Before Malcolm X, Dessalines: a 'French' tradition of black Atlantic radicalism

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Abstract

This article explores the anticolonial and postcolonial thought of Haitian revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Dessalines, like Malcolm X, whom Cornel West calls a 'prophet of Black rage', is part of a black Atlantic radical tradition. Dessalines's secretary Louis-Félix Boisrond Tonnerre has often been viewed as the 'author' of some of Dessalines' documents, including the Haitian Declaration of Independence, but I argue that Dessalines' voice remains distinctive and that he and his secretaries should be viewed as authorial teams. Dessalines' vision is syncretic, incorporating African diasporan views of the spiritual world and nature into his decisively anticolonial political ideology. These texts challenge the anglophone identity of the black Atlantic, and invite reconsideration of the diverse 'beginnings' of the postcolonial.

Keywords

black Atlantic
Bois Caïman
decolonization
Jean-Jacques
Dessalines
journalism
manifesto
postcolonial theory
the Haitian Revolution

Résumé

La pensée anticoloniale et postcoloniale de Jean-Jacques Dessalines, chef de la Révolution haïtienne et premier empereur d'Haïti, est considérée ici vis-à-vis de la tradition de l'Atlantique noir formulée par Gilroy, et surtout par rapport à Malcolm X en tant que 'prophète colérique' de l'Atlantique noir. Malgré le statut 'd'auteur' de la déclaration de l'indépendance haïtienne souvent conféré au secrétaire Boisrond Tonnerre, la pluralité des documents produits par Dessalines en conjonction avec plusieurs secrétaires laissent entendre une voix distincte. L'idéologie anticoloniale de Dessalines incorpore de façon syncrétique des traces d'interprétations africaines du monde spirituel et de la nature. Ces proclamations et manifestes mettent en question l'identité anglophone de l'Atlantique noir et nous invitent à interroger les diverses 'commencements' du postcolonial.

Nous avons osé être libres sans l'être, par nous-mêmes et pour nous-mêmes.

– Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Declaration of Independence, 1 January 1804

[...] which powers never concede to people like us who are the authors of their own liberty [...].

– Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Acceptance of his nomination as Emperor, 15 February 1804

Postcolonial history in theory and postcolonial theory in history

Since the eclipse of a certain form of late twentieth-century postcolonial theory in which, as Frederick Cooper summarizes, there was at times a 'double occlusion' resulting from 'turning the centuries of European

1. Frederick Cooper, 'Postcolonial Studies and the Study of History', in Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton and Jed Esty (eds), *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005, p. 403.
2. *ibid.*, p. 401.
3. Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP, 2006, p. 238. The essay 'Notes on the "Postcolonial"' was initially published in *Social Text*, 31–32 (Spring 1992), pp. 99–113.
4. *ibid.*, p. 238.
5. *ibid.*, p. 233.
6. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 1.
7. *ibid.*, p. 10.

colonization overseas into a critique of the Enlightenment, democracy, or modernity',¹ there have been numerous reconsiderations of the relationship of postcolonialism to history. For Cooper, such reconsiderations have the potential to reveal both 'the specificity of colonial situations' and 'the importance of struggles in colonies, in metropolises, and between the two'.² For Ella Shohat, who queried 'When, exactly, does the "postcolonial" begin?'³ in 1992, exploration of these temporal parameters highlights not only the forgotten continuity of postcolonial and Third World studies, it also prompts further productive questions of the politics of any single historical framework: 'Which region is privileged in such a beginning? What are the relationships between these diverse beginnings?'⁴ The insufficiently theorized beginnings of the postcolonial may conceal insights, Shohat suggests, into why the notion of the postcolonial 'does not lend itself to geopolitical critique'⁵ in the context of contemporary conflicts such as the Gulf War and the Iraq War. In this article, I will be engaging not so much with how to theorize postcolonial history, as with how to situate postcolonial theory in history – how to expand the domain of postcolonial theory and its twentieth-century black Atlantic canon, which includes Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, to include earlier 'theorists' from an earlier 'beginning' of the postcolonial. The Haitian revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines, I will propose, left textual traces of anticolonial philosophy not just in early nineteenth-century post-revolutionary practice, but 'in theory'. These 'theoretical' antecedents help to articulate the politics of the postcolonial, and they also expand the conventional chronological and linguistic boundaries of black Atlantic radicalism.

Paul Gilroy's paradigm of the black Atlantic was inspired by the failure of nationalist paradigms when 'confronted by the intercultural and transnational formation' of black participation in 'abstract modernity'.⁶ Curiously, however, the construct of the black Atlantic remains documented predominantly with anglophone materials, particularly with regard to pre-twentieth century modernity. Since languages tend to function as extensions of national(ist) paradigms, this creates an implicit national and imperial frame for an explicitly transnational concept. 'England and Englishness'⁷ are deconstructed by black history in Gilroy's research, but 'English' – in the Caribbean, the United States, Africa and Britain – remains uncontested as the language in which black history is represented. From Crispus Attucks to Olaudah Equiano, Denmark Vesey to William Cuffay, Robert Wedderburn to Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey to Claude McKay and Teddy Riley to Funki Dreds, the black Atlantic is anglophone, even when the English in question is a second language. The travels or exile of Martin Delaney, W.E.B. DuBois, Nella Larsen, Richard Wright and Quincy Jones in Liberia, Haiti, Denmark, Paris and Sweden also reach us in English form. Gilroy's work frequently refers to black Atlantic writings 'about' the Haitian Revolution, but not 'from' the Haitian Revolution. This monolingual casting of the transnational research net excludes most direct representations of the Haitian Revolution, which was by any measure a major black Atlantic contribution to abstract modernity.

It also overlooks the dimension of nearly simultaneous anglophone translation of important Haitian revolutionary texts, since major proclamations frequently were published in English in US media at close to the

time of their original composition, as part of the Haitian leadership's appeal to a public beyond the (post) metropole. For example, one of Dessalines' secretaries, B. Aimé, appealed in 1803 to the editor of *Poulson's Daily Advertiser* to publish a proclamation on behalf of the newly freed inhabitants of Saint-Domingue, in the spirit of (transnational) Republican impartiality:

Monsieur,
 Vous êtes invité, au nom des hommes libres de St-Domingue, et plus encore au nom de l'impartialité qui doit caractériser tout bon républicain, d'insérer dans votre prochain numéro la proclamation incluse. Vous obligerez infiniment
 Votre très humble
 B. Aimé
 Secrétaire⁸

8. Letter cited by H. Pauléus Sannon in *Histoire de Toussaint Louverture*, 3 vols., Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie A. A. Héreaux, 1920, vol. 1, p. 203.
9. Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: North Carolina University Press, 2004, p. 3.

Without taking into account Haitian revolutionary 'theorizations' of an early nineteenth-century 'beginning' of the postcolonial, it is difficult to fully consider Laurent Dubois' provocative recontextualization of the Enlightenment as an ideology both illuminated and refashioned by slaves or former slaves and their political battles in the Revolutionary Caribbean.

The enslaved revolutionaries challenged the racialized colonial system of the day, deploying the language of republican rights and the promise of individual liberty against a social order based on the denial of their humanity. In winning back the natural rights the Enlightenment claimed as the birthright to all people, however, the formerly enslaved laid bare a profound tension within the ideology of rights they had made their own.⁹

Since postcolonial theory originally emerged partly as a contestation of Enlightenment humanism as a paradoxical frame for imperialist modernity, it is especially congruent with the ongoing development of postcolonial studies to integrate voices from a late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century interrogation of the politics of universalism.

The limited universalism of the French Revolutionary 'Rights of Man' was challenged in the Haitian Revolution. In 1804, French colonial power in Saint-Domingue was overthrown not by colonists, as in the American Revolution, or by the colonized, as in Algeria, but by the slaves of colonists.

Yet the most celebrated Haitian revolutionary leader, Toussaint Louverture, viewed the colony as indissociable from republic, and revolution, whether in France or Saint-Domingue, as a republican product. Or at least, historians such as C.L.R. James have gathered as much from the political values that he reflected back to the French. There is considerable evidence to temper this non-independence model, including Toussaint's practical inability to tolerate the colonial authorities sent to Revolutionary Saint-Domingue, from the abolitionist Léger-Félicité Sonthonax to the racist Count of Hédouville, and also his tacit encouragement of anglophone powers in their conviction that he was simply awaiting the right moment to declare independence from France. Nevertheless, in his own writings, Toussaint had not fundamentally targeted the colony as an unacceptable political and economic organization the way that he had targeted slavery as an

10. Michel-Rolphe Trouillot, 'The Three Faces of Sans Souci', *Silencing the Past*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, pp. 31–69.
11. The *Journal des Débats* published what it called 'l'extrait d'une proclamation qui fut publiée par Dessalines, le 28 avril dernier', on 7 August 1804. The *Journal* did not specify the source of the original French publication, and the extract given is derived from an American newspaper, documented only with the following reference: 'Nouvelles étrangères, Etats-Unis d'Amérique, New York [sic] 18 juin.' The French version is somewhat abbreviated in comparison with American versions.
12. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Declaration of Independence, 1 janvier 1804, Archives nationales, AF III 210. The Archives nationales manuscript of the declaration differs in small ways from the conventionally cited version, from Thomas Madiou's *Histoire d'Haïti*.
13. Benjamin Constant, *Journaux intimes*, A Roulin and C. Roth (eds), Paris: Gallimard, 1952, p. 123.
14. Cornel West, 'Malcolm X and Black Rage', in Joe Wood (ed.), *Malcolm X in Our Own Image*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992, p. 48.

unacceptable practice. Toussaint's fellow general Henri Christophe became known under his own later rule for his long-standing competitive parody of the French monarchy, replete with dukes and duchesses of Lemonade and Marmelade, so he seems even less likely to serve as a catalyst for a general epistemological challenge to colonialism. Alexandre Petion, who ruled in the South while Christophe ruled in the North, initially had participated in the Napoleonic military expedition 'against' the blacks, and only defected from the colonial army after the kidnapping of Toussaint, so he is a similarly unlikely source of general anticolonial ideology. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in *Silencing the Past*, draws our attention to the importance of maroon and *bossale* leaders of pre-Independence insurrections, who may have been more radical in their challenges to colonialism than the Haitian generals and leaders affiliated with the French military, but they left virtually no textual traces.¹⁰

Unlike other Haitian revolutionary leaders, Dessalines, the first ruler of Independent Hayti, from 1804 to his assassination in 1806, explicitly contextualized himself as radically anticolonial. In his famous 'I have avenged America' manifesto, dated 28 April 1804, and first published in English in the United States in June of 1804, prior to being published in France on 7 August 1804,¹¹ Dessalines stated:

A little unlike him who has preceded me, the ex-general Toussaint Louverture, I have been faithful to the promise which I made to you when I took up arms against tyranny, and whilst the last spark of life remains in me I shall keep my oath. *Never again shall a colonist or a European set his foot upon this territory with the title of master or proprietor.* [original emphasis]

New York Commercial Advertiser, 4 June 1804

He went on to contextualize this anticolonial axiom, this rejection not just of slavery but of colonial or European mastery and ownership, as 'the fundamental basis of our constitution'. In the Declaration of Independence, Dessalines had cautioned that it was not enough to have expelled the factions 'qui se jouaient tour à tour du fantôme [sic] de liberté que la France exposait à vos yeux, il faut par un dernier acte d'autorité nationale, assurer à jamais l'empire de la liberté [...]'.¹² The ghostly liberty of the French Revolution would be replaced by liberty's anticolonial empire in Haiti.

Dessalines' vivid anticolonial poetics would inspire horror in the minds of many western observers. The French political theorist Benjamin Constant, after reading the proclamation cited above, reflected, 'Il y a quelque chose de sauvage dans ce style nègre, qui saisit d'une particulière terreur nous autres, accoutumés aux formes et à l'hypocrisie de l'état social.'¹³ In many ways, Dessalines served as an early, non-anglophone, 'prophet of black rage', to quote Cornel West in his portrait of Malcolm X: 'His profound commitment to black humanity at any cost and his tremendous courage to accent the hypocrisy of American society made Malcolm X the prophet of black rage – then and now.'¹⁴

The ex-slave leader as political 'author'

Can we really use the illiterate Dessalines' proclamations and correspondence as bona fide texts attesting to a radical black Atlantic intellectual tradition?

What about the frequently cited caveat that Dessalines' transcribed proclamations, notably the Declaration of Independence, were actually written by his secretary, Louis-Félix Boisrond Tonnerre?

Texts mediated by dictation, transcription, editing and translation, are endemic to the field of political writings, as well as to specifically black Atlantic genres such as the slave narrative. Textual mediation stands out as an obvious factor in relation to documents produced by former slaves, who were often either illiterate or partly and idiosyncratically literate, like Toussaint Louverture.¹⁵ Yet we do not dismiss correspondence by Napoleon Bonaparte or General Leclerc because it was transcribed by secretaries. I will show in the textual analyses that follow that there are particular reasons to confirm the readability of Dessalines' authorial voice in his Independence documents. His proclamations were transcribed not only by Boisrond Tonnerre, but also by Juste Chanlatte and other anonymous secretaries. If their role was predominant, one might expect to see several distinct conceptual and rhetorical faces of the writings attributed to Dessalines. Yet all the documents in which Dessalines theorizes Haitian freedom and political autonomy share a clear pattern of ferociously anti-colonial position statements and an exhortatory rhetoric divided between heroic exultation and bitterly vengeful warnings. Symbolism concerning nature and magical powers, and a concern with the fate of slave communities in other colonies, are also prominent.

Dessalines' early proclamations are such remarkable speech acts that they prod us to recognize that even if Boisrond Tonnerre and Chanlatte were on some level co-authors, there is no reason to devalorize hybrid authorial productivity between an illiterate ex-slave leader and other more privileged blacks who had more access to education and were also important political figures. Boisrond Tonnerre was a black Atlantic author of very significant merit in his own right, and although his secretarial role should not disqualify Dessalines as a political voice, it should draw attention to his own literary legacies. Before his assassination at an early age in 1806, Boisrond Tonnerre wrote a memoir that also serves as a history of the Haitian Revolution.¹⁶ Like Toussaint Louverture's memoir, this text constitutes an urgent reclamation of narrative political power and identity. Boisrond Tonnerre, like Dessalines, was a radical voice. Chanlatte was an author of the 1824 *Histoire de la Catastrophe de Saint-Domingue*,¹⁷ as well as of the first Creole play of the Independence era.¹⁸ The fact that the voices of general and secretaries are forever interwoven in Independence documents does not lessen their importance. In effect, Dessalines' textual legacy serves as a reminder that western categories of authorship exclude slaves by default. The cult of original authorial voice, deployed through the individual's published writing, leaves little room to recognize the mediated speech acts of those who have been barred from education in the segregated worlds of 'creolization', in which, as Césaire notes in *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*, a 'peuple de transplantés' must 'naître à lui-même'.¹⁹

The politics of the proclamation

Dessalines' texts are characterized by an acute awareness of the psychological impact and manipulative potential of political proclamations; their

15. On Toussaint Louverture's writing and literacy, see Deborah Jensen, 'Toussaint Louverture, Spin Doctor? Launching the Haitian Revolution in the French Media', in Doris Garraway (ed.), *Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, Charlottesville, VA: Virginia University Press, forthcoming 2008.
16. See Boisrond Tonnerre, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire d'Haïti*, Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Editions Fardin, 1852.
17. See Juste Chanlatte et Bouvet de Cresset, *Histoire de la catastrophe de Saint-Domingue*, Paris: Librairie de Peytieux, 1824.
18. See Juste Chanlatte *L'Entrée du roi en sa capitale* is anthologized in Jean-Claude Bajeux, *Mosochwazi pawòl ki ekri an kreyòl ayisyen (Anthologie de la littérature créole haïtienne)*, Port-au-Prince, Haïti: Editions Antilia, 1999.
19. Aimé Césaire, *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963, p. 23.

20. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, 'Proclamation ou sommation faite au Général qui commandait à Santo Domingo,' 8 février 1804, copied in the *Notes historiques de Moreau de Saint-Méry*, Archives d'Outremer, F3, vol. 141, pp. 549–53.

21. M.-E. Descourtilz, *Voyages d'un naturaliste à Saint-Domingue*, 3 vols., Paris: Dufart, 1809, vol. 3, p. 281.

power is a frequent subject of his own proclamations. In the Declaration of Independence, Dessalines condemns 'notre crédulité et notre indulgence, vaincu non par les armées françaises, mais par la piteuse éloquence des proclamations de leurs agents'. In other documents, Dessalines shows a similar preoccupation with the effects of French writings on the colonized. In a 8 May 1804 proclamation issued to the inhabitants of neighbouring Santo Domingo (the Dominican Republic), which he hoped to govern, Dessalines, working with the Secretary-General Chanlatte, first warned against 'seduction' by the writings of French officers who were attempting to gain a foothold there:

Déjà je m'applaudissais du succès de mes soins, qui ne tendaient qu'à prévenir l'effusion du sang; mais un prêtre fanatique n'avait pas encore soufflé dans votre âme la rage qui le domine; mais l'insensé Ferrand n'avait pas encore distillé parmi vous les poisons du mensonge et de la calomnie. Des écrits enfantés par le désespoir et la faiblesse ont circulé aussi plusieurs d'entre vous, séduits par des insinuations perfides, briguant l'amitié et la protection des français.²⁰

He was likewise conscious of the potency of his own political image, and relished the horror he inspired in proponents of colonialism. In the Declaration of Independence, he urged, 'Rappelle-toi [...] que mon nom est devenu en horreur à tous les peuples qui veulent l'esclavage, et que les despotes et les tyrans ne le prononceront qu'en maudissant le jour qui m'a vu naître.'

An additional dimension of Dessalines' strong interest in semiotic politics was the issue of the colonial language, French, versus Creole, which, although spoken by the colonists also, nevertheless was strongly identified as the slaves' own 'jargon'. The French naturalist Michel-Etienne Descourtilz, who observed Dessalines during his time as a political prisoner of the Haitian army, recorded that he foreswore the use of French after Napoleon's armies had landed in 1802, in a conscious appropriation of the local discourse and a rejection of colonial semiotics:

Dessalines, commençant à se prononcer ouvertement contre l'armée expéditionnaire, évitoit, détestoit jusqu'à leur idiome; c'est pourquoi il reprit très-sévèrement le fils d'un propriétaire des Gonaïves, qui, créole de Saint-Domingue, s'avisait de lui parler en français: '*Tiembé langue à vous, lui dit-il en le toisant avec dédain, pourquoi chercher tienn' les autr'*'?²¹

Dessalines' 'authorial' role thus extends beyond his own speech acts, to his political critique and manipulation of the very stakes of authorship.

The African Emperor in the postcolonial New World

We learn from Dessalines' acceptance of his nomination as Emperor, dated February of 1804, that he viewed himself as a warrior, and would remain identified as a general even in his new, ostensibly more prestigious, role as Emperor. This proclamation, signed by Dessalines, Governor General, and by the Adjutant General Boisrond Tonnerre, was widely published in English translation in the United States, although not until

October and November of 1804, almost six months after the apparent date of the original proclamation:

I am a soldier. War has ever been my portion; and as long as the cruelty, the barbarity, and the avarice of our enemies, bring them to our shores, I will justify your choice, and combating at your head, I shall prove that the title of your general will ever be honorable to me.

Daily Advertiser, 11 October 1804

Napoleon's imperial nomination had occurred during a special session of the Tribunat on 1 May, at which Citizen Curée had introduced a motion '1) que le Gouvernement de la République soit confié à un Empereur; [et] 2) que l'Empire soit héréditaire dans la famille de Napoléon Bonaparte, actuellement Premier Consul.'²² The February 15 date of Dessalines' acceptance thus seems to indicate that his own nomination as Emperor preceded that of Napoleon. But the almost binaristic contrast of style and content between the two immediately begs the question of which nomination and acceptance actually responded to and critiqued the terms of the other. Although Curée's motion, and the rapturous accord of all members of the Tribunat but the beleaguered Lazare Carnot, was delivered in heroic terms ('Charlemagne avait gouverné la France en homme qui était supérieur de beaucoup à son siècle' [*Moniteur universel* 11 floréal an 12]), the final French confirmation was dry, pompous and legalistic. It stressed that the 'imperial dignity' would be hereditary, passing on from male to male by primogeniture among Napoleon's children or those of his brothers. It stipulated details ranging from the role of the senate under the Empire to the residences of the Emperor and the salary percentages of a hypothetical future 'minor Emperor' and Regent.²³

By contrast, Dessalines' acceptance speech is dramatic and personal. Not only is it focused on his warrior status, it has a strongly non-western tone. Hereditary transmission of imperial status is the first target of what appear to be his revisions of the structures of empire. And in fact, the nineteenth-century Haitian historian Thomas Madiou confirms that Dessalines' tone of critique was just that: his nomination and acceptance were backdated to January and February of 1804, but they were actually composed in August, after the Haitians had received news of the new French Empire.²⁴ This is why the nomination and acceptance did not appear in American newspapers until early October. This manipulative attempt simultaneously to compete with critique French power does not reduce the interest of the Haitian identification, however; on the contrary, it shows Dessalines' conscious differentiation of his own practices and beliefs from those of the European metropole he had defeated. Haitian emperors have been belittled as mimic emperors, but Dessalines was also a critic emperor.

Dessalines speaks in the acceptance of never allowing his sword to 'sleep' in order to pass on his own valour to the national family of warriors:

The supreme rank to which you elevate me tells me that I am become [sic] the father of my fellow citizens, of whom I was the defender; but the father of

22. Imperial nomination of Napoleon Bonaparte, *Moniteur universel*, 1 May 1804 (11 floréal, an 12 de la République).
23. The report of the 'Organic Senatus Consultum' of Floreal, year 12, stated in Article 1 that 'The government of the republic shall be entrusted to an emperor, who assumes the title of emperor of the French.' *The Daily Advertiser*, 26 July 1804.
24. Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haïti*, Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Imprimerie de Jh. Courtois, 1849, vol. 3, p. 170.

a family of warriors never suffers the sword to sleep if he wishes to transmit his valor to his descendants, to inure them to battles.

Although the power of his sword can be magically transmitted, and will guarantee the safety of his soldiers, Dessalines specifically renounces heredity ('ancestry') in the transmission of imperial power:

I renounce, yes, I formally renounce, the unjust custom of transmitting my power to my family. I shall never respect ancestry, but when the talents requisite for a good governor are united in the subject. Frequently the head which is fired by the burning ardor of youth, contributes more effectually to the happiness of his country than the cool experience of age, which temporizes at the moment when temerity alone should govern.

This non-dynastic transmission of power reflects Dessalines' belief that authority is earned through prowess and the inspired military exhibition of paternal concern for the national family. For Dessalines, authority is also compensated in full by this national military/spiritual bond. In the Declaration of Independence, he noted that he had never sought any material gains from his leadership role, but considered himself paid in full by the Haitians' hard-earned freedom: 'Je ne suis riche que de ta liberté.'

Dessalines' distrust of the moderating influence of age is a sign of his belief in the necessity of not just one revolution, but revolutions in the plural: 'If the sober passions make common men, half measures will arrest the rapid march of revolutions.' Revolution was an ongoing process, and leaders were necessarily revolutionaries. There were no halfway revolutions for Dessalines, in theory or in practice.

Dessalines showed a preoccupation with magical projections of power closely related to the glory of the warrior. There are frequent references to 'idols' and 'relics' in proclamations he issued through both Boisrond Tonnerre and Chanlatte. On first glance, in these references Dessalines appears to be using the western critique of religious or magical materialism in the same sense, but against the accuser. On closer examination, it becomes apparent that he is critiquing the power of western idols without renouncing other magical practices and powers. Thus in his acceptance of the imperial nomination, he attacks the French use of 'idols' and 'relics', and derides their power. The Africans, he contends, had been enslaved as a 'sacrifice' to the French 'idol' of prejudice. The Haitians had smashed this idol through their own autonomous agency, which was, he implies, the only way abolition could actually overthrow the western beliefs of which the institution of slavery was a projection: 'We are men who have founded our Independence to the prejudice of that consideration which powers never concede to people who like us are the authors of their own liberty', he states. '[We] have no occasion to beg for foreign assistance to break the idol to which we were sacrificed. That idol, like Saturn, devoured its children, and we have trampled it under our feet.' This passage, published in 1804, quite precisely foreshadows the terms of Hegel's assertion that freedom from bondage could not come in the form of a gift. Dessalines implies that slavery was only a concrete 'idol' of a larger sacralized field of western prejudices and hierarchical values.

A similar critique of French magical projections of power appears in Dessalines' 8 February 1804 proclamation, composed with Chanlatte, to the inhabitants of Santo Domingo. Napoleon, hoping to repossess Santo Domingo as a base from which to contest the Haitian decolonization, had installed General Ferrand as governor of Santo Domingo in January 1804. Ferrand would coordinate a French naval presence and try to ward off the incursions of the Haitians. (In an illustration of the French determination to control Santo Domingo, Napoleon instructed Vice-Admiral Decrès on 1 September 1805 to send a ship from Martinique that would rendezvous with two other ships off of Santo-Domingo, 'où ils prendront des ordres du général Ferrand, pour croiser autour de la colonie et en imposer aux bâtiments qu'armeraient les noirs et aux autres bâtiments qui croiseraient avec les rebelles.'²⁵) Dessalines was determined to overthrow French control of Santo Domingo, and in his proclamation he mocked the Dominicans' magical thinking with regard to the powers of the French:

Vous sauvera-t-il ce ministre imaginaire lorsque le fer et la flamme à la main je vous poursuivrai jusque dans vos derniers retranchemens ? Eh ! Sans doute ses pensées, ses grimaces, ses reliques ne pourront m'arrêter dans ma course. Vous préservera-t-il de ma juste colère ?²⁶

Dessalines had come to count the citizens of Santo Domingo among his 'children', but he warned them that if they aligned themselves with the relics and magical thinking of the French, his vengeance would be as drastic and powerful as that of nature's offended boundaries:

Qu'ils apprennent donc que je suis prêt, que la foudre va tomber sur leurs têtes : qu'ils sachent que mes soldats impatients n'attendent qu'un signal pour aller reconquérir les limites que la nature et les éléments nous ont assignés. Encore quelques instans et j'écrase les débris des français sous le poids de ma puissance.

Another, and decisive, representation of Dessalines' belief in the superior powers of his own righteous vengeance occurs in the English version of the 'I have avenged America' proclamation. Dessalines generally was attentive to established political metaphors, but rather than reiterating them, he recast them so that they were simultaneously appropriated and critiqued. In the proclamation, he redeploys the 'tree of liberty' metaphor to striking effect.

The Revolutionary French had made the 'tree of liberty' a centrepiece of popular celebrations of the Revolution. In Saint-Domingue, the 'tree of liberty' also had been celebrated by the French commissioners and by Toussaint. When Toussaint was seized and deported by the French, he famously proclaimed, 'In overthrowing me, they have uprooted in Saint-Domingue only the trunk of the tree of the liberty of the blacks; it will grow back because its roots are deep and numerous.'²⁷ The tree of liberty in Toussaint's Gonaïves statement was the tree of liberty 'of the blacks'. But for Dessalines, liberty in the mouths of the French was a euphemism for the veiled existence of slavery and prejudice, and so the tree of liberty became the tree of slavery and prejudice. Likewise, the French, renowned

25. Letter of Napoleon Bonaparte to Vice-Admiral Decrès, 1 September 1805: http://www.histoire-empire.org/correspondance_de_napoleon/1805/septembre_01.htm Accessed 30 April 2007.
26. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, 'Proclamation ou Sommation Faite au Général qui commandait à Santo-Domingo, Au Cap, 8 février 1804, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Gouverneur-Général aux habitants de la partie Espagnole,' Archives d'Outre-mer F3, vol. 141, p. 550. (The date on this manuscript appears to be wrong ; the majority of historical sources provide the date of 8 May 1804.)
27. Cited in Pamphile de Lacroix: 'He addressed these memorable words to the division chief Savary, commander of the vessel: "In overthrowing me, they have only knocked over in Saint-Domingue the trunk of the tree of the liberty of the blacks; it will grow back by the roots, for they are deep and numerous."' *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Saint-Domingue*, Paris: Pillet aîné, 1819, vol. 2, p. 203.

throughout the western world as champions of the rights of man, were for Dessalines 'the implacable enemies of the rights of man'. He claimed to have given the signal through which the justice of God had worked through the slaves to bring 'the axe upon the ancient tree of slavery and prejudices'. But it is the further development of this metaphor that is truly striking. Dessalines imagines that once the Haitians have brought down the tree of slavery and prejudice, they place its bared wood against their hearts like a magical amulet. The contact of the wood against their hearts makes them as cruel as their enemies, and their vengeance becomes like an overflowing torrent, carrying away everything that opposes it:

In vain had time, and more especially the infernal politics of Europeans, surrounded it [the tree of slavery] with brass; you have stripped it of its triple armour: you have placed it upon your heart that you may become an overflowing, mightly [sic] torrent, that tears down all opposition, your vengeful fury has carried away every thing in its impetuous course. Thus perish all tyrants over innocence!

The wood of the tree of slavery, worn protectively against their chests, hardens the slaves' hearts, and allows them to fell their abusers.

Anticolonial nature

Dessalines arguably aspired to the legacy of Makandal, the slave who was executed in 1757 for his attempt to organize an anticolonial revolution by mass poisoning, as much as to that of Toussaint Louverture. In the 'I have avenged America' proclamation, we see that for Dessalines, Makandal's attempted insurrection was on a continuum with the yellow fever that had decimated the French troops (killing even their leader, Leclerc), and the fires with which the Haitians had blocked Napoleon's repossession of cities that had come under the control of the ex-slaves. Poison, disease and conflagration were all manifestations of the supernaturally offended spirit of the slaves, animating the natural realm in sympathetic cataclysm. He warned the world that the sea itself would rise up against hostile naval incursions:

Let that nation come who may be mad and daring enough to attack me. Already at its approach, the irritated genius of Hayti, rising out of the bosom of the ocean, appears; his menacing aspect throws the waves into commotion, excites tempests, and with his mighty hand disperses ships, or dashes them in pieces; to his formidable voice the laws of nature pay obedience; diseases, plague, famine, conflagration, poison, are his constant attendants. But why calculate on the assistance of the climate and of the elements? Have I forgot that I command a people of no common call, brought up in adversity?

Dessalines' environmental poetics of invincible revolution was quite elaborate. Even if the colonists should penetrate the seaside cities, he warns, in a reference to the successful guerilla tactics of the former slaves and maroons, 'woe to those who approach too near the mountains!' Jean Fouchard's formulation of the 'maroons of liberty' is consistent with Dessalines' identification of postcolonial Haiti with the military sanctuary of the mountains.

The Haitian Revolution is of course believed to have begun with the ceremony and the oath of the Cayman woods, which Haitian historian Hérard Dumesle provided in Creole form in 1824:

Bondié qui fait soleil, qui clairé nous en haut,
 Qui soulevé la mer, qui fait grondé l'orage,
 Bon dié la, zot tandé? caché dans youn nuage,
 Et la li gadé nous, li vouai tout ça blancs faits!
 Bon dié blancs mandé crime, et part nous vlé bienfets
 mais [sic] dié lá qui si bon, ordonnin nous vengeance;
 Li va conduit bras nous, la ba nous assistance,
 Jetté portrait dié blancs qui soif dlo dans gié nous,
 Couté la liberté li pale coeurs nous toùs [sic]²⁸

28. Hérard Dumesle,
*Voyage dans le nord
 d'Hayti, ou révélations
 des lieux et des
 monumens*, Aux
 Cayes, Haiti:
 De l'imprimerie
 du Gouvernement,
 1824, 90.

It translates from the Creole as follows:

God who makes the sun that illuminates us from above,
 Who embroils the seas, who makes the storm rage,
 God is there, do you hear?, hidden in a cloud,
 And there he watches us, he sees everything the whites are doing!
 The God of the whites orders crime, and wants nothing good for us,
 But the God there who is so good, orders us to take vengeance;
 He will guide our arms, he will give us assistance;
 Cast down the portrait of the god of the whites, who thirsts for tears in our
 eyes;
 Listen to liberty, it speaks in all of our hearts.

Dessalines' figure of the irritated genius of Hayti resembles the environmental eruptions of God in the oath, who sends stormy seas from his vengeful vantage point in the clouds. Even more explicitly, in a stunning line at the end of the 'I have avenged America' proclamation, Dessalines explains that he has extended his mercy only to whites who had taken an oath to live with the former slaves in the woods: 'A handful of whites, commendable by the religion they have always professed, and who have besides taken the oath to live with us in the woods, have experienced my clemency. I order that the sword respect them.'

Nature symbolism is especially prominent in this proclamation, but it also appears in others. In the Declaration of Independence, Dessalines lauds 'notre climat vengeur', and asks when the Haitians will grow weary of breathing in the same air as that breathed by the French: 'Quand nous lasserons-nous de respirer le même air qu'eux?' And in the proclamation to the inhabitants of Santo Domingo, as previously mentioned, he outlined his determination to reconquer 'les limites que la nature et les éléments nous ont assignés'. Far from the culture/nature binarism of western thought, Dessalines framed nature as an animated anticolonial force central to the Empire of liberty.

Black universalism, or Dessalines' pan-Africanist ideology

The unabashed animism, militant anticolonialism, relish for vengeance and critique of French revolutionary hypocrisy in Dessalines' proclamations

29. St-Victor Jean Baptiste, *Le Fondateur devant l'histoire*, Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Imprimerie Eben-Ezer, 1954, p. 241.

mark his discourse as distinctively non-western. His political outreach to slaves in other colonies further characterizes his thought as an early manifestation of pan-Africanist political solidarity. Although Dessalines's radical distrust would cause him ultimately to order the massacres not only of whites, but also of mulattoes – a move which would lead to his own assassination in 1806 – in the 'I have avenged America' proclamation of 1804 he viewed a general racial solidarity as crucial. No more divide and conquer tactics through racial ideology, he warned:

Blacks and yellows, whom the refined duplicity of Europeans has for a long time endeavoured to divide: you who are now consolidated, and make but one family: without doubt it was necessary that your perfect reconciliation should be sealed with the blood of your butchers. ... That happy harmony amongst yourselves ... is the secret of being invincible.

That solidarity extended not just to the allegedly separate racial categories of the African diaspora in Saint-Domingue, but to the African diaspora in other colonies. Dessalines urged not only remembrance of 'the catalog of atrocities committed against our species', and the reinslavement plotted 'with the calmness and serenity of a countenance accustomed to similar crimes', but remembrance of Delgrès' unsuccessful 1802 revolt in Guadeloupe: 'the brave and immortal Delgresse, blown into the air with the fort which he defended, rather than accept their offered chains'. He wishes that he could decolonize not only Guadeloupe but also Martinique: 'Unfortunate people! If only I could fly to your assistance, and break your fetters!'

The historical question of Dessalines' intentions with regard to other African diasporan colonial populations is an important one for the illumination of his political philosophy. Although as discussed above, Dessalines did, unsuccessfully, attempt to bring the inhabitants of Santo Domingo into his political/military 'family', his argument for doing so was essentially that the Dominicans were being deceived, and even bewitched, into this French alliance, and that the island of Hispaniola was naturally separate from the frontiers of Europe. He had made it abundantly clear in the Declaration of Independence that he was against any proto-colonial or neo-colonial exercise of Haitian authority in the Caribbean region. The Declaration exhorts, 'Gardons-nous cependant de l'esprit de prosélitisme, [...] laissons en paix respirer nos voisins. Qu'ils vivent paisiblement sous l'égide des lois qu'ils se sont faites.' He cautions against becoming 'législateurs des Antilles', or letting the Haitians' glory consist in 'troubling the repose of neighboring islands'. This section of the Declaration concludes, 'Paix à nos voisins, anathème au français!' And yet Jean Baptiste Saint-Victor argues that Dessalines had a 'pan-American' ideology with strong connections to early South American independence struggles: 'Et c'est à la faveur de ce climat de liberté créée dans les Amériques par le triomphe des armes indigènes que, vers le mois d'août 1804, les patriotes du Vénézuëla délèguèrent auprès de Dessalines une mission chargée de solliciter son concours pour l'Indépendance de ce pays.'²⁹

The most detailed evidence of Dessalines' intentions to spread the revolution in Haiti came in 1806, when a French colonist from Saint-Domingue, Roberjot Lartigue, who was then working as a French commissioner in

Saint Thomas, reported that he had uncovered a plot by Dessalines to forcibly decolonize Guadeloupe and Martinique and liberate their African diasporan populations. To date, there is somewhat indirect documentation for this plot. Lartigue's narrative to M.L.E. Moreau de Saint-Méry on the matter has the disadvantage of being a retroactive reconstitution, in 1814, of original correspondence on the matter that had allegedly been lost in 1806. Yet Lartigue's description resonates with Dessalines' earlier statement of wistful military solidarity with the black revolutionaries who perished in Guadeloupe in 1802. The possible veracity of the story is also recommended by the fact that it would have been a logical strategy for circumventing the British (and French) naval blockade around Hispaniola. It is furthermore substantially – yet not definitively – supported by an 1815 pamphlet in which Lartigue, campaigning for a royal retirement pension based on his meritorious service, reprinted letters from a wide array of Caribbean officials who testified to their knowledge of Dessalines' plot at the time.³⁰

Lartigue claimed that Dessalines had sent a number of black and mixed race Haitians to St. Thomas to form a club. There, they worked on a plan to slip into the French colonies and instigate an uprising of the blacks. Lartigue reported that in October of 1806,

Dessalines expédia de St. Domingue des émissaires pour exécuter le projet monstrueux de descendre à la Martinique et à la Guadeloupe, d'y assassiner tous les habitants, de brûler les villes, de soulever tous les nègres et les gens de couleur et d'y former 14 régiments, s'en rendre maître et y établir l'indépendance de ces deux colonies.³¹

Having learned of the plot, Lartigue rushed to inform the authorities and allegedly succeeded in having an injunction passed on 18 October 1806 against any commerce with the 'nègres révoltés de St. Domingue'. He tried to have deportation proceedings initiated, but in the meantime, some of the plotters relocated to Trinidad, where they continued to raise support for an anticolonial insurrection on Christmas eve in Guadeloupe and Martinique. They were, however, discovered and punished by the Trinidadian government, according to Lartigue. In the meantime, Dessalines himself had been assassinated, on 17 October 1806.

Dessalines' documented and rumoured attitudes towards the other enslaved populations of the Caribbean reveal what one could describe either as early pan-Africanism, or as a paradoxical 'black universalism': a universalism, like that preached by the Enlightenment, delimited in de facto terms by loyalty of race, region and privilege. Pan-Africanism has always contained this paradox of being a particularist and a universalist ideology at once; Dessalines' critique of French Revolutionary universalism reminds us that prior to the Haitian Revolution, it was similarly fashioned as a kind of pan-Europeanism rather than universalism in an absolute sense.

X

Malcolm X remained best known by the 'X' conferred generically on Nation of Islam members to replace their 'slave names'³² until they had earned an Arabic one, long after he had earned his new name. This is no

30. Roberjot Lartigue, *Rapport de la conduite qu'a tenue M. Roberjot Lartigue, au sujet de l'entreprise formée par Dessalines, pour soulever la Martinique, la Guadeloupe, et Marie-Galante, Certifié de MM. Le Lieutenant-général-Gouverneur de la Guadeloupe et dépendances; le Général-Préfet colonial et le Général-commandant des troupes de la même île; le Colonel-commandant de la ville et arrondissement de St.-Pierre; le Grand-Juge de la Martinique; le Général-commandant en chef, Administrateur-général de Santo-Domingo; d'un Habitant, Officier de la Trinité espagnole; et le Grand-Juge de St-Thomas, Conseiller de Justice actuel de S.M. le Roi de Danemarck.* Paris: Dubray, imprimeur, 1815.

31. Letter from Roberjot Lartigue to M.L.E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, backdated 20 May 1806 (delivered to Moreau 29 August 1814), Archives d'Outre-mer F3, vol. 141bis, pp. 453–62.

32. As biographer Kofi Natumbu explains, 'All Africans brought to the Americas were initially given the last name of the slaveholder who "owned" them.' *Critical Lives: The Life and Work of Malcolm X*, Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books, 2002, p. 140.

doubt because the X expressed something unique to his ideology and activism. This ‘prophet of Black rage’ often indirectly suggested that outside of some future pan-African reinvention – from scratch – of society, African Americans could have no genuine hope. The X of his transitional status resonated with this oblique oxymoron of nihilistic rebirth. In 1962 he wrote, ‘There is no justice for us black people. There is no future for us nor our children in “civilized” America.’³³ Without overtly advocating the violence that had infused both the poetics and the tactics of Dessalines, Malcolm X taught hatred of the white blood that circulated in his own body, which he viewed as a legacy of rape, just as Dessalines chafed at breathing air that had been breathed by white masters.

When Dessalines claimed to have ‘avenged America’, he was, in part, claiming a new start in radical fidelity to the historically oppressed peoples of post-Columbian America. In the Declaration of independence, he promised a stable government to the ‘indigenous people’ of the country abruptly renamed ‘Ayiti’ after the aboriginal Taino Indian name for the ‘highlands’ of the island of Hispaniola. Of course, the diasporan population of former slaves could hardly have been less ‘indigenous’ in a literal sense, and the actual indigenes had succumbed to genocidal extinction long before. In effect, the indigeneity chosen by Dessalines and other officers as a model for postcolonial Independence was a traumatic and paradoxical indigeneity of lost homelands on the one hand, and vanished homeland populations on the other.

Malcolm X and Dessalines, separated by language, nation and almost two centuries, were nevertheless part of a black Atlantic tradition whose leaders have, all too often, had to imagine rather than read their dialogue. Dessalines, in conjunction with his secretaries, left one of the earliest known ‘oeuvres’ of radical black Atlantic political theory, in which he contested every trace of French colonial slaveholding culture: ‘Tout y retrace le souvenir des cruautés de ce peuple barbare, nos lois, nos mœurs, nos villes, tout encore porte l’empreinte française, que dis-je?’ These unique documents, French-language challenges to ‘Frenchness’, provide us with a pre-twentieth century and non-anglophone model of the ‘beginning’ of the postcolonial – marked with an X for its prophecy of black rage.

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