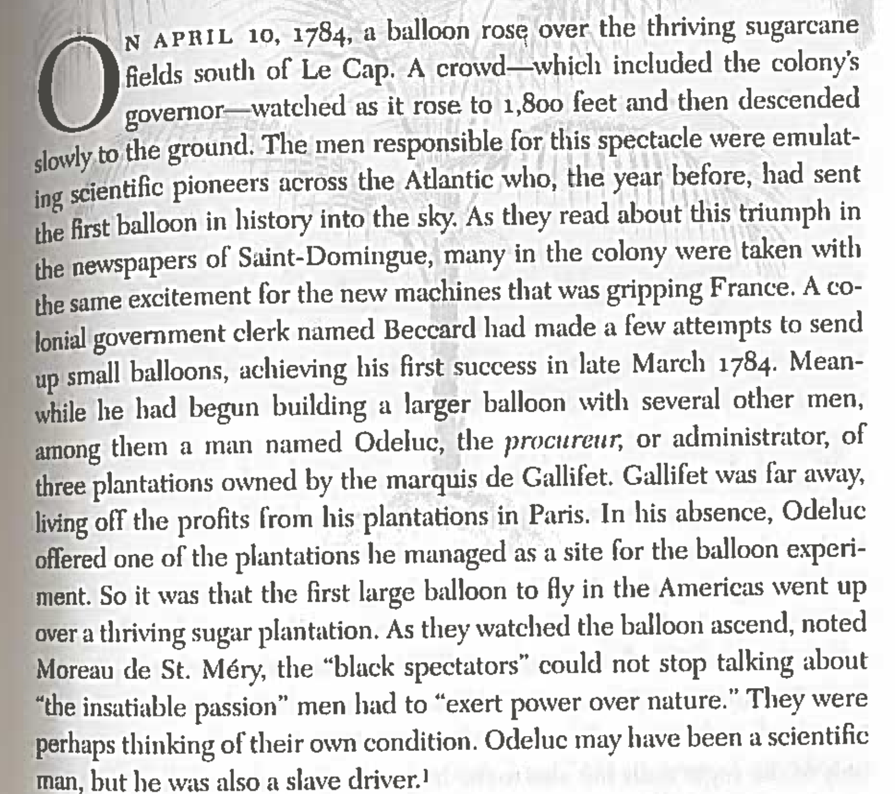
he could not enforce the decree. Many whites openly proposed that the solution was to "cut the throats" of the free-coloreds, "desert" France, and "call in the English."[61]

The wife of the marquis de Rouvray wrote with disgust about what she called the "Messieurs de France," the "stupid" and "inept" individuals who, having given the colonies the right to make their own laws, had then turned around and taken this right away. Like many planters, she saw the decision as proof that the National Assembly was committed to destroying their lives as masters, and believed that secession from France might be necessary. Saint-Domingue, she argued, should send deputies "to all the powers that have slave colonies" in order to "ask for help in case the Assembly ends up pronouncing the abolition of slavery, which it certainly will do." The slave owners of the Americas, she hoped, would band together to stop the "contagion of liberty." Her husband, having taken part in the formation of the National Assembly a few years before, was now back in the colony, and he was sure that Saint-Domingue would soon be under the power of the British. Although he supported the demands of the free people of color, he saw an irreversible danger in the direction the National Assembly was taking. In the midst of all these troubles, Madame de Rouvray took solace in "high hopes" for the crops of cane and coffee that were growing around her, still worked by obedient slaves. "The cane is magnificent," she wrote in July 1791, and the weather was perfect. The storms had been coming in almost every day.[62]



CHAPTER FOUR

Fire in the Cane

On April 10, 1784, a balloon rose over the thriving sugarcane fields south of Le Cap. A crowd—which included the colony's governor—watched as it rose to 1,800 feet and then descended slowly to the ground. The men responsible for this spectacle were emulating scientific pioneers across the Atlantic who, the year before, had sent the first balloon in history into the sky. As they read about this triumph in the newspapers of Saint-Domingue, many in the colony were taken with the same excitement for the new machines that was gripping France. A colonial government clerk named Beccard had made a few attempts to send up small balloons, achieving his first success in late March 1784. Meanwhile he had begun building a larger balloon with several other men, among them a man named Odeluc, the *procureur,* or administrator, of three plantations owned by the marquis de Gallifet. Gallifet was far away, living off the profits from his plantations in Paris. In his absence, Odeluc offered one of the plantations he managed as a site for the balloon experiment. So it was that the first large balloon to fly in the Americas went up over a thriving sugar plantation. As they watched the balloon ascend, noted Moreau de St. Méry, the "black spectators" could not stop talking about "the insatiable passion" men had to "exert power over nature." They were perhaps thinking of their own condition. Odeluc may have been a scientific man, but he was also a slave driver.[1]

The balloon "revolved slowly as it ascended," allowing the crowd to see the decorations painted on it. The coats of arms of the governor, the intendant, Beccard, and Gallifet were prominently displayed. Alongside them were allegorical figures representing chemistry, physics, air, and fire—figures whose form we can only imagine, since no image of them was

left behind—presumably meant to celebrate the triumph of science over nature: the laws that governed the movement of physical objects; the properties of the elements that could be combined, sometimes explosively, by humans; the versatility of the air, which when heated to the right temperature could produce a movement that had always been thought impossible. On that day, as they watched the spinning, rising balloon, the spectators probably could not imagine that the final element, fire, would within a few years transform everything around them.

"Your houses, Monsieur le Marquis, are nothing but ashes, your belongings have disappeared, your administrator is no more. The insurrection has spread its devastation and carnage onto your properties." With these words the marquis de Gallifet learned of the destruction wrought on his plantations by the August 1791 slave insurrection. The writer of the letter, Millot, owned a neighboring plantation that had suffered a similar fate. Writing from Le Cap, he described an "immeasurable" devastation and lamented that the colony, "once flourishing," now was nothing more than "ashes and rivers of blood." A few weeks later Gallifet received more details from one of his surviving managers, Pierre Mossut, who had carried a telescope to a hill outside Le Cap to survey the damage. The plain around the plantations, wrote Mossut, contained nothing more than "slaves, ruins, and the most complete devastation." Gallifet's plantation, once a centerpiece of the thriving sugar economy of Saint-Domingue, had become a camp for an army of slave insurgents.[2]

Founded in the early eighteenth century by a colonial governor, the Gallifet plantations were so famous by the second half of the century that to describe something sweet, people in Saint-Domingue said "as sweet as Gallifet sugar." And to describe utmost happiness, they said "as happy as a Gallifet negro" (although the question remains: "Who said this, the planters or the slaves?"). One visitor to Gallifet's three main plantations in 1779 described hygienic slave quarters built with masonry and tile roofs (in contrast to the typical mud and thatch huts). Aqueducts brought water not only to the sugar mills but also to the hospitals, gardens, and slave quarters. He described Odeluc as "knowledgeable, wise, and thoughtful" as well as humane.[3]

But Odeluc's job meant that he had one priority: producing as much sugar as possible. "How can we make a lot of sugar when we work only sixteen hours [per day]?" he wondered in a 1785 letter. The only way, he con-

"Révolte des Nègres à St. Domingue." Engraving of the 1791 uprising. The original caption asserted that the "contradictory decrees" of the National Assembly regarding the colonies led to "all the horrors of a civil war." *Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.*

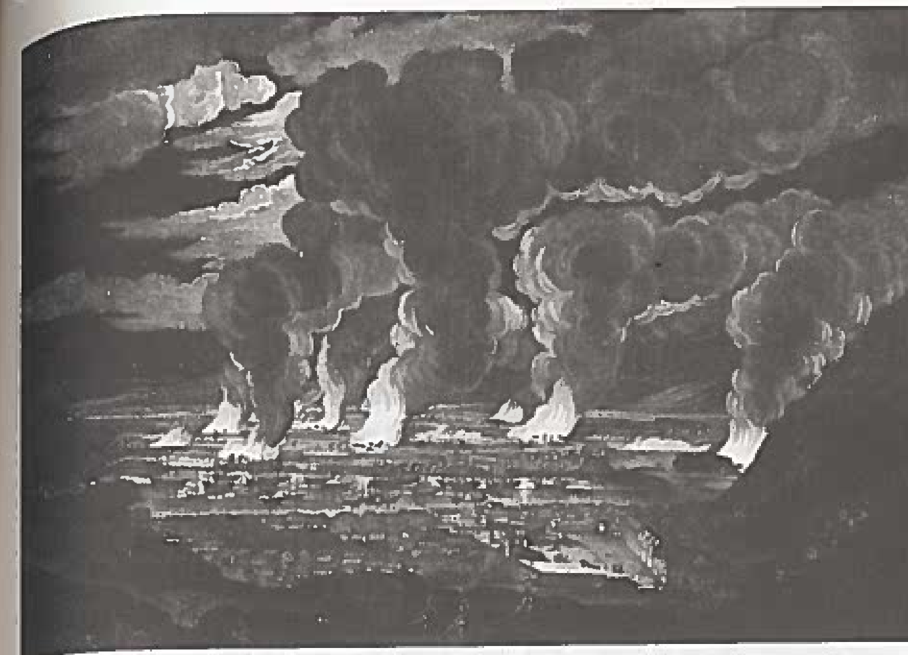
cluded, "was by consuming men and animals." Of the 808 slaves on the Gallifet plantations in January 1791, there were almost none older than sixty, and a small percentage were over forty. "It seems that the happy slaves of Gallifet did not tend to live very long." Of a group of 57 African slaves brought to the plantation in February 1789, 12 were dead within a year. Birthrates were low, and one-third of the children born on the plantations soon died. In 1786 there was an "extreme dryness," and winds blew so hot they cracked furniture and shattered glasses. In 1788 there was drought again, and it was worse in 1790. Sugarcane production suffered,

and with it Gallifet's profits, but most of all the slaves. Their numbers decreased over the decade, but the amount of land cultivated did not. They were simply worked harder. The slaves on the smallest of the three plantations, La Gossette, were the worst off. In 1789 20 of them escaped into the woods for two months, demanding the replacement of their manager.[4]

In August 1791 a series of nighttime meetings of slaves took place in the northern plain. Some of the Gallifet slaves attended, and decided to join in the mass insurrection that was being planned. On the night of August 21 the manager of La Gossette, Pierre Mossut, was awakened by a group of slaves who announced that they were "coming to talk to him" and who then attacked him. Mossut was wounded in the arm but fought back and managed to escape. He sent word to the main Gallifet plantation, and soon Odeluc and several other whites arrived at La Gossette. The next morning, accompanied by a judge from Le Cap, they interrogated slaves and extracted a worrisome confession: there was a plan afoot to start "a war to the death against the whites." The slave overseer of the plantation, Blaise, was identified as one of the ringleaders. Blaise, however, was nowhere to be found.[5]

That night, slaves rose up on several plantations in the nearby parish of Acul. A band led by a slave named Boukman "spread like a torrent" through the parish. On one plantation, "twelve or fourteen of the ringleaders, about the middle of the night, proceeded to the refinery," where they seized "the refiner's apprentice, dragged him to the front of the dwelling-house, and there hewed him into pieces with their cutlasses: his screams brought out the overseer, whom they instantly shot. The rebels now found their way to the apartment of the refiner, and massacred him in his bed." These slaves were soon joined by a large troop from two neighboring plantations, and together they burned the entire plantation to the ground. The only person they spared was the plantation's surgeon, whom the slaves took with them, "with the idea that they might stand in need of his professional assistance." From there the insurgent band attacked surrounding plantations, and by early the next morning all but two of the plantations in the parish had risen in revolt.[6]

During the morning of August 23 the revolt spread from Acul to the neighboring parish of Limbé. A troop of nearly 2,000 slaves went from plantation to plantation, killing whites, burning houses, and setting cane fields alight. In parishes farther east, meanwhile, slaves rose up on several plantations. Much of the northern plain was soon engulfed by the rebel-



Painting of the northern plain burning during the August 1791 insurrection. The unknown painter was looking from above the town of Le Cap. The ash and smoke from the burning cane fields covered the sky for days. *Private collection.*

lion. "The fire, which they spread to the sugarcane, to all the buildings, to their houses and *ajoupas* [huts], covered the sky with churning clouds of smoke during the day, and at night lit up the horizon with aurora borealis that projected far away the reflection of so many volcanoes, and gave all objects a livid tint of blood."[7]

Many whites fled the region, but at the La Gossette plantation Odeluc, Mossut, and a small detachment of National Guard troops prepared to confront the insurgents. As soon as they arrived, however, the soldiers threw down their weapons and fled through the cane fields toward Le Cap. "We were attacked by a horde of assassins, and could offer only meager resistance," wrote Mossut. "After the first volley, we took refuge in flight." Odeluc, weighed down by his boots and his age, was surrounded by insurgents and killed. Mossut, however, escaped when a domestic slave of the plantation appeared and presented him with a horse.[8]

Some masters and overseers successfully fought back, sometimes aided by loyal slaves. The conspiracy, however, had involved slaves from through-

out the region, and the bands of insurgents often found supporters ready and waiting, and welcomed eager new recruits. The majority of slaves on the Robillard plantation, for instance, joined the group of insurgents who arrived on August 25. The owner had fled, but the driver of the plantation, who refused to take part in the insurrection, was killed. Robillard's house and the lodgings of several slave artisans and the driver were set alight. The slaves preserved their own quarters, however, as well as "two large tables to take their meals." They also smashed to pieces all the sugar-manufacturing equipment on the plantation. Indeed, throughout the region insurgents destroyed "not only the cane fields, but also the manufacturing installations, sugar mills, tools and other farm equipment, storage bins, and slave quarters; in short, every material manifestation of their existence under slavery and its means of exploitation."[9]

On the morning of August 23 a man rode into Le Cap on a barebacked horse, shoeless, hatless, a sword in his hand. "To arms, citizens, our brothers are being slaughtered and our properties are being burned; all the slaves of the plain are advancing with fire and iron in hand!" "At first everyone thought he was crazy," but they gathered around him, asking questions, and soon came to believe him. Refugees from the northern plain were soon pouring into Le Cap. The town's officials issued an order preventing all ships in the harbor from leaving—to keep the sailors around for the defense of the town, and to ensure that there was somewhere for the inhabitants to go if it failed. They fortified the roads and passes and placed troops and cannon around the edges of the city. They also began punishing slaves they suspected of complicity in the revolt. "Above 100 negro prisoners" were "shot in the burying place" during two days in late August. Soon "six gallows" were erected in one square, flanked by a wheel "to put the poor devils to torture, as they are brought in." One man proposed that all the masters in the town hand over their male domestic slaves, who would be placed in preventive custody on ships in the harbor. "The streets were deserted" in Le Cap, though "at times one saw brigands pass by in chains on their way to execution, and wounded soldiers who were being taken to the hospital, or fearful people carrying aboard the vessels their most prized possessions." In the distance there could be heard "the rumbling of burning fires and the explosions and whistling of cannon," but the war was everywhere: "One feared being slaughtered by one's servants."[10]

Several rebel attacks on the town were turned back from the fortified positions. But from their camps outside the city, insurgents taunted the

soldiers. They were camped "one league" away, but they frequently approached "in numbers to bid defiance. Many of them are killed by our cannon. They, notwithstanding, come up unarmed." Estimated as 2,000 strong on August 23, by August 27 the insurgents were "reckoned 10,000 strong, divided into 3 armies, of whom 700 or 800 are on horseback, and tolerably well armed," though the rest were "almost without arms." An army was gathering on the plain, and there seemed no way to stop it.[11]

"There is a motor that powers them and that keeps powering them and that we cannot come to know," Pierre Mossut wrote to Gallifet of the insurgents. "All experienced colonists know that this class of men have neither the energy nor the combination of ideas necessary for the execution of this project, whose realization they nevertheless are marching toward with perseverance." Although many had been captured and questioned, "all observed obstinate silence when questioned about who armed them and incited this odious plot." What was happening was impossible, and yet it was happening before his very eyes. Other masters were also bewildered by the success of the insurrection. "How could we ever have known that there reigned among these men, so numerous and formerly so passive, such a concerted accord that everything was carried out exactly as was declared?" one asked. A revolution was under way, but no one—not its victims, not those who were marching across the northern plain of Saint-Domingue seeking freedom and vengeance—knew how far it would go or where it would take them.[12]

Just over a week before the insurrection began, on Sunday, August 14, 200 slaves gathered on the Lenormand de Mézy plantation in a parish called Morne-Rouge. They were delegates from plantations throughout the central region of the northern plain, including the parishes of Limbé, Petite-Anse (where the Gallifet plantations were), Port Margot, Limonade, Plaine du Nord, and Quartier Morin. There had been meetings like this before, and in fact they were common enough that several planters had given their slaves permission to attend what they described as a "dinner." But this meeting was special: final plans were made for a mass uprising.[13]

Most of the delegates at the meeting were privileged slaves, and many of them were the drivers on their plantations. These men, of necessity trusted by their masters, had a relative freedom of movement and were leaders on the plantations. Because of their position, they generally carried swords that, meant to threaten the slaves, could also be used for other pur-

poses. Still, they were in a curious position, since while field slaves respected (and also feared) them, they also might well have felt ambivalent about having them as representatives. Acting as driver in the service of a master was not the same thing as leading slaves against him, even if both roles required similar qualities. Yet if anyone was capable of leading slaves in a coordinated and widespread revolt, it was these elite slaves, who came as representatives of thousands and thousands of others back on their plantations.[14]

All we know of the meeting comes to us from fragments of testimony. One participant described how, during the meeting, a man—a "mulatto or quartaroon"—read a statement announcing that the king and the National Assembly in Paris had passed a decree abolishing use of the whip by masters and provided slaves three free days a week instead of two. Local masters and authorities, the statement added, were refusing to apply the new decree, but luckily troops were on their way to the colony to force them to do it. Like the rumor that had circulated in Martinique in 1789, this one served to inspire and perhaps reassure potential insurgents. It also highlighted the possibility that, given the open conflict between local assemblies in Saint-Domingue and the National Assembly, the latter might be an ally in the battle against local slave masters. The rumor was an effective call to arms, and it was productive in its own way. The powers in Paris had in fact done nothing to improve the lot of the slaves, and were not about to, but that would change once the slaves took action on their own.[15]

Several delegates at the meeting argued that they should wait for the arrival of French troops before taking any action themselves. But others argued that they should rise up immediately. The revolt almost started that night, but cooler heads prevailed and a more careful plan was finalized. It required careful coordination among large numbers of slaves, who were to rise up and start the burning and killing in unison. The date set for the event was, as best we can tell, the night of Wednesday August 24. It was a surprising choice; with remarkable consistency, slave conspirators in the Americas during the eighteenth century planned their uprisings for Sundays or holidays, days when it was easier for slaves to circulate without inciting suspicion, and when they would not have to fight after a long day of work in the fields. But on August 25 a meeting of the entire Colonial Assembly was scheduled in Le Cap. It would have been, as one historian notes, "not only a day when the population of Le Cap would have been distracted by the big event, but also a unique opportunity to eliminate the entire political elite of Saint-Domingue." The choice was a measure of their ambition.[16]

In the week after the meeting of August 14 some slaves, unable to contain themselves, carried out premature acts of rebellion. On the sixteenth, for instance, slaves were caught setting fire to a building on a plantation in the Limbé parish, and under interrogation one told the plantation owner that "all the drivers, coachmen, domestics, and confidential negroes" had "formed a plot to set fire to the plantations and to murder all the whites." He named several slaves on the nearby plantation as fellow conspirators. All the slaves on this plantation were gathered and asked if there was such a plot. The slaves answered "with one voice" that this accusation was a "detestable calumny" and swore "inviolable attachment" to their manager. He believed them, and, as one account lamented when it was too late, "his credulity has been our ruin." Still, whites were aware that something was afoot, even if they had no idea how extensive the conspiracy really was. For the conspirators, weeks of planning, not to mention many lives, were on the verge of being lost. So, starting with the attack against Mossut at La Gossette, and then the uprisings in Acul, the revolt was set in motion early. The insurrection was more fragmented and haphazard than the plan of the fourteenth had envisioned. The early launching of the insurrection may have short-circuited a plan for the slaves in Le Cap to rise up on August 25 as insurgents attacked from outside the town. The 1791 insurrection, for all it ultimately achieved, might have been an even greater success.[17]

How was it that these slaves, at this time, were able to do what no other group of slaves had ever done before or would again? What made their insurrection so powerful? The success of the insurrection lay in the capacity of the conspirators to organize across plantations, bringing together slaves separated by significant distances and working under the watchful eyes of overseers and masters. The conspiracy required leadership and, just as importantly, trust, for its discovery could have led to the capture and execution of the participants.

The most visible leader during the first days of the insurrection was Boukman, who had worked first as a driver and then as a coachman. Boukman was, it is believed, a religious leader, a role that would have earned him respect among many slaves. Before the revolt, in the woods at a place called Bois-Caïman, Boukman led conspirators in a religious ceremony. (Various accounts describe him officiating alongside an old African

woman "with strange eyes and bristling hair" or else a green-eyed woman of African and Corsican descent named Cécile Fatiman.) Although the service is usually described as having taken place after the meeting on August 14, it probably took place on the following Sunday, August 21, at a plantation halfway between those of Gallifet and Le Cap. It was a convenient gathering place for slaves on their way back from the town's markets. At the ceremony Boukman apparently proclaimed: "The god of the white man calls him to commit crimes; our god asks only good works of us. But this god who is so good orders revenge! He will direct our hands; he will aid us. Throw away the image of the god of the whites who thirsts for our tears and listen to the voice of liberty that speaks in the hearts of all of us." Those assembled took an oath of secrecy and revenge, sealed by drinking the blood of a black pig sacrificed before them. It was a form of pact probably derived from the traditions of West Africa.[18]

Antoine Dalmas, the only person who wrote about Bois-Caïman at the time, portrayed it as the ultimate expression of African barbarism. Dalmas had served as a surgeon at the Gallifet plantation and survived the insurrection on the northern plain before fleeing into exile to the United States. There, in 1793 and 1794, he wrote a memoir in which he described how "before executing" the plan they had made at the August 14 meeting, the conspirators had a "kind of celebration or sacrifice" in which "a black pig, surrounded by fetishes, covered with offerings each one stranger than the next, was the holocaust offered to the genius of the black race." "The religious ceremonies that the blacks practiced in slitting the pig's throat," he continued, "the eagerness with which they drank its blood, the value they placed on possessing some of its hairs—a kind of talisman that, according to them, would make them invulnerable—serves to characterize the African." He concluded that "it was natural for such an ignorant and stupid class to take part in the superstitious rituals of an absurd and bloody religion before taking part in the most horrible of assassinations." Dalmas's work—which, when it was finally published in 1814 was followed by an essay arguing that the Haitian Revolution was illegitimate and that the French should take back their former colony—is the only surviving account of the event written soon after it took place.[19]

Dalmas's account was taken up by another writer, the French abolitionist Civique de Gastine, who added the (now canonical) detail that it was a dark and stormy night. In 1824 a Haitian writer named Hérard Dumesle penned a poetic description of the ceremony, drawing on oral accounts he

heard during a journey in the region of Le Cap. Dumesle was a great lover of classical Greek and Roman culture, and many of the details he ascribed to the religious practices of the slaves—such as a divination based on the entrails of the sacrificed pig, performed by a "young virgin"—would have been more familiar in ancient Rome than in revolutionary Saint-Domingue. But Dumesle's text provided the earliest written version of the speech given at the ceremony, although it did not attribute the speech to Boukman, as later writers did. Over a decade later, another account of the ceremony appeared through an interview with a man who recalled his participation in it. Incorporated into a famous history of Haiti written by Beaubroin Ardouin, this account mentioned an "oath" taken during the ceremony.[20]

The story of the Bois-Caïman ceremony symbolizes the place religious practice had in the slave insurrection. The insurrection of 1791 required community and leaders, and there is little doubt that, in one way or another, religious practices facilitated the process of its organization. Once the insurrection began, religion helped inspire insurgents, and solidified the power of certain leaders. One French soldier reported how insurgent troops advanced to the tune of African music, or amidst a silence broken only by the "incantations of their sorcerers." Another contemporary described how, as insurgents prepared to fight, religious leaders prepared *ouanga* (fetishes) and so "exalted the imagination of the women and children, who sang and danced like demons." One young slave, Hyacinthe, who became a leader in the Western Province, was a religious leader, and carried a talisman made of horsehair into battle. And when insurgent leaders were killed, ceremonies were held in their honor. One insurgent leader was buried by the troops who had defeated him, but later "the negroes took him up and buried him again with great pomp." The invocation of the mysterious ceremony at Bois-Caïman serves as shorthand for the complex and varied presence of religion in the planning and execution of the insurrection.[21]

Though religious practices facilitated and spurred on insurrection, it was only their combination with careful political organization that made the 1791 uprising successful. The plantations and towns of the colony had been the site of a productive and complex encounter between African traditions and Catholicism throughout the eighteenth century. But the dramatic social transformations brought about by the Revolution—the movement away from plantations and into insurgent camps, the encounters

between groups of slaves from different regions in a context of cultural liberty—helped propel a new set of religious developments in the colony. Slave insurgents who had drawn on their religious traditions in seeking solace and strength became part of new communities in which religious practices were reconfigured and strengthened.

Before the insurrection of 1791 there may in fact have been two ceremonies: one in which a cow was sacrificed, perhaps to serve the deity Ogou, who is still served in this way; and the other, at Bois-Caïman, in which a pig was sacrificed. These were perhaps early versions of two traditions of worship that were later brought together in Haitian Vodou—the "Rada" and "Petro." The Rada rites have their roots in West Africa, while the Petro seem to have evolved from Kongolese traditions. The Petro *lwa*—Vodou gods—are more unpredictable, temperamental, and at times violent than the Rada, and carry the marks of both slavery and resistance. One 1950s ethnographer described Petro ceremonies dominated by the "crack of the slave-whip sounding constantly, a never-to-be-forgotten ghost" that recalled the "raging revolt of the slaves against the Napoleonic forces" and "the delirium of triumph" of the Haitian Revolution. The history of the revolution, then, became part of the religion, some of whose practitioners see the Boïs-Caïman ceremony as the founding moment of their religion, a charter both for the gathering of different African nations and for the unification of African-born and creole slaves in pursuit of liberation. Thus Bois-Caïman remains a symbol of the achievement of the slave insurgents of Saint-Domingue, a symbol not of a specific event whose details we can pin down, but rather of the creative spiritual and political epic that both prompted and emerged from the 1791 insurrection.[22]

A few weeks after the insurrection began, an insurgent was captured by a troop of white soldiers. He tried to escape by pleading his innocence, but, according to one soldier, when he "saw that his fate was sealed," he began to "laugh, sing, and joke" and "jeered at us in mockery." Finally, they executed him. "He gave the signal himself and met death without fear or complaint." When they searched his body, they found "in one of his pockets pamphlets printed in France, filled with commonplaces about the Rights of Man and the Sacred Revolution; in his vest pocket was a large packet of tinder and phosphate and lime. On his chest he had a little sack full of hair, herbs, and bits of bone, which they call a fetish." The law of liberty, ingredients for firing a gun, and a powerful amulet to call on the help of the gods: clearly, a potent combination.[23]

Many planters believed the ideals of the French Revolution, spread by uncomprehending and overenthusiastic whites, were responsible for bringing fire and carnage to the colonies. In early September the colony's assembly passed a "provisional decree, prohibiting the sale, impression, or distribution of any pieces relative to the politics and revolution of France." Pierre Mossut, writing to Gallifet in Paris, blamed the insurrection on "the various writings published in your capital in favor of the Negroes," which had circulated in the colonies and were known to the slaves. The planter Madame de Rouvray wrote that the insurrection was the direct result of the actions taken in metropolitan France by abolitionists. "The *scelerats* [villains] swore they would have us slaughtered by our slaves!" she exclaimed, perhaps thinking of the famous passage prophesying insurrection in the Abbé Raynal's *Histoire philosophique.* Madame de Rouvray found further proof of her assertion in reports claiming that there were whites leading the slave insurgents in battle. Along with the 150 slave insurgents her husband had killed just the day before, she wrote in September, was one white man who was *carbonisé*—covered in carbon as a kind of blackface. Another account claimed, similarly, that there were whites leading the insurgents "with blackened faces," and who "were discovered by their hair." One priest captured among the rebels confessed, probably prodded by the fear that he would be executed (as he indeed soon was), that he had been "sent over with four more from France" in order to "teach negroes to revolt." An even more extreme version of this paranoia was expressed in a September letter claiming that "fifty *new* emissaries were coming" to the colony "to raise insurrections among the slaves." It accused Julien Raimond of "making numerous levies of rogues and ragamuffins in the streets of Paris," and attacked Robespierre and Condorcet, "members of the National Assembly," as "dangerous enemies to the colonies." The letter was taken quite seriously. A decree was passed in response, ordering that "every emigrant from France should be sent back to the mother country, at the expense of the colony," unless they possessed property on the island or were related to someone who did.[24]

There was a long-lived chorus of writers who blamed the revolt on the spread of egalitarian ideals within Saint-Domingue, as if these ideals all by themselves had the power to set the colony on fire. The front page of the

inaugural issue of the *Moniteur Général* of Saint-Domingue, a vehicle for the colony's planter-dominated assembly, was a poem titled "Philanthropy." It identified a "ferocious and blood mania" called "philosophy" as the "invisible and perfidious arm" that was driving "one hundred thousand rebel slaves." Antoine Dalmas, our source on the Bois-Caïman ceremony, provided a list of the accused that included the entire Enlightenment. It began with the Société des Amis des Noirs, "who had as their avowed goal the loss of the colonies," but continued with "those numerous sects" who called themselves "economists, Encyclopedists, etc.," and who formed "a kind of Republic" that, to their great misfortune, had influenced the rulers of France. Those like Dalmas who made such claims implicitly viewed the slaves as capable of interpreting and transforming Enlightenment ideals, and of applying them to their own ends.[25]

Dalmas, meanwhile, scoffed at those who offered a mirror image of this theory, claiming that the king and the aristocrats were behind the revolt. But some took this allegation quite seriously. A lawyer named Gros, who was a prisoner of the insurgents, claimed that they all believed that the king had been imprisoned, and that they had been given orders "to arm themselves and give him back his liberty." He concluded that "the revolt of the slaves is a counterrevolution." The marquis de Rouvray found credence in both theories. In December 1791 he wrote to his daughter that "the Amis des Noirs were probably the initial cause of our misfortunes," having sent emissaries to the colony, two of which had been hung for "having preached their dogma among our slaves." But he added that it was also "very certain" that "the partisans of counterrevolution" had played a major role in inciting the slave revolt in the hope that the loss of Saint-Domingue would help stir up the coastal provinces of France and turn their inhabitants against the revolution. The idea that white counterrevolutionary planters were behind the revolt would have a long life. In 1793 the Republican commissioners in the colony would arrest some planters, accusing them of having "advised, encouraged, excited, or protected" slave revolt, as well as of having supplied insurgents with ammunition and provisions. In a proclamation on slavery issued in May of that year, they announced that it was not "among the slaves" that the "causes of their insurrections" would be found. It was neither "for themselves" nor "from themselves" that they had revolted, but rather the result of external "impulsions" by men who had no "African blood."[26]

But of course the insurgents had their own ideologies, their own histories, and their own hopes for the future. While the actions of royalist and Republican whites helped set the stage for the insurrection and contributed to its development, the slave insurgents were the true force behind it. As Jean-Philippe Garran-Coulon, author of a long official report on the "troubles" of the colonies published in the late 1790s, argued, the slaves of Saint-Domingue (like those who followed Spartacus in Rome) had been moved to action not by the actions of instigators but rather by the "genius of liberty," which had incited them to "break their chains." If they had been encouraged by the talk of liberty in the colony, and by the "unthinking" statements of some whites, the slaves had no "instigator" other than "the love of liberty and hatred for their oppressors." "Slaves are in a permanent state of war with their masters and the government that maintains slavery. They have the right to demand liberty by any means, even violence," he wrote. Taken up in a violent and no doubt at times exhilarating process of revolution, they drew on a variety of ideals as they struggled to find their place in a rapidly changing world. Their voices, for the most part screened out of the voluminous accounts of the insurrection of 1791, nevertheless bleed through in ways that can help us understand the complicated process of political invention that took shape during the Haitian Revolution.[27]

Early in the insurrection, one group presented a clear set of demands. They approached a French officer and told him that they would surrender if "all the slaves should be made free." But they were "determined to die, arms in hand, rather than to submit without a promise of liberty." The whites and free-coloreds who were sent with the official French response—which rejected emancipation but offered an amnesty to all insurgents who would return to the plantation and denounce their leaders—were attacked, and six of the nine were killed by the disgusted insurgents.[28]

In a few cases, slave insurgents explicitly phrased their demands in the language of Republican rights. When a group of slaves were questioned about the meetings they had attended just before the insurrection began, they declared that "they wanted to enjoy the liberty they are entitled to by the Rights of Man." The next day several "leaders of those mobs" were "taken and interrogated," and their answer "was like the first received." Another account of the 1791 insurrection described how "an innumerable troop of negroes presented themselves almost underneath the batteries of Le Cap, asking for the rights of man." The pamphlet of the "Rights of Man" found on one executed insurgent also suggests the important role of this document in inspiring certain slaves.[29]

But insurgent leaders more commonly called on the authority of the king of France himself. This was the case of a remarkable free-colored man who took on the name Romaine la Rivière (also known as Romaine-la-prophetesse), who emerged as a leader in the Southern Province of Saint-Domingue in late 1791. Having established himself in an abandoned church, he conducted mass before an upside-down cross and claimed to be "inspired by the Holy Spirit and in direct communication with the Virgin Mary, his godmother, who answered his solicitations in writing." He repeatedly told slaves that the king had already freed them, but that their masters were refusing the decision, using this assertion to encourage them to join his armed band. Romaine la Rivière was remarkable for the strength of the claims he made on both the earthly and heavenly powers, but he was not unique. When Boukman was killed in mid-November, insurgents lamented that he had been "killed for the most just of causes, the defense of his king." The insurgent leader Jean-François, "the supreme chief of the African army," wore a gray and yellow uniform decorated with a "cross of Saint-Louis," an aristocratic military order. His guards' uniforms were decorated with the royal fleur-de-lis. He and the leaders he fought with called themselves generals and officers of the "army of the king." Some insurgents spared some white sailors they had captured because "they were in the king's service." Garran-Coulon concluded: "It is certain that the *nègres* armed themselves in the name of the king; that they had a flag soiled by the fleur-de-lis, and by the motto 'Long live Louis XVI'; that they constantly invoked his authority, and called themselves *gens du roi*."[30]

The insurgents had complex motivations for evoking the king of France, whom many saw as a potential ally and liberator because of the rumors that had circulated about his actions in their favor. Many probably recalled the royal decrees of the 1780s which were meant to improve the lot of the slaves, and which had incited such hostility among their masters. When in December 1791 the insurgent leaders Jean-François and Georges Biassou were negotiating with colonial officials, they explained that their followers were prey to "false principles," notably the idea that "the king has given three days per week to the slaves," and that they would feel betrayed if they were not granted them. In the same letter they noted their "obstinacy" in expecting the favors they had been told they would receive from the king. Three days of freedom a week was not complete liberty, but as a change that carried the seeds of a more autonomous existence it would have been an inspiration for many slaves. In some parts of the colony,

meanwhile, insurgents passed on the news that the king had abolished slavery completely. Not unlike the peasant rebels in France during the Great Terror of 1789, the slave insurgents of Saint-Domingue invoked a powerful and distant figure—who they rightly understood might have the power to counteract the assemblies of the colony—against their all-too-local enemies. As Garran-Coulon noted in his report, the evocation of the king was a logical political strategy. Even if the royal government protected them very little against their masters, it was the only protection they could "invoke against the tyranny of their masters." "Is it surprising that in such circumstances, the negroes tried to take advantage of the division of the whites, and even to increase it as much as they could in order to diminish the strength of their enemies, and gain the support of those they considered their [the whites'] enemies?" The insurgents of Saint-Domingue evoked the king in pursuit of concrete political goals that were, in the local context, quite revolutionary.[31]

Evocations of the king did not imply a rejection of the language of Republicanism. By mid-1791, despite the increasing radicalization of events in France, the country was still nominally a constitutional monarchy, not a republic, and many did not see the Rights of Man and the authority of the king as mutually exclusive. The rumored decree discussed at the meeting of August 14, after all, was said to have been passed by the king *and* the National Assembly. Later in 1791, Biassou wrote of his readiness to "serve his king, the nation, and its representatives." Such ideological syncretism continued in Saint-Domingue even after the break between the Republic and the royalty was accomplished in France. In early 1793 one insurgent leader named Joseph flew a tricolor flag decorated with three fleur-de-lis, freely mixing Republican and royalist symbols. Later that year the Republican commissioner Léger Félicité Sonthonax recalled that some insurgents who had been recruited to the Republican side had proposed to make him "king in the name of the Republic" as a way of ending the war against their enemies. But when the conflict between republicanism and royalty finally became a clear conflict between slavery and freedom, many—though not all—former slaves threw in their lot with the Republic.[32]

Insurgents had a powerful incentive to take a "royalist" tone: the collaboration, and ultimately alliance, they developed with the Spanish across the border in Santo Domingo. The Spanish had "an open market with the brigands," who arrived with money, but also with dishes, jewels, furniture,

and animals taken from plantations to buy supplies, as well as weapons and ammunition to supplement those they took on plantations or during battles. This trade, as well as some direct military aid given by the Spanish, provided crucial support for the insurgent army, and indeed was probably one reason it succeeded as well as it did. Insurgent leaders traveled to the border, and Spanish officers visited their camps. The insurgents cultivated such contacts, adopting an "extravagantly royalist rhetoric" and "posing as defenders of church and king" at least in part to encourage the Spanish to support them.[33]

Insurgents also often described their own leaders as kings. In the Southern Province in early 1792, a group of insurgents ultimately created the "kingdom of the Platons" and chose a king to be their leader. Romaine la Rivière had, according to one observer, the ambition to become the "king of Saint-Domingue." In the north, too, certain leaders were elected as kings. On a Sunday two weeks after the revolt began, insurgents who had taken over Acul celebrated two weddings in the town's church with an imprisoned Capuchin priest officiating. "On the occasion, they assumed titles, and the titled blacks were treated with great respect." "Their colours were consecrated, and a King was elected"—a free black named Jean-Baptiste Cap. A few weeks later, after a clash between insurgents and French troops, "a negro superbly dressed and decorated, with a crown on his head, was found upon the field of battle."[34]

For the majority of the population of the island who were African-born, the form and content of kingship were probably defined by the traditions of their homelands. Garran-Coulon attributed the royalism of the insurgents in part to their "ignorance," since "in Africa as well as in Saint-Domingue, they knew only royal government." The Republican commissioner Légér Félicité Sonthonax similarly wrote in late 1793 that "the most stupid of Africans" could understand the "simple" idea of a king, while "even the most sophisticated of them" could not "conceive of the idea of a republic." Such interpretations and oppositions were of course misleading. Kingship meant something quite different in Africa—for instance, in the Kongo, whence many slaves had come in the decades before the revolution—than it did in Europe. In Kongolese political culture, there was a long-standing conflict over the nature of kingship, between traditions that emphasized a more authoritarian form of rule and others that limited the power of kings and provided for more democratic forms of rule. Such traditions drove conflicts in which many of those enslaved in Saint-Domingue

would have participated. Indeed, the Kongo might even "be seen as a fount of revolutionary ideas as much as France was." As with so much of the insurrection of 1791, the only evidence we have of the transcultural development of insurgent political ideologies is extremely fragmented, but the naming of "kings" among the insurgents likely involved a transcultural dialogue between European and African visions of leadership and government.[35]

African slaves from the Kongo arrived with another kind of experience that they made useful in Saint-Domingue. Many of them had been soldiers fighting in the civil wars that ripped apart the kingdom of Kongo before they had been captured and sold into slavery. They were "African veterans," who had knowledge and experience of warfare and knew how to use firearms. The warfare practiced in the Kongo was quite different from that of European armies, involving organization in small, relatively autonomous groups, repeated attacks and retreats aimed at confusing the enemy, and firing from a prone position and, when possible, from behind shelter. Soldiers in Saint-Domingue consistently described similar tactics among the insurgents. One contemporary wrote that instead of exposing themselves as a group like "fanatics," they fought "spread out and dispersed," and positioned themselves in places that made them seem ready "to envelop and crush their enemies by their numbers." They were careful in their observations of the enemy. "If they encounter resistance, they don't waste their energy; but if they see hesitation in the defense, they become extremely audacious." A report from 1793 described how a group of insurgents, surprised by an attack, took refuge behind rocks and, "following their cowardly custom, *hidden,* fired on us." As the French troops charged the insurgents, they retreated "from ambush to ambush until they had reached some inaccessible rocks." These tactics were successful; the "inaccessible" rocks were clearly accessible to the insurgents, who escaped the attack, though they left behind their dead and paths of blood. The insurgent leaders Jean-François and Biassou made the importance of African military tactics clear in a letter they wrote late in 1791, in which they asserted that most of their followers were "a multitude of *nègres* from the coast"—that is, from Africa—"most of whom can barely say two words of French but who in their country were accustomed to fighting wars."[36]

African veterans were not the only ones who brought military experience to the insurgents. Although they were a minority, there were also free people of African descent in the insurgent camps, some of whom had expe-

rience of serving in the French colonial militia or the *maréchaussée*. Many of them brought more than just experience. In late September a group of "mulattoes and free negroes" who had been serving against the insurgents deserted "with arms, baggage, and military stores" and "joined the rebels." The towns of Fort-Dauphin and Ouanaminthe, near the Spanish border, were taken over by the insurgents thanks to the desertion of Jean-Baptiste Marc and Cézar, two "free blacks" who had fought for several months against the "brigands" before joining them, bringing ammunition and cannon. Slaves who had been employed hunting for their masters had experience with firearms. One visitor to the colony in the late 1790s described some hunters, who seem to have developed their skills as slaves before emancipation, who each week were given enough powder for seven shots. With this they were to provide enough food for a week. They hunted birds by crawling through the lagoons with their rifles over their heads, until they found several birds "living in society," killing several with a single shot. Such skills could be put to use in other kinds of ambushes as well.[37]

When they lacked weapons, as they often did, the insurgents used startling "ruse and ingenuity." "They camouflaged traps, fabricated poisoned arrows, feigned cease-fires to lure the enemy into ambush, disguised tree-trunks as cannons, and threw obstructions of one kind or another into the roads to hamper advancing troops." Some insurgents advancing on Le Cap stood firmly up to three volleys of shot, each of them "wearing a kind of light mattress stuffed with cotton as a vest to prevent the bullets from penetrating." Some demonstrated a suicidal courage when they "suffocated the cannon of the enemy with their arms and bodies, and so routed them." Although at first many insurgents did not know how to use the cannon they captured, loading them improperly, they soon learned. One group took control of a battery along the coast, and when a French ship fired on the battery to dislodge them, they braved a barrage of 250 cannon shots. They then used the cannon balls that had landed around them to fire back at the ship, which was seriously damaged before its crew managed to sail it away.[38]

Violence, in the form of military engagements with French troops and the massacre of white planters and their families, was a central part of the insurrection. Many of the accounts of the event that were soon produced and disseminated throughout the Americas and Europe presented tales of savage and unthinkable atrocities committed by the slaves. One well-known account—presented to the National Assembly in France in

November 1791 and quickly published in English translation in 1792—included a description of the attack on the Gallifet plantations that claimed that the insurgents carried as their "standard the body of a white child impaled upon a stake." This detail was not mentioned in the descriptions of the attack on Gallifet by Pierre Mossut or Antoine Dalmas, neither of whom would have been likely to suppress so memorable an image had they been aware of it. But it was accepted as true by many readers, and often repeated as a symbol, and condemnation, of the insurrection. In Paris the famed revolutionary Camille Desmoulins used the potent image when he declared that his political enemy, the abolitionist Brissot, was to blame "if so many plantations have been reduced to ashes, if pregnant women have been eviscerated, if a child carried on the end of a pike served as standard of the blacks."[39]

The same account described many other horrors—a carpenter named Robert tied between two boards and sawed in half, husbands and fathers killed and their wives and daughters taken by the insurgents and "reserved for their pleasures," one woman raped on the body of her dead husband. Drawing on this text, and on what he heard during his stay in Saint-Domingue in 1791, Bryan Edwards embellished some of these horrors (the carpenter Robert was sawed in half because his assassins declared that "he should die in the way of his occupation") and provided descriptions of others (a policeman was nailed to the gate of his plantation and his limbs chopped off "one by one with an ax") when he wrote what would become a standard reference for later histories of the revolution. The insurrection, he wrote, had produced "horrors of which imagination cannot adequately conceive nor pen describe" and a "picture of human misery" that "no other country, no former age, has exhibited": "Upwards of one hundred thousand savage people, habituated to the barbarities of Africa, avail themselves of the silence and obscurity of the night, and fall on the peaceful and unsuspicious planters, like so many famished tygers thirsting for human blood." Death awaited "alike the old and the young, the matron, the virgin, and the helpless infant," and within "a few dismal hours the most fertile and beautiful plains in the world are converted into one vast field of carnage;—a wilderness of desolation!"[40]

But Edwards also described an "unexpected and affecting" act by a slave who saved his owners, Mr. and Mrs. Baillon, and members of their family. This slave, "who was in the conspiracy," hid them in the woods and brought them provisions from a nearby insurgent camp during the first days of the

uprising. After they failed to make it to nearby Port Margot in a canoe he had found for them, the slave "appeared like a guardian angel" and escorted them to sanctuary in the town. In contrast to the stories of black atrocity, which Edwards presented without indicating from whom they came, this story of black heroism required a footnote: he explained that he had learned the story secondhand, from a friend who had heard it from Madame Baillon herself. This perhaps explains why his version differed from that presented in another account of the same event, which identified the insurgent in question as "one of the negro generals," a man named Paul Blin. (Blin, an overseer on a plantation in Limbé, did play an important role in the planning and execution of the insurrection.) In this version, Blin helped the family only at the insistence of his wife (who was the Baillons' nurse), and led them to a rickety boat only so that they would die in a manner less horrible than that "prepared for the unhappy family" by the insurgents. Whatever the truth was, Blin ultimately paid the price for having gained a reputation for mercy. The notorious insurgent leader Jeannot had Blin brutally killed under the pretext of treason because he had heard the story of the assistance he had given to white planters.[41]

Stories about insurgent slaves saving white masters powerfully highlighted the drama of a world turned upside down, and raised the question of how the contorted human relationships developed in slavery would be transformed in a new context. Having long justified slavery as a relatively benign system, and taken comfort in the relations of kindness and charity they imagined they had with certain privileged slaves, many planters were shocked by the sudden transformation of these men and women into dangerous enemies. What made the "horrors" of the insurrection even worse was the betrayal of especially trusted slaves such as drivers and domestics. One account lamented that it was the slaves "which had been most kindly treated by their masters" that were "the soul of the Insurrection." "It was they who betrayed and delivered their human masters to the assassins' sword: it was they who seduced and stirred up to revolt the gangs disposed to fidelity." It was a "heart-breaking discovery" to the planters, who would see nothing but despair in the future were it not for certain acts of "invincible fidelity" by certain slaves. Such loyal slaves had received their liberty in thanks, but—and this was crucial—this liberty was "the gift of their masters." Seeking to hold onto a world that was burning all around them, white masters sought relief in stories of fidelity that provided the consoling mirage that their world could once again be as it had been.[42]

The insurgents of 1791 were enormously diverse—women and men, African-born and creole, overseer and fieldworker, slaves on mountain coffee plantations and sugar plantations—and carried with them many different motivations, hopes, and histories. Using violence against a violent system, they shattered the economy of one of the richest regions of the world. During the first eight days of the insurrection they destroyed 184 plantations; by late September over 200 had been attacked, and "all of the plantations within fifty miles of either side of le Cap had been reduced to ashes and smoke." In addition, almost 1,200 coffee plantations in the mountains surrounding the plain had been sacked. According to one observer, "one can count as many rebel camps as there were plantations." Estimates of the numbers of insurgents varied widely, but by the end of September there were at least 20,000, and by some estimates up to 80,000, in the insurgent camps.[43]

"They are spurred on by the desire of plunder, carnage, and conflagration, and not by the spirit of liberty, as some folks pretend," one white merchant wrote of the insurgents. But plundering masters' homes, destroying the infrastructure of the plantations on which they were enslaved, and killing those who had enslaved them were powerful ways to pursue liberty. Indeed, they were the only ways available to most of the slaves. We can only imagine the exuberance and exhilaration the rebels must have felt as they took vengeance, turned the tables on their masters, and saw, perhaps for the first time, the extent of their power. We can only imagine, too, the wrenching pull of divided loyalties that many must have experienced, between staying with families on plantations and leaving with insurgent groups, between participating in a revolt that might very well lead to their brutal execution and trying to stay neutral in the midst of a war, between serving masters and hoping for rewards and fighting for an uncertain liberty. For what lay ahead was profoundly uncertain. The insurgents knew they would have to continue to fight French forces in order to hold on to what they had gained. But what might victory look like? What would it take to turn Saint-Domingue into a place where they could live with hope and possibility?[44]

For one slave of the Gallifet plantation, the insurrection had ironic consequences. In February 1791 Marie-Rose Masson had given Odeluc 3,342 livres. It was what a slave trader would ask for the purchase of two babies, and it was the price of Masson's freedom and that of her mother. Masson's father was the man who had preceded Odeluc as the manager of the plan-

tations, and who had died soon after she was born. Odeluc had raised her, and agreed in 1787 to let her buy her liberty, but it took her four years to amass the required money. When she paid him in February, he gave her a receipt but put off signing the emancipation papers. Then, in August, he was killed at La Gossette. Masson, perhaps because she was so close to gaining her liberty, did not join the insurrection, and remained in the service of Odeluc's replacement, Mossut. He, however, refused to acknowledge the agreement she had made, and kept Masson and her mother as slaves. The insurrection, in killing Odeluc, had taken away the purchased freedom of these two slaves, even as all around her other slaves powerfully demonstrated the freedoms they had seized from their masters. It is unlikely that Mossut, Masson, or the insurgents who surrounded them could imagine that within two years there would no longer be any slaves in Saint-Domingue.[45]

CHAPTER FIVE

New World

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER 1791 Madame de Rouvray wrote to her daughter from a very different world. She was comparatively lucky. Her slaves had not rebelled, and no insurgents had reached her plantation. Her husband, the marquis de Rouvray, was leading troops that had kept the insurgents out of the region. Still, Madame de Rouvray announced resolutely that they would have to leave Saint-Domingue, "for how can one stay in a country where slaves have raised their hands against their masters?" They might go to Havana, where they could find land and rebuild a plantation with their slaves—"if we are lucky enough to preserve them from the contagion." If it became impossible to live as slave masters in Saint-Domingue, Cuba would have to do—even if its customs were "quite opposed to our own."[1]

While the marquis de Rouvray was fighting insurgents in the eastern part of the northern plain of Saint-Domingue, an officer named Anne-Louis de Tousard, a veteran of the American Revolution, was leading troops south of Le Cap. Tousard had led a first attack on two plantations in Acul on August 24 and 25, though he made little headway against the 3,000 to 4,000 insurgents concentrated there. By late September, however, he had achieved several victories. On the twenty-third he surprised a group on one plantation and quickly routed them with "a great slaughter." A counterattack by the insurgents, among them "cavalry commanded by king Jeannot," was pushed back by "well-directed fire." Two days later the insurgents were again defeated after they charged three times but were driven back "with great loss."[2]

Since the beginning of the insurrection, the main Gallifet plantation had