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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (July 2012), pp. 615-638

Published by: [Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5309/willmaryquar.69.3.0615>

Accessed: 09/03/2013 19:38

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Sources and Interpretations

Jean-Jacques Dessalines and the African Character of the Haitian Revolution

Deborah Jenson

WAS Jean-Jacques Dessalines a Creole or an African? Historian Joan [Colin] Dayan, expressing the standard interpretation of mid- to late twentieth-century historiography, describes Dessalines as literally Creole—born in the colony—yet performatively and ideologically African. In this “vexed entry into history,” Dessalines was born, Dayan writes, “sometime in 1758 on the Cormiers plantation, in a parish now known as the Commune of Grande-Rivière du Nord,” where his first master was “a brutal white named Duclos”; he “was then sold to a black master.” The locally born Dessalines would have inherited the symbolically “French” privileges inherent in the distinction between Creole status and the plight of the newly arrived African, or “bossal,” slave, yet Dessalines was known for “rejecting things French.” In the popular tradition in Haiti, Dessalines was “apotheosized but not purged of incoherence” in Vodou, where Papa Desalin and Desalin Ogou are associated with the incarnation of the warrior’s spirit. In the composite stories about Dessalines “construed with different meanings by diverse groups over time,” Dessalines could “gesturally, figurally *become African*” to communicate with the majority African-born population. “We are dealing, therefore,” Dayan summarizes, “with a Creole who could take on the role of an African as easily as he could serve the French.”¹

Is this entry into history *too* vexed? If Dessalines’s Creoleness so consistently demands explanation as metamorphosis, if this notoriously uncompromising leader has to be recast as a chameleon, if the plantation of his birth and ritual memory of *Ogou fery* (the warrior *lwa*) so consistently jostle for attention, why do we ignore the contemporaneous accounts that

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¹ Joan [Colin] Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (1995; repr., Berkeley, Calif., 1998), 19 (“vexed entry,” “brutal white”), 17 (“sometime in 1758”), 24 (“apotheosized”), 23 (“construed”), 22 (“gesturally,” emphasis added).

William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 69, no. 3, July 2012
DOI: 10.5309/willmaryquar.69.3.0615

describe him as African-born? Is it possible that Dessalines's case is not so much one of "becoming African" as one of "becoming Creole" in later historiography? How have narratives of Dessalines's Creole or African status shaped our understanding of the Haitian Revolution as what Laurent Dubois calls "an African revolution"?²

The existing sources referring to Dessalines's background, and the interpretations that have been placed upon them, demand more scrutiny. In Dessalines's lifetime the few individuals who spoke of his background at all described him as African-born, and this designation became the accepted historiographical account of his origins until the middle of the nineteenth century. The narrative of Dessalines as Creole, born on a particular plantation, emerged only in the mid- to late nineteenth century, in piecemeal fashion. If Dessalines was Creole, born of local parents on a specific plantation, it remained an astonishingly well-kept secret throughout his life and for four decades after his death: no historical traces, whether in the form of plantation registers, baptismal certificates, or accounts from his lifetime, have yet been discovered to support it. Prominent figures associated with the plantations and families invoked in the Creole narrative of Dessalines's origins did write about the Haitian Revolution, but they did not mention any association with Dessalines.

The ambiguity of Dessalines's case is not unique; on the contrary, it calls to mind the contradictory evidence surrounding the origins of the author of the most famous "African" exemplar of the slave narrative genre, the 1789 *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Vassa's trajectory has similarly challenged historians to define the ways that African and Creole taxonomies arbitrated social and cultural experience and ultimately shaped print or verbal representations of historical trajectories.³ Although of course empirically a person is born in one place and at one time, in a certain sense, to echo Simone de Beauvoir concerning gender, one "was not born but became" Creole or African in Saint Domingue.⁴ Especially for children or young people who may have

² Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 5.

³ Alexander X. Byrd has cautioned that lack of attention to the development of "notions of self and ethnicity" in ambiguous cases such as that of Gustavus Vassa can yield "analytically flat and relatively ahistorical" conceptions of Afro-diasporic identity. See Byrd, "Eboe, Country, Nation, and Gustavus Vassa's *Interesting Narrative*," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 63, no. 1 (January 2006): 123–48 (quotations, 147).

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir problematized the birth relationship to gender in *The Second Sex*: "One is not born but becomes a woman." Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York, 1984), 287. The slippery nature of the performance of origins in colonial hierarchies is also compatible with Judith Butler's related model of "drag" in gender studies, which "plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" in a way that "dramatize[s] the signi-

been severed from witnesses of their earlier life, socioethnic identities were only fully realized contextually, whether in the first lurching step off a fetid ship or in a delicate ballet of overt, implicit, suppressed, or refashioned identities in the ongoing pursuit of social survival, alliance, and mobility.

No one who knew Dessalines well revealed a precise narrative of his origins. The formerly enslaved of Saint Domingue generally shied away from narrating early experiences under slavery.⁵ This culture of autobiographical nondisclosure was the mirror opposite of the generic mandate of the Anglophone slave narrative, shaped by publishing partnerships with abolitionists who were eager to disseminate revelations of slavery's impact on life trajectories. The lack of peer attestation to Dessalines's early life does not necessarily point to a particular concealed origin: most detail on Toussaint Louverture's and Henry Christophe's biographies also came not from people who knew them personally but from journalistic, military, or historiographical sources.⁶

African-born slaves made up about 60 percent of Saint Domingue's population in 1790.⁷ Ships' registers and estate inventories show that African birth was categorized in terms of a complex plurality of ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, geographic, and historical identities. The colonists' often-erroneous assumption that slaves' original group identities were comparable to European nations certainly provided the basic grid for the European construction of African "nations," but the enslaved themselves often appropriated and further modified these terms. David Geggus noted in 1989 that "many mysteries remain as regards the ethnic lexicon for Caribbean planters but it is for modern scholars to decipher rather than dismiss it."⁸

Saint Domingue ethnographer M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, who provided a gloss on a couple dozen African ethonyms, admitted that among slaves the nomenclature of African origins was far more complicated than the categories he had presented. "When you question negroes on their

fying gestures through which gender itself is established." Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; repr., New York, 1999), 175 ("plays upon"), xxviii ("dramatize[s]").

⁵ See Deborah Jensen, *Beyond the Slave Narrative: Politics, Sex, and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution* (Liverpool, 2011).

⁶ For a discussion of spelling Henry Christophe's first name with a *y*, a practice I have followed in all my published work, see Julia Gaffield, "Haiti and Jamaica in the Remaking of the Early Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World," *WMQ* 69, no. 3 (July 2012): 583–614, esp. 593 n. 23.

⁷ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, 1998), 319.

⁸ David Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Data from French Shipping and Plantation Records," *Journal of African History* 30, no. 1 (March 1989): 23–44 (quotation, 35).

place of birth,” he explained, “they cite their canton which they view as a kingdom, as if one were distinguishing between someone from Le Havre or Normandy and someone from France.”⁹ Advertisements for runaway slaves are one of the richest sources of information on slaves’ ethnic identifications, precisely because they were designed not to suit colonists’ classificatory conceptions but to make the runaways recognizable by others—often by other slaves—to facilitate their arrest and return. Jean Fouchard’s 1972 *Les Marrons de la liberté* launched an enduring field of inquiry on the ads. Now it is possible to digitally search the database Marronnage in Saint-Domingue (Haïti), a collection of ads in the *Affiches américaines* from 1766 to 1791, in which more than a hundred and fifty categories of slaves’ “nations” appear (with varying degrees of overlap among differing spellings, subcategories, and conceptions of categories).¹⁰ These nations appear to have been defined to a considerable extent by the slaves themselves, as suggested in a 1784 ad for a new slave “who does not know how to speak or indicate his nation.”¹¹

The collectivities represented in the contemporaneous discourse of slaves’ nations were acknowledged to be foundations of slaves’ social life. When naturalist Michel Etienne Descourtilz wanted to study ethnic collectivities among slaves, he eavesdropped on meetings arranged by a slave informant with small groups of slaves from the same nation “on the pretext that he [the informant] wanted to *nationner* (‘nation’) with them.”¹² This social structure of “nationing” was an early foundation for the structure of *nanchon* or *nasyon* (“nation”) in Vodou. The question of the origins of Dessalines, who is one of the only political figures to have been absorbed into the Vodou pantheon, shows the convergence of religious and ethnic structures in the Haitian Revolution.

The classificatory system undergirding the social action of nationing was quite distinct from the colonial pigmentocracy through which elite Afro-diasporic identities were associated with lighter skin achieved through

⁹ M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’isle Saint-Domingue* (Philadelphia, 1797), 35. This and all other translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ Jean Fouchard, *Les Marrons de la liberté*, rev. ed. (Port-au-Prince, 1988); Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec and Léon Robichaud, Marronnage in Saint-Domingue (Haïti): History, Memory, Technology, University of Sherbrooke, 2011, <http://www.marronnage.info/en/index.html>. The Duke Franklin Humanities Institute Haiti Humanities Laboratory “Slave Nations” project, in collaboration with the University of Sherbrooke, is researching conceptions and signs of slaves’ ethnicities in the colonial era through ads for maroon slaves.

¹¹ *Affiches américaines*, Apr. 28, 1784, in Le Glaunec and Robichaud, Marronnage in Saint-Domingue (Haïti), <http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type=annonce&id=6817>.

¹² M[ichel] E[tienne] Descourtilz, *Voyages d’un naturaliste, et ses observations . . .* (Paris, 1809), 3: 115.

reproduction between different groups in the colonial system. Moreau de Saint-Méry explained in his gloss on slaves' nations that he only used the term *negro* to orient colonists who were unfamiliar with the real diversity of African skin color, in which many groups were light-skinned but not *mulâtre*.¹³

One of the obstacles to understanding the significance of Dessalines's particular background is that only a few historical texts from the Haitian revolutionary era describe the role of slaves' nations. In daily life in the eighteenth century, slaves' collective identities were communicated through a broad array of African languages as well as through nonalphabetic semiotics such as skin markings (scarification) or dental shaping. These identities were preserved as knowledge in song and dance. The Vodou symbolic traditions that developed around slaves' nations are another form of historiographical witnessing, in ritual rather than print cultural form, but the gap between these cultural knowledge and preservation systems and the Euro-American print cultural historiography of the Haitian Revolution was fairly absolute until the mid-twentieth century. In the colonial period, slave owners and ethnographers virtually never had literacy in African languages, although they were sufficiently aware of their existence to sometimes note in ads for runaways that an individual spoke multiple African languages. They did note slaves' body fashioning in such ads, and they occasionally marveled at the complexity of the messages slaves received when they "read" others' bodily markings.¹⁴ The Haitian revolutionary leaders who mastered Euro-American print culture, whether through literacy or through collaboration with teams of secretaries, adhered to its codes by not mentioning the specifics of African origins or cultural collectivities. To date, we have nothing resembling a complete list of non-Creole leaders within the Haitian Revolution, let alone detailed descriptions of their nations and their political and military relationships to other nations.

In revolutionary-era historiography, the few identity categories that were frequently mentioned were sometimes bona fide labels for the largest demographic rubrics, but more often they were rhetorical figures for a general idea of Africanness or blackness. *Congo* could designate either the majority demographic of African-born slaves or a metonym (a symbolic

¹³ Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description*, 30.

¹⁴ For an indication of colonists' awareness of multiple African languages, see a 1775 ad that reads "a Negro named Jean-Baptiste, Congo nation, stamped Berbez, five foot three inches, with two broken toes on his right foot, speaking several languages of Guinée and describing himself as free, has been maroon for three months." *Affiches américaines*, July 26, 1775, in Le Glaunec and Robichaud, *Marronnage in Saint-Domingue (Haïti)*, <http://www.marronnage.info/en/lire.php?id=4444&type=annonce>. M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry was one of those to express amazement at the messages slaves received from bodily markings; he described "Mina negroes recognizing princes from their homeland by these bizarre markings, and falling at their feet" (Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description*, 30).

association based on the contiguity of one category to another) or synecdoche (a symbolic association based on the relationship of the part to the whole) for Africanness. Likewise *Guinée*, which has come to be synonymous for *Africa* in Kreyòl (*Guinen*) and which was used to designate the “little Africa” neighborhoods of the colony, is a rhetorical stand-in derived from the name for a more delimited geographic region in early modern Africa. The term *African* could serve as another word for *black*; Louverture was sometimes referred to as “African” by writers who had already acknowledged his Creole origins.

Despite their quasi invisibility in the print cultural record, the specifics of African slaves’ nations are essential to deciphering the African character of the Haitian Revolution. Some groups were apparently particularly central to the revolutionary effort, as described in a remarkable 1793 news story about “nagos negroes (a valiant nation from the Golden coast)” in the *New York Diary*. The article excerpts an anonymous letter from Cap François, dated February 3, 1793, that presents a startling scenario of Nago slaves working together to circumvent two strategic threats to an African revolution: military attacks on the blacks by “mulatto” troops, and small pockets of black capitulation to whites. The mulatto leader Candie, identified in the letter as the commander of the people of color, at first failed to control the black camps at Dereal because they were defended by Nagos who had assembled “from all the plains and mountains” and who were “armed with arrows,” presumably of their own making. The Nagos eventually were defeated and retreated to the mountains. From their retreat, however, they learned that among the blacks “several chiefs of large gangs, fled in this small district on their provision gardens, came to the whites, and promised to assemble the next day, and return again to their duty.” The Nagos attacked and dispersed them. Although the whites, according to the letter, assiduously attacked small camps in the mountains and facilitated “the return of the well disposed,” the Nagos succeeded in minimizing the effects of these maneuvers. The slave insurrection could have faced decisive threats from the combined influences of mulatto military control and maroon camps’ eventual movement toward stability and negotiated returns, but instead, the letter recounted, “about 1900 negroes only have surrendered since the commencement of the campaign.”¹⁵

THE LIST OF WRITERS who represented Jean-Jacques Dessalines’s origins based on some degree of firsthand knowledge is very small. In 1803 Armand Levasseur, lieutenant aide-de-camp in the French army of Saint Domingue, became an observer in Dessalines’s military camp. Along with Adjutant Commander Urbain Devaux, Levasseur was one of two hostages provided

¹⁵ “Extracted from a letter, dated Cape-Francois, February 3, 1793,” [New York] *Diary; or Loudon’s Register*, Mar. 6, 1793, [3].

by General Donatien-Marie-Joseph de Vimeur, Vicomte de Rochambeau, to guarantee French adherence to the emerging negotiations for the French retreat and to facilitate communication with Dessalines. Levasseur spent at least two years in Saint Domingue, and he spoke Kreyòl well enough to transcribe and translate an extended quotation by Dessalines.¹⁶ During his time with Dessalines, Levasseur set himself “to the task of observing his mind and his physique” in an unsympathetic account that he published on his return to France in 1804. Dessalines was, Levasseur wrote, “a former Bossale slave; before the first insurrection he belonged to a man from the class of the *petits blancs* . . . He is of modest stature, he is somewhere between 50 and 55 years old, and he does not know how to read or write: he is astoundingly active, and goes from place to place with surprising rapidity.” Levasseur footnoted “Bossale” as meaning “from the African coast” and “*petits blancs*” as meaning “merchants, workers, and artisans; anyone who is not a property owner or planter.” In Levasseur’s portrait Dessalines is not a *créole devenu bossal*—a Creole who could remake himself to seem bossal—he is a former bossal, who beginning in 1804 wielded what the world and Levasseur mocked as a “sceptre d’airain,” a “bronze scepter.”¹⁷

Levasseur’s statement of Dessalines’s identity correlates with an 1803 report uncovered by Julia Gaffield, in which British diplomat Edward Corbet, who had fairly extensive dealings with Dessalines, identified General Henry Christophe as a Creole from Grenada and Dessalines as African: “Dessalines is an African, brutal and sanguinary in his disposition and altogether illiterate.”¹⁸ Corbet’s statements, like those of Levasseur, represent the problematic ideological bias of contemporaneous European reporting, yet they are firsthand accounts. The two men understood the difference between African and Creole origins and did not hesitate to identify Creole blacks, like Christophe, as such.

Levasseur, in addition to identifying Dessalines as a bossal slave, noted that he served as “Inspector-general of the black troops” (a role in which he would have been in charge of an African majority) as well as the inspector of agriculture. He recounted that, ten days before the departure of the

¹⁶ The conditions of Armand Levasseur’s time in Dessalines’s camp are explained by a Saint Domingue property owner and “expense liquidator” for Rochambeau’s army, Philippe Albert de Lattre, in de Lattre, *Campagnes des français à Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1805), 141. Levasseur claimed that he did not own property in Saint Domingue, which suggests that he may not have been related to prominent landholder and Saint Domingue deputy René Armand Levasseur de Villeblanche.

¹⁷ [Armand Levasseur], *Événemens qui ont précédé et suivi l’évacuation de Saint-Domingue, publiés par un officier de l’état-major de l’armée* (Paris, 1804), 25 (“to the task”), 25 n. 1 (“African coast”), 25 n. 2 (“merchants”), 48 (“bronze scepter”).

¹⁸ Edward Corbet, Jan. 28, 1803, Colonial Office (CO) 137/110, p. 339, National Archives of the U.K., Kew. Profound thanks to Julia Gaffield for sharing her valuable research.

French, he heard Dessalines say, “I ravaged everything while we were at war, but now that the white French army is leaving my country, we will have peace. . . . I’m going to make the blacks work and the whites leave their properties. But I will not look at color, and I will protect them and theirs.”¹⁹ Levasseur translates the second sentence in that quotation to mean simply “I am going to reestablish agriculture,” which overlooks this early announcement that Dessalines did plan to displace all whites from their properties. Dessalines’s statement to Levasseur indicates the fine line he planned to walk in the independence era: there would be peace, and whites would be protected, but they would not be property owners. There are considerable parallels between this account and the roughly contemporaneous proclamation of independence by Dessalines, Christophe, and Philippe Clerveaux on November 29, in which they reassured the French that those who had “renounced their old errors, abjured the injustice of their exorbitant pretensions” would find protection in Saint Domingue at “the Aurora of peace.”²⁰ Levasseur noted that Dessalines’s statement to him was directly contradicted by the Haitian Declaration of Independence “a month later,” in which Dessalines as “*tiger-man*” lamented that “everything here retraces the memory of the French name, and reminds us of the cruelties of that homicidal people; our laws, our customs, our cities, all bear the imprint of France; *what can I say? There are still Frenchmen on our island!*”²¹

Levasseur was meticulous in documenting social categories in Saint Domingue, including tensions between the “anciens libres” (those who were already free before the general emancipation, like Toussaint Louverture), the “nouveaux libres” (the newly emancipated whose continued freedom hung in the balance of the Haitian Revolution), and the “city slaves and slaves from the big houses.” He claimed that Dessalines had problems with some African groups, who sometimes acted quite independently. Other “black leaders” in Dessalines’s camp had narrated to Levasseur “the difficulties that Dessalines had in uniting the different groups that had managed to surround us [the French] in different locations.” One group had gone maroon rather than accept Dessalines’s leadership: “There is a group of Congos, opposed to Dessalines, who, since the departure of the army, have fled to the outskirts of the hills that separate the French from the Spanish part of the island; but the peaceful character of these blacks, the terror Dessalines inspires in them, and the lack of lead-

¹⁹ [Levasseur], *Événemens*, 27 (“Inspector-general”), 29 (“I ravaged everything”).

²⁰ “Proclamation: Dessalines, Christophe, and Clerveaux [Proclamation of Independence of Saint Domingue],” *Albany Gazette*, Jan. 12, 1804, [3].

²¹ [Levasseur], *Événemens*, 29 (“a month later”), 30 (“*tiger-man*”), 30 n. 1 (“everything here”).

ership among them, does not allow us to invest any hope in them: they are definitely not friends of the Europeans.”²²

The term *Congo* may have been used generically in the above account, but whatever the ethnicity of this peaceable group, they were apparently not the only separatists in an Afro-diasporic state that was born at the same time as classes of its own maroons. A London news story from the time identified another maroon group as the Coromantians:

Dessalines is declared Captain-General of St. Domingo; Clairveaux, Christophe, and several other Mulattoes, are made Generals of Division and Brigade. . . .

It is said that a body of negroes of the Coromantyn Tribe some time ago separated themselves from the rest, and retiring to the interior, have erected themselves in a separate and independent settlement. The Coromantyn Negroes are the most vigorous, robust and war-like of the Natives of Africa.²³

These details raise important questions: what kinds of relationships existed among the different nations, even those, such as the Coromantians and the Nagos, who were regional neighbors, not to mention among the different socioeconomic groups of the enslaved?

Michel Etienne Descourtilz, who like Levasseur was a prisoner of Dessalines’s camp, noted that house slaves—very likely Creole—often came to him, clandestinely, to complain that Dessalines’s troops were pillaging and ravaging their gardens. To weaken Dessalines’s chances of success, these “faithful” slaves revealed “secrets” of his retreat in Camp Marchand, where Dessalines had allegedly created underground mines in which he and his followers could hide; the mines could also serve as a site from which to blow up attacking French troops. These slave informants also asserted that “Congos” and “Guineans” were so superstitiously enthralled by Dessalines’s words that the general had persuaded them that death would mean a return to “Guinée,” where they would be incorporated into the army of “papa Toussaint” and would return to conquer Saint Domingue. Was “papa Toussaint” at that time a religious figure, a *loa*, presumed or known to be dead and yet with a magical military efficacy from the other side of the grave? According to Descourtilz, Dessalines’s invocations were so effective that his followers took on a “supernatural courage” and, “singing Guinean songs, proceeded with the certainty of meeting their former loved ones again.”²⁴

This passage is particularly revealing in that it gives details of Dessalines’s early attachment to Marchand, where he would later found

²² *Ibid.*, 49 (“anciens libres”), 47 n. 1 (“black leaders”), 53 (“group of Congos”).

²³ [London] *Morning Chronicle*, Feb. 2, 1804, [2].

²⁴ Descourtilz, *Voyages*, 3: 383 (“faithful”), 384 (“supernatural courage”).

his imperial city, and of his ability to work with bossal slaves in their own discourses, replete with African songs. It also gives us a possible clue as to Dessalines's African regional affiliations, since "metempsychosis," or the belief in African rebirth after death, was particularly associated with inhabitants of the Gold Coast, including the Aradas and Minas, as Descourtiz noted.²⁵

Dessalines's profound but apparently uneven relationship with different African groups has sometimes been cited as justification for the Creole narrative. But there is no reason to assume that African collectivities in the revolution and independence were politically compatible or that their strategies for mobility were uniform. Dessalines's leadership was also subject to strong "divide and conquer" tactics by the French, who hoped to fragment his powerful constituency. According to Philippe Albert de Lattre in his *Campagnes des français à Saint-Domingue*, the French cherished the goal of "dividing the rebels," and they offered land and freedom to anyone who would turn against Dessalines: "We issued a call to the former negro slaves, assuring *freedom* for those who would march against Dessalines. This act was drawn up before notaries in the town of Petite Anse. The former master, or his proxy, was obligated to give freedom, for free. . . . The act promised the new freeman, in the name of the government, four *carreaux* of land after the pacification of the colony."²⁶ That offer, from Victoire Emmanuel Leclerc's lifetime, demonstrates the singular challenge that Dessalines's leadership of the "nouveaux libres"—mostly African—presented to the French.

The next published source to identify Dessalines as African—but with notably different details—was a source historians love to hate: Louis Dubroca's 1804 *Vie de J. J. Dessalines*, or, in an expanded Spanish edition published in Mexico in 1806, the *Vida de J. J. Dessalines*. Dubroca's text was parroted in media sources in multiple locations in the Euro-American world, and it is difficult to assess the precise degree to which it influenced (or contaminated) accounts that were emerging, or impressions that were being consolidated, at around the same time. But Dubroca and Levasseur probably were not copying each other, since Dubroca held that Dessalines, while African-born, had been owned by a free black rather than a *petit blanc*:

This ferocious African had very recently been imported from the coasts of Guinea. At the dawn of the insurrection he belonged to a free black named Dessalines. He was then known as Jean-Jacques, and his ignorance of the customs and habits of Europeans, of their civilization and their language, was such that he had no idea of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3: 130.

²⁶ De Lattre, *Campagnes des français*, 105 ("dividing the rebels"), 105 n. 1 ("We issued a call").

them at all, and solely conserved the ferocity and the barbarity of the climate of his birth. . . . The first act of barbarism that he committed . . . was the assassination of his master, whose name he appropriated as if it had always been his.²⁷

The racist allegory linking Dessalines's African origins to ignorance and ferocity is unmistakable. The possible factual basis is undermined by obvious exaggerations, such as the notions that Dessalines had been imported from Guinea "very recently" and spoke no French, both of which were indirectly refuted by numerous other writers. No independent source reiterates the detail of Dessalines killing the free black who was his master, and in fact there are other sources that claim to know of this free black's ongoing existence in the late revolutionary era. But for all these problems, there are also numerous details in Dubroca's biography that suggest reasonably plausible research in the colonial arena—beginning with the idea that Dessalines was owned by a free black, which would have contradicted hegemonic assumptions of fundamental correlations between whiteness and mastery and between blackness and slavery. Dubroca was one of the first to represent the complex drama involving Louverture and his sons' tutor, Coisson, during which Louverture had to assess whether his sons were actually hostages to Napoléon Bonaparte. He also was one of the few French historians to describe the division of the blacks by nation in the insurrection:

Numerous African castes had formed in [Georges] Biassou's army, each quite distinct in its language, customs, and even in the variety of color; they never came together unless summoned by their supreme chief, and only for battle. Then they separated again, and some returned to dwellings that were like large country houses, and others to groupings of little cabins called *Ajoupas*, and some made their cabins of sticks. On a first glance one saw the *Congos*, distinguished by their passion for the dance. Onlookers also saw the *Mozambiques* in their proud and martial bearing. Then one made out the *Nagos*, the *Ibos*, and the *Mondocos*, savage and cruel cannibal nations.²⁸

Dubroca showed himself to be very familiar, in the expanded 1806 edition, with a little-known attempt by General Louis Ferrand to secure the ongoing presence of the French on the eastern side of the island in the early

²⁷ [Louis Dubroca], *Vida de J. J. Dessalines, gefe de los negros de Santo Domingo . . .*, ed. Juan Lopez Cancelada, trans. D. M. G. C. (Mexico [City], 1806), 4. For the French edition, see [Louis] Dubroca, *La vie de J. J. Dessalines, chef des noirs révoltés de Saint-Domingue . . .* (Paris, 1804).

²⁸ [Dubroca], *Vida de J. J. Dessalines*, 3 n. 1.

days of Haitian independence and to ruin the fledgling Haitian economy through legal challenges to trade in Haitian ports. Dubroca reprinted a rare injunction issued by Dessalines to Ferrand that had been published in one U.S. newspaper but was otherwise mostly unknown: "It is contrary to the laws and independence of the Haitian Empire to permit a portion of the French army to remain on the island."²⁹ Even some of the glaring errors in Dubroca's work show some kind of encounter with genuine information. For example, in Dubroca's 1802 biography of Louverture, he described the slave leader Biassou as being interned in an inland prison in "Saint-Augustin" on the island of Saint Domingue.³⁰ He was wrong—yet this was an early trace of something no one else seemed to know at the time, which was that Biassou had gone to Saint Augustine, *Florida*.

When the German newspaper *Minerva* published a version of Dubroca's biography of Dessalines in 1805, the editor inserted a footnote explaining the newspaper's concerns about the credibility of Dubroca's account. The paper made inquiries and concluded that it was based on material provided by a longtime military eyewitness: "That these reports are contemporary there can be no doubt. It could only be questioned whether the compiler, who is an unknown writer, was in a position to properly report them. On this question, a provisional answer is that he refers to material preserved by an excellent officer who lived in St. Domingue for twelve years and was an eyewitness to most of what is here reported."³¹

Who *was* Dubroca? It has long been assumed that his biographies of Louverture and Dessalines were commissioned directly as propaganda for Bonaparte's expedition.³² It is certainly the case that the *Life of J. J. Dessalines* loses few opportunities to berate the British where Saint Domingue was concerned, but this particular vendetta was evident in work published under the Dubroca name in 1798 (*The Politics of the English Government Unveiled*), before the start of the Consulate. The notion that Dubroca was a propagandist for Bonaparte is also contradicted by an early, anonymous biography of Louverture, the 1801 *Vie privée, politique et militaire de Toussaint-Louverture*, in which the author accuses Dubroca of being an apologist for the Saint Domingue revolutionary civil commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax: "We read it [apparently an advance copy of *La vie de Toussaint-Louverture*] and considered it a virulent diatribe composed by *Santonax* or his creatures."³³

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁰ [Louis] Dubroca, *La vie de Toussaint-Louverture . . .* (Paris, 1802), 65 n. 1.

³¹ *Minerva*, 1805, vol. 1, 434. My thanks to Kenneth E. Carpenter for this reference.

³² Malick Ghachem, "The Colonial Vendée," in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering (Bloomington, Ind., 2009), 156–76, esp. 171.

³³ *Vie privée, politique et militaire de Toussaint-Louverture. Par un homme de sa couleur* (Paris, 1801), 10.

Dubroca was an astoundingly shadowy figure, and it is difficult to pin down his real activities and affiliations.³⁴ He seems to have been an ex-Barnabite priest (he gives his name as “Louis Barnabite Dubroca” in one text) who rushed to swear allegiance at the altar of the revolutionary republic, got married, and became a lifelong opponent of religious fanaticism.³⁵ He became a bookseller after leaving the priesthood, and then a writer. He was associated with the movement of theophilanthropy.

After Levasseur and Dubroca, the next major contribution to publishing on Dessalines’s origins came in 1806. A French biographical dictionary published in Leipzig asserted that Dessalines was a black general “born in Africa, in the Gold Coast, and then transported to Saint-Domingue where he became the slave of a free black named Dessalines, whose name he took.”³⁶ At first glance this version of the story appears very close to Dubroca’s, but inspection of the details reveals small discrepancies and refinements of information. Dubroca had cited the “coasts of Guinea,” which could have been a general reference to the African coast—even simply to having been shipped from the coast—or a reference to the coast of the specific place called Guinea, which began on the Grain Coast, included the Gold Coast, and then extended to the Slave Coast and Benin. The dictionary entry thus provides further precision at least on the region sketched out by Dubroca, localizing a specific site within the coastal region of Guinea, a region that today overlaps with coastal Ghana and part of coastal Togo. After 1806, the detail about Dessalines’s origins on the Gold Coast was widely adopted in a variety of other encyclopedia or print sources.

The idea of a free black owner, meanwhile, eclipsed Levasseur’s contention that Dessalines’s owner was a *petit blanc*. This was a claim in the 1810 *Cri des colons*, which was officially authored by Saint Domingue colonist and naturalist François-Richard de Tussac but written in the spirit of a collective “cry of outrage” by multiple former Saint Domingue colonists. Although this work, bombastic and often whimsical, displays deep colonial

³⁴ A prolific modern French author to whom WorldCat cannot assign a firm date of death, Louis Dubroca was hopelessly bibliographically merged with someone who appears to have been a separate individual—probably his brother, Jean-François Dubroca—but who even in that time period was often credited with authorship of some of the same texts, which raises the possibility that they were the same person. See the description of Louis and Jean-François as brothers in Sylvie Monniotte et al., *Les noms de famille du sud-ouest* (Paris, 1999), 113. Louis Dubroca was born in Saint-Sever in the Landes in southwestern France in either 1755 or 1757. Jean-François Dubroca was born in the Landes in 1753—if he was truly a separate individual. The entry for Louis Dubroca in J[oseph]-M[arie] Quérard’s *Les supercheries littéraires dévoilées: Galerie des auteurs . . .* (Paris, 1853), 5: 128, presents “Jean-François” as simply an incorrect name, suggests that the birth date of 1757 is wrong, and gives 1831 as a firm date of death.

³⁵ L’abbé Guettée, *Histoire de l’église de France* (Paris, 1857), 361.

³⁶ “Dessalines,” in *Biographie moderne, ou dictionnaire biographique, de tous les hommes morts et vivants . . .*, ed. Alphonse de Beauchamp (Leipzig, 1806), 2: 88.

and antirevolutionary bias, it shows a fascinating attempt on the part of the colonists to try to identify Dessalines's origins: "Dessalines. . . the slave of a free negro of the same name, whom one of us knew to have been the concierge of the Cap, had, from his tender youth, embodied the full array of vices. His buttocks were embroidered with the scars of ineffectual whippings, as he was incorrigible. Speaking of these whippings, he once said he would never have pity, either for blacks or for whites, until the scars had disappeared."³⁷ The colonists did not comment on whether Dessalines had been bossal or Creole, but they seemed to give firsthand confirmation of his having had a free black owner, whom "one of us knew."

In fact, one of the colonists claimed to have heard from the free black Dessalines himself that General Dessalines had returned to him in search of his baptismal certificate at the time of his marriage, since Louverture had insisted that all his generals be married in the church, and church weddings required certificates of baptism. (M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry noted that bossal slaves eagerly pursued baptism to avoid being insulted by Creoles as unbaptized "chevaux," or horses—an intriguing possible description of African Vodou practices—so the existence of a certificate does not in itself resolve birth origins.)³⁸

Although the colonists' image of a mass wedding of Louverture's black generals may seem far-fetched, Louverture himself described exactly this event. In the "Récit des événements qui se sont passés dans la partie du nord de Saint-Domingue," which was published in *Paris, pendant l'année 1802* by Jean-Gabriel Peltier, Louverture describes his follow-up to his publication of the colony's new constitution. He had set himself the goal of publishing new laws, organizing a judicial system—tribunals of appeal and cassation—and redoing "a part of municipal administration structures." While touring the country for this work, he detoured to St. Marc

to celebrate the marriage feast of Division General Dessalines, and several other military officers, to whom I had made this promise, quite a while back, in the name of the government.

Once in Saint-Marc, I acquitted my promise. This celebration was to last for several days; but since I had other important duties to fulfill, and as the law dictated that I go to establish a tribunal of appeals in Santo-Domingo, I prepared to resume my travels, after having informed General Dessalines that I would leave my wife with him to represent me and to carry out the honors of the feast.³⁹

³⁷ [François-Richard de Tussac], *Cri des colons: Contre un ouvrage de M. l'évêque et sénateur Grégoire, ayant pour titre de la littérature des nègres*. . . (Paris, 1810), 229.

³⁸ [Tussac], *Cri des colons*, 231; Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description*, 35.

³⁹ Toussaint Louverture, "Récit des événements qui se sont passés dans la partie du nord de Saint-Domingue, depuis le 29 Vendémiaire jusqu'au 13 Brumaire An 10 de la République Française une et indivisible (4 Novembre 1801)," *Paris, pendant l'année*

Later authors, including Placide Justin, James Barskett, Charles St. Malo, and Gaspard Théodore Mollien, would elaborate on Tussac's statement that Dessalines's former owner was alive and well. Although Tussac's book identified Dessalines's black slave owner as being the "concierge of the Cap," later writers would variously assign him the identities of roofer and potter. Justin and Barskett wrote that General Dessalines made his former owner his *sommelier*.⁴⁰ This would appear to be a sign of a characteristic drift and embellishment after revisiting narratives of firsthand experience from an earlier period. Although there are numerous journalistic descriptions of social events in Dessalines's court, none mention a former *master-cum-sommelier*.

The *Cri des colons*, however, also points indirectly to one very significant clue in favor of the African narrative, which is that no colonist ever came forward as the former owner of Dessalines and identified him as a Creole slave who had grown up on a particular plantation. This absence of a claim suggests the possibility that Dessalines, transplanted to Saint Domingue at an early age, had been bought immediately by a free black or a *petit blanc*. Given the social mobility that would have accrued from Creole origins, it is hard to imagine that Dessalines and his peers would have willingly erased all traces of them, even given the need to serve in some environments as "a Creole who could take on the role of an African."⁴¹

It is important to note that free black slave owners named "Saline" appear in ads for runaway slaves in the prerevolutionary era. In 1774 a Bambara woman named Rose was advertised as missing by "*Marguerite la Saline*, known as *Caguia*, a free Negress in Petit-Goave."⁴² Stewart R. King's work on notarial acts and acts of *état civil* is a key step in revealing the lives of free people of color or free blacks in colonial Saint Domingue, and documentation of a free black Des Salines may eventually turn up. But there are numerous possibilities for the genesis of a last name for Jean-Jacques, including some tie to the Limonade plantation, featuring salt mines, owned by a Chabanon brother (and Saint Domingue deputy) who became known, in relation to the physical features of his property, as Chabanon Dessalines. Since according to the Assemblée Nationale there was a camp of insurgents on that plantation in 1791, Dessalines could have

1802 35 (1802): 66 ("municipal administration structures"), 67 ("celebrate the marriage feast").

⁴⁰ Placide Justin and James Barskett, *Histoire politique et statistique de l'île d'Hayti, Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1826), 436.

⁴¹ Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 22.

⁴² *Affiches américaines*, Sept. 14, 1774, in Le Glaunec and Robichaud, *Marronage in Saint-Domingue (Haïti)*, <http://www.marronage.info/fr/lire.php?type=annonce&id=4136>.

taken the place name to distinguish himself as a leader of that camp.⁴³ Yet another possible source for the name could have been a connection to the African *saliniers* led by the colonist Auguste Borel, Chevalier de Saint-Louis, from a site in the “bourg de la Saline.”⁴⁴

The *Cri des colons* is one of the very last texts in which knowledge of Dessalines is purported to be firsthand. African explorer Mollien, who was only born in 1796 and therefore obviously had no personal knowledge of Dessalines, wrote that although Dessalines was born in slavery, he seemed less Creole than African, not least in his passion for dancing. Dessalines’s love of the dance, considered uncouth by the elite classes, runs through early historiography: “Like all of the Congos from whom he derived his origins, he [Dessalines] . . . loved pleasure and above all the dance, in which he sought to perfect his abilities; we even owe to this taste several bamboucha (fandangillo) that he composed for the balls at his court. In general, he had the habits of an African rather than a Creole.”⁴⁵ Mollien’s assessment of Dessalines as someone born into slavery but African in his self-presentation and cultural life was not published in the nineteenth century.

The general narrative of Dessalines as African-born continued unabated in historiographical sources, with some variation of detail, until a Haitian historian who had modeled his oeuvre on that of French Romantic historian Jules Michelet appeared on the scene: Thomas Madiou.

THOMAS MADIOU, BORN IN 1814, of course had no firsthand acquaintance with Jean-Jacques Dessalines. A deep admirer of Haiti’s African cultural heritage, Madiou nevertheless sought to rehabilitate Dessalines in a form palatable to a political environment in which conflicts between light-skinned and black elites continued to rage. An obvious compromise was to make the most African of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution into a black Creole. In an undated fragment entitled “Dessalines,” Madiou wrote, “He symbolized, to our eyes, the alliance of the African and his descendants.”⁴⁶ Madiou positioned Dessalines in terms both of an “African genius” running from Saint Augustine to the leaders of the Haitian Revolution and of harmony between different racially privileged groups, among whom Madiou himself had to mediate in his own diverse political roles.⁴⁷

⁴³ See Stewart R. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint-Domingue* (Athens, Ga., 2007). The reference to “several camps of the revolvers, situated on the plantations of *Chabanon* [Dessalines], [*Chabanon*] *la Chevalerie*, *Bullet*, *Duplat*, *Charitte*, *Denort*, *Dagout*, and *Galifet*” is found in *A Particular Account of the Commencement and Progress of the Insurrection of the Negroes in St. Domingo* . . . , 2d ed. (London, 1792), 11.

⁴⁴ [Jean-]Ph[ilippe] Garran [de Coulon], *Rapport sur les troubles de Saint-Domingue* . . . (Paris, 1799), 3: 69–88.

⁴⁵ Gaspard Théodore Mollien, *Haïti ou Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 2006), 2: 54.

⁴⁶ Thomas Madiou, “Dessalines,” in *Auteurs haïtiens: Morceaux Choisis*, ed. Solon Ménos et al. (Port-au-Prince, 1904), 33.

⁴⁷ Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d’Haïti* (Port-au-Prince, 1847), 1: v.

Still, Madiou provided only the barest elements of a Creole narrative that would exemplify this alliance of the African and his descendants: in volume 2 of the 1847 *Histoire d'Haiti*, he wrote that Dessalines was a "Creole from the Grande Rivière du Nord."⁴⁸ In volume 3 he added a phrase about the Cormier area—*not* the Cormier plantation: Dessalines was a "Creole from the Cormier section of the Grande-Rivière du Nord parish."⁴⁹ Madiou does not seem to make any connection between the names Dessalines and Duclos in his 1840s texts (although the two names do appear, unrelated but on the same page, in volume 1).⁵⁰ Confoundingly, an asterisked footnote in the 1985 reedition of part of the *Histoire d'Haiti* provides the full Creole narrative: "Dessalines, in his youth, was called Duclos. When he was sold by his first master who was a white, to a black owner named Dessalines, he took the latter's name. But many of the officers in the 4th regiment who had been childhood companions continued to call him Duclos."⁵¹ This footnote is difficult to account for. If it had actually figured in Madiou's early editions, it would surely have spread to other writers, including Beaubrun Ardouin and Alexandre Bonneau—but it apparently did not. Since the volumes of the *Histoire d'Haiti* were published from 1847 to 1904, up to two decades after Madiou's death in 1884, it is very possible that the note was added by an editor. It is also possible that it was added by Madiou himself, but later in his life, since some asterisked footnotes in his oeuvre employ the first-person pronoun.⁵²

If Madiou did not introduce the details about the Duclos plantation, who did? In a strange twist, it appears that it was Edgar La Selve who laid out the full Creole narrative in the extremely curious 1881 tome *Le pays des nègres: Voyage a Haiti, ancienne partie française de Saint-Domingue*. La Selve wrote, "Born in 1758 at Cormier, a plantation in the Bande-du-Nord, near Cap-Français, he [Dessalines] was raised by Duclos, a white colonist whose name he took, as was the custom among slaves who took their masters' last names, until he was bought, still at a young age, by Dessalines, a free black for whom he worked for thirty-three years, and whom he made his butler,

⁴⁸ Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haiti* (Port-au-Prince, 1847), 2: 213.

⁴⁹ Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haiti* (Port-au-Prince, 1848), 3: 36.

⁵⁰ Madiou, *Histoire d'Haiti*, 1: 287.

⁵¹ Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haiti, 1804–1807* (Port-au-Prince, 1985), 111n.

⁵² For example, in an important note in a volume that ostensibly runs through 1843 but obviously was published later, we read, "The last time I saw Madame Dessalines was in St. Marc, in 1851. She was still strong, tall, svelte, in possession of all her faculties. Her handsome and regular features were well-preserved." If Thomas Madiou met Dessalines's widow in the course of her (successful) campaign for a government pension, however, it is not clear that the encounter would have yielded objective historical information, as the vetting of her request would have involved the same political tensions to which Madiou was responsive in his view of Dessalines as a symbolic link between Africa and Haiti. Madiou, *Histoire d'Haiti (1827–1843)* (Port-au-Prince, 1988), 534 n. 1.

after he became governor-general.”⁵³ La Selve is described in nineteenth-century biographical notes as a professional traveler, and the title of his famous book echoes other colonial travel writings that begin with *Au pays des nègres* (“in the land of negroes”). He was a white Frenchman—or, as one reviewer enthused, “white of pure race”—born in Dordogne in 1849, two years after Madiou first published his opus.⁵⁴ La Selve had published his *Histoire de la littérature française d’outre-mer* and *Histoire de la littérature haïtienne* in 1875, and in 1880 he became secretary-general of the Académie internationale des Palmiers, which had the mission of expanding French literature abroad and encouraging “voyages d’études” (travel for research purposes) in faraway countries. In the early 1870s, La Selve visited Haiti, taught rhetoric in the Lycée national Pétiou in Port-au-Prince, and wrote his book, the publication of which was delayed after it was misplaced in his luggage on his return home. (An earlier version was published in 1879.)⁵⁵ La Selve generously notes in his book that if he had not “visited” Haiti and even “lived there during long months,” he would not have been up to describing its complexities.⁵⁶ The book regales the reader with stories of the author’s visits to different historical sites and what he learned from asking questions in these regions. The fact that La Selve dedicated his book on Haiti to Leopold II, king of Belgium and exploiter of the Congo, thanking him for his initiative in the Association internationale africaine, speaks volumes about the cultural niche of this book.

Somehow, La Selve’s narrative of Dessalines’s origins became the standard account, especially after it was cited in François Dalencour’s 1944 *La fondation de la république d’Haïti*. But much of what La Selve writes about Dessalines has the air of giddy invention, implausible and undocumented. He has Dessalines repeatedly exclaim “*Moutié!*” which La Selve describes as a “swear word of Dessalines’s own invention.” He provides an imagined dialogue—based on plagiarism of a scene from Joseph Saint-Rémy’s *Mémoires* of Toussaint Louverture, but with new flourishes worthy of Tintin—in which Dessalines proposes to give his daughter Célimène as a bride to Alexandre Pétiou, whom Dessalines calls “*papa au bon coeur*” (“good-hearted daddy”). The rationale behind this theatrical plot is Dessalines’s wish for the Haitian people to “*bronze*” itself through “the fusion of mulattoes and blacks.”⁵⁷ La Selve’s account of Dessalines’s background is riddled

⁵³ Edgar La Selve, *Le pays des nègres: Voyage a Haiti, ancienne partie française de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1881), 166–67.

⁵⁴ Léo Quesnel, “Anciennes colonies françaises: Haïti,” *Revue politique et littéraire: Revue bleue* 19 (1882): 84–87 (quotation, 84).

⁵⁵ Edgar La Selve, *La République d’Haïti, ancienne partie française de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1879).

⁵⁶ La Selve, *Le pays des nègres*, 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 102 (“*Moutié!*”), 102 n. 1 (“swear word”), 105 (“*papa au bon coeur*”), 106 (“*bronze*”).

with problems, from the fact that it was not at all typical for slaves to be allowed to use their masters' last names (they were branded with them, but that was not the same as being allowed to use them) to the unacknowledged use of Placide Justin and James Barskett's uncorroborated claim that Dessalines made his former owner not his butler but his *sommelier*. La Selve's work does contain a plethora of real names, places, and corroborated claims, however, which veil the text's fundamental unreliability as historiography. It remains uncritically cited to this day and appears to be the basic building block of the narrative onto which it has been possible to velcro numerous other details, like the alleged existence of Dessalines's two brothers, also named Duclos, who also changed their names to Dessalines.⁵⁸

This genealogy begs the question: was the Creole narrative a refashioning of Dessalines for political purposes such as the reunification of mulatto and dark-skinned elites, amplified by the forces of *teledjòl* ("telejaw," meaning gossip) or other indiscriminating transmission? It is worth noting that the names Cormier and Duclos were prominent in Saint Domingue property ownership and politics, but no member of these families ever claimed to have owned Dessalines. A colonist named Cormier was in fact president of the Club Massiac at the time of the slave insurrection in 1791, and he wrote *Mémoire sur la situation de Saint-Domingue, à l'époque du mois de janvier 1792*, in which he described himself as a "member of the society of French colonists, ruined by the disasters in Saint-Domingue." Cormier waxed nostalgic for an era in which slaves "consoled themselves in obedience, and said in their language, *the white is my master, and the king is the master of the white [blanc maître à moi, roi maître à blanc]*." He blamed Thomas Clarkson and the British abolitionists, the Société des amis des noirs and Mirabeau, the *mulâtres* and the *petits-blancs*, but not specific slave leaders—and he did not name Dessalines. Interestingly, Cormier did describe apparently hypothetical or prototypical rather than real incendiary writings by the blacks, in quotation marks as if he had seen or heard them: "Eternal principles exist the same way for us that they do for you; like you, we are born and remain free and equal . . . we want the sun to illuminate among us only free men; the rays of that light-shedding star will no longer fall on slaves in irons. . . . We will no longer endure the double torture of enslavement viewed against the spectacle of the liberty of others."⁵⁹

The Duclos family was also prominent in Saint Domingue; a Duclos had served as governor earlier in the century, and slave ads show members

⁵⁸ See *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Jean-Jacques Dessalines," accessed Jan. 30, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Jacques_Dessalines.

⁵⁹ [Cormier], *Mémoire sur la situation de Saint-Domingue, à l'époque du mois de janvier 1792* (Paris, 1792), 1 ("member of the society"), 3 ("consoled themselves"), 20–21 ("Eternal principles").

of the Duclos family throughout the colony in the prerevolutionary era, as *habitants* but also as *petit blancs*. No Duclos spoke publicly of any connection to Dessalines, although in 1883 Henri Louis Duclos published an account of the Haitian revolutionary experiences of French general Bertrand Clauzel. According to Duclos, Clauzel had formed an alliance with Congo “negroes,” who needed to protect themselves against attack by Dessalines—presumably because they were not sufficiently invested in the revolution, if they were willing to collaborate with whites.⁶⁰ Despite this remarkable detail from the history of the early revolutionary era, Duclos as historian makes no mention of any Duclos relationship to Dessalines.

Nor was any direct parent or sibling of Dessalines ever identified in the nineteenth century. This does not appear to have been because of modesty about Dessalines’s personal life: the state paper, the *Gazette politique et commerciale d’Haïti*, did publish an announcement of the death and funeral of Dessalines’s mother-in-law.⁶¹

IF JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES was not Creole but an African-born individual who was taken captive, transported on a slave ship, compelled to adapt to Saint Domingue cultural structures after his arrival, and influenced by nationing with members of related African social collectivities, he would represent a critical suppressed link—if an endlessly oblique one—in our understanding of how those experiences informed African revolutionary agency in colonial Saint Domingue. Vodou provides a valuable alternative historiography on Dessalines as a figure emblematic of African military dynamism. Yet, like print historiography, it provides only hieroglyphic glimpses of realities that colonial culture was unqualified or unwilling to represent publicly. Whereas the early printed histories embedded scant details of African life in racist diatribes, the ritual traditions preserved lexicons and iconic systems that were soon a residue of a lost material past.

Although it remains fundamentally difficult to recover direct traces of the nineteenth-century evolution of Vodou lyrics, Dessalines’s role in the Haitian Revolution and independence were featured in some of the earliest transcriptions of Vodou songs. Louis Mars’s 1943 essay “La psychopathologie du vaudou” quoted at length a transcription (in the old Haitian orthography) by Lorimer Denis from a Vodou ceremony in the 1930s:

Emperor Dessalines O!
Emperor Dessalines O!

⁶⁰ H[enri Louis] Duclos, *Histoire des ariégeois* (Paris, 1883), 3: 632.

⁶¹ The death notice for Dessalines’s mother-in-law appears in the *Gazette politique et commerciale d’Haïti*, Nov. 14, 1805; “On the 2nd of this month, Madame Marie Elizabeth, mother of her August Majesty the Empress, died at Artibonite, aged 56 years old. Her funeral was celebrated the next day in the city of Dessalines, where she was buried.”

We are valiant men
 What harm do you think they can do us
 The country is already in our hands
 The country is already in our hands⁶²

As an epic figure in the Vodou tradition, Dessalines is recurrently aligned with Ogou (or “Ogoun”) and the Nago *nanchon*. Emmanuel C. Paul writes, “Tradition would have it that Dessalines was Nago and that his principal god was an Ogû.”⁶³ The motifs of the *nanchon*, or Vodou confederations, bear traces of slaves’ understanding of their nation identities. The Nago (or “Nagom” or “Nagot”) ethnic collectivity is associated with the Bight of Benin and Yoruba heritage. In eighteenth-century Saint Domingue, Nago ethnicity was linked more precisely to the Côte d’Or, or Gold Coast, as described in ads such as the following one from 1770: “Ledit Nègre est de nation Nago, Côte d’Or.”⁶⁴ In the 1793 letter about their “valiant nation from the Golden coast,” Nagos were contextualized as enforcers of the revolutionary mission among the slaves.⁶⁵ Other inhabitants of the Gold Coast in eighteenth-century Saint Domingue ads for runaway slaves were the Mina or Amine from around Fort El Mina, the Aradas or Radas, the Caplaous from Cap Laho, the Otam, the Malé or Malais, and the Coromantians. Ads in the *Affiches américaines* also describe Nago as a language, as in the 1767 ad for “*Médor*, Ibo negro. Speaks Nago.”⁶⁶ Édouard Foà, in his 1895 book *Le Dahomey*, describes Nago as spoken in Porto Novo, Yoruba, Dahomey, Popo, and “very widely in the Côte d’or.”⁶⁷ Foà in fact identifies the Nago as above all a linguistic group, although the term *Nago* could also describe the Yoruba language.⁶⁸

Dessalines, in his Vodou incarnation, is associated with Ogou[n], variously the god of war or the name for a healing science or ingredient in that region. Ogou is also the name of a region in Togo and a river named after the god Ogoun. “[Ogoun] Chango, thunder, is one of the most powerful

⁶² Louis Mars, “La psychopathologie du vaudou,” *Psyché: Revue internationale des sciences de l’homme et de psychanalyse* 3, nos. 21–26 (July–December 1943): 1064–88, esp. 1083 (my translation). (“Empereur Dessalines O! / Empereur Dessalines O! / Nous cé vanyan gaçons, / Ca ou coué ya fait nous / Pays là nan main nou déjà / Pays là nan main nou déjà”)

⁶³ Emmanuel C. Paul, *Panorama du folklore haïtien (présence Africaine en Haïti)* (Port-au-Prince, 1978), 57.

⁶⁴ *Affiches américaines*, Dec. 26, 1770, in Le Glaunec and Robichaud, *Marronnage in Saint-Domingue (Haïti)*, <http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type=annonce&id=2882>.

⁶⁵ *Diary*, Mar. 6, 1793, [3].

⁶⁶ *Affiches américaines*, June 17, 1767, in Le Glaunec and Robichaud, *Marronnage in Saint-Domingue (Haïti)*, <http://www.marronnage.info/fr/lire.php?type=annonce&id=1969>.

⁶⁷ Édouard Foà, *Le Dahomey . . .* (Paris, 1895), 333.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 97–98.

and dreaded divinities. When he growls, the inhabitant goes inside and closes his door. Anyone who stays outside, as if in defiance, risks attracting the anger of this fetish.”⁶⁹ Eminent Vodou specialist Milo Rigaud wrote in 1953 that “Hogoun Chango, the most powerful of the Nagos, communicated the ardor of the warrior to Dessalines.”⁷⁰

Piercing through the prejudices of colonialism and the abrupt severance from a cultural past are these traces of an African Dessalines who struck like thunder. This Dessalines was revered and feared within one paradoxically coherent tableau, avenging the enslaved in Saint Domingue like, in the words of Aimé Césaire, “a god caught in a trap”:

St. Dessalines, who died at Red Bridge
like a god caught in a trap—
The black fire of the earth
spewed from the awful cleft
when he with his thunder defied
deceit with the thousand arms.⁷¹

Future research on Dessalines may uncover documents attesting to the sale of a young “Jean-Jacques” (or more than one) from the Gold Coast or Dahomey in the 1760s, 1770s, or 1780s, or to the culture of relationships between free black owners and slaves, or to nineteenth-century traditional associations between Dessalines and African nations—or it could uncover documentation of his plantation birth. Any such additions to the current corpus of Dessalinean legacies will help to interweave narratives that have long served different constituencies and to make Dessalines’s “vexed entry into history” a portal to the larger narrative of the “African” Haitian Revolution.⁷²

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 221–22 (quotation), 238.

⁷⁰ Milo Rigaud, *La tradition voodoo et le voodoo haïtien (Son temple, ses mystères, sa magie)* (Paris, 1953), 69.

⁷¹ Aimé Césaire, *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1970), 78–79 (act 3, scene 2).

⁷² Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 19; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 5.

Postscript: Dessalines's Scars

Research continues, and more evidence emerged as the preceding essay was going to press. Jean-Baptiste Lemonnier-Delafoffe, a French soldier in General Rochambeau's army in Saint Domingue, transcribed an 1803 Creole battle song, remarking that it was "was worthy of all of our republican songs":

Soldiers, strike!
Their death is not your business,
Here there is no father,
There is no mother!
Soldiers, strike!
Their death is not your business!⁷³

Lemonnier-Delafoffe also discussed Dessalines himself and mentioned the Haitian leader's tribal scarification: "The ferocious Dessalines, this black African, whose cheeks were imprinted with the decorative scarring of his nation, of his tribe; this negro who had never showed any mercy to whites, and for whom a single gesture sufficed to send his soldiers to fight to the death, had under his command the whole army, including Pétion, the brilliant battle strategist, a mulatto raised in our own schools, and who came with the expedition to Saint-Domingue."⁷⁴

Lemonnier-Delafoffe was not the only one to note Dessalines's facial markings. Guillaume Mauviel, the French bishop who first served in Saint Domingue as a liaison to the blacks and then moved to Santo Domingo, had also described Dessalines's "African ferocity" with reference to the fact that "his hideous face was furrowed with scars."⁷⁵ Antoine Métral, in his 1825 history of the French expedition to Saint Domingue, likewise wrote that Dessalines bore the facial marks traditional in his country of origin: "This chief . . . was of a turbulent, audacious, ferocious genius. Whether he was acting out of vengeance or ambition, he stained his hands with the

⁷³ "Grenadiers, à l'assaut! / ca qui mouri zaffaire à yo, / gn'y a point papa, / gny' a point maman! / Grenadiers, à l'assaut! / ca qui mouri, zaffaire à yo!" M. [Jean-Baptiste] Lemonnier-Delafoffe, *Seconde campagne de Saint-Domingue du 1er décembre 1803 au 15 juillet 1809* (Havre, France, 1846), 85.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁵ Cited in M. A. Matinée, *Anecdotes de la Révolution de Saint-Domingue, racontées par Guillaume Mauviel, évêque de la colonie (1799–1804)* (Saint-Lô, 1885), 120. I have suggested elsewhere that Guillaume Mauviel may be the "fanatical priest" targeted by Dessalines in his spring 1804 warning speech to the inhabitants of Santo Domingo; see Jensen, *Beyond the Slave Narrative*, 99.

blood both of the blacks and the whites. . . . His appearance was fierce, his body language oblique, and his gaze sanguinary; born on the African coasts, his face, furrowed with cuts, signaled his country of origin.”⁷⁶ Paulin de Chamrobert, who wrote several encyclopedia articles about different moments of Haitian independence, warned against accepting Métral uncritically, yet he did parallel Métral by saying that Dessalines’s “volcanic soul” was revealed in “his face furrowed with cuts.”⁷⁷

References to Dessalines’s scars gradually disappeared as the story of his Creole origins emerged and became dominant. The earlier comments on his scarification do not necessarily establish his African origins: opposing the contemporary social validation of Afro-Creoles in a sustained and wily maneuver to court the African majority, a Creole Dessalines could perhaps have even joined a local initiation involving rudimentary scarification, ceremonies that do occasionally occur in rural Haitian communities. But in the Haitian Revolution and independence, some of the observers who were most familiar with the varieties of colonial identity mentioned something that must also have been true of many African and maroon leaders: that Dessalines bore on his skin the emblematic inscriptions of his African nation. As noted earlier, François-Richard de Tussac, speaking on behalf of a collectivity of exiled colonists, recalled that Dessalines’s body was “embroidered with the scars of ineffectual whippings, as he was incorrigible” and that Dessalines had said of these scars that he “would never have pity, either for blacks or for whites, until the scars had disappeared.”⁷⁸ Was Dessalines also fighting for revolution as he understood it to keep his African scars from disappearing?

⁷⁶ Antoine Métral, *Histoire de l'expédition des français a Saint-Domingue, sous le consulat de Napoléon Bonaparte, suivie des mémoires et notes d'Isaac Louverture* . . . (Paris, 1825), 46.

⁷⁷ Paulin de Chamrobert, “Dessalines,” in *Encyclopédie des gens du monde* . . . (Paris, 1837), 8: 70–71 (quotations, 8: 70).

⁷⁸ [Tussac], *Cri des colons*, 229.