promise of freedom. Although unsuccessful in their demands, the militia succeeded in burning down the colony of Jamestown. Reactions of the planter elite to this event illustrate a fear of an alliance among indentured servants and enslaved workers. Shortly after this revolt in 1680, the Virginia

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<sup>7</sup> “The Beginning — 1619,” Slavery and the Making of America Timeline, PBS, 2004, <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/timeline/1619.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Jemima Pierre, “Slavery, Anthropological Knowledge, and the Racialization of Africans,” *Current Anthropology* 61, no. S22 (October 2020): 220-221. See article for more information on the development of a system of racialization that was created to uphold white supremacy, as well as the impact of this racialization on the African continent and identity.

<sup>9</sup> Archive of Maryland Online, *Proceedings*. Maryland State Archives, <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/000001/000001/html/am1--526.html> (April 9, 2022).



colony passed “An act for preventing Negroes Insurrections,” which forbade enslaved individuals from meeting in groups or bearing arms and legalized the murder of fugitives from slavery.<sup>10</sup> This extreme intensification of the laws concerning enslaved labor shows how intense the paranoia and worry was that large groups of enslaved individuals would revolt even from the earliest days of slavery in America. The example of Bacon’s Rebellion and the ensuing reaction within various colonies provide the necessary background for the Stono Rebellion in 1739. Bacon’s Rebellion and the rhetoric surrounding this event detail a racial-based system of slavery that functioned by ideologically and legally “othering” the enslaved population from not only the white colonists, but also from the white indentured servants.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Stono Revolt**

The Stono Rebellion was the most significant moment of armed resistance in colonial America. The event occurred on Sunday, September 9, 1739, and resulted in the deaths of at least twenty white people and at least thirty-four enslaved individuals.<sup>12</sup> Scholars have debated the various immediate causes of this event, outside of the horrific conditions of the enslaved. The accepted answer has long been the allure of the Spanish King’s edict, which was a political gesture that promised freedom to enslaved Africans from British colonies who made it to

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<sup>10</sup> General Assembly “Preventing Negroes Insurrections,” 1680. In *Encyclopedia Virginia*. Virginia Humanities, 2021. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/an-act-for-preventing-negroes-insurrections-1680/>.

<sup>11</sup> Oscar Thomas-Olalde and Astride Velho, “Othering and Its Effects: Exploring the Concept,” *Writing Postcolonial Histories of Intercultural Education*, 2011: 27. See article for further discussion of othering and its role in postcolonial analyses of racism and racialized slavery.

<sup>12</sup> “Two Views of the Stono Slave Rebellion South Carolina, 1739.” *Becoming American: The British Atlantic Colonies, 1690-1763*. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/peoples/text4/stonorebellion.pdf>.

Florida.<sup>13</sup> This declaration was meant to weaken the British colonies in advance of the ensuing Spanish-British conflict. However, another cause has been highlighted: just a month before the revolt, the South Carolina colonial assembly had passed a law “requiring planters to go to church armed in case of a slave revolt or an escape.”<sup>14</sup> This law illustrates that—similar to the feelings after Bacon’s Rebellion—revolt of the enslaved masses was a real fear of the enslavers.

Most of the information that remains today about this revolt comes from colonial reports and letters. The main source detailing the events of September 9, 1739, comes from an anonymous white official. The language used in this report details the white families that died by name and praises the colonial militia, for “they did not torture one Negroe, but only put them to an easy death” once they were discovered.<sup>15</sup> The only non-white account of this event is a 1930’s oral account from George Cato, the great-great-grandson of Cato, the leader of the Stono Rebellion. In contrast to the official colonial report, Cato’s interview claims that the enslaved were unarmed when they were killed. The differences in these accounts illustrate the biases of both the colonial officials and the oral history within Cato’s family. Colonial officials might want to portray the Stono rebels as armed and dangerous to portray the white men that defeated them as more skillful and advanced. This perspective might also be used to justify why the colonial militia reacted with such violence, ultimately killing over thirty enslaved people. In contrast, Cato’s telling of the story portrays the enslaved individuals as unarmed, and therefore

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<sup>13</sup> “The King’s Edict,” Hidden History Miami, Florida Humanities Council, <http://hiddenhistorymiami.com/the-spanish-kings-edict.html>.

<sup>14</sup> “The Stono Rebellion” Bill of Rights Institute, <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/the-stono-rebellion>. See also John Thornton’s “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion” for a detailed investigation into the impacts of the potential Kongolese background of several of the enslaved people on the Stono Rebellion, including military skill, military dancing, and tactical behavior.

<sup>15</sup> “Two Views.”

unjustly killed. Cato's story comes from a tradition of oral history within a family where generations of enslaved individuals fought for emancipation and continued to experience systemic racism and Jim Crow laws afterward. From that perspective, Cato might focus on the noble aspirations of the enslaved, particularly of his grandfather's fight against slavery. For instance, Cato ends his interview by saying that his great-great-grandfather "'die but he die for doin' de right, as he see it'" [*sic*].<sup>16</sup> Regardless of these biases, the facts remain that these enslaved individuals revolted from a life of chattel slavery—perhaps for a chance of freedom with the Spaniards or for other reasons—and were murdered as a result.

Other colonial reactions after the Stono Rebellion included a report from William Stephens, future governor of the Province of Georgia. In this report, which comes from Stephens' journal of his work overseeing the colonists in Georgia, Stephens writes an account of the Stono Rebellion four days after it happened, meaning news of this event spread quickly after it happened. Stephens' focus is tracking down the missing enslaved individuals; reward money was offered for every enslaved individual brought back to Charleston, whether alive or dead.<sup>17</sup> This source also purports that the enslaved had revolted because they wished to seek freedom under Spanish control.

## Reactions to the Stono Revolt

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<sup>16</sup> "Two Views."

<sup>17</sup> William Stephens, *A journal*, 129, London: Printed for W. Meadows, 1742; See also, Commons House of Assembly, "Stono Rebellion Slave-Catchers," Africans in America, Public Broadcasting Service, November 29, 1739. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h312t.html> for colonial assembly report detailing the efforts to track down self-liberated enslaved individuals even months after the Stono Rebellion.

Reaction to this event was immediate and widespread. Details of the Stono Rebellion entered private correspondence, national news, and legislation. Immediate reactions within private letters reveals that some colonists were overwhelmed by the multitude of difficulties facing the colony at that time, including sickness and threat of Spanish invasion. The Stono Revolt was just another factor that the colonists hoped the government would punish.<sup>18</sup> A private diary entry theorizes that a potential and justified motivation behind the revolt was the fact that enslaved workers were made to work “on the day of the Lord.”<sup>19</sup> In terms of national news, the earliest mention of the Stono Rebellion comes from the *Boston Gazette* two months after the event. This article undermines the threat of the enslaved rebels, saying that they didn’t cause any damage and were easily subdued, which ignores the drawn-out nature of the revolt and the fact that several enslaved rebels were missing for months after the event.<sup>20</sup>

South Carolina colony lieutenant governor Bull penned perhaps the most significant of personal accounts to the Board of Trade in Charleston. This account praises the bravery of the colonial militia for “put(ting) a stop to any further mischief” and appeals to the Board for support in rewarding Native Americans who “pursue and if possible, bring back the Deserters.”<sup>21</sup> Bull’s letter once again highlights the bravery of the white colonists over the actions of the rebellious

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Smith, ed., *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, University of South Carolina Press, 2005, 9-10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. See chapters 13 and 14 of Smith’s book for accounts illustrating the discussion of Stono in the writings of early historians and abolitionists.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17. See chapter 12 from the same book for a discussion from Bull’s son on the Stono Revolt. Bull’s son praises the harsh slave codes put in place after the event for preventing any future threat of rebellion in states where slaves are a majority of the population. He also warns against viewing enslaved people as equally human to deter them from revolting in the future.

enslaved deserters. Overall, what these more personal accounts reveal is that the news of the Stono Rebellion wasn't silenced, and people did not pretend it did not happen in the immediate aftermath. White colonists were all too aware of what happened at Stono and were wary of another similar event happening where they lived.

In addition to personal accounts of the events, significant legal action took place as a result of the Stono Rebellion. These new laws illustrate the extent to which the revolt impacted the ideological foundations of slavery in colonial America. For instance, the 1740 South Carolina "Negro Act" made the condition of enslavement heritable from the mother's side; required enslaved individuals to carry a ticket detailing the reason for their absence from the plantation if they had an errand to run; made it legally required for all enslaved individuals to submit to any examination by a white person when found outside the enslaver's property; and made it illegal to teach an enslaved individual to read or write.<sup>22</sup> The conditions within this slave code would remain active through the establishment of the United States until the abolition of slavery after the Civil War. Even then, the vestiges of these laws would remain active in Jim Crow policies. There is even a direct reference to the Stono Rebellion in the 1740 "Negro Act:"

"whereas several Negroes did lately rise in rebellion, and did commit many barbarous murders at Stono...all and every act...in and about the suppressing and putting all and every said Negro and Negroes to death, is and are hereby declared lawful, to all intents and purposes whatsoever."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> South Carolina Slave Code, 1740, in *Excerpts From South Carolina Slave Code Of 1740 No. 670 (1740)*, edited by Annie Campbell, Columbia: South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Departing from earlier slave codes, this entry codifies the murder of self-liberated individuals. Furthermore, as will be shown in later discussions of reactions to the Haitian Revolution, the reactions to the Stono Rebellion do not deny the fact that the revolt happened. Rather, they are details of horrified and scared reactions to this event. Colonists were aware of the threat of enslaved revolts and when faced with the reality of such an event, implemented harsher laws to solidify the enslaved status. Reactions also credited the motivations for this rebellion to the Spanish colonial power, which discredits the enslaved individuals and their ideological autonomy.

### **Background of the Haitian Revolution**

The Haitian Revolution was another monumental event of resistance. In contrast to the Stono Rebellion, the Haitian Revolution successfully established the first Black-led republic, cementing its status as the largest and most successful revolt of enslaved individuals. In addition, the Haitian Revolution was much longer than the Stono Rebellion, lasting from 1791 until 1804 when the country declared independence from France. Many comparisons can be made between the Stono Rebellion and the Haitian Revolution. However, focusing on the discussions of slavery and enslaved individuals and the different ways these two events have been remembered and discussed will reveal similarities in power structures over time.

Before the Haitian Revolution, France was one of the largest slave-trading nations and relied heavily on enslaved labor. The most significant and wealthiest colony within this empire was Saint Domingue, which exported large amounts of sugarcane and coffee. Although the French Revolution—which ostensibly promoted the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity—began in 1789, enslaved labor continued to make France one of the wealthiest countries. The revolutionaries who promoted these lofty ideals, however, remained reticent to speak out against

slavery, which was abolished in the country but remained the economic backbone of the French colonies. In 1790, a proposal within the National Assembly proposed a gradual abolition of the “barbarous abuse” of slavery in the colonies to “restore...basic rights” to the enslaved.<sup>24</sup> This proposal was ignored, illustrating the opposition to even gradual emancipation at this point. There are also multiple accounts of enslavers saying that an enslaved revolt is “impossible” or a “chimera.”<sup>25</sup> These enslavers viewed the concept of a mass enslaved uprising as unthinkable or impossible. These ideas of unthinkability were based on the racist belief that enslaved individuals were incapable of conceiving of freedom or a life beyond enslavement. Enslavers stressed the obedience and tranquility of the enslaved, implying that they would never think about revolt or resistance. However, these enslavers would soon be proven wrong: within a year of those accounts, the Haitian Revolution had begun.

### **Reactions to the Haitian Revolution**

Once the Haitian Revolution began, reactions within France and Haiti were similar to the enslavers’ earlier accounts because they also focused on the supposed impossibility of the event, even as it was happening. The Haitian Revolution officially began in August 1791, amidst the French Revolution in Europe. There is an account from an anonymous white person in Haiti on the night of August 22, the day the Revolution in Haiti began. This account details the man’s experience being awoken in the night by gunshots and narrowly escaping death because of the mercy of a formerly enslaved man “whom (he) had always treated well.” Although his account

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<sup>24</sup> “Vieffville des Essars, On the Emancipation of the Negroes (1790),” *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring The French Revolution*, <https://revolution.chnm.org/d/340>.

<sup>25</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1995, *An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-Event*, Boston: Beacon Press: 72.

emphasizes his fear and shock at the events, the author still mentions that it would only take a few whites to “(break) up this savage horde with no resistance” and credits the motivation of the revolution to the whites of France, claiming that the people actively imprisoning him were “not intelligent enough and lacked the facilities to conceive of such a vast project.”<sup>26</sup> Another first-hand account of the events implies that the whites had been abandoned by God and “that the insurrection had upset the very order of nature.”<sup>27</sup>

Lastly, Marcus Rainsford’s account, which was published a year after the establishment of independent Haiti, still credits the motivations for the revolution to the “change of...government” in the “mother-country” of France.<sup>28</sup> These primary reactions fit within Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s foundational work on the history of the Haitian Revolution as an unthinkable non-event. Trouillot discusses how formulations of the Haitian Revolution—at the time it happened and today—force the narrative into a box that aligns with their preconceived notions of slavery, which are rooted in racism and inequality.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Trouillot argues that whites at this time would not give “a single thought of (enslaved) uprising unless that was

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<sup>26</sup> Jeremy Popkin, 2007, *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 49-53.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Marcus Rainsford, 1805, *An historical account of the black empire of Hayti: comprehending a view of the principal transactions in the revolution of Saint Domingo; with its ancient and modern state*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/02012395/>. See Rainsford’s account for the first complete narrative in English written about the Haitian Revolution. Rainsford was an officer in the British Army and traveled to Haiti to recruit black soldiers. Surprisingly, Rainsford was supportive of an independent Haiti. See also Alyssa Sepinwall, “Still Unthinkable? The Haitian Revolution and the Reception of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s Silencing the Past,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 75 – 103 for more on how the revolution is credited to European ideas today.

<sup>29</sup> Trouillot, *An Unthinkable History*, 72.



fomented by the whites themselves,” which is echoed within the previous primary sources.<sup>30</sup>

### **Comparisons between Stono and Haiti**

Although the Stono Revolt and the Haitian Revolution occurred decades apart and in different continents, reactions to these events reveal similar themes. One major difference in reactions to these events is the degree to which they were discussed in a real sense. People writing in the aftermath of the Stono Revolt did not question the validity of the revolt; rather, they expressed genuine fear for their safety in a world where their “own Industry should be the Means of taking from us all the Sweets of Life and rendering us liable to the Loss of our Lives and Fortune.”<sup>31</sup> After the Stono Revolt, people were confronted with the idea that enslaved individuals had the agency and propensity to self-liberate en masse. However, even when confronted with this reality, white colonists continually placed the motivation and inspiration for this revolt on the Spaniards, not the enslaved. Similar to the Haitian Revolution, to conceptualize the Stono Revolt in a way that adhered to dominant ideas about the autonomy of the enslaved, the colonists found it easier to believe a foreign imperial power started the revolt.

This reaction is where the Stono Revolt and the Haitian Revolution are similar. Whereas Stono was credited to the Spanish, the Haitian Revolution was assumed to be solely inspired by the French Revolution or a change in government in France, as Rainsford purported.<sup>32</sup> The

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<sup>30</sup> Trouillot, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, 29.

<sup>32</sup> For a rare account that credits the revolution to the Haitian independent spirit and a desire for liberty, see this book written by one of the leaders in the Revolution and the self-proclaimed King of Haiti: Christoph Henri Christoph and Prince Saunders, *Haitian Papers: A Collection of the Very Interesting Proclamations, and Other Official Documents; Together with Some Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Kingdom of Hayti*, London, Printed for W. Reed, law bookseller.

overarching theme between these two moments of resistance is the fact that it was unthinkable that these events could have been organized by the enslaved.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, in both instances, when the events were actually discussed, they only served as cautionary tales to the enslaving class of the danger of emancipation.<sup>34</sup> Trouillot's ideas about the unthinkability of the Haitian Revolution can therefore be applied to the Stono Revolt as well.

### **The Making of Unthinkability**

Trouillot espouses several theories as to why the Haitian Revolution was considered impossible at the time it occurred. Within the previously mentioned racist worldview is the tendency to normalize the system, meaning that “to acknowledge resistance as a mass phenomenon is to acknowledge the possibility that something is wrong with the system.”<sup>35</sup> Colonial and imperial powers at the time were ideologically inclined to view the economic system of chattel slavery as natural, normal, and necessary for their own economic prosperity. In this worldview, it would be impossible to consider enslaved revolution because it goes against the ingrained belief that slavery is inherent and will always be part of society. Trouillot argues that the unthinkability is also a result of the fact that the Revolution challenged the “ontological

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<sup>33</sup> See Rebecca Hall, *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021 for further discussion of slave revolts that were considered unthinkable, even as they occurred. Hall focuses on the fact that the more women there were on a slave ship, the more likely there was to be a revolt. Herein lies the intersection of the dominant ideologies of racism and white supremacy with sexism.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Reinhardt, “200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 4 (2005): 251, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40027220>.

<sup>35</sup> Trouillot, 84.

order of the West and the global order of colonialism.”<sup>36</sup> In essence, this is the main reason why the Haitian Revolution was silenced and made to seem unlikely even as it was occurring.

The outbreak of this revolution and the establishment of the first independent Black country countered every belief inherent in hegemonic Western philosophy; this is the very same Western ideology that inspired the American and French Revolutions in this same era. These two revolutions were based upon similar ideas as the Haitian one: escaping the burden of overbearing powers—be it a colonial government, monarchy, or vicious enslavers—for the promise of freedom and liberty in a reconstructed society. However, the Haitian Revolution was different, and therefore unthinkable, because it challenged these ideas from a racial standpoint.<sup>37</sup> The Enlightenment ideals that were so popular in this era were directly challenged and fell short of the promises of the Haitian Revolution. This contradiction reveals the shortcomings of Enlightenment thinking that still functioned within a society based upon the legal commodification of Black individuals.<sup>38</sup>

Similar to this line of thinking, Trouillot’s discussion of unthinkability places the Haitian Revolution in a category of revolutionary thought that achieved something previous revolutions only claimed to do. Furthermore, historians have claimed that the Haitian Revolution was the ultimate test to Enlightenment thinking. However, Trouillot goes even further and argues this was the “ultimate test to the universalist pretensions of both the French and the American

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<sup>36</sup> Trouillot, 89.

<sup>37</sup> See Thomas Reinhardt, “200 Years of Forgetting” for more on just how revolutionary Haiti, a slave-holding society, becoming a society of free Blacks was. Reinhardt’s article also outlines the ways the Haitian Revolution was silenced after it happened, which still has impacts today.

<sup>38</sup> Refer to Beckert and Rockman for more on the co-development of slavery and capitalism in America.

revolutions” and both failed.<sup>39</sup> Trouillot’s claim provides more evidence as to why the Haitian Revolution existed outside of the epistemological foundation of Western rationales from the moment it began.

### **The Impact of Unthinkability on Ideologies about Freedom**

To view something as unthinkable is different from viewing something as unlikely or difficult. The idea of unthinkable is similar to the idea of impossibility, but unthinkable is even more extreme. Not only does unthinkable imply an impossible aspect to the scenario, but it infers that the potential outcome of such an event is so undesirable and so far beyond the realm of rational thought that one cannot reasonably imagine the event happening in the current world. In order to confront these ideas about unthinkable, the dominant culture would need to shift. Jonathon Glassman’s ideas of what it means to be free address this shift.

Glassman proposes that different systems of slavery, such as slavery in the Indian Ocean world, create different opportunities for various forms of resistance. In this sense, Glassman argues that in certain situations—most notably the case study of the Mrima of Tanzania—enslaved individuals sought freedom not from an ideological motivation, but to gain access to rights previously excluded to them.<sup>40</sup> This configuration of freedom argues that freedom is ensured through having entanglements, meaning a social web of security that situates a person within a society with a particular role, responsibilities, and rights. Glassman is not proposing that no part of slave resistance in this case study was ideologically based, but that to achieve freedom in this situation, one must work within the system. This idea directly opposes Roberts’

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<sup>39</sup> Trouillot, 88.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathon Glassman, “The Bondsman's New Clothes: The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast,” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1991), 284.

conception of freedom and ideas about rebellion within a slave society. However, Roberts mainly focused on the Caribbean world, which functioned within a different system of slavery than Glassman's examples.

Discussing marronage, Roberts proposes that only through this method of self-liberation from enslavement can freedom truly be known and experienced. In this method, "freedom is not a place; it is a state of being."<sup>41</sup> In contrast to Trouillot's discussion of the Haitian Revolution as freedom from the yoke of European colonization, Roberts takes this idea further and asks what freedom is possible within a capitalist social system. If, as Roberts infers in his conception of the world, slavery is a given within society, then marronage—the flight from and refusal of slavery—is the only way to be free. Even within a revolution, one cannot be free if they have not experienced what it is to be unfree. Contrasted with Glassman, Roberts' ideas could be a way of thinking about freedom in the context of Haiti's impossibility. Considering that marronage is "a total refusal of the enslaved condition" and is viewed as "the most widespread act of defiance," sociogenic marronage—the mass flight from slavery to establish a new ideological state—might be one way that the Haitian Revolution can be conceptualized by those who still find it unthinkable.<sup>42</sup> If the Haitian Revolution is unthinkable, the idea that marronage would be the method by which it was achieved would be even more difficult for the dominant ideology to understand. Marronage as the truest and most radical form of self-liberation is the only way to achieve freedom and independence in a world that views that very action as impossible.

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<sup>41</sup> Roberts, 11. See section "Why Marronage" for more on this method as the ultimate freedom-seeking route.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 11-13.

Marronage is the continual process by which the impossible becomes possible through self-liberation and the repeated assertion of one's freedom.

### **Impact on Modern Historiographies**

The supposed impossibility of the Haitian Revolution had long term impacts after the establishment of independent Haiti. Although Haiti was declared an independent country in 1804, France placed a heavy indemnity on the state and Haiti was not recognized on a global scale until the latter half of the nineteenth century, leading to economic isolation and disruption within the nation that was formerly the most prosperous colony. This economic punishment still impacts the country today. This unthinkability is still prevalent today and this issue is reflected in the lack of consideration of the Haitian Revolution in modern-day historiography, as well as a significant gap in the historical archive concerning the Stono Revolt, Haitian revolution, and sources documenting enslaved rebellion. Furthermore, historians frequently cite the difficulty of finding sources in archives that center the lived experiences of the enslaved. Rebecca Hall has written about this and the necessity of using “historical imagination” to fill in the gaps as accurately as possible.<sup>43</sup>

Hall's difficulty in not only accessing but finding usable sources in the archive that do not cover up or ignore historical atrocities emphasizes the issues that the Stono Revolt and Haitian Revolution uncover. These ideas are still unthinkable to many people today, which is largely a result of their absence in historiographical and educational avenues. Although there have been recommendations to include the Haitian Revolution in curriculums,<sup>44</sup> this has not been

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<sup>43</sup> Rebecca Hall, *Wake*.

<sup>44</sup> Valentina Peguero, “Teaching the Haitian Revolution: Its Place in Western and Modern World History,” *The History Teacher* 32, no. 1 (1998): 33–41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/494418>. See also Lauren Collins, “The Haitian

implemented in most schools. Alyssa Sepinwall has outlined the lack of scholarship on the Haitian Revolution in France as part of a national amnesia to "mak(e) slavery seem less central to France's past" while implementing laws that made "schools teach about the "positive" value of French colonialism."<sup>45</sup> This lack of scholarship is reflected—to a lesser, but still real, extent—when it comes to the Stono Revolt. The only comprehensive teaching standards in South Carolina that instruct on how to teach the Stono Revolt requires instructors to lecture on the "economic necessity of slavery" and still credits much of the motivations of this revolt to the Spanish government.<sup>46</sup> These ways of teaching center the perspective of the enslaving class, further diminishing the autonomy and agency of the enslaved. Educational systems like this are one way these hegemonic ideologies remain consistent and become reinvented and reinforced throughout different generations.

## Conclusion

The lack of scholarship discussed within this paper illustrates the validity and long-term impact of Trouillot's ideas about unthinkability. The history of the Haitian Revolution, as well as the Stono Revolt, still conflict with ideologies of white supremacy, racism, colonialism, and imperialism that are dominant today. In order to counter this prejudice, the historiography of

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Revolution and the Hole in French High-School History," *The New Yorker*, December 3, 2020.

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-haitian-revolution-and-the-hole-in-french-high-school-history>

for more on the absence of the Haitian Revolution in French classrooms.

<sup>45</sup> Alyssa Sepinwall, "Atlantic Amnesia? French Historians, the Haitian Revolution, and the 2004-2006 CAPES Exam," *Journal of the Western Society for French History* no. 34 (2006),

<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.0642292.0034.019>.

<sup>46</sup> Jackie Orr, "Lesson Plan: Overview," *Teaching American History in South Carolina*, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170921000709/http://teachingushistory.org/lessons/documents/StonoRebellion.html>.

these events must shift from discussing them as a shocking and impossible event. Historians must emphasize the agency and autonomy of enslaved individuals, while still recognizing the overwhelming structural forces that limited their choices. In keeping with Roberts' ideas about freedom, centering marronage in discussions of self-liberation and resistance highlights this agency while acknowledging the necessity for the complete rejection of a slave society to achieve freedom. Furthermore, emphasizing the use of enslaved narratives—when they can be found—as reliable and valuable sources is one way of working within the issues of the archive that historians like Hall have identified.

The Stono Revolt and Haitian Revolution are two notable moments of armed resistance and, in the latter case, of independence for self-liberated individuals. Furthermore, the stories of these rebellions point toward a connection among the development of Western economic philosophy, the commodification of labor, and the proliferation of enslaved resistance. Scholars of Western capitalism should take these connections into account, particularly in the ways they relate to Roberts' ideas about the possibilities of freedom in the modern world. Lastly, these events are important to understand for a historical and philosophical understanding of freedom, resistance, and slavery in the Atlantic world. They can remain silenced or unthinkable no longer.



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