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The persistence of Félicité Kina in the world of the Haitian Revolution

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The persistence of Félicité Kina in the world of the Haitian Revolution

Kinship, gender, and everyday resistance

Nathan H. Dize

Since the early 1990s, studies of the Haitian Revolution and its multiple theaters have shifted from the realm of silence to open and public discourse. However, the study of the 13-year period from August 1791, when plantations in the northern plain of the French colony of Saint-Domingue were set ablaze, until General Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared Haiti independent on January 1, 1804, has still led to challenges in assessing the lives and conditions of Black women, enslaved and free, in the world of the Haitian Revolution. Scholars have shown that it can be rewarding to examine the ways that women participated in and shaped the history of the revolution through the figure of Cécile Fatiman, the manbo or Vodou priestess who, along with Boukman Dutty, animated the Ceremony of Bwa Kayiman (Bois Caïman), which launched the 13-year revolution. Others, like Colin Dayan, have looked to Ezili, the Vodou lwa/goddess, as a narrative mode for telling women’s stories in Haiti. Furthermore, Haitian literary historian Marlene L. Daut asserts that women’s narratives in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Caribbean often slip from view, not only because women are either assumed to be actors only when it entails willing or forced sexual encounters but also because in the history of slavery “what often counts as rebellion is violent armed resistance.”

In her search for Jean-Louis le Baron de Vastey’s mother, Élisabeth “Mimi” Dumas, Daut demonstrates how difficult it can be to trace family histories during the Haitian Revolution, not only due to the colonial dispersal of archival documents but also as a result of the “tensions involved in representing one’s self as connected to enslavers in the post-slavery society” (Daut 2017, 31). Similarly, Lorelle Semley and Nicole Willson have shown how the stories of individual women – Anne and Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol and Catherine Flon, respectively – are able to provide critical perspectives on what constitutes resistance, mobility, and citizenship in a period where the political terrain on which they stood shifted daily. For instance, how might physical movement through the Atlantic world or the material histories of flag-making assist in the recovery of occluded narratives of women at the turn of the nineteenth century in the revolutionary Caribbean? To be sure, the veiled nature of Black women’s histories during and after the Haitian Revolution requires scholars to rethink how rebellion is constituted as well as the spaces in which history is said to be made.
For that reason, this chapter follows Stephanie M. H. Camp’s assertion that “spaces matter” when considering women’s acts of resistance to enslavement and dispossession and that in order to account for women’s stories, we must turn toward everyday forms of resistance. Camp argues that “turning our attention to the everyday, to private, concealed, and even intimate worlds, is essential to excavating bondwomen’s [and precariously free women of color’s] resistance to slavery because women’s history does not merely add to what we know; it changes what we know and how we know it.” This chapter draws on these methodological lessons from Camp, Daut, and others in order to tell the story of how Félicité Adelaïde Kina resisted the Napoleonic government’s attempts to tear apart her family by imprisoning her husband Jean and stepson Zamor in a medieval French prison high in the Jura mountains of France.

Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Félicité Kina in the world of the Haitian Revolution

Before the news of the toppling of the Bastille and the outbreak of the French Revolution reached Martinique, in August 1789, a rumor circulated that Louis XVI had abolished slavery in the colonies. As a result, groups of enslaved people gathered between two plantations near the town of Saint-Pierre, armed with the tools used to cut sugar cane, declaring their freedom. The colonial Governor Charles du Houx de Vioménil immediately ordered the colonial militia to disperse the crowd of rebels, capturing 200 maroons, punishing 23, and executing eight. While this revolt may seem minor, it provides a way of accounting for the revolutionary shifts that began to take place in Martinique as well as in Guadeloupe in the 1790s in the world of the Haitian Revolution.

After the Saint-Pierre revolt, colonial Martinique entered a period of “civil war” in 1790, when a polarized white enslaving class made of grand blancs and petit blancs (big whites and little...
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whites) vied for political power with the gens de couleur (free people of color) and enslaved Blacks seeking citizenship and legal rights. In June of that same year, 14 gens de couleur were killed, according to the Gazette de la Martinique, for “[aspiring] to the quality of citizens.”10 By March 1791, the French had sent troops to quiet the civil war in Martinique, but it was clear that any peacetime would be short-lived.

From 1792 to 1794, revolts broke out between white republican and royalist factions in Martinique and Guadeloupe as they also recruited enslaved and free people of color to their causes. As the cracks in the colonial order began to emerge, the French National Convention issued a decree on February 4, 1794, granting universal emancipation in French Guyana, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Saint-Domingue. Given the local instability in the Caribbean and the lack of metropolitan control from mainland France, the British seized on the chance to lay siege to both Martinique and Guadeloupe in February 1794 and later, Saint-Domingue in mid-September of the same year.11 The British not only relied on their own troops and reinforcements from their colonies of Dominica and Jamaica, but they also managed to recruit formerly enslaved soldiers like Jean Kina to lead enslaved battalions in fighting both royalist and republican French fighters. Jean Kina’s military career, as historian David Geggus carefully traces, led him to Fort-Royal, Martinique, where on October 28, 1800, he married the daughter of a free Black mason, a 14-year-old girl named Félicité Adélaïde Quimard.12 On May 20, 1802, two months after signing the Treaty of Amiens establishing peace between the British and the French, Napoleon Bonaparte re-instituted slavery in Guadeloupe, French Guyana, and Martinique.

In January 1803, the 16-year-old Félicité Adélaïde Kina traveled from Paris to Pontarlier to protest the imprisonment of her stepson Zamor and her husband Jean for allegedly inciting revolution in British-occupied Martinique two years earlier. All three had been deported from the Caribbean island to England in 1801 and then detained in France in December 1802. In the late stages of pregnancy, Félicité obtained a passport from Parisian officials to be reunited with Jean and Zamor in the town of Frambourg, the closest town to the Fort de Joux prison. Once she arrived, Félicité presented herself before the commander of the prison and refused to leave Frambourg or the adjacent city of Pontarlier until Jean and Zamor were released.13 Unsure how to receive Félicité Kina, the commander refused to allow her to see her husband and sent her back to town.

Due to her pregnancy, Félicité negotiated with a female innkeeper in Frambourg early during her stay and later in a hospice for women in Pontarlier, where she gave birth to her child.14 Eighteen months later, Jean and Zamor consented to serve the Napoleonic army in Italy as a condition of their release. Both men had fought in the insurgent army battling against the French in Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) as well as for the British in southern Saint-Domingue and Martinique, for which they won their freedom.15 Once again, the pair were forced to negotiate freedom from captivity with military service once their request to serve as carpenters in a French port city was denied. In order to keep their family and kinship ties together, Félicité, along with her infant, accompanied Jean and Zamor to the French town of Menton along the Italian border to prepare for another war.

Stories of Félicité and the Kina family tend to revolve around the military careers of Jean and Zamor, recounting their service with insurgent forces in Saint-Domingue and the British army in both Saint-Domingue and Martinique, their arrest and deportation to England and France, and their conscription into the battalions of Free People of Color sent to fight in Napoleon’s Italian campaigns in 1805 (Geggus 2002, 137–47). These tellings, however, overshadow Félicité’s story: the way that she navigated the Napoleonic legal system in order to keep the Kina family intact through imprisonment, dispossession, and liberation from captivity. So much of what
we know about the Kina family’s time in France from January 1803 until September 1804 is recorded in the carceral records of the Fort de Joux collected in the appendix of Alfred Nemours’ 1929 *Histoire de la captivité et de la mort de Toussaint Louverture*, the manuscript of which was typed by his wife “Madame Nemours.” Although Félicité was never imprisoned with Jean and Zamor, these documents provide a record of her intimate and political maneuverings within a racially codified, imperial French space. On the one hand, these 18 months represent a period of spatial stasis for Jean and Zamor, who despite sharing the same prison cell, remained inside the walls of the medieval fortress overlooking the Swiss border, interacting only with the fort’s commander and the maids who cleaned the cells and brought them sustenance. On the other hand, Félicité’s movement was physically unencumbered as she freely traveled from Paris to Frambourg to the prison, made routine trips between the Fort de Joux and the surrounding towns and villages, and gained access to philanthropic networks that assisted her with childbirth and charitably provided her with shelter and food.

Félicité Kina understood that in order to preserve her family ties, she had to follow Jean and Zamor to the Fort de Joux and physically present herself before the French government to protest their detention. She did just that. On New Year’s Day, 1803, Félicité obtained a passport to travel from Paris to the prison at Fort de Joux to reunite with her husband and stepson. On January 18, the prison’s commander wrote to his superiors in Paris that Félicité traveled the distance of over 400 kilometers pregnant and alone. Félicité informed the commander of the fort that she would not leave her husband and stepson, and she planned to give birth in a nearby town. Before leaving the prison, she demanded to see her husband. The commander refused, and Félicité left the fort to seek refuge at an inn, where she stayed on credit (Nemours 1929, 254). Félicité’s very presence was unprecedented, causing Amiot, the commander of the fort, to write to his superiors:

I kindly ask of you […] to inform me as to the conduct that I must keep with regards to this woman who has already asked me to see her husband (and) whom I have denied the right until I have received orders from you or the government [Je vous prie […] de me faire savoir la conduite que je dois tenir envers cette femme qui m’a déjà demandé à voir son mari que j’ai refusé jusqu’à ce que j’aie reçu des ordres de vous ou du gouvernement]  

(Nemours 1929, 254)

On February 3, Félicité returned to the prison to collect the family’s luggage, including a number of her dresses, since for some time she had only possessed the clothing on her back. In order to recuperate the family’s belongings, Félicité had to receive permission not only from Amiot but also from her incarcerated husband (Nemours 1929, 257). When they were arrested, the Kinas were in possession of three trunks, which contained clothing for all three, including a number of Félicité’s dresses, decorative headscarves, and other articles like a taffeta parasol. Records show that the contents of the other two trunks were either to be confiscated and used to clothe Jean and Zamor while they were imprisoned or to be sold by the Napoleonic state in order to subsidize the Kinas’ imprisonment (Nemours 1929, 254).

While the French government clearly could have confiscated and sold the contents of all three trunks to the profit of the state, Félicité’s presence and her pregnancy tested the limits of Napoleonic carceral protocols. The deputy prefect, Citoyen Micaut,17 of the department of Doubs, wrote to his superiors on her behalf:

I would be charmed if you were to inform me if it would be possible to return to the Kina woman the suitcase that contains merely the effects of her own personal use […] this
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A woman who has reached the term of her pregnancy has been welcomed with all possible humanity by the administrators of the hospice of Pontarlier… [Je serais charmé que vous voulussiez bien me faire connaître s’il conviendrait de remettre à la femme Kina la malle qui ne contient que des effets à son usage […] cette femme qui touche au terme de sa grossesse a été accueillie avec tout l’humanité possible par les administrateurs de l’hospice de Pontarlier.

(Nemours 1929, 257)

Numerous letters circulated between administrators, prison officials, and local judges to resolve Félicité’s request for her property. This not only helped her to maintain a partial yet indirect contact with her husband and stepson, but also successfully kept the Kina name in the front of local officials’ minds. While the records Nemours includes in the appendix to Histoire de la captivité et de la mort de Toussaint Louverture do not definitively show that Félicité was able to recover her or her family’s belongings, as a free woman of color, she was able to petition the government for a number of weeks on this very subject (Nemours 1929, 258). At the same time, Félicité’s inability to collect her belongings is entwined with the incarceration of her formerly enslaved next of kin, Jean and Zamor. As people with intimate ties to slavery, it appears that in mainland France, the Kinas would have to, as Saidiya Hartman writes, “[fashion] themselves again, making possibility out of dispossession.”

Petitions, escape, and conscription: the Kinas’ military path to freedom

According to the local government ministers, by March 25, Félicité had given birth to her child and had overstayed her welcome at Pontarlier’s hospice. The two ministers wrote that Félicité had to leave because she had a child and was without either a profession or financial means to pay for her room and board (Nemours 1929, 258). Félicité, nonetheless, remained. We can only speculate as to how Félicité managed to negotiate her stay at the hospice, because there is a gap in the archival record. The ministers’ letter concluded only that “[Félicité] stayed thanks to the gifts of a few well-meaning people” (Nemours 1929, 262). It appears that the midwives and the charity of women innkeepers in Pontarlier allowed Félicité to safely give birth to her child and remain close to Jean and Zamor until they were released from prison. After receiving authorization from the Napoleonic army, the four Kinas left for Menton on August 20, 1804.

However free Félicité’s movement was, the department of Doubs was still part of a Napoleonic France that had already re-instituted slavery in Martinique and Guadeloupe and that was still embroiled in an expeditionary invasion of Saint-Domingue to attempt to restore the colonial order and re-enslave or eradicate the Black insurgent soldiers of the Indigenous Army. A letter written by J. de Bry, the prefect of the department of Doubs, wrote that the Kinas were arrested by the English in Martinique for “having placed themselves at the helm of a negro insurrection that has broken out on this island [pour s’être mis à la tête d’une insurrection des nègres qui éclata dans cette ile]” and that once they had been transferred to the fort, they must not “be informed of the presence of Toussaint-Louverture [sic] [informés de la présence de Toussaint-Louverture]” (Nemours 1929, 250–1). By 1803, the palpable “fear of French negroes” in the Caribbean had indeed reached the depths of the mainland French administration, so much so that an interior department on the Franco-Swiss border was aware of Black rebellion and its challenges to the colonial status quo. In this space and in the eyes of the Napoleonic legal system, Jean and Zamor were seen as rebels and fugitive slaves whose precarious hold on freedom made them subject to labels marked by enslavement, such as “nègre,” meaning
simultaneously “negro” and enslaved person of African descent, in the legal records of the Fort de Joux. Despite the terminology “Men of color [Hommes de couleur]” used on many of the letterheads accounting for Jean and Zamor’s provisions, the government officials and various commanders of the Fort de Joux continued to refer to them as “nègre” in the body of their correspondence, implying that the Kinas’ hold on freedom was both tenuous and precarious in the eyes of the local French administration (Nemours 1929, 252–3).

After 19 months in French custody, in July 1804, Jean and Zamor Kina petitioned the local government seeking clemency for the rest of their prison sentence. Even though the Kinas seemed to have been imprisoned indefinitely, they offered via the prefect of the department of Doubs to serve the Napoleonic government as ship makers and carpenters in any of the ports of the French Republic (Nemours 1929, 261–2). These initial proposals were apparently rejected, because a document titled “Freeing of Kina, father and son [Mis en liberté de Kina père et fils]” states that the two men were freed exclusively to serve in the Free Colored battalions of the Napoleonic Army in the 1805 invasion of Italy (Nemours 1929, 262). The two were to report to the French town of Menton, on the Franco–Italian border along the Mediterranean Sea; however, it was not initially certain that Félicité could follow the two men to war. Set to depart for Menton at the end of August 1804, Félicité was told that she must produce the passport that had enabled her legal passage from Paris to the Fort de Joux nearly two years prior. At some point, however, Félicité had lost the passport and declared it missing, requiring the French government to inquire with the Police prefecture in Paris to validate her story (Nemours 1929, 264).

At this point, the prefect and deputy prefect of Doubs were quite familiar with the Kinas’ case and seemed to be intent on helping to keep the Kina family together, especially since Félicité had so frequently interfaced with local officials in Doubs, Pontarlier, and at the Fort de Joux. By the time the Kinas finally left the Fort de Joux for Menton, the prefect of Doubs managed to outfit the family with a stagecoach and a pension for Félicité and her child of 15 centimes per league traveled due to French law dating back to June 13, 1790 (Nemours 1929, 265–6). From the moment Félicité Kina arrived in Pontarlier, pregnant with child, to the moment she left with Jean, Zamor, and her newborn child, she managed to navigate a racially hostile space and government that sought to separate her from the only family she had; her persistence and

Figure 13.2 Letter head from Alfred Nemours’s documentary appendix in Histoire de la mort et de la captivité de Toussaint Louverture, where Jean and Zamor Kina are referred to as “Hommes de couleur.” (Image credit: Bibliothèque Numérique Caraïbe, Amazonie, Plateau des Guyanes, Public Domain)
pursuit of legal action must be considered as acts of resistance that ultimately resulted in the reunion of the Kina family.

In perhaps the most comprehensive English-language narrative of the life of Jean Kina, David Geggus recounts Jean’s heroic journey from an enslaved soldier in the southern province of Saint-Domingue to a French prisoner for presumably spreading insurrection in the neighboring French colony of Martinique. While Geggus mentions Félicité Kina, he grants her little subjectivity apart from her role as wife and mother. Sociologist of slavery Stéphanie Mulot refers to this process as a political and scientific discourse in which “the bases of colonial domination are reinforced by their relationship to sexual domination.” In short, to account for the stories of free and enslaved women of color is to understand the way that sex and gender shape colonization, enslavement, and other forms of dispossession. To tell these stories, we must engage with the full spectrum of personal and political acts that make up women’s lives. Unlike her husband and her stepson, Félicité Kina did not have a military career; however, her actions while Jean and Zamor were imprisoned acutely constituted acts of resistance. Scholars also overlook Félicité’s time in France because it coincided with the imprisonment of one of the most famous leaders of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture, who died in a French prison only three months after Félicité arrived to protest her own family’s captivity.

Conclusion: Félicité Kina and Black women’s military lives in Napoleonic France

When Félicité married Jean Kina in October 1800, she became a military wife. As Jean’s wife, Félicité was subject to the movement and maneuverings of her husband in addition to the manipulation of whichever military corps he joined. In marrying Jean, Félicité made the transition from a civilian life to a military one. She was now subject to the same laws and constraints as Jean, including arrest and his precarious hold on freedom as a formerly enslaved Black man. In looking at her travels from Fort-Royal to London and from Paris to Pontarlier, it is clear that Félicité’s political and legal acumen was sharp. She understood how to maneuver the French legal system, locate her kin, and navigate the networks of white women in the villages surrounding the Fort de Joux prison in order to successfully give birth and remain in proximity to her imprisoned husband and stepson. Félicité also managed, by her presence alone, to secure a pension and subsidized travel for the entire family from Pontarlier to their new military training post along the Côte d’Azur in Menton, France. Félicité’s story provides a salient example of how militarization impacted Black families within the wider frame of the Haitian Revolution and how Black women navigated their position as military wives, “straddling,” as Cynthia Enloe argues, “military and civilian positions.”

Months before the Kinas were transferred to French custody, Napoleon Bonaparte’s government re-instituted slavery in Martinique. Growing up in the colony, this was a legal reality that Félicité had navigated for the majority of her life prior to her marriage to Jean. Before, as a girl of color in Martinique, she was subject to the legal whims of a militarized French colony that had been living under war-like conditions in the revolutionary Caribbean for nearly 10 years. After her marriage to Jean, she was subject to the whims of the British army and later the French Imperial army as her mobility was conscripted not only to Jean but to the military. Félicité’s story allows us to see what Enloe characterizes as “the military’s intimate relationship with the state – with the central government and the laws and ideologies which sustain its authority,” especially as it pertains to Black soldiers and their families in the First French Empire (Enloe 1983, 11). To some degree, Félicité was contained behind a “double-locking door” of Black civilian life in a French slave society and the military life in the First Empire, but her story also

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shows how a careful navigation of French laws and ideologies surrounding the military family enabled the Kinas to remain united in the face of enslavement and/or coerced military conscription (Enloe 1983, 15).

In looking closer at the Black military family in the era of the Haitian Revolution, in particular, we might also turn to stories of failed or denied reunification – like Toussaint Louverture’s family, who were interned and dispersed throughout France before and after Toussaint’s death in April 1803 – for what they might say about the differing experiences between Black military leadership and the rank and file. It is clear that Toussaint Louverture’s status as a general in the French army resulted in a heightened profile for his wife, Suzanne, and their children, causing them to be placed under arrest and to experience imprisonment. But was Félicité’s mobility, in part, a result of Jean’s subaltern status within the military? Did other Black military families face similar experiences? In the end, Félicité’s story reveals the importance of examining the Black military family in the Age of Revolutions, because within these family experiences, we gain a fuller understanding of the contours of Black citizenship as well as the (un)willing participation in military life.

Notes

1 Versions of this chapter have appeared on Nursing Clio, a collaborative, peer-reviewed blog focusing on the history of gender and medicine, as well as in the Haitian History Journal. Nathan would like to thank these venues for the permission to reprint portions of this chapter. For the original post, see Nathan H. Dize, “The Persistence of Félicité Kina: Kinship, Gender, and Everyday Resistance,” Blog. Nursing Clio, July 26, 2018. https://nursingclio.org/2018/07/26/the-persistence-of-felicite-kina-kinship-gender-and-everyday-resistance/.

2 In his foundational study, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, Michel-Rolph Trouillot articulates how the Haitian Revolution remained “unthinkable” to U.S. and European intellectuals during and after the revolution, because it challenged the very ontological and political roots of the Enlightenment.


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11 For a survey of the impact of these rebellions and political tensions, see Dubois, 124–71.


14 This story is adapted from the narrative woven by the Haitian historian Alfred Nemours and the archival documents he collected and published in Alfred Nemours, *Histoire de la captivité et de la mort de Toussaint Louverture : Notre pèlerinage au Fort de Joux* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1929).


16 Alfred Nemours, a Haitian diplomat and retired general, was the first to provide evidentiary proof of how the Napoleonic regime denied Toussaint Louverture the resources he needed to survive in the Fort de Joux prison, amounting to a torturous execution over the course of eight months from August 1802 until his death on April 7, 1803. See also Gutarra, Dannelle, “Toussaint Louverture’s Captivity at Fort de Joux,” *Journal of Caribbean History* 49, no. 2 (2015): 145–59.

17 This official’s name is also occasionally spelled “Micaux” as well as “Micaud” in Nemours’ appendix.

18 A subsequent letter reiterating Félicité Kina’s request was sent to the Grand Judge in Pontarlier.


21 Nemours acknowledges the women and men who aided Félicité Kina only by profession, like the midwife and male functionary who helped process her passport documents.


