**“All spirits are roused”: Citizenship and Migration Across the Mona Passage during the Haitian Unification of Hispaniola, 1822-1844**

Andrew Walker, February 2017

During the late eighteenth century, runaways who had been held as slaves in Puerto Rico frequently sought refuge on the eastern shores of Hispaniola in Spanish Santo Domingo. Colonial authorities on the two islands responded to the rising rates of *marronage* by expanding their networks of collaboration, sponsoring slave hunters, and extraditing refugees claimed as property. After Santo Domingo’s unification with independent Haiti in 1822, however, local officials who had previously assisted slaveowners in Puerto Rico were charged instead with carrying out the radical antislavery provisions of the Haitian constitution of 1816, which voided all property claims in persons and promised freedom and citizenship to people of color who managed to reach any portion of the island’s territory.

The magistrates of eastern Haitian *tribunales de paz* or *tribunaux de paix* interviewed migrants in order to determine whether they could claim citizenship and take up residence in the republic. In this presentation, I’d like to call attention to an apparent paradox built into the records of these interviews. Haitian administrative custom discouraged officials from invoking any explicit terminology of enslaved status or racial categorization. Yet these were the very criteria that legally distinguished future citizens from ineligible migrants. How, then, did authorities determine who could become “Haitian?” What roles did the migrants themselves play in the admissions process? How can we begin to read these sources today?

Drawing on a small set of migrant declarations, I hope to make two points about the transition to Haitian rule, free soil, and citizenship in Santo Domingo. First, the testimonies point to wider currents of migration towards, rather than away from Haitian Santo Domingo, and hint at the popular forces that shaped the juridical unification of the island. In spite of the brevity of their declarations, migrants from Puerto Rico (and other islands) demonstrated a deep knowledge of the recent political transformations in Santo Domingo and expressed their objectives in the language of Haitian law. The testimonies also reveal how local officials developed a procedure for admitting migrants based on these stated motives for traveling to Hispaniola. If the migrants expressed a wish for “freedom” broadly defined, then authorities usually allowed them to stay without further questioning. This practice opened the door to a wider number of new citizens. But it also collapsed the distinctions between runaways from enslavement, free people of color fleeing institutionalized racial discrimination abroad, and other travelers hoping to elude foreign colonial authorities or simply to start new lives in Haitian territory.

The migrants whom I’ll be discussing today traveled west across the Mona Passage, the narrow strait between Puerto Rico and Hispaniola. Departing from coastal cities in Puerto Rico such as Mayagüez, Cabo Rojo, and Añasco, they usually arrived on the beaches of Macao, Bayahibe, and Chavón in Santo Domingo. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most of eastern Santo Domingo was under the jurisdiction of San Dionisio de Higüey, an interior ranching town that served as the administrative center for successive governments along a wide portion of the coast from La Romana in the south almost to the Samaná peninsula in the north.

In February 1822, Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer entered the city of Santo Domingo and declared emancipation and political unification. Henceforth, the laws of the western republic would be in force across the island. As historians Ada Ferrer and Johnhenry González have demonstrated, post-revolutionary Haitian leaders implemented a free soil doctrine as a major innovation and contribution to global antislavery. President Boyer and his predecessors drew on the constitutional revision of 1816 in order to reject the property claims in formerly enslaved people who reached Haitian shores, and even interrupted a portion of the ongoing traffic in African captives. [[1]](#footnote-1) The constitution guaranteed political asylum, granted immediate recognition of Haitian nationality, and promised full citizen rights to all migrants of African and indigenous ancestry after one year of residence, thereby locating the basis for citizenship in shared past experiences of slavery, colonialism, and institutionalized racial discrimination rather than place of birth or family origin.[[2]](#footnote-2) For their part, local eastern administrators and foreign consular officials soon recognized that these policies formed a cornerstone of the Haitian unification project in Santo Domingo.

In March 1826, six runaways from Martinique sailed to the city of Santo Domingo in a small boat named the *Marie*, owned by the man who claimed to be their master. The governor of Martinique dispatched three ships, including a war frigate, to demand their extradition, but to no avail. Haitian general Jérôme Maximilien Borgella followed the precedent of previous cases in western Haiti. He refused to hear the governor’s complaints, and insisted that the “institutions of the republic” prevented the extradition of persons claimed as slaves who had traveled to Haiti.[[3]](#footnote-3) The recently arrived French consul in Les Cayes expressed dismay at the mission of the Martinican officials, noting that the runaways could count on the widespread support of citizens from both sides of the island. “All spirits are roused here at the mere thought of the extradition of these fugitives,” he wrote to his superiors in France.[[4]](#footnote-4)

During the more than two decades of unified rule, migrants from Puerto Rico continued to brave the unpredictable currents and frequent sandbanks of the Mona to reach the shores of Hispaniola. If the new arrivals landed on the eastern coasts, Haitian officials usually brought them to Higüey. There, they testified about their voyage to the *juez de paz*, or *juge de paix*, Juan José Martínez. The man who recorded these interviews was Ramón Soñé, a scribe who had once been contracted by slave hunters to affirm their rights over Puerto Rican runaways during the colonial period.[[5]](#footnote-5) Now, Soñé’s job was to condense the tribunal’s interviews into a brief register called a “certificate of declaration,” in which he noted the age, occupation, place of origin of all migrants, as well as their professed motives for undertaking the journey.

Martínez and Soñé interviewed dozens of migrants who were described as “domestics” and “cultivators.” These were the standard terms used throughout Haiti to refer to urban and rural former slaves. In April 1837, they examined a group of six individuals from Puerto Rico who had arrived at Macao beach. María Victoriano, Crepino Calderón, Martín López, Juan Torre, Tomás Layón, and Eugenio Morales explained that they were natives of Mayagüez and Añasco. They had set sail from Mayagüez in a canoe “bound for this island in search of their freedom because they were domestics.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The following day, the officials of the tribunal questioned five more travelers who had disembarked at Macao, including the “cultivator” Viviana Morales and her eighteen-month-old daughter Agustina Morales. When the judge asked the group to state the reasons for their voyage, they apparently provided the same answer. “They left the port of Mayagüez in a canoe with five oars bound for Santo Domingo, as a free country, to seek their freedom.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

These two groups followed a common itinerary between the two islands. The previous summer, five men with the surname Álvarez sailed from Añasco to Macao in a small rowboat, “in search of their freedom.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Like Viviana Morales, they too were described as “cultivators.” In October 1839, another five men appeared in a sailboat at the beach of Yuma, having set out from Mayagüez four days previously at nighttime. “The cause for their coming to this island,” the magistrates wrote, “was the mistreatment and punishment they received from their masters, with the exception of the fourth one [Juan Andrés Miranda], who is a free man by birth.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The authorities thus hinted at the past condition of enslavement by calling attention to its absence, as in Miranda’s case, rather than acknowledging property claims in persons that had no legal meaning on Haitian soil***.***

As the example of Juan Andrés Miranda suggests, “domestics” and “cultivators” were not the only ones seeking to establish themselves in Haitian Santo Domingo. The smuggler Lorenzo Camacho of Cabo Rojo testified in 1837 that he had spent nineteen months living undetected near the beach of Chavón after arriving at Bayahibe from Puerto Rico. According to his interview, Camacho wanted to travel to a “free country.” He eventually let slip that he had made several previous trips transporting contraband salt pork between the two islands, thus acknowledging that he had violated a commercial travel ban. Yet Martínez never charged him with any crime. Camacho’s expressed desire to reach a “free country” apparently satisfied the officials, and they allowed him to remain on the island.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In contrast, when the cooper José Bais and his daughter María Monserrate arrived at Yuma from Cabo Rojo in March of that same year, they made no mention of “freedom” or a “free country” in their meeting with Martínez and Soñé. Instead, Bais revealed that his wife had left their family, and that he had decided to move with his daughter to Santo Domingo so that they would not have to see her again.[[11]](#footnote-11) Furthermore, the pair attested that they had been born in the Canary Islands, making them constitutionally ineligible for Haitian citizenship.[[12]](#footnote-12) This case flummoxed Martínez. The judge penned a letter to a superior military commander deferring to his judgment in the matter.[[13]](#footnote-13) There is no trace of the final decision, but the fact that Martínez requested further instructions strikes a sharp contrast with his handling of cases of self-proclaimed “freedom seekers.”

The recurring phrase “in search of OR seeking freedom” apparently served as shorthand for officials across the island. During the 1826 dispute over the *Marie*, the secretary-general in Port-au-Prince had emphasized to the French consul that “the Government of Haiti can never consent to the extradition of those who…are able to enjoy the rights of Haitians when they come seeking freedom on the soil of Haiti.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Ten years later, judge Martínez would describe the trip of the five men named Álvarez from Puerto Rico in nearly identical terms, underlining that they had “come in search of their Freedom” on the island of Haiti.[[15]](#footnote-15) Such invocations were not only a summation of migrants’ aspirations. They also functioned as a formula for national and local authorities alike to designate situations in which new arrivals could be considered legally “Haitian;” that is, that they were henceforth Haitian nationals and future citizens of the republic for having reached Hispaniola. The process, whereby authorities translated migrants’ stated motives into proof that they met the minimum requirements for exercising the rights of Haitians, highlights the interplay between popular pressures and procedural concerns and constraints that conditioned the wider extension of citizenship during the unification.

It is important to signal that the terms “cultivator” and “domestic” also served a double purpose. When Martínez and Soñé described migrants as “cultivators,” for instance, they were both referring to an invalidated past property claim and attempting to fit the newcomers into a socio-legal hierarchy of laborers and property-holders. In 1826, the Boyer administration promulgated the Code Rural, a compilation of statutes from earlier post-emancipation legal regimes in colonial Saint-Domingue and independent Haiti. The code attempted to augment exports of cash crops by compelling propertyless citizens to cultivate the estates of wealthier landowners through the mechanism of indentured labor contracts. In this context, officials carefully tailored their written records of migrant interviews in order to reject the legal force of enslavement in foreign territories all while laying the foundations for new forms of unfree labor in unified Haiti.

I’d like to talk for a few minutes about how this seemingly obscure chapter in Caribbean history can serve as a starting point for teaching about the lived experiences of migration and the shifting meanings of citizenship. Instructors don’t necessarily have to spend much time on the immediate historical context of the early nineteenth century in order to give students the opportunity to engage with its lessons. One option is to develop an ethnography exercise based on the examples of the Higüey tribunal’s interviews with migrants. Instructors can ask students to conduct an interview of their own with someone they know (or someone on a pre-approved list compiled by the instructor) who has experienced migration of some form first-hand. Potential subjects need not be limited to those who have moved across national borders, but might include internal migrants (friends who have moved between cities, for instance, or relatives who traveled from the countryside to a larger town) as well.

Students should create a record of their interview by following a fixed template with a limit of 150 words, which will include only a few basic questions: Where did the subject come from? What motivated the subject to leave? What did the subject bring on the journey? At the end of this first stage, instructors can ask the students not only what they learned about the subject’s motivations, but also what challenges they faced in capturing and retelling the story. Finally, students can exchange their work and reconstruct the other migration histories based on the short transcripts prepared by their fellow classmates.

If instructors do wish to address the nineteenth-century Mona migrations, they might ask students (at the secondary level or higher) to read a selection of testimonies from Haitian Santo Domingo in combination with short excerpts from secondary works on Atlantic slavery or the Haitian Revolution. Students should draw on their own experiences conducting interviews to read the documents not only for their content, but also for the parts of the migrants’ stories that are left out. What do students think Haitian citizenship meant to migrants, local authorities, and national leaders? What relationship can they identify between Haitian citizenship and freedom from slavery? This lesson can also segue into a discussion about the contemporary crisis in the Dominican Republic, where authorities have endorsed a campaign of de-nationalizations and expulsions against Dominican citizens of perceived Haitian descent in the wake of a 2013 ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal. By focusing first on the ways in which migrants constructed and claimed Haitian citizenship in nineteenth-century Santo Domingo, students can begin to assess the long-term relationship between the circulation of individuals, the expansion or contraction of political rights, and broader ideas about belonging and national community across the Mona Passage and beyond.

1. Initially the revision of the 1806 constitution of the southern Republic of Haiti, the 1816 constitution came into force throughout Haiti after the collapse of Henri Christophe’s northern monarchy in 1820. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ada Ferrer, “Haiti, Free Soil, and Antislavery in the Revolutionary Atlantic,” *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 1 (2012), pp. 40-66; Ada Ferrer, *Freedom’s Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), esp. pp. 329-346; and Johnhenry González, “Defiant Haiti: Free-Soil Runaways, Ship Seizures, and the Politics of Diplomatic Non-Recognition in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Slavery & Abolition* 36, no. 1 (2015) pp. 124-135. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Consul-General Maler to Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 28 March 1826, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, La Courneuve, France (hereafter CAD-LC), Correspondance Consulaire et Commerciale, Port-au-Prince, vol. 1, Folio 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Tous les esprits se soulèvent ici à la seule pensée de l’extradition de ces fugitifs,” Ragueneau de la Chainaye to Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 15 April 1826, CAD-LC, Correspondance Consulaire et Commerciale, Les Cayes, vol. 1, Folio 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In 1818, for instance, Soñé traveled to the capital of Santo Domingo on behalf of Lucas Rijo, Baltazar Rijo, and Baltazar Martínez. There, he requested the return of “ten black slaves who were apprehended” in Higüey, “fugitives from the island of Puerto Rico.” The three slaveholders claimed that they had initially captured the maroons, and therefore maintained full ownership of the “property” in question. See Otorgamiento de poder, 31 March 1818, Archivo General de la Nación, República Dominicana (hereafter AGN-RD), Archivo Real de Higüey, Signatura 1700143, Legajo 7, 1795-1822, Expediente 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “…naturales de Malla guez y Añasco que salieron del Puerto de Mallaguez con una piragua con destino para esta ysla a buscar su libertad por ser ellos domestico.” Certificación de declaración, 12 April 1837, AGN-RD, Archivo Real de Higüey, Signatura 1700123, Legajo 18 Azul, 1838-1904, Expediente 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “que sarieron del puerto de Mallagues en una piragua de sinco remo Con destino a Santo Domingo a buscar su libertad Como pais libre,” Certificación de declaración, 13 April 1837, AGN-RD, Archivo Real de Higüey, Signatura 1700123, Legajo 18 Azul, 1838-1904, exp. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “q.e se embarcaron en el puerto de Añasco en un bote que ellos mismos se trajeron un bote nombrado el cabrito con destino a la ysla de S.to Domingo en busca de su libertad y q.e se desembarcaron en la costa de Macao de profesiones cultivadores estados soltero” Certificación de Declaración, 30 Julio 1836, AGN-RD, Archivo Real de Higüey, Signatura 1700123, Legajo 18 Azul, Expediente 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “…que la causa de haber venido fue por el mal trato y castigo que les davan sus amos a exepcion del cuarto que es hombre libre de su nacimiento ,” Certificación de Interrogatorios, 10 October 1839, AGN-RD, Archivo Real de Higüey, Signatura 1700128, Legajo 21, 1837-1839, Expediente 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “que ninguna causa mas que el que es venir para acá a un pais libre pues vino hasta sin pasaporte por que no podia sacarlo para acá.” Certificación de Declaracón, 13 June 1837, AGN-RD, Archivo Real de Higüey, Signatura 1700123, Legajo 18 Azul, 1838-1904, exp. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bote con destino a la isla de Santo Domingo, 14 March 1837, AGN-RD, Archivo Real de Higüey, Signatura 1700123, Legajo 18 Azul, exp. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. After unification, the Boyer administration carved out a new loophole allowing foreign-born inhabitants and white residents of Santo Domingo to take Haitian citizenship as long as they owned landed property and pledged allegiance to the republic. As new arrivals, Bais and Monserrate failed to meet the property-holding requirement. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Juan José Martínez to Bernard Philippe Alexis Carrié, 14 March 1837, Cuaderno copiador de correspondencias, March-April 1837, AGN-RD, Archivo Real de Higüey, Signatura 1700123, Legajo 21, 1837-1838, exp. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “Le Gouvernement d’Haïti ne peut, dans aucun cas, consentir à la remise de ceux qui, par leur naissance, sont habiles à jouir des droits d’haïtiens lorsqu’ils viennent chercher la liberté sur le sol d’Haïti.” Secretary-General Joseph Balthazar Inginac to Consul-General Maler, 7 April 1826, CAD-LC, Correspondance Consulaire et Commerciale, Port-au-Prince, vol. 1, Folio 144. Excerpts from this letter are also transcribed in Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d’Haïti, Tome 6: 1819-1826* (Port-au-Prince, Editions Henri Deschamps, 1988), p. 518. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Martínez underlined and capitalized this word in the original text. Juan José Martínez to Bernard Philippe Alexis Carrie, 18 April 1837, Cuaderno copiador de correspondencias, March-April 1837, AGN-RD, Archivo Real de Higüey, Signatura 1700128, Legajo 21, 1837-1839, exp. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)