

MIRROR OF DESIRE:
BLACK DRAMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

by
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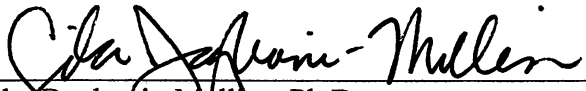
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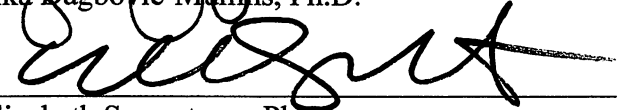


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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes three of the plays inspired by the Haitian Revolution and written by black playwrights. The first chapter covers William Edgar Easton's *Dessalines, a Dramatic Tale: A Single Chapter from Haiti's History*. It discusses Easton's decision to depict Dessalines as a man of faith, a believer, a Christian. The second chapter employs Langston Hughes' play, *Troubled Island*, to argue Dessalines' modernity. The third play, by Saint Lucian playwright Derek Walcott, is *The Haitian Earth*. The thesis concludes with a brief discussion of his play and its contribution to black consciousness. I propose that the revolution plays a major role in World History, and argue that the Haitian Revolution served as a looking glass to many African Americans in search of a black identity.

DEDICATION

To the one I refuse to forget; the one who was sacrificed to give us life.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines Black dramatic representations of the Haitian Revolution. I propose that the revolution served as an outlet for many black writers to explore and challenge their own ideologies about race. *Dessalines, a Dramatic Tale: A Single Chapter from Haiti's History* (1893) and *Troubled Island* (1936) are plays written by two African-American writers from different time periods. The plays show two of the ways that African-Americans understood Haitian history and its relevance to their own U.S. contexts. Both plays accentuate Dessalines's significance to World History in the way both William Edgar Easton and Langston Hughes turn him into the savior of the black race. Easton's *Dessalines*, infused with Christianity, modernizes the revolution in a completely different way. Easton's linkage of Christianity with the revolution shows that modernity, which connotes progress, must be critiqued for it to be revolutionary. This is why Dessalines' victory in the play is his adaption of Christianity as his religion. However, according to Hughes, Dessalines was opposed to anything European, their religion included. Dessalines was more concerned with saving his race than his soul; the soul that he supposedly should not have given his status as a chattel. In Hughes's *Troubled Island*, Dessalines is depicted as the martyr of the black race; a sophisticated but misunderstood slave whose simple goal was to establish a black republic that would serve as home for blacks everywhere. He was fighting against both slavery and racism. Unfortunately, possibly because it was a revolution conducted by blacks who Europeans

and U.S. thinkers of the time and since could not imagine as political agents, the revolution failed to be as effective as other revolutions of the time. According to Sybille Fisher, the story of the Haitian Revolution has always resided in the margins of history. She explains that “Haiti had vanished from the front pages of European and North American newspapers, and even black abolitionists in the United States ceased to hold up Haiti as the example of black liberation and achievement” (2). Fischer calls this a truncation of modernity, a disavowal of Haiti’s modernity. In other words, Haitians were denied the right and resources to govern themselves, and were resented for appropriating what was rightfully theirs. As a result, Haiti became a mystified island said to be inhabited by barbarians and misfits.

The propagated idea that the people of Haiti are incapable of running the country efficiently is evaluated in Mary A. Renda’s well received book *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940*. Renda asserts that the U.S occupation motivated many literary intellectuals to produce works based on the subjugation of the nation and notes that exoticism is a pervasive theme in popular plays inspired by the Haitian Revolution. This concept of exoticism is revealed in the emplotment of both plays. I use David Scott’s book *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* to discuss the plot of the aforementioned plays. Scott examines C. L. R. James’s mode of emplotment that organizes *The Black Jacobins*. He argues that James’s decision to add the six paragraphs in the beginning of the last chapter is designed to change how readers interpret the story of Toussaint Louverture, or Toussaint himself. The six paragraphs, as constructed by James, bring a certain modernity to Toussaint’s figure “that explains his mistakes and atones for them” (292).

James constructs Toussaint as a modern figure because he believes that Toussaint was so feared by the French because he was fighting “against the claims of organized society” (291). This fight, according to James, was inspired by the French Revolution. Toussaint demanded that the “relation with the France of liberty, equality, fraternity and the abolition of slavery without a debate, should be maintained” (James 290). Toussaint believed that France could sympathize with his cause given their own philosophy about freedom and took it for granted that France would treat him and the slaves like men. Unfortunately, his appeal to reason did not work. His certainty that a partnership between Haiti and France was attainable ruined him. But, as James implies, Toussaint’s defeat convinced Jean-Jacques Dessalines, his successor, that liberation and independence was only attainable if the French were removed and banished from the Island. Haiti won its independence under the leadership of Dessalines who ordered the extermination of all whites on the island. The war for independence ended in 1804 when Dessalines declared Haiti’s independence. Fischer’s book *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Culture of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2004) acknowledges the Haitian Revolution as one of the most “extraordinary events in the Age of Revolution” (v). Yet, those who write about the revolution marginalize Haiti even as they purport to praise its people and their courage.

A recap of the Haitian history is my point of departure because it brings forth the question of modernization as discussed by Fischer and Scott. Fischer asserts that “slavery in the Caribbean was one of the first and most brutal appearances of modernity” (12). However, what made the slaves in the Caribbean modern was their resistance against slavery, not a devotion to Christianity as Easton suggests. Paradoxically, modernity here

implies that the slaves had the courage to question the content of the given modernity, and to resist its injustice.¹ According to James in *The Black Jacobins*, Saint-Domingue in the 1780s and 1790s was the site of social unrest and uprisings among the whites and the free people of color, but what would become the Haitian Revolution really began with a major slave uprising in 1791. The maroon slaves were determined to rebel against the prejudice and cruelty of the French. In August 1791, long after, but still in the memory of Makandal's execution, a large group of slaves met on the hills in the northern part of Saint-Domingue for the Bois Caiman ceremony led by Boukman. Within the next few days, enormous uprisings began on a number of the most profitable sugar plantations on the island. Later, in 1791, Toussaint joined the revolution and became the first formidable leader of the revolution. His troops would later, in 1794, join forces with the French. Years later in 1798, he negotiated American neutrality with John Adams, and finally in 1802, he was captured and deported to Europe. He died that same year in prison. Toussaint's death cleared the way for Dessalines to prove his commitment to the revolution as he assumed power and control of the Haitian troops. In 1803, he led the troops to a defeat of the French invading force and declared Haitian independence on December 31st. In October 1804 Dessalines crowned himself Emperor: "The Negro monarch entered into his inheritance, tailored and valeted by English and American capitalists" (James 370). In 1806, Dessalines was assassinated by two of his top generals, Alexandre Pétion and Henri Christophe. Henri Christophe was then elected president of the North side of Haiti, and Alexandre Pétion became president of the South side. This division was the start of Haiti's tumultuous civilization.

¹ This statement is inspired by Milan Kundera's essay "To be Absolutely Modern."

Though the war for independence concluded in 1804, the fight for equality and recognition continued well after liberation. As Fischer alludes to in the preface of her book, instead of celebrating the slaves' contribution to mankind, others have chosen to ignore it and concerned themselves more with the development and evolution of the race. This rejection of the racial equality favored by Haitians has caused westerners to isolate and castigate them. James explains this in *The Black Jacobins* when he makes it clear that the massacre of the whites was only a tragedy because of what it ultimately resulted in. For him, it was not the putative horror of the massacre that earned it its coinage. He asserts that:

Had the British and the Americans thrown their weight on the side of humanity, Dessalines might have been curbed. As it was Haiti suffered terribly from the resulting isolation. Whites were banished from Haiti for generations, and the unfortunate country, ruined economically and its population lacking in social structure, had its inevitable difficulties doubled by this massacre. That the new nation survived at all is forever to its credit for if the Haitians thought that imperialism was finished with them, they were mistaken. (374)

James makes his point by emphasizing the fact that the massacre was unnecessary because the whites were no longer feared. However, the decision to do so was based on the desperate need for independence. This massacre was just another impossible choice that proved very consequential. Dessalines did not order the massacre of the whites simply for revenge, as James states, he did it out of desperation. His dilemma was not much different than Toussaint's Dilemma. Dessalines may not have been afraid of the

whites, but he was terrified of what their presence could mean. Therefore, this massacre of whites does not symbolize the bestiality of Haitians, but rather the depth of their trepidation and trauma. As Aimé Césaire states: “They have been skillfully infected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, [and] abasement.”²

Consequently, the intensified rebellious spirit in the slaves was often misunderstood, or rather dismissed by the whites. Haitians’ fight for equality only confirmed the whites’ suspicions that blacks were savages who could not control their primitive instincts. This rather hypocritical assessment of the blacks by the whites persevered as time progressed.

Renda further examines the consequences of this assessment in her book *Taking Haiti*. She argues that during the occupation Haiti was only spoken of to express barbarism and unspeakable violence. Her book discusses how Haitians were victimized, once again, by imperialism. The United States explained their presence there by claiming that Haitians, because of their beastlike qualities, were incapable of governing themselves. Renda asserts that the occupation of Haiti endorsed a paternalist discourse that depicts Haitians as childlike people who need discipline and training; the kind of training they never received given their resistance to indoctrination over a hundred years ago. This image of Haiti, as stated before, exoticises the Haitian culture in the way it turned it into a mystified island. Renda explains why these different writers turned to Haiti for (self)-validation. She argues that the black republic offered new ways to understand blackness. She reports that “Americans who presided over, visited, or read about Haiti found opportunities to re-imagine their own nation and their own lives as they appear to be reflected and refracted through Haitian history and culture” (20). As a result,

² This quote appears in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*.

African-Americans, who were capable of identifying with Haiti, could question the authenticity of their identities as they reevaluated their blackness.

Furthermore, Frantz Fanon discusses the issues of the black man with himself and his plight as a man of color. He explains why it's necessary for black people to let go of the past in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He finds that it is necessary for the Negro to not be a slave to slavery, meaning that he must seek to be humanly recognized, not to be white, white-like, or whitened. The Negro who searches for white approval does not "demand human behavior from the other" (229). Instead he shows a willingness to hide his black skin behind a white mask. This is essentially what Dessalines was fighting against. His desperate measures were meant to secure the future of all blacks so that they would not have to apologize for their black skin. Dessalines was a lover of freedom, an extreme humanist to some, who was fighting for racial equality, not just for tolerance. Also, Fanon's theory explains why it was necessary for both westerners and Europeans to reject humane sensibility. He writes: "ah, yes, as you can see, by calling on humanity, on the belief in dignity, on love, on charity, it would be easy to prove, or to win the admission, that the black is the equal of the white" (32). Those who perpetuate the belief that blacks are in any way inferior to whites are but appealing charges that require them to atone for their atrocities against the black race. After all, would it be so wrong for us to say that whites exploited blacks because they wanted to feel human themselves, that is to say because they wanted to assert their superiority over the black race? What was the Haitian Revolution then if not a fight for humanity? Yet, Haitians were resented for asserting that humanity; Dessalines, their valiant leader, was vilified for his vigilance.

In such a case, I propose that Hughes' play *Troubled Island* is his sincere homage to Dessalines, a man he could identify with in different ways. Hughes' representation of Dessalines shows how he rejects the notion that Dessalines was a simple man driven by arrogance and cruelty. He saw him as a black man who wanted to prove to whites that black men were their equal on all counts. Hughes demonstrates that Dessalines was willing to break the chains of slavery at all costs in the way Dessalines openly expressed his sentiment to his people. By choosing to write thusly about Dessalines, Hughes unearths an alternate truth about the leaders of the revolution; and that truth is that the revolution happened because the Haitian slaves desired freedom and autonomy. However, *Dessalines, a Dramatic Tale: A Single Chapter from Haiti's History* by Easton retells the tale of the tragic emperor in a way that exposes what Easton posits as his true civilization. Easton uses religion to explain Dessalines' primitive tendencies. According to him, regardless of Dessalines' courage and honor, and love of freedom, he was still uncivilized. The civilized person, according to him, fears God and lives by His word. Therefore, the first chapter of the thesis employs exoticism to read Easton's play published in 1893, some years after the United States recognized Haiti's independence. Fischer's book explains why Easton chose to recuperate Haiti's image by transforming Dessalines into a devout believer. However, Easton's attempt at "modernizing" Haiti robs Haitians of their culture and denies them their victory. To prove this, this thesis will do more than just analyze these different representations of Dessalines. In this project I will attempt to prove that in both plays there is this pertinent fascination with the representation of Haiti as a perverse and unruly island.

Literature has, of course, served as a medium (albeit a safe or a subjective one) that provides different answers as to why the slave revolt in Haiti has been so well hidden and overlooked. Easton's interesting representation of Dessalines urges us to acknowledge the question of modernity that surrounds the Haitian Revolution. His play brings forth the question of religion: how equal could they be as non-Christians? By placing Dessalines in this religious framework he then becomes an honorable man. His portrayal of Dessalines as a Negro turned Christian shows that he was "aware of the need to Christianize the savage Negro soul" (Fanon 142). Easton was one of the first blacks to write about the Haitian Revolution and did so because he wanted to show "the heroic struggles of the Haitians for independence" (Fehrenbach 77). However, by imposing his idea of "the right lifestyle" on the Haitians he has actually emboldened their oppressors.

For instance, by looking at the available literature on Haiti, one will observe that the mere success of the revolution has been superseded by a less threatening phenomenon: the progression of Haiti as the first Black State. "Revolutionary Tradition in Black Drama," an essay by Errol Hill, briefly discusses this sudden shift in drama. Hill writes: "Faced on the one hand with the glorious triumph of the most successful slave revolt in History, and on the other with the disappointing reality of what Haiti has become, black writers are understandably preoccupied with the question: what went wrong?" (415). As history has it, Haiti was not recognized as independent by the United States until 1862 which is decades after France gave its recognition. President Boyer, in a failed attempt to improve Haiti's economic situation, compensated France for property

lost during the revolution.³ Other states refused to acknowledge the success of the revolution because they were afraid that “slave insurgency might well come to threaten their states too” (Fischer 1). After all, the greatest sin would have been to recognize the question of race as political, as Toussaint had clearly done by demanding that Haiti joined the dominant society on equal terms. When Haitian slaves claimed their independence they were asking for the world to accept them as their equal and to give them the chance to prove themselves. They were not asking for special treatment; they were ready to rule their people, but since the world was not yet ready to accommodate them, they were left to fend for themselves. France refused to acknowledge their freedom and demanded that they be compensated for their losses. Determined to keep their independence, Haitians were forced to buy their freedom from France. The price they had to pay set them back many years financially and socially.

In *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Edwidge Danticat remarks that there were no congratulatory salutes from the United States when Haitians claimed their independence in 1804. This lack of support from their neighbor gravely handicapped their infrastructure. Danticat writes that more than “200 years had passed since the Western Hemisphere’s second Republic was created” (97), yet its development as a free state has been sluggish. The deleterious effect of this desertion is still noticeable today. “The profound wounds that this process left in its collective psyche, and the ways in which these events affected external perceptions of Haiti” are revealed in subsequent

³ Haitian President Boyer, in 1825, agrees to give France 150 million francs as repayment in return for France’s recognition of Haitian independence.

stories of horror about Haiti.⁴ In the “[Un]kindness of Strangers: Writing Haiti in the 21st century,” J. Michael Dash writes about how many writers have attempted to explain Haiti. Dash’s humorous account of their comical attempts to define Haiti shows that their error was in the incorporation of the gothic. These strangers, as Dash calls them, seem incapable of writing about Haiti without talking about how grotesque and peculiar the country is.⁵ Dash remarks that “not only does Haitian history seem doomed to repeat itself, but American Marines writing about Haiti seem destined to repeat each other” (171). The story shared by marines and magnanimous whites alike is one that was alleged to be true because they all either had qualifications or they were philanthropists with no ulterior motives. That same story, written in many forms and told invariably, defined Haiti as a deprived country unable to show gratitude to “benevolent” foreigners; as unfit for democracy and incapable to govern themselves. And so, no doubt the narratives, Broadway plays, poems and essays produced by these writers and outsiders contribute to the belief that Haiti is an uncivilized nation with a body of obdurate and depraved people in need of guidance and discipline.

If anything, Americans used Haiti as an example of black civilization as they became aware of their white civilization. The U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 contributed a lot more to American culture in the way that it sensationalized the events that happened in Haiti by forcing outsiders and participants to view Haiti as a nation in dire need of help. Consequently, Haiti was a looking glass that reflected what they

⁴ Appears in a review by Kenneth Maxwell of Sybille Fisher’s book *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*.

⁵ Michael J. Dash refers to John Houston Graige, Robert and Nancy Heintz, Michael Heintz, Philippe Girard, John D. Garrigus as unkind strangers who write about Haiti. He accuses them of writing about Haiti under the pretense of having a creole identity.

wanted to see versus what was there. Many of Haiti's visitors were inspired to paint pictures of the country as they "saw" and "understood" it. Their representation of Haitians as primitively merciless, or Dessalinienne, as Haitians have dubbed themselves, leaves us wondering whether or not the revolution was rushed. Thus, the unthinkable has been reduced to an accidental and subsidiary phenomenon, an "at the most": "the most that can be said of this revolution, it would appear, is that it 'achieved independence'" (Bongie 74). At the most, they were able to free themselves, but at the risk of what? At the most, Haiti is now an independent nation, not an autonomous one. That they achieved independence was no longer the amazing factor; the aftermath of such a success was now the pertinent dynamic that interested writers. "The impact of the occupation on the United States must be understood then, with the reference to the rich and varied cultural engagement it precipitated" argues Renda (302). For example, Harlem Renaissance personality Langston Hughes, who traveled to Haiti during the US Occupation in search of an African identity, wrote *Troubled Island* in 1936 to honor Haiti's first emperor. The portrayal of Dessalines in *Troubled Island* is that of a tragic personage. For Hughes, Dessalines, like Toussaint, were both haunted by a deadly desire, they both wanted to make Haiti "La Perle des Antilles." As a black man fighting for the progress of the race, Hughes understood that need to elevate and showcase the courage and beauty of the island. Instead of highlighting what others call his beastlike qualities, Hughes praised Dessalines for his unending self-pride.

Both Hughes and Easton, among others, felt compelled at some point in their lives to retell the Haitian Revolution. Their unique representation of Haiti in these plays highlights their own abstract relationship with the island. My first chapter examines how

Easton's play depicts Dessalines as an intellectual and reasonable man. The play ends with Dessalines and Clarisse in a tight embrace inside the church before the altar with Dessalines professing his eternal love and conversion to Christianity to Clarisse. This adaption of the Haitian history depicts Dessalines as a man who believes his greatest victory to be that he is able to overcome his ignorance. The discourse in *Dessalines* is imbued with Easton's religious and political beliefs. At the age of twenty-two Easton was a prominent figure in the Republican politics of the State of Texas. He served for twelve years as the chairman of the executive committee of the Republican party of the Travis County. Robert J. Fehrenbach writes that "With the assistance of Rev. I. B. Scott, afterward Bishop Scott, of the M. E. Church, and Rev. A. Grant, bishop of the A. M. E. Church, Mr. Easton organized the Texas Blade Publishing Company and became its editor, giving the race a fearless advocate and defender."⁶ His representation of Dessalines was supposed to offer a new image of black culture. That he chose to write about Dessalines is a "tribute to the magnificent courage and achievements of the Negro" (77). But that he would choose to tame Dessalines is a manifestation of his own religious beliefs and his need to represent the black race as worthy and intellectual. According to Easton, the slaves' struggle creates a racial complex originating from a nonexistent relationship with God. Easton's conservative education and lifestyle posits the slaves' oppression and barbarous nature in their misapprehension of the Bible and the unbelief in Christian faith.

⁶ This biographical information on Easton, written by Janice G. Stickley, accompanies the online version of the play. Her source is Fehrenbach's essay titled "William Edgar Easton's *Dessalines*: A Nineteenth Century Drama of Black Pride and Beasley's book titled *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*.

My second chapter turns to how Langston Hughes, as a black dramatist, seemed to be more concerned with recreating this oppressing and unmerited image of black people as inherently immoral. For this image not only contradicts the advancement and accomplishments of the black nation, more importantly, it dismisses and demeans its humanity. The play celebrates the struggle that many are too quick too often to discount. It speaks to all black people; it is meant to inspire them and to remind them that all Americans share a national identity and that that identity unites them all by their common experiences as black people. Hughes was always fighting to end segregation in America. He wanted blacks in America to redeem and empower themselves. Hughes did not use religion or faith as a driving force in his representation of Dessalines. Instead, he viewed him as a courageous man who was preaching a more resounding sermon. Dessalines' philosophy would have never allowed him to accept a God that the whites prayed to and thanked after killing innocent slaves. Further, it would not allow him to "worship at an altar where the sacrifice of liberty and manhood occur each day" (Easton 7). Dessalines' dream was to create a united black nation that would rise above all wretchedness, as was Hughes' dream for the black race.

Possibly because of its tumultuous past and tragic present, Haiti has remained the example of premature freedom. Western society's fascination with Haiti seems to be a desire for it to fail so that they can confirm their charges against the black race. They claim that black people are not fit for self-government. If they can prove that to be true then it will also prove their defense that slavery was essential and natural to the development of the new world. Nonetheless, the Haitian Revolution "had created a new race of men" (James 197); A group of people who saw no need to be ashamed of being

black. The creation of this new race is the legacy of the revolution. It should inspire blacks everywhere to revolutionize, to take back their pride and confidence.

CHAPTER ONE

RECUPERATING HAITI:

BECOMING THE ALLY OF ONE'S OWN GRAVEDIGGERS

To question the need for the Haitian Revolution and to begrudge its success is to blame the slaves for being humans. The revolution happened and was successful because Haitian slaves were acutely aware of their oppression but rejected their classification as chattel. As a group of enslaved people, they challenged their oppressors' wild and unmerited ideologies by fighting for their rights as men. Their fight for freedom was so that they could regain their status as free-born human beings. Therefore, it would have been outlandish for them not to follow the example of their French oppressors who were also fighting for their rights as men. This idea is echoed in Sybille Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed* in which she posits the revolution as a challenge to the status quo. She reproaches those who continue to perpetuate the idea that Haitians have possibly crippled their supposed civilization in achieving a freedom that they fought hard and long to get. If revolutions are recognized as quintessential modern events then why is the Haitian Revolution looked upon as an aberration?⁷ It seems to be that Haitian slaves viewed slavery as both a social and political problem. They demanded that their oppressors see them as humans, something that the institution of slavery considered absurd at the time.

⁷ Sybille Fischer uses Hanna Arendt's *On Revolution of 1963* as an example to show how Haiti and revolutionary antislavery cause trouble for political theory. She writes that Hanna's main argument is that: "revolutions are quintessential modern events" and yet despite "the fortunes made on the colonial plantations and through the slave trade played an important part in the rise of the bourgeoisie in many European regions, the Caribbean plantation and the political upheavals in the colonies rarely make into the canonical histories of modernity and revolution" (7).

But that the slaves saw no reason why they could not call themselves humans, as did their white counterparts who forced them into labor, shows critical thinking. Therefore, simply by avowing their equality, Haitians were able to merge the social with the political. The revolution started because of the continuous disregard of the slaves' feelings and humanity that fueled the slaves' desire for freedom, a freedom that they deemed attainable only through politics. The desire to have the same human rights as those cruel and unabashed French masters who only saw them as property helped them establish a society that many could not conceive. Therefore, the idea of the unthinkable exceeds the revolution and finds rest only if we recognize the revolution as modern, for this relative egalitarian society we have now is what they were fighting for after all. However, William Edgar Easton's play *Dessalines, a Dramatic Tale*, written in 1893 does not recognize the revolution as a good example of "universal human liberty."⁸ He misses the point of what makes Haiti modern in the way he equates modernity with civilization.

Unlike his contemporary Frederick Douglass who understands that civilization has always followed modernity, Easton "subjectifies" history in the way he stereotypes Haiti's wild nature.⁹ Unlike Douglass who sees a complacent and proud Haiti determined to stay true to herself and her autonomy, Easton sees a degenerate state in ruins. According to Fischer, blacks in the United States, in the mid-1860s, ceased to view Haiti

⁸ Spoken by Frederick Douglass, Easton's contemporary, who speaks differently of Haiti. His speech is about Haiti's progress in the line of civilization.

⁹ The point here is that Easton was well aware of the fact that his representation of Haiti was unique and false. But, he pleads with historians to credit an "erring brother" for keeping up with the spirit of the revolution. And by saying that "Dessalines in only a 'pointer' to the literati," he reinforces that the story of the revolution and its impact on the world can still be glorious even if the story of its leader, Dessalines, changes.

as an example of Black liberation. Many of them questioned whether or not the slaves were ready for liberty, whether or not they really understood the words “vive la liberté” that they were singing, and whether they could truly be equals when they endorsed different beliefs from those they were seeking approval from. So, all sorts of allegations were made against Haiti during her time as a free state. These allegations were becoming pervasive and mainstream in the 19th century, and it is those allegations that Easton hoped to refute in writing *Dessalines, a Dramatic Tale*. The play is not about the revolution, and Easton makes that clear when he does not tell us when in history the play is taking place. Easton is more concerned with rehabilitating Dessalines’ image as Haiti’s first leader. Instead of the historically infamous Dessalines who was often depicted “as a man of action and violence without a real corresponding ideology or political project” (Dubois 542), he conceives a Dessalines that is patient, moral and perceptive.¹⁰ Devoid of violence of any kind, the play ends with Dessalines and Clarisse in a tight embrace inside the church before the altar with Dessalines professing his eternal love and conversion to her. This adaptation of the Haitian history depicts Dessalines as a man who believes his greatest victory to be that he is able to conquer himself by overcoming his ignorance. Also, characters like Petou and Dominique in the play reflect Easton’s sentiment about the Island. He saw Haiti as an island in need of divinity. If Easton was indeed looking to immortalize the distinguished dead and to give rise to the black race during that period

¹⁰ Laurent Dubois writes in his essay “Dessalines Toro d’Haiti” that “the vision of Dessalines as a violent leader, one bent on revenge and carnage, emerged in the 1790s, solidified in the 1800s, and in many ways is still with us—both in Haiti and outside it” (543). The word *toro* in Dubois’ title is a creole word for bull, a word obviously used as an epithet for Dessalines. In the years following the revolution Dessalines has been seen as a ruthless, violent and “a bossal slave.” According to Deborah Jensen Dessalines was a bossal because he was born in Africa and resisted becoming a black Creole. In her essay “Jean-Jacques Dessalines and the African Character of the Haitian Revolution” Jensen writes that Armand Levasseur, a lieutenant in the French army of Saint Domingue, believed that Dessalines was a bossal: an illiterate and brutal African.

when prejudices against Haiti were determining its image, then he could not have done better than depicting a Haitian revolutionary leader. That he chose to write about Dessalines in the way that he did is a manifestation of his own religious beliefs and his need to praise the uncelebrated and unrecognized qualities of the black race. According to Easton, the slaves' struggle creates a racial complex originating from a nonexistent relationship with God. This racial complex prevents them from seeing the "good values" that whites had to offer. Easton's conservative education and lifestyle posits the slaves' oppression and barbarous nature as a reason for their misapprehension of the Bible and unbelief in Christian faith. Given this reading of the play, readers can understand Dessalines' transformation as Easton's way of bringing civilization to Haiti. But this attempt at "modernizing" Haiti robs Haitians of their culture and denies them their victory.

It must be understood that when Haitian slaves fought for freedom, they were fighting for equality and fraternity as well, even though it seems like of the three only one was recognized. Though recognized, their freedom was not respected or valued. Haitians were seen with contempt and were excluded or insulted because of their color. Many African Americans who could identify with Haitians' struggle against oppression discovered a misunderstood nation. While each artist celebrates Haitian heroism in his or her own unique voice, it still remained that "because of its status as the first black republic in the western hemisphere, Haiti became a feared symbol of antislavery revolution and thus also a feared symbol of black republic" (Chancy 204). Thus, the revolution provided an outlet for many black writers to challenge their own ideologies about race. It allowed them to explore that sense of duty that obliged them to seek out an

alternate truth. In writing *Dessalines* Easton hoped to end the everlasting image of the Negro that continued to oppress the black race. Easton contends that black people have to assert their true identity in order to counter the misrepresentations of the race. However, the precedent that he sets entraps Negroes rather than empowers them. They find themselves in a loop; an exhaustive loop that requires them to resort to undesired measures to assert power. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes about an old friend who is a Negro medical student who “had an agonizing conviction that he was not taken at his true worth—not on the university level, he explained, but as a human being” (60). This Negro medical student who was afraid that he would never get the deserved respect and recognition from his European colleagues felt forced to join the army in order to feel worthy. To him, joining the army was the very last resort. Finally, he was feared and respected. He was able to “make white men adopt a Negro attitude toward him. In this way he was obtaining revenge for the imago that had always obsessed him: the frightened, trembling Negro, abased before the white overlord” (61). No longer seen as a subservient Negro, the medical student was able to alter his image. This Negro friend is similar to Dessalines who wanted more than anything to be respected, to be seen as he saw himself.

Milan Kundera also discusses the notion of the self and identity in relation to what he terms imagology in his popular novel *Immortality*.¹¹ Kundera defines imagology as “something that goes by so many names: advertising, agencies, designers who devise the shape of everything from cars to gym equipment, political campaigns...” (113). The

¹¹ *Immortality* was published in 1991. In the book Kundera discusses why novels are susceptible to deconstruction and why they are so adaptable. Also, he takes a deconstructionist view of the modern world to discuss the concept of identity in a postmodern world.

list does not have to stop there. I add to it travel writers, media, journalists and black writers who act as imagologues that dictate the desired and favorable ways of seeing Haiti because as Kundera writes, “ the reign of imagology begins where history ends” (116). When ideology fails to influence, when it fails to amend history, imagology enters and dominates. As a result of this, society becomes dependent on these imagologues who shape people’s ideas about culture. Kundera expresses the view that as humans, people are nothing more than images in the eyes of others. He makes the argument that “as humans we are not the master of ourselves/images. We are at the mercy of those who see us; our image lies in the eyes of others” (114). Kundera’s argument confirms the Negro’s fear of not being seen as a worthy human being who happened to be black. In a less than tolerable world, the black as the other has to transform himself, to practically become whitewashed, in order to feel human. Kundera here is explaining the critical aspect of the self as a looking glass to prove the arbitrariness of binaries.

The idea of the self as a looking glass is discussed in greater details in Michael J. Dash’s book *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination*. Dash argues that Haiti is rather an invention of the American imagination in the way that they each perceive the other as what they are not in a struggle for superiority and validation. Patrick Bryan states that Dash “suggests, at first impishly, but with increasingly great conviction that the American perception of Haiti had as much to do with American perceptions of themselves and what they did not wish to be” (279). In other words, the book establishes a parallel between the way Haitians and Americans interact with each other. According to Dash, they both reject the other as something they would not want to be, thus creating an imaginary binary. Consequently, Haiti was a

looking glass that reflected what the U.S. wanted to see versus what was there. His book is an “attempt to show how polarizing stereotypes in imaginative literature are developed which make historical and political realities intelligible” (x). Some wanted to see a more civilized populace that is advancing and contributing to the world; others wanted to confirm their prejudices and saw “the extreme example of blacks lapsing into savagery when restraints were lifted” (9). His goal was to reveal how both Haiti and the United States paint a certain image of the other in order to build tolerance for what they consider unattractive and sacrilegious.

Both Dash and Kundera provide an interesting concept with which we can analyze Easton’s treatment of the Haitian Revolution. Easton defined Haiti against the same thing Haiti was fighting: the ideals of Christian Europeans. Consequently, Haiti had to renounce its uniqueness for a chance to be absolutely modern. Kundera contends that to be absolutely modern “has no fixed, clearly defined content” (138). Therefore, for Easton, Haiti’s modernity is determined by the character of its people not by its victory over ignorance. *Immortality* tells us that we will never see ourselves as others see us because we do not form our own image; we are rather told and informed of our image. As stated by Michael Dash, “the other is denied its own objectivity and simply exists so that the subject can define itself” (2). Haiti, as the other emptied of its own identity, becomes “a commodity to be dominated or possessed” (Dash 1). And in order to survive in this image obsessed society, most refuse to see Haiti for what it is; insisting instead on rehabilitating its image by using Dessalines as their instrument. Not unlike these black writers, Easton takes control of the “literati of the race” by rewriting history. His retelling

of the Haitian Revolution shows that he is more concerned with correcting the past than with exposing it in all its glory.

Consequently, Easton's depiction of Dessalines establishes his disavowal of Haiti's modernity. By transforming Dessalines, Easton did more than just project his insecurities and fantasies onto Haiti, he reinvented Haiti. Easton wanted to create a black nation united as one under God. Easton uses Dessalines to discuss Haiti in an attempt to create transnational ties in the fight against racism and imperialism. The language used in the play resonates more with a western canon that reconstructs the Haitian culture. In approaching the subject of Haiti in that manner, Easton, as a black man, destroys his racial roots in order to celebrate a black past that he deems more heroic. Robert J. Fehrenbach titles his essay "William Edgar Easton's *Dessalines*: A nineteenth-Century Drama of Black Pride" and starts it with: "Late in nineteenth century, when the American Negro was customarily presented on the stage as the silly darkie or the clownish song and dance man of the minstrel show, William Edgar Easton, an American black, wrote a play celebrating the beauty, strength, and heroic virtues of his people" (75). So, Easton's decision to transform the founder of the first black republic stems from a desire to reform the public opinion about the first independent blacks of the world, for if it is believed that if they fought for freedom in the name of God then what they did was justified if not ordained. In the preface of the play, he shares with his readers the reason for such a provocative play. He writes:

Especially with us has the art of drama writing been neglected. This fact is more deplorable when we pause to consider the potent influence the drama wields in the reformation or vitiation of public opinion. In recent Rome

the drama was made the reformer of private vices and public morals. On the mimic stage were portrayed the direful results of the abuse of power, and kings were made acquainted with the needs of their subjects. The stage in those days, as it is today, was a mirror for despots to view their own inquiry. (iv)

Easton chastises black writers for not realizing the power of the stage. The stage, he explains, has always been the place to unmask the problem. Therefore, black writers should use it as an apparatus for reformation because only then can they really change how people see them. In writing *Dessalines* he is displaying the new Negro. He asserts that the Negro cannot progress if he does not take advantage of the world he lives in.

The discourse in *Dessalines* is imbued with Easton's religious and political beliefs. Easton opens the play with Flavien, a mulatto, looking to confirm his suspicions that "there must be some infernal conspiracy afloat" (1). This distressed and troubled character sets up the religious tone in the play. Flavien only exists in the first scene of the play and serves no purpose outside its religious framework. When Dessalines enters the first scene, Flavien is passionately declaring his hatred for the race that his mother was cursed with. Dessalines, who hears him ranting, calmly reminds him that he is nothing more than what he just expressed, that he is simply a lowly "mulatre drawn from the carcass of a slave, by the unrighteous process of the master, [and] is a human given to the world unable to bear the ostracism of racial prejudice and capable of every slavish hatred" (7). As a mulatto, Flavien, who despises the black race, is depicted as a God-fearing man who preaches obedience and the goodness of God to the slaves. Dessalines tells him that his religion only teaches slaves how to be subservient to their master. He

explains to him that the instructions and teachings of his masters are empty words designed to oppress the black race. He depicts a Dessalines who is as much an orator as he is a fighter. His words inspire and punish those around him. He takes pride in being black because he sees worth in being black, and deceit in the opposing race. However, his attitude changes later in the play when he meets Clarisse, a mulatresse, who finally succeeds in making him a God-fearing man. Her acts of kindness and her gentleness touch Dessalines so deeply that he longs “to hear the tale of Christianity from a truthful source” (64). Because of Clarisse he comes to realize that the masters have been lying to them all along. He realizes that it isn’t God that he hates because he never knew Him; it is rather the false doctrine that the masters are feeding them that he hates.

However, that Easton had to alter Dessalines’ image to put a positive spin on the revolution shows that he did not recognize the revolution as modern. According to Fehrenbach, “Dessalines’ conversion seems to indicate that along with uprooting his primitivism and paganism, the new faith will make him more like the good Clarisse: sweet and gentle” (83). Christianity’s authority in the play usurps the authority of the African gods, which Dessalines credited for initiating the slave revolt before the influence of Clarisse. In the play, Dessalines’ conversion does not come with any big revelation or miracle. In fact, the only miracle he witnesses comes from within. The more knowledge he acquires, the more confused he becomes. His idea of justice, then, is becoming more complicated as his ignorance surfaces. He finds himself in conflict with his conscience; he does not know that he had so much to learn about the doctrines of Christianity. After a long battle with himself, he finally declares that he believes:

With all my heart, at last—I believe! Only yesterday I decided to turn this temple over to the barbarous hands of my rude soldiery. Impotent! Aye, and I would stand calmly view the work, and gloat in diabolic pleasure at the butchery of the priests, and the cries of the affrighted nuns, and found music in the groans of the slaughtered dead! Start not, maiden!—reason had left its throne, in its stead, frenzy ran riot in crimsoned with the lifeblood of nobler thought, by stern rage, bereft reason, forgot I, that even in the darkest hours of our enslavement ranked with the stupid ox and patient ass, here beside yon altar was one place where the humble slave could kneel side by side with the proud master. Here at least there were no slaves; no masters, save the one Master of all mankind! (Easton 114)

With these words Dessalines confesses his conversion to Clarisse, whom he claims to be more “potent” than the French. She “outgeneralled” him, the leader of the slaves, and with her guidance he was able to understand the mystery of his troubled heart, a heart he reckons will be as true to her as it has been to the cause of liberty. Therefore, imagology finds its full expression in Dessalines. Imago, as employed by Fanon, means an idealized mental image of another person or the self. After having rescued Clarisse from the hands of what he deems to be ignorance, Dessalines realizes that he also has been rescued. Clarisse helps him find in himself “a mind ripe for Christian good” (Easton 102). For that reason, one is to deduce that Dessalines is also a victim of his image. He learns that his “irrational” behavior is controlled by a desire to maintain a distorted image of him, and a past that wronged him.

Before Clarisse, Dessalines was seen as nothing more than an “infernal black,” someone with a warped vision of freedom filled with cruelties and hatred. He was ruthless in his search for justice, seemingly born ready to kill for liberation, and often said to be soulless. But with the help of the fair maiden who embodies Christianity, a new image of him is emerged. Now, readers see him as Clarisse does, a chivalrous man suffering from the ignorance of men:

In his fiercest moments, when fresh from the maddening exchange of blows; begrimed with the cannon’s smoke and bespattered with the crimson tear of life, he hath been to me, always, a courteous gentleman. And my woman’s heart—unlike thy cold judicial mind—tells me no man, who hath proper respect for virtuous womanhood, can be evil to the core.
(Easton 102)

According to Easton, this new image of Dessalines fits better because it renders Dessalines a modern man fighting for human rights. This is to say that Easton uses Dessalines as a tool in his quest for the new Negro.¹² The play depicts its hero, Dessalines, as an intellectual and reasonable man. This is a rather significant change in Dessalines’ character. Clarisse saves Dessalines from her brother Rigaud who only knows the barbarous Dessalines. She explains to him that Dessalines is much more than the image he embodies. In Dessalines she sees a person deserving of love and honor. This picture implies that Easton, possibly because he failed to see the revolution as modern, did not see the greatness in Dessalines and those that chose to join him in the fight for liberty.

¹² Deborah Jensen informs us that there exists a “racist allegory linking Dessalines’ African origins to ignorance and ferocity, which has become the common image of the Negro” (625).

Easton admits that it is in his own humble fashion and “with diffidence” that he penned what he perceived to be a recuperative image of the Negro. He wrote *Dessalines, a Dramatic Tale* in 1893, a period when plays about Haiti were particularly scarce in the United States. The play has been out of print for quite some time. It has just recently been published by Forgotten Books in 2012. Consequently, there is little to no scholarship available on it. Fehrenbach, who is one of the scholars who write about it, reports that “the play saw limited production, and the published form of the drama, never reissued or reprinted, has been all but omitted from lists and bibliographies of American plays” (75). He presents three readings of the play in his essay published in 1975, but it is with the third I agree. He states that *Dessalines* is “a sentimental, melodramatic, and often bombastic play” (75). This assertion can be credited to the Christian theme in the play, which according to Fehrenbach “weakens the play artistically, detracting from the power of the heroic figure and confusing the racial theme” (84). As established earlier, the representation of Dessalines as a God fearing man undermines the modernity of the revolution, and misrepresents the identity of its leaders. Fehrenbach also writes that “the play, set during the Haitian struggle for independence, is romanticized history with events and characters, especially the central figure, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, altered to suit Easton’s purposes” (75). This means that Easton inserts Haiti in the mainstream world where Haitians are forced to abandon their tradition in order to mimic that of their oppressors. As a result of this, the people of Haiti have become a specimen, a body of people with no past, no struggle, no identity and no origin.

Ex minister to Haiti, Frederick Douglass’s speech in Chicago shares the same timeline as Easton’s irreconcilable play. Douglass gave his speech on January 2, 1893 in

honor of Haiti. His speech elevates instead of recuperates Haiti. A few weeks later, on January 20, Easton wrote the preface to his play in which he pleads for “the critic with a charitable hand [to] separate its history from romance and [to] give the author the credit, at least, of seeking in the way he knows best to teach the truth” (vii). The truth that Easton so desperately wants to preach is that the human mind cannot be captivated by slavery. This, he deems more important than Douglass’s truth that Haiti “has grandly served the cause of universal human liberty” (Douglass). Like many other Black Americans, Easton was too concerned to paint a picture that accurately mirrors Haiti, “the only self-made Black republic” (Douglass). He could not see the beauty that existed in Haiti at the time because he was too close to the subject. His version of the revolution is drastically shaped by his insecurities as a black man of Haitian descent.¹³ What he wanted to see, while he stood erect behind his tainted glass, was a country that was self-governed and westernized. The play, then, falls short of Easton’s intention. According to Easton, it was supposed to be his feeble attempt at elevating the Black race by lionizing its tradition, history, literature and music.

By defining Haiti against the same thing it was fighting, Easton weakens Haiti’s contribution to the new world. To Easton, Haiti’s story has yet to be told in a manner that proves its modernity. However, Frederick Douglass says that the Haitian Revolution modernized society in a way that the so called ancient nations ever did. The fathers of the revolution teach the world the most important lesson of all about humanity. Douglass had this to say about Haiti in his speech:

¹³ Robert Fehrenbach alludes to this when he writes that “when the subject is as close to the dramatist’s life as the theme of racial injustice is to a black American, artistic perspective is essential if he is to avoid writing propaganda instead of imaginatively charged theatrical experience” (89).

Until Haiti struck for freedom, the conscience of the Christian world slept profoundly over slavery. It was scarcely troubled even by a dream of this crime against justice and liberty... Until she spoke no Christian nation had abolished Negro slavery. Until she spoke no Christian nation had given to the world an organized effort to abolish slavery. Until she spoke, the slave trade was sanctioned by all the Christian nations of the world. Until Haiti spoke, the church was silent, and the pulpit was dumb. Slave-traders lived and slave-traders died, and of them it was said that they died in triumphs of the Christian faith and went to heaven among the just.

With these words Douglass, who was of course speaking historically of the influences of the Haitian Revolution in society, paints a vastly different picture than Easton. Douglass wants us to understand that Haiti in all her former glory has always been, and will continue to be “the theatre of great events” (Douglass). Only on its soil have many brave souls fought for an unspeakable freedom. Haiti was the first to be invaded by Christianity and also the first to expose its hypocrisy and falsehood. When Haiti struck for freedom, its people displayed great courage and an intelligence that surpassed that of the great civilization of her time.

The above quote complicates the Christian message that Easton advocates. Those words show how Easton, in a way, reverts a truly modern revolution to backwards Christian models. In Easton’s picture it is Haiti that is transformed; it is Haiti that is conquered by the Christian world. He theorizes Christianity as the answer to Haiti’s struggle. Again, the structure of the play proves that Easton is indeed writing for a white audience. Easton’s objective is not to preserve the sanctity of the revolution. It is rather to

conceive a heroic image of blackness that reflects his faith. His depiction of Dessalines and the slaves of Haiti merely offers an alternate view of the history that started a revolution. The many consistent representations of Haiti, Easton noticed, continued to reinforce stereotypes of blacks such as laziness, childishness, and violent irrationality. So, in order to rectify them, he uses colorful yet hollow words to speak of Haiti and the slaves, words that undermine the spirit of the revolution. Hence, he turns the revolution into exactly what it was not. The revolution was more than just breathing “words of hatred” (8), according to Easton’s Dessalines. He resisted using the slaves’ vernacular because he was too aware that he was the first person taking advantage of the drama genre. The dialogue in the play confirms Easton’s need for recuperating the black race. As shown in the play, the focus is rather on the philosophy and the intellect of the slaves, not the fearlessness and the many obstacles they had to overcome in spite of their handicaps.¹⁴ As one of the first black Americans to join the world of historical drama, Easton wanted to disprove the myth about Negro by writing a play about religion that could inspire all races. However, he wrote the play not to show the slaves’ struggle and the injustices of slavery, but more to exhibit the intelligence and the simplicity of the slaves. To him, all they wanted was to be free on all terms.

For example, in Easton’s play the slaves are not the ordinary always ready for battle slaves. Characters such as Petou and Dominique are portrayed as opportunists. Their deaths in the play reveal Easton’s prejudices against the slaves’ religion.

Fehrenbach writes: “in the rebellion Dessalines is striking and exemplary; he is the black

¹⁴ According to Fehrenbach, Easton was greatly interested in contemporary state of the theatre. He writes: with its war, comedy, romance, music, dance, grand speeches, a multiplicity of characters and conflict, and a variety of scenes, the play is first of all theatrical entertainment” (85). Characters like Petou and Dominique prove that “Easton seems to have attempted to write a Shakespearean play about blacks” (85).

hero par excellence. The antics of Dominique and Petou [both of whom practice voodoo] serve to set off the heroic deeds of the black leader” (88). The pedantic and philosophical Dominique awaits the victory of a revolution that he takes no part of in the hope that Dessalines will make him the Lord Chancellor of Port-au-Prince. He advises Petou, his faithful servant, about life, women, and grandeur: “let me again tell thee, knave Petou, shouldst thou expect to become like unto myself, thou must in thy chrysalis state mortify the flesh. From women, strong drink—strong drink, thy weakness—richly spiced foods and fine feathers thou must abstain” (Easton 41). Dominique is advising Petou on how to behave once the French no longer rule Haiti. He represents the pseudo-intellectual, pseudo-civilized Negro in the play. He has a philosophy about everything, but refuses to take the necessary actions. He speaks about freedom in terms of appreciation for the better things in life, but does not embrace Christianity. He recognizes that there is more to life than freedom, and fears that Dessalines is missing that point. This is why he hopes to be the Lord Chancellor of Port-au-Prince. He wants the chance to introduce them to the fine things in life, to civilization.

Dominique, unlike Dessalines, does not believe that liberty is a life of freedom. He asserts that the price of freedom is death, and that to him is beyond the ultimate price. He believes that there is more to life than liberty and he expects that he can enjoy that without fighting for liberty. According to Fehrenbach, “the disdainful comments of Dominique about the will-o’-the-wisp ‘liberty’ only make more eloquent Dessalines’ repeated defense of freedom and liberty” (88). After all, as Dominique understands, those who fight for freedom are dreaming a false dream of happiness:

Well, says my philosophy: “man is born of woman and liveth but a few days. He cometh up in the morning and is chopped down about nightfall. That joy which lasteth not long is a precious boon. To keep this boon the wise man maketh any sacrifice. Not so with the fool. He seeketh what he calls happiness; he sometimes calls it liberty. In pursuit of the myth he loseth substance.” Ah, what gaineth thy stomach shouldst thou get the whole shoat and lose all that teeth. (Easton 42)

Easton here is speaking through Dominique of the future of an unrestrained Haiti. Unrestrained to him signifies a lack of divine guidance. Easton romanticized the revolution in order to design a play that brightens Haiti’s future. Dominique is seen warning Petou of the days after the revolution. He recognizes that the slaves still have much to learn before they can be independent, and unless they realize that, they will never be happy with themselves. According to Dominique, there’s no use to look for happiness in life because we are constantly faced with dangers. Therefore, we shall seek to be content with life, because one’s life is never full.

Petou looks up to Dominique whom he perceives as “the naughtiest wine imbiber in the army” (Easton 26). Together they form the duo in the play that also serves as comic relief. Petou is the humorous one who executes Dominique’s schemes. He ridicules Dominique who often accuses him of having a poor brain that cannot master great things. Yet, Petou is often successful in tricking him. For instance, when Dominique threatens to have him killed, Petou outwits him by appealing to his ambitions:

Strike, my lord, with all thy strength; strike as one who would, with one fell blow, bury ambition with hatred....if by chance, thy blow were to

kill—ah, bien! Bid goodbye to thy—rather my eloquent memorial to
Dessalines, giving good reason why thou shouldst be created Lord
Chancellor of Port-au-Prince. (Easton 38)

Thus, Petou convinces Dominique to forgive him. Very well assured of himself, Petou boasts that even flies and roaches are caught with treacle. These two do not participate in the revolution. They are portrayed as greedy individuals looking for riches. Through them we learn that Dessalines loved not God or himself better than liberty. Theirs is the only death that is shown as inevitable in the play. According to Dessalines, they are nothing more than hardened villains who have no desire for the public good, and therefore must die. Their death carries great meaning in the play because it helps us understand Easton's rhetoric that is filled with religious undertones. As Fehrenbach suggests, Easton's improved Dessalines is an example of "contrived religious explanations for all good that happens" (88). Dessalines' capability to accept God, his openness to Christianity renders him modern and honorable. By killing off the two immoral characters in the play, he reminds readers of the intended message in the play. His stated reason for writing *Dessalines* is that he hopes to see a "happier era inaugurated by the constant production of legitimate drama, written exclusively for Negro players and meeting... with the full endorsement of the brother in white" (Easton vii). This statement in its entirety is testimonial to Easton's definition of modernity. He was not writing for the Black race; he was writing to please white society.

This play is different from other plays inspired by the Haitian Revolution such as Hughes' *Troubled Island*, Walcott's *The Haitian Earth*, Walcott's *Drums and Colours*, and Matheus' *Ounga* because it is set in Port-au-Prince and does not end with a dead

Dessalines. The setting of the play does not truly matter to Easton because, as I argue, he is not writing a play to celebrate a symbolic history; the revolution is not his main concern. He wrote the play to vitiate public opinion. His representation of the revolution excuses the slaves' barbaric manner and explains their position rather than promotes their courage. For instance, Dessalines' monologue at the end of Act 3 answers the lingering question on the public's mind. It is directed at those who wonder if the leaders of the slave rebellion thought of themselves as modern:

It is cruel, Dessalines—'tis barbarous, Dessalines; but no more cruel, no more barbarous than my examplers in this war.... My cause is just and their cause is wrong. Mine are the deeds of the avenging gods that follow in the wake of crime. Their battles are to enslave and make of men beasts; my battles are for human rights, and it is just my blows should fall the hardier.... I ask my heart, when these Franks harnessed in all contrivances of their boasted civilization, with bottomless mines of saltpeter wrung from the innermost bowels of the earth; with weapons of steel tempered in the heat of the lighting's flash; with engines of war that belch forth death—destroying hundreds with the bare lighting of a fuse—with all these arts, the result of centuries of study, the Franks have yet to learn the meaning of justice. (81)

Dessalines preaches that he is the product of the environment in which he was made a slave. If he is a savage it is not because he is from a weaker race, but because as a black, he was enslaved and treated like a savage. Therefore, when it comes time to rebel against the cruelties of the French, he retaliates with fearful vengeance, and with the same

savagery the “Franks” practiced on them. The difference between Dessalines and his oppressors is that, unlike them, he is much aware that the mind cannot be captivated. So, no matter how much they try to beat him into a state of hopeless bondage his mind will rebel against the ignorance of his masters.

Moreover, Easton’s decision to present Haiti thus to the world is to elevate a black body of people seen as ignorant, which then credits the success of the revolution to the African gods. One of the many interesting changes in Easton’s Dessalines is his rejection of the voodoo religion. In Act 2 scene 2 of the play Easton introduces Mere Marguerite as the fierce and savage witch who is to sacrifice Clarisse to the gods. But, before Mere Marguerite can complete the ritual, Dessalines comes in accompanied by his maroons:

DESSALINES. What mean these grewsome rites, thou limb of hell?

MERE MARGUERITE. Choose well thy language, ere I hurl upon thy head a curse that will dry the very marrow of thy bones and make life a misery to thee. Away, unbeliever!

DESSALINES. Spawn of hell, for this intended murder ye die! Dessalines has spoken. Pierre, surround this den of serpents with our men, and let no one escape. I decreed to death all of you: but it shall not be so.

Many here are but the ignorant dupes of yonder unnatural woman. (57-58)

This scene is the most intense scene in the play. In a play where all we get is philosophy (long discussions about the rights of men) and speculations one is prone to ask why we are exposed to the voodoo scene. In having Dessalines proudly and boastfully denounce

voodoo, Easton implies that the leader of the revolution, that the barbarous and dauntless Dessalines, father of the black race was not a savage, but an intelligent man seeking justice and freedom on all terms. Yet, just as Sybille Fischer notes of nineteenth century literature, Easton's *Dessalines* does not tell the story "of dehumanization and ruthless quantification of life" (17). It speaks instead of the misinterpretations of the Bible. Consequently, Easton reinforces the deception of the very institution that we want to expose.

However, the simple fact that Easton had to convert Dessalines to make this point is an insult to the Haitian leaders that fought hard to teach "the world the danger of slavery and the value of Liberty" (Douglass). Easton implies that no matter how cruel and inhumane slavery was, given the opportunity [Haitians] slaves, and ultimately blacks everywhere, could not deny the existence of an almighty God. *Dessalines*, in that way is a fantastic tale about the revolution and freedom of a lost nation, not about the unthinkable victory of the Africans. As already stated, freedom here does not mean liberation, but that Dessalines conquered his ignorance. If Dessalines, the ultimate savage, was able to accept the true teachings of the Christian Church, so could blacks everywhere. In the last scene of the play, Dessalines cries victory even before going into battle. And to Clarisse he says:

DESSALINES. Your love doth conquer me. Then let us remember that
freedom must always be inspired by...

CLARISSE. Religion, love and mercy

DESSALINES. 'Tis well the, that the religion which fostered in the slave
the love of liberty and gave him the courage to contest the power
of might—with the weapons of right, shall be hereafter—the proud
heritage of every Haitien! (117)

To end the play thus is to overlook the success of the revolution. The success of the revolution lies in its modernity for it was the French Revolution that inspired the slaves to seek their own liberation. It is Dessalines' struggles to beat his circumstances that make him modern. So, even though he does not profess to reinvent Haiti, Easton's strategy in writing a play that is supposedly inspired by the revolution, but yet is devoid of the violence of the struggle, is an attempt at erasing Haiti's past. Douglass declares that Haiti's "liberty was born in blood, cradled in misfortune, and has lived more or less in a storm of revolutionary turbulence" (Douglass). By sheltering readers from the violence of the revolution Easton redefines blackness as he introduces the new Negro. Thus, Haiti falls victim of the imagological system of that time: "its predetermined strangeness, its strictly defined separateness had become the discourse that allowed it to be seen" (Dash 10). People were defining Haiti in terms of its shortcomings, not its accomplishments. This isn't necessarily the sort of immortalization that Haiti seeks, but the one that Easton deems necessary for Haiti if its people wish to join the dominant world on equal terms.

In any case, just as Fischer submits, we cannot let the fact that we cannot make assertions with certainty "lead us to reproduce the silence that dominated all issues regarding the Haitian Revolution and its significance for western modernity" (xi). The putative barbarism of the revolution which serves as the reason for it to be silenced reproduces a circuitous explanation for its significance and its disavowal. One should not

be expected to willingly accept the horror of the revolution without giving thought to the abject environment Haitians were placed in. Dash explains in his book that the fictions of a given period provide a framework “within which even historical narrative can be explained” (x). With that in mind we can understand the exotic image that outlasts Haiti and what it represents. This image reveals itself in Easton’s play in the way he characterizes it as a dramatic tale. Its depiction of Dessalines flouts the spirit of the revolution. Though Easton does not claim that Dessalines is the epitome depiction of Blackness, he does hope that the play will be provocative enough to inspire future generations to take control of their image, to change the way the world sees them. Around the time the play was written, Haiti’s image had ceased to represent its true character. Those who knew of Haiti either did not know of its turbulent past, or were still mad at her for being different. But at the same time Haiti serves a specific purpose to many blacks who could not figure out their place in a society that refused to embrace them as equals. Those who were interested in reclaiming a lost identity visited her fertile and resilient soil to understand their image in the eyes of others.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION: A LEGACY FOR BLACKS EVERYWHERE

In the twentieth century Haiti's noble existence was turned into a commodity. Haiti became an object of fascination and was marginalized by the very empire that occupied it. This not only paralyzed the infrastructure the occupation professed to be building in the country, it also fueled the logic empire it was spreading, that civilization had not yet reached Haiti. The presence of the U.S. military in Haiti that was supposed to produce a new politically stable Haiti did very little for the nation itself but was a great success for America. According to Mary Renda, "Haiti continued to serve as a means to negotiate domestic cultural politics in the United States" during the time of the occupation (186). Moreover, the occupation contributed to the growth of national African-Americans by inviting them to challenge "conceptions of national identity in the United States" (264). Therefore, the occupation of Haiti, as demonstrated by Renda, contributed a lot to American culture in the way that it sensationalized the events that happened in Haiti, forcing outsiders and participants to view Haiti as a nation in dire need of help. But at the same time, Haiti was also becoming a wonder; the unwanted and kinless island was becoming a mystified must-see black republic with a rich history and an attractive culture. Authors, civilians and journalists were writing about a Haiti that they deemed backwards, not the one they truly encountered. Naturally, many people were attracted to those fantastic tales and relied on them to fuel their imagination and creativity. Popular novels such as *Hayti or the Black Republic* by Spencer St. John, *The*

White King of La Gonave by Faustin Wirkus, and *Black Baghdad* by John Houston

Craige created a sensationalistic image of Haiti, one that begged the public to see Haiti as different and fundamentally lesser than other countries.

Mary A. Renda asserts that the United States failed to conscript the U.S. marines into its paternalist discourse because Haiti could not be controlled. In her book *Taking Haiti* she writes: “in fact, the encounter with Haiti and Haitians occasioned by the occupation itself reminded U.S. Americans of new and forgotten cultural resources – narratives and images associated with Haiti and with the Haitian past” (301). Renda means that Haitians were too proud and valiant to be told they were inferior. As descendants of such great leaders as Toussaint, Dessalines and Christophe they would not be made to feel ashamed of their culture. The willpower that the people of Haiti exuded in the face of danger and adversity inspired many visitors to evaluate their own privileges and prejudices. Like the many Americans that made their way down to Haiti, Langston Hughes found in Haiti new ways to explore his Americanness and new ways to challenge “conceptions of race and national identity in the United States” (Renda 264). While in Haiti, Hughes found a new appreciation for Haitian culture and history. The people of Haiti so inspired him with their devotion to black pride, that he wrote *Troubled Island*, a play about the Haitian Revolution that exudes bravery and dignity.

Although numerous accounts of the Haitian Revolution perpetuate the idea that its success was possible because it was based on emotion, and that its leaders were ill prepared for its aftermath, for Hughes, the revolution was an unforgettable and praiseworthy phenomenon. According to him, its “legacy could help to remake race in America” (Renda 263). In the late 1930s, Hughes was becoming more concerned with the

advancement of the black race.¹⁵ After covering the Spanish Civil War in 1937, Langston Hughes was more determined to defend Black Art. In Madrid he met inspiring writers who were just as dedicated to the art of the people as he was.¹⁶ In her essay “Langston Hughes’s Experimental and Revolutionary Theatre: ‘Water Drawn from the Well of the People’ and ‘Given Back to them in a Cup of Beauty,’” Olga Barrios highlights Hughes’ different concerns with social and racial issues. She, like others who write about Langston Hughes, mentions *Troubled Island* only in passing; there are virtually no critical discussions of the play. Barrios gives a summary of the play and concludes that “the play shows Dessalines downfall as a result of having betrayed the ideals of revolution” (89). Tammy L. Kernodle also writes about *Troubled Island* in her essay “Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies: the History of Still’s “*Troubled Island*.” However, her main focus is to discuss the difficulties that both Langston Hughes and William Grant Still encountered while trying to launch the play. Barrios consents that, “Hughes ventured into the historical mode to criticize the abuse of power and betrayal of one’s community and principles in postcolonial societies” (89). She claims that the African American community was always on Hughes’ mind because he was all too aware

¹⁵ Hughes’ concern with black race is expressed in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” The lines: “we younger artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. . . we build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (80), are strictly in opposition to Edgar William Easton’s demand of the black race. He writes that his main reason for writing a play based on the Haitian Revolution is that he hopes to see a happier era inaugurated by the constant production of legitimate drama, written exclusively for Negro players and meeting. . . with the full endorsement of the brother in white” (viii).

¹⁶ Tammy L. Kernodle’s “Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies: The History of Still’s ‘*Troubled Island*.’”

of the need for a Black Aesthetic.¹⁷ She writes that “Hughes believed that African Americans needed neither to be ashamed nor afraid of being black for there was beauty they should seek and find within themselves, as he had done” (80). This call for self-love and acceptance is meant to honor those like Dessalines who believe that their skin color is not something to apologize for, nor is it something to be ashamed of. Consequently, Hughes’ representation of Dessalines, a black who rejects all things European, is that of a simple man, one who cares more about speaking the black truth against the white power. Dessalines’ one ‘simple’ goal was to give rise to a black nation, to fight against the white power that relentlessly plotted against their advancement as a race. In writing *Troubled Island*, Langston Hughes reveals the consequences of Jean-Jacques Dessalines’ decision to remove all whites from Haiti. This decision, Hughes voices, was not necessarily the best, it was simply necessary.

Hughes’ play allows us to view Dessalines as a broken man. *Troubled Island* is the story of a black nationalist with an unlikely vision who was bold enough to fight for what he believed in despite the many obstacles he faced: he was married to a mulatto who found him repulsive, he was forced to trust a group of people that never had his best intention at heart, he was chosen as the leader of a destitute nation, and above all he was overtaken by a passion to be free in the broadest sense of the word. His vision is reflected in the air of confidence he wears and in his unrelenting search for glory. Hughes pardons this pursuit as he unweaves the reason behind it to show that Dessalines was eager to display blacks’ worth to the world. The celebration of black worth is often a common

¹⁷ Barrios uses this quote from Hughes to support her argument that Langston Hughes set the foundations for the Black Arts and Black Theatre Movements in the 1960s: “Unless the Black artist establishes a ‘Black aesthetic’ he will have no future at all. To accept white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The Black artist must create new forms and new values” (90).

theme in Hughes' works. Hughes' commitment to social justice prompts him to depict Dessalines as a liberator of the black race.

In contrast to Hughes' *Troubled Island* that celebrates Dessalines and his choice to free Haiti at all costs, C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins* portrays Dessalines as "a savage, blood-thirsty slave who only saw under his nose" (288). James' slanderous approach suggests that Dessalines was not a thinking man like Toussaint. We can only see Dessalines as a man of action in James' text because he depicts him as a man who lacked the "necessary" education, and ultimately, reason. I understand that James' decision to reconstruct Toussaint, his favorite hero, as a conscript of modernity stems from James' reverence for European values and teachings. As a black man James could identify more with Toussaint because he, too, felt conscripted at times by colonialism.¹⁸ Interestingly, Hughes' play rejects James' simplistic view of Dessalines and constructs him as a character that displayed courage even in the most dreadful and horrifying moments.

To fully understand Hughes' choice to recuperate Dessalines, I must utilize David Scott's analysis of James' *The Black Jacobins*. In the book *Conscripts of Modernity: the Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, Scott makes known his problems with anti-colonial romance and offers James' *The Black Jacobins* as the exemplary work of anticolonialism that depicts the success of the revolution as a tragedy, not a total victory. One of the many things Scott argues is that we should move away from this urge to persistently expose "the negative structure of colonialism's power" (6). This urge for revolution that he alludes to provides a platform for his analysis of Toussaint Louverture as a modern

¹⁸ David Scott's "Toussaint's Tragic Dilemma."

character in James' text that unsurprisingly condemns Dessalines. Scott rejects the common perception of the structure of colonialism that "demands from us an attitude of anticolonial longing" (7). He argues that the structure of colonialism cannot be rejected completely because it was not a totally negative structure that brutalizes natives.

According to him, colonial subjects are the products of colonialism as it also shapes their identity. Scott implies that colonialism is not just an "obstacle to be overcome" (7); he asserts that it can also be productive in so far as it continues to inspire the oppressed to become who they are by refusing to succumb to that which settlers have tried to make of them. This process requires that they realize that the colonizers seek to dehumanize them and to wipe out their culture. Therefore, in order to progress as a people, the oppressed need to reverse the power dynamic that paralyzes them. In "the Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment" David Scott establishes Dessalines's shortcomings as James saw them: "free of the prescripts that constrain and narrow the horizon of a man like Dessalines, that faithful adjutant, that simple soldier, Toussaint is nevertheless a conscript of a larger and more profound condition that simultaneously enables and disables him..." (171).

According to Scott's reading of James, Dessalines was a simple man because he was not aware of the world around him as Toussaint was; in other words Dessalines was not enlightened for if he was his goal would have been to change the world, to expose its deepest truths, to restore its natural order and ultimately to reveal that blacks are valuable humans reacting to prejudice to hatred. But since Dessalines put Haiti first, he was fighting a losing battle. What James saw as a flaw was not in fact a flaw nor was it a shortfall. It was a choice, a conscious choice not to buy into the philosophy of the

oppressor. Dessalines had his own plan for Haiti and he was determined to liberate Haiti of the cruelties of the whites.

Despite James' given reason for Toussaint's modernity, it still stands that Dessalines and those who chose to follow him were motivated by more than just the words of an enlightened European. As James would have it, when Guillaume Thomas Francois Raynal's *Philosophical and Political History of the Sentiments and Trade of the Europeans* came into the hands of Toussaint, he was instantly transformed into a modern figure with a modernist political desire. According to Scott, who claims that he is not concerned with the details of the Revolution and the social history surrounding it, "there is an important reading of *The Black Jacobins* in which such constructions of Toussaint Louverture are seen as evidence of two very considerable shortcomings in James's approach to the study of the San Domingo Revolution, namely, elitism and Eurocentrism" (101). Critics illuminate James's "inclination to overvalorize Europe and Western civilization" (101), to show that instead of appreciating the sole and simple reason for the revolution (that slavery was inhumane and unnatural), James finds purpose elsewhere. He finds purpose in European culture. However, Scott dismisses those concerns by reminding readers of what is significant in the text. To him, the right reading should bring up questions about Toussaint's modernity.

In "Toussaint's Tragic Dilemma" Scott examines James's mode of emplotment that organizes *The Black Jacobins*. He argues that James's decision to add the six paragraphs in the beginning of the last chapter to the 1963 reprint of the text is to change how readers interpret the story of Toussaint Louverture, or Toussaint himself: "In these paragraphs James constructs an image of Toussaint's tragic dilemma. He sees that

dilemma and the catastrophe that follows from it, as being in part an outcome of the irreconcilable dissonance between Toussaint's expectations for freedom and the conditions in which he sought to realize them" (134). By placing those paragraphs right at the beginning of chapter 13, after we have just dismally watched Toussaint make some very questionable judgments, James hopes to reconstruct Toussaint's image by trying to convince readers that Toussaint could not have chosen otherwise. He could not have made a better decision because there were no better choices, as far as he was concerned. This very calculated revision to the book, Scott offers, "alters the very content of the form of the dramatic action he is setting before us" (134).

Scott tells us that Toussaint was forced into a situation in which he was doomed to fail, and this is the reason why he merits the title of a tragic hero. He stresses that he was not a tragic hero because he failed, but because he was an enlightened slave. He writes: "For Toussaint, James suggests, the problem of emancipation was, palpably, not merely a problem of ending slavery, of breaking the bondage of the slaves. Rather, the problem of emancipation entailed also the project of imagining and constructing a sustainable freedom within new forms of life" (133). Simply put, James is suggesting that unlike Dessalines, Toussaint's purview of freedom went beyond just being emancipated; for him that alone was attainable but not sufficient. Also, as James points out, this is, however, where Toussaint lost all credibility with his people. He lost the allegiance of the slaves who had made the choice to follow someone who didn't question the idea and need for independence. Dessalines, "that faithful adjutant," admits James, was always ready to lead the slaves out of the confusion in their moments of uncertainties. Though uneducated, he knew just what to say to enliven and inspire the slaves.

In *Troubled Island*, Hughes does not place much value on education as he portrays Dessalines as a man who does not derive his philosophy of the revolution from European values. So it appears that Dessalines knew what to say to revolutionize the slaves because he spoke their language. Hughes wrote him as a “real” slave character who shares the struggle and burden of his people. As a slave, he knew just enough to know that slavery was inhumane, and that it needed to end. For example, in Act 1 scene 1, when the slaves start to feel uneasy and unsure about the revolt he tells them: “To live! Men free, alive! Alive! Go, Martel, and tell that to the men on guard without, for some are even yet afraid. I saw it in their eyes. Tell them tonight we strike with all our force, and none must be afraid. There are two ways of being free . . . alive or dead. We’ll live! This time, the French will die” (35). Dessalines was not confused about what he wanted for Haiti. More than that, he was never confused on how to accomplish that. With those words, Hughes paints Dessalines as a leader who could not afford to compromise his position as a revolutionary man. His choices as the leader may have been foolish and unrestrained at times but they were executed with utmost conviction.

Hughes, therefore, was able to capture the humanity of the slaves in his play. He depicts them as sentient beings who only needed to look at the scars on their backs, or the look of suffering in one another’s eyes to understand the need to be liberated. Those slaves did not need philosophy to help them discern the life they were subjected to. Therefore, Hughes appointed Dessalines as the courageous leader who was transformed into the enemy once he was enslaved. So, as the enemy and the victim, he did what seemed natural to him at the time: he regained his undeniable rights as a human being. As Scott explains, to recommend that Toussaint L’Ouverture (as his last name is usually

spelled to convey the idea that he created an opening for Haitian slaves to emancipate themselves) needed to be told that he was oppressed is to suggest that “New World slaves were incapable of self-emancipation and required the intercession of humanitarians and politicians of goodwill” (102). This essentially implies that the slaves needed to be told that they were not properties and that they had human rights. In doing that, James robs the slaves of their identity as African people with worthy values.

When looking at *The Black Jacobins*, Scott asserts that tragedy provides a more useful narrative framework because it focuses on the “colonial modern,” rather than the story of “heroic resistance” as tragedy (148). This focus allows us to also read Hughes’s *Troubled Island* as a tragedy because the fact that Hughes started the play by showing readers how Dessalines was elected to be the leader of the much anticipated revolution conveys that he intended it to be read as a tragedy.¹⁹ Hughes shows Dessalines as a man who wants the black race to rise above the role society has assigned them. However, in his quest for independence he faces complications that are just as serious but different than Toussaint’s. The play starts with the slaves plotting the revolution in the year 1791. Instead of giving us an account of the fight itself, Hughes opts for a more private and sensitive scene. By making us privy to this rather emotional moment we can be more sympathetic. In the first scene, we learn that Dessalines was chosen by the people as the leader, a decision that irritated and disappointed the mulattoes who had chosen to fight with the blacks. Hughes depicts the mulattoes as Dessalines’ error in the way he represents them as opportunists and conspirators who never had the slaves’ best interest

¹⁹ In the previous chapter I argue that Easton’s emplotment of *Dessalines, A Dramatic Tale* offers a problematic image of the revolution. The grievous tale of Dessalines, as it is told by Hughes, takes a romantic form in Easton’s version. Easton’s play does not cover any of the glorious battles of the period, nor does it have any white characters.

at heart. The mulattoes had only chosen to join them because they assumed that one of them would be the leader. They communicate their disappointment to the slaves by insulting Dessalines, calling him “ignorant and head- strong.” To that the slaves answer that Dessalines is all they need. The slaves remark that they do not need any fancy words to express what they already know: Liberté, égalité, fraternité:

ANTOINE. We know what the words are -- the same as the French use in Paris! Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

MARS. But Frenchmen keep us slaves in Haiti.

POPO. We want those words in action, here, now, for blacks as well as whites.

VUVAL. There are many ways of recreating words, Popo. (30)

Apparently, the slaves did not care about those other ways. What they needed was someone to help them put those words in action, someone like Dessalines who knew the “whip well enough to hate it, someone who was not afraid” (30). Dessalines was chosen by the slaves because he was brave, but more importantly he was chosen because it was believed that no one hated the French more than him. He hated them so much that he assumed that all those who hated the whites were friends of the blacks.

This unsubstantiated belief led him to, despite the complaints of the slaves, choose Vuval (a mulatto) as his aide and later give him the title of Count. The play picks up several years later with Dessalines in his palace going over a few documents with Vuval. As the count, Vuval serves as Dessalines spokesperson. He reads him his letters and answers them. In that same scene we find out that Vuval has been deceiving Dessalines and that they all thought Dessalines to be a ridiculous and unfit leader. They

concocted the perfect plan to get him out of Cap-Haitien to kill him. He left the banquet to go to the coast to restore order where, word got to him, the peasants have revolted. He was ambushed in Archaie where he was killed.

Dessalines's downfall is in part due to the utter disdain he later expressed for blacks. By highlighting Dessalines' error after the revolution, because it is only after the revolution that Dessalines starts to turn his back on his culture, Hughes is advocating how important it is that blacks remain true to themselves and their cause. The trust Dessalines placed in the mulattoes caused him to mishandle his supporters. As erroneous and hypocritical that may sound, Hughes makes it so that we don't see it as a miscalculation. We are never left in the dark; we always know what Dessalines is thinking. And what he is thinking is what he knows to be the sad truth, that he needs the mulattoes, maybe not to help them fight the whites, but at least to help Haiti be a successful and civilized country. To those who complained about the mulattoes he said: "We do need them, my friends. We need their help. Make no mistake of that. They can read and write. I've chosen Vuval as my aide" (35). Evidently his decision to ally with the mulattoes was not instinctively made. So, it wasn't that he carelessly forgot to account for a missing chip; it was rather that he was blindsided.

In contrast, the slaves in the play never trusted the mulattoes because the mulattoes were never slaves. According to Hughes, the mulattoes were incapable of really being in support of black freedom. They were half-whites and therefore could not appreciate their need for freedom like Dessalines could. Unlike Toussaint, Dessalines understood the slaves' need for freedom and so was fine with just freedom for the time being. He was anxious to liberate Haiti from the clutch of the whites, and once he'd done

that, he figured, he would take care of the political aspect of the revolution. Toussaint's character wanted freedom and civilization, which he thought was only possible if he maintained a relationship with the French. Dessalines was able to answer differently to this modernity they both found themselves conscripts of because he did not have any ties with the French and because he did not feel anything except pure hatred and contempt for them. Readers can clearly see this in the first scene when he scolds Azelia for taking pity on the whites:

JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES. Then why cry pity on him? I know you must hate him. But when you say, "Poor man," you make me laugh.

The whites never have pity on us. We're just slaves, dogs to them.

AZELIA. You're right, Jean Jacques!

JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES. They burned Mackandal for trying to be free, didn't they? They had no mercy on him. We'll show no mercy on them now. (11)

This scene shows that Dessalines refused to entertain the idea of a free Haiti with the French still freely wandering the island. He didn't trust the French and had every reason not to. Their continuous shameless rejections of the black race as worthy souls inborn distrust in his heart. After all they have done to them he knew that they were incapable of justice and humanity, therefore it was necessary to remove them from the island.

Dessalines is also depicted by Hughes as more realistic than Toussaint. He was certain that the whites would never withdraw from Haiti willingly. He fervently believed that it would require force and the desire to rid Haiti of the whites that have uprooted

them from their motherland to force and subject them to labor. And he expressed just that to anyone who dared let their humanity interfere with the revolt:

MARTEL. I remember well the burning of Mackandal. Thirty years gone by, 'tis. They made the slaves for miles around witness it, as an example of what happens to any Negro who wants to be free. Burning is a horrible thing, Jean Jacques! I hate to think that we must do it, too.

JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES. You're over kind, Martel. I do not love my masters.

MARTEL. I'd let them live, if they'd leave us free.

JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES. They won't, so there's no if about it.

We have no choice but to kill . . . wipe out the whites in all this island . . . for if the French are left alive to force us back in slavery, we'll never get a chance to rise again. And for us, you and me ---- Boukman, Christophe, Toussaint, and all our leaders --- there'd be only the rack, the wheel, or burning at the stake like Mackandal. Mackandal! (12)

Thus the unfaltering Dessalines led Haiti and its people to liberty, and for Hughes, he was content with that. Hughes explains that since the slaves' victory should have never occurred, the hardship that followed is expected, if not inexorable. There was nothing else more important than securing that freedom and that was Dessalines's intention. What the rest of the play explores is the struggle to secure that victory.

And so it seems, for Hughes, that the fundamental difference between Toussaint and Dessalines is not that Toussaint was educated and Dessalines was not. It is rather that Dessalines was willing to break the chains of slavery at all costs, and he openly expressed

that idea to his people: “In France, white men -- free men have risen against the king and torn the Bastille down. How much more reason have we, we who are slaves, to rise against our masters! How much more reason to strike back at those who buy and sell us, who beat us with their whips and track us down with their dogs!” (35). Yet again, he is reassuring them that independence is what they need. He is assuring them that “it’s every arm in Haiti we need” to really build Haiti up from the ground (44). It is because of this passion and dedication that he was elected to be the leader. Dessalines, as seen in the play, was entrusted to lead the blacks to freedom. And he did so the best way he knew how. Scott reminds us that we live in a tragic world that forces us to make decisions. “Tragedy,” he argues, “is remorseless. The tragic personage cannot evade responsibility” (134). The choices Dessalines was confronted with were limited. He had no precedence and therefore was forced to act in the manner that he believed would be the most effective.

In a tragic narrative choices are never clear and never really your own. Dessalines’ decision to govern Haiti as a black nation forced him to face the truth about his limitations. The portrayal of Dessalines in *Troubled Island* is that of a tragic personage mostly because he was haunted by a deadly desire. He wanted to make Haiti “La Perle des Antilles.” He aspired to make Haiti a land “where every black man lifts his head in pride, where there’ll be schools and palaces, big armies and a fleet of boats, forts strong enough to keep the French forever from our shores” (Hughes 44). Though often accused of being a savage and a boor, Hughes shows that Dessalines was more complex than that. This is another reason why tragedy works so well with what Hughes is trying to do in the play. Dessalines was a troubled soul and his tragic collisions are represented in

the play as developing Haiti as a free Black country and not having the resources needed to rule (risking the restoration of slavery). Dessalines' tragic flaw then seems to be his blind determination to be grand. His is a tragic story that tells the tale of an uneducated black emperor who wanted his people to believe in his dream for them. Dessalines' expectations of freedom and his struggle to make Haiti a civilized and modern country with "roads, and docks and harbors fine as any country in the world" (43) was misunderstood by the peasants and planters in Haiti who accused him of being a tyrant. When Dessalines communicates his sentiment to Martel, a wise old man, he assures him that these protests happened because of a lack of vision. Their short-sightedness could not allow them to comprehend what Dessalines was doing with the country.

However, the slaves are not the only ones who are portrayed as short-sighted in the play. Dessalines also endorsed a myopic doctrine; he could not admit or recognize that all whites were not the same. But that's only because none of them showed him mercy and continuously sought to kill his people's spirit. So, he refused or rather was afraid to believe that some of them were not depraved, for if he admitted that then he would also have to admit that he needed them. Though absolutely understandable, it was still a flaw because his hatred for the whites at times clouded his vision. In the play, he is even advised by Martel, who sometimes seems to echo Toussaint, to let the hatred go, to be free.

MARTEL. We're free. Let's act like free men, ready to meet others as equals - and no longer speak of all white men as enemies.

(sitting down) Our ports are open now, to English traders. In time, we'll open to the French. The world will drink our coffee. From them we'll buy things in return. We'll need the French.

JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES. The French? The French! I never want to hear that word again, Martel. The French! Bah! How my tongue burns when I say that word! Masters of all this sun-warmed land! Cruel monsters of terror! The French, who broke the bones of Oge on the rock! The French -- who tortured Chevannes until his life blood ran down, drop by drop -- dead for freedom! The French, who cut their scars upon my back -- too deep to ever fade away! Look!

(He rips his shirt wide open, exposing his back covered with great red welts.) Look what they've done to me! Look at my scars! For these the whites must pay!

VOICES. The whites must pay! Make 'em pay! Make 'em pay! Oh, make 'em pay

(slowly) Even now, although I'm Emperor, my back still aches from the blows they've laid upon it. (45)

In retrospect, Dessalines' supposed hatred for the whites is seen by Hughes as a great mistake that paralyzed the growth of the nation. This exchange between Martel and Dessalines shows Hughes' own struggle and complications with white society. His complications with white society have to do with the misrepresentations of the Negro.

According to Hughes, these misrepresentations hinder the progression of the Negro and its culture. Unfortunately, over 200 years of slavery has forged an inextricable bond between the two races. Black culture is embedded in white culture just like the white race cannot exist without the black race to define it. Frederick Douglass writes that “the talk of the bettering ourselves by getting rid of the white race is a great mistake. It is about as idle for the black man to think of getting rid of the white man as it is for the white man to think of getting rid of the black”²⁰ (“Lecture on Haiti”). By emphasizing Dessalines’ hatred for the whites, I believe that Hughes is expressing just how heavy the past that they have to live with is. There seems to be a reluctance and hesitation to readily let go of a past that is in itself an identity. The past exists so that the Negro can extract from it the missing pieces of his identity. So, the solution may not be to isolate one race from the other, but a complete dismissal of the past is not the answer either because the Negro can never part with his identity and race. Instead the Negro must understand that his past gives rise to the future of his white counterpart; and that it is he who shapes the identity of his colonizer. The past should be a reminder of who they are; it should not be a reason to reject their culture. It is believed that Dessalines vowed to never forgive the whites because he believed that his scars were reminders that are rooted too deeply in his flesh, a decision that Hughes saw as an error.²¹

If Toussaint’s error was, as James believes, “more intellectual than moral,” then Hughes’ play suggests that Dessalines’s error was moral. His flaw, in short, was moral

²⁰ Found in Frederick Douglass’s “Lecture on Haiti” given in Chicago in 1893.

²¹ As more research continued after the submission of her essay “Jean-Jacques Dessalines and the African Character of the Haitian Revolution,” Deborah Jensen was able to find some interesting information on Dessalines. She writes “...Dessalines had said of these scars that ‘he would never have pity, either for blacks or whites, until the scars had disappeared’” (638).

because he was acting on emotions. The grudge he carried instilled in him a desire to exterminate all whites, and that unrestrained need contributes to his fall. When Aristotle talks about hamartia, he refers to “the devastating reversal that constitutes tragedy; he is arguing that the best kind of tragic plot is neither one in which a decent person undergoes a change of fortune from good to bad, nor in which depraved person undergoes a change from bad fortune to good fortune” (Scott 154). Hughes’s decision to construct Dessalines’ image as a character that was neither good nor bad, but one that finds himself in the middle of two conflicting yet equally flawed realities, but still has to choose one, permits us to pardon him. It was not that he had a specific defect; it was rather that he was the product of circumstances. Dessalines, which was undoubtedly held in great esteem, could not forgive the French because of the very reasons why he was being told he needed them. He resented them because they never gave him a chance to be a man. This is his woeful speech to the slave:

But I must tell you how full my heart is tonight, and how I keep remembering back to when I was a little naked slave among the slaves. Every day an old man came to dump a pot of yams into a trough where we ate, and the pigs and the dogs, they ate, too. And we got down alongside ‘em, on all fours, and ate -- us and the dogs. I thought I, too, was a beast. I didn’t know I’d ever grow to be a man. I thought only white folks grew up to be men. The Frenchman drove his sheep to market -- just so they drove our parents to the fields when the sun came up. They owned them, too. Overseers with their dogs, whip in hand, always driving Negroes to the fields. And when the white man saw me growing tall, big enough to work,

he drove me, too. Slowly I moved, too slow. The overseer lifted high his whip and cut me 'cross the back. And when I turned, He lashed me in the face. I cried out, he struck again. Then I lifted up my head and looked him in the eyes, and I knew I was a man, not a dog! I wanted to be free! (34)

This speech is significant because it is through this speech that Hughes expresses his reason for recuperating Dessalines. As a black man, he was able to identify with Dessalines's struggle. He understood his desire to be a man for his people. Those beautiful words were enough to condemn the whites and elevate the blacks. With those words we see that Dessalines's choice was necessary for he did not know any other way to be a man. Freedom and, thus, being emperor was his chance to prove to the French and everyone else that he was a man, that blacks were men. *Troubled Island* represents Dessalines's struggle to beat the odds stacked up against him. We see him trying to convince the blacks, his people that he wanted the best for Haiti. But at the same time, he knew that he needed the help of the mulattoes to run Haiti effectively and also the help of all Haitians to keep Haiti's natural resources flourishing. His desire to succeed, based on the play, burgeoned from something more than just hatred. Nonetheless, the thought of freedom and determination to motivate all Haitians supersede his judgments. "The paralyzing collision between his aspirations and his conditions" was deadly (Scott 135).

Over 100 years after its establishment as the first black republic, Haiti found itself being governed by white Americans. Hughes is certainly both saddened and alarmed by that fact. What he encountered when he arrived in Haiti was a travesty. Now, many are quick to blame the Haitians themselves for their fate, but as Hughes attests to in the play, when one of us is oppressed we all are oppressed. So, Dessalines' dream should be our

dream. His desire to elevate the black race was not confined to Haiti. His legacy is not “contained in the date 1804.”²² There is still much more that needs to be done; the revolution is still in the making. It is up to every one of his progenitors to continue the fight. Hughes, who shared the same vision as Dessalines, was well aware that there was still a long way to go. Using Scott’s book we can use Hegel’s definition of tragedy to read Act 2 scene 1 to analyze Hughes’s depiction of Dessalines as a man with a vision to better the black race. In that scene, we have Vuval sitting in the palace with Dessalines discussing some letters. One of the letters that Vuval reads says that the people of Gros Morne are asking for teachers because they want to learn to read. Hearing that Dessalines grows despondent:

JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES. (sadly, after a painful silence) I can’t read myself. And we have no teachers. (Louder) Vuval, why did so many mulattoes run away to Paris? We black people need you -- you were educated. Now we have no teachers to send to Gros Morne.

VUVAL (carelessly) That little village couldn’t afford to pay a teacher, anyhow.

JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES Pay? Pay! Pay! Always pay! Does no one know that need fulfilled is pay enough? (angrily) Does no one, loving Haiti, find his pay in doing for her? But it’s money we need, is it? Then change that letter I ordered you to write -- tell Beyard I ask forty thousand francs instead of twenty. (Hughes 43)

²² From “The Theatre of Revolution/the Haitian Revolution as Theater” by Michael J. Dash.

This letter made him so angry because it was a reminder of his limits, his condition. This letter represents everything that the French stole from them. Hearing the cry of the peasants fuels a desire that he clearly envisions, but remains out of reach; the vision to make “Haiti rich--and just as grand as when it belonged to the white folks” (Hughes 54). Tragically, we learn that Dessalines’s effort to reform Haiti is being compromised. Vuval divulges that he has not really been writing what Dessalines has been dictating to him. He confides to Claire that his letters have been rather offensive to the officers, calling them all kind of names. And, Dessalines, not knowing any better signs them. Thus, unbeknownst to him, the generals thinking that Dessalines has turned against them are now revolting, and the people start doubting Dessalines:

MARTEL. In times like these, if Toussaint l’Ouverture were only here to guide us, Popo! Napoleon’s heart must be like stone to trick so great a leader away from his people.

POPO. I wish Toussaint was here. It looks like Jean Jacques don’t know how to run things very well. I wish I could help him.

MARTEL. Jean Jacques is a mighty soldier, Popo, and a brave man. He’s not a statesman. But he’s our friend, and we love him--so we must help him.

POPO. We must, Father Martel.

MARTEL. As you protect his body, I’ll try to guard his mind.

(despairingly) But sometimes I don’t know, Popo, I don’t know. (62)

Even as all that is happening Hughes does not forsake Dessalines. We are forced to see him as Hughes sees him: a determined man who sacrificed all in the name of liberty. He

always knew what needed to be done, how to deal with those who sought to disturb his vision. Still, as Hughes sees it, he should not have underestimated the people's love (and need) for freedom. Pardonably, Scott writes that, according to James, Toussaint's miscalculations were complicated, that they were complications that he could not have foreseen. James argues that they originated from a "divided soul" and that if there was a better choice he probably would have gone for that. However, what Hughes is ultimately conveying is that Dessalines found the correct method to freedom, but was never given the chance to realize his vision:

(looking upward through the open portals) Haiti, land that should be so happy, grown instead so sad! Land of golden moonlight and silver rain, bright birds, and brighter sun, perfumed breezes and a sea so green hills of great woods and valleys of sweet earth. Why can't it be a happy land? So many years of struggle, and still vile intrigue binds our wings like spider webs. Oh, most unhappy Haiti! When the drums beat in the hills at night, mournful and heart-breaking, I can feel your sorrow! No wonder the Empress hates your drums! Where is their power now to make the Gods smile upon this troubled island? (61)

This troubled island, that many have died and many will continue to die for, is still fighting for peace as it mourns its first emperor. Hughes tells the story of the first black Haitian emperor to honor the decision of a former slave that dared to dream a grand dream. This play promotes sociopolitical analysis and accounts for the legacy of blacks everywhere. The Haitian Revolution and its aftermath is used as an example of what can happen if blacks continue to ignore the real problem by disassociating themselves with

their heritage. Hughes illustrates the real problem as the propensity for blacks to see the beauty in their oppressors' art without being aware of their contribution to it. This message was significant in the 1930s when blacks were struggling with their identity. An identity that they can only recover once they realize that they have a culture of their own to nurture, one that has hitherto been beneficial to white culture. In conclusion, *Troubled Island* presents Dessalines as a man with a grand but unlikely vision, as a black nationalist. Hughes portrays him as a fervent yet fearful leader. The play depicts a character that embraces his color but rejects its stigma. Instead, he seeks to prove to his oppressors that his people can govern themselves by fighting for their right to be men.

CONCLUSION

THE UNREALISTIC DICHOTOMY:

A THIRD LOOK AT THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset.

Arthur A. Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past"

Arthur A. Schomburg's essay "The Negro Digs Up His Past" (1925) distinguishes between narratives and history as he discusses the need for black people to make a decision about how they see themselves. He argues that black people are robbed of their culture by those recording the past. He blames this on "the bigotry of civilization" which he associates with a depreciation of Africa. Africa, like Haiti, has been denied "its true role and position in human history" (967). My discussion of William Edgar Easton, which has been about his devaluation of the Haitian culture, further explains why Haiti has lost its role in human history. I have argued that Easton's attempt at modernizing Haiti robs Haitians of their victory. He futilely tried to repair Haiti's image by snubbing the very thing that made it successful, its culture. Haitians were the first to reject slavery and that was distinctly because of racial pride, a notion that was not lost on Langston

Hughes. Hughes, I have argued, underscores the importance of culture with his representation of Dessalines as a tragic character; a black man who was the victim of a bigoted society because he refused to see himself as society saw him. He opted to combat the racist views against his culture. Schomburg reasons that the Negro's culture has been gravely misrepresented in history, and asserts that instead of letting himself be victimized by the past, the Negro should recognize that his color does not vindicate his bondage.

This problem of a black identity is also discussed in Alain Locke's "The New Negro" (1925). In the essay, the notion of black identity changes; it moves from the Negro myth (that Easton alludes to in his play) to the new Negro identity. The new Negro moves from social mimicry to self-discovery. The new Negro no longer mimics white people; instead he develops his own art. He is more socially conscious and has his own ways of seeing the world, its history and its meanings. He recognizes that revolution is constantly in the making and contributes to its movement. The Negro who digs up his past discovers that the start of history is completely arbitrary. Once he becomes aware of that, he repudiates the notion that he is the problem. In doing so, he identifies the real enemy, the one usurping power. The colonizer, who has long sought to denigrate the Negro, teaches that he is culturally and intellectually superior to the Negro. The new Negro, knowing better, removes himself from the shadows of his oppressors and meets their arrogance. According to Larry Neal,

This confrontation between the black radical and the white liberal is symbolic of larger confrontations occurring between the Third World and Western society. It is a confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized, the slavemaster and the slave... even though Western society

has been traditionally violent in its relation with the Third World, it sanctimoniously deplores violence or self-assertion on the part of the enslaved. (2045)

Therefore, it is in the Negro's best interest to learn of his past. More importantly, it is in his best interest to create arts that represent the troubles of his people because narratives not only have the unyielding power to convince, they also persist. For instance, much of what people believe about Haiti comes from stories that portray "Haiti as a 'little nation' one could be proud to raise up" and others present it "as a land of wretched people one had violently to control" (Renda 302). Mary A. Renda explains that during the time of the occupation, U.S. policy makers "appealed to the racial consciousness of whites who might feel proud to lend a helping hand to a supposedly capable, backward people, or who might appreciate the need to discipline a childlike people whose revolutionary misbehavior had gotten well out of hand" (303). These young men who were enlisted were expected to correct Haitians who refused to be conquered. This image of Haiti excused the presence of the Americans and implemented understanding of race that marginalizes blacks and exoticizes Haitians.

Both Hughes and Easton were black Americans who wrote about Haiti to combat the injustices and prejudices of their time. Easton wrote *Dessalines* in the late 1800s to recuperate the black race. With the play, he was able to shine a much more favorable light on African-Americans by conforming to a white adaptation of the world. He ignored the intricacies and the nuances of the revolution in order to sell his oppressors an improved image of the people who defeated them less than a hundred years ago. As Easton begged readers to understand his motive for writing such a thought-provoking

play, he proceeded to pen what is possibly the most absurd representation of Dessalines. Easton basically sacrificed one of the heroes of his race to appease and entertain whites.

As discussed in the corresponding chapter, Easton's characterization of Dessalines is his solution to Haiti's exoticism. By converting Dessalines into a believer who rejects the slaves' religion, Easton hoped to thrust Haiti in the civilized world. But as Sybille Fischer and Frederick Douglass point out, Haiti's biggest concern was never civilization. It has always been racism and fear, the fear of revolution. In *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Edwidge Danticat writes that Thomas Jefferson refused to aid Haiti because he was too afraid of what a slave revolution in his country would mean. Danticat states that the frightening thing about revolutions is that "their essence was not in their instantaneous bursts of glory but in their ripple effect across borders and time, their ability to put the impossible within reach and make the downtrodden seem mighty" (98). And to have the roots of that revolution planted in "America's backyard" was more than Jefferson could handle. He could not support the victory of the first black state because he was not ready to accept the obvious truth. He found it much more fitting to maintain the status quo than to admit that the white race was in no way superior to the black race: not in mental capacity and definitely not in valor. A message that is just as emphatic now as it was in those unfortunate days, I might add.

Langston Hughes, who is an advocate of black worth, celebrates the death of the emperor by acknowledging the richness of the Haitian culture. Hughes did not believe in imitating white culture. In 1931, when he sought to promote his negritude, Hughes turned to Haiti. He recognized that Dessalines' legacy is the legacy of all black people, and that

when one of their own is oppressed, they are all oppressed. He wanted the black race to progress and to nurture its own culture because there is beauty in the black culture. When he arrived in Haiti he was immediately impressed with the art of the people and their simple way of life. He understood that Haitians, despite their fiery spirit, were proud of their heritage. They embraced who they were and strived to uphold Dessalines' legacy because, as Michael J. Dash says, "the Americans had modernized everything but Haiti and the Haitians" ("The [Un]Kindness of Strangers: Writing Haiti in the 21st Century" 172). The Haitians so inspired Hughes that he chose them as the example of black pride. In the 1936 version of his play, *Troubled Island*, he represents Dessalines as the liberator of the black race. He turns him into a tragic character that stood no chance against this prejudiced and segregated world. His plea is that people of color put their heads together so that they build another tomorrow.

Derek Walcott's play the *Haitian Earth* (2002) the last play in the *Haitian Trilogy* is another example of another black playwright who uses the Haitian Revolution to portray the nuances of race. My discussion of Walcott's play serves as an extension of my analysis of Hughes and Easton's plays. His play is an example of how a more contemporary writer writes about Haiti. Not unlike Easton and Hughes who represent blackness through visual politics, Derek Walcott chooses to explore the arbitrariness of race through the use of language. *The Haitian Earth* contributes greatly to black identity in terms of language. Frantz Fanon speaks of the Negro and language to say that "to speak means ...to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization... A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (17). Walcott's play shows Dessalines' refusal to succumb to the "language of

the civilizing nation, the culture of the mother country” (17). Therefore, Walcott’s treatment of language in his play shows that true civilization occurs only when the colonized accepts the language of the colonizer as his own.

The play is composed of two acts. Act I opens up with Dessalines fighting a boar. He defeats the boar and screams victory, declaring that he will come back to that same beach, on which the boar’s lies dead, as a king because he is the invincible Dessalines who will drive “the French pigs into that sea” (Walcott, *The Haitian Earth* 303). His prideful sense of self that is celebrated in *Troubled Island* is exaggerated in *The Haitian Earth*. Walcott attributes it to Dessalines’s need to establish a pure African nation in Haiti. He explores the existence of Africa in every black body, and focuses on the common people in the play to accentuate the ambition and the egoism of the Haitian revolutionaries. Yet again, we have another black writer writing about the Haitian Revolution as it relates to his experiences as a black man. Walcott’s possible reason to write about Haiti could be to provide a reason as to why Dessalines’ vision remains so out of reach as his focus is more on the progression of the country as a black state than it is on the revolution. He examines the lives of the common slaves who suffered under the dictatorship of their leaders. He questions the methods of the revolution as he explains how each leader was self-absorbed, and shows how pride was the downfall of each of the revolutionary leaders. However, he is more similar to Hughes in his depiction of Haiti as a tragic character in the play, and Dessalines as the emperor who has to work out his destiny on that island. He pays equal attention to each group of people living on the island as he tells of the island’s transition from a colony to a free nation.

In his essay “Men and heroes: Walcott and the Haitian Revolution,” Edward Baugh asserts that the three plays that make up *The Haitian Trilogy* reflect Walcott’s evolution as a Caribbean dramatist with a hybrid complex. This idea of a racial complex that appears in Easton is displaced in Derek Walcott’s representation of Haiti. Walcott’s complexity originates from a complicated relationship with Africa. Baugh reads Walcott’s unpublished poem “Another Life” to mean that Walcott’s desire to replace ‘heroes’ with ‘heraldic men’ connects with his quarrel with history” (46). “Another Life,” according to Baugh, reveals Walcott’s powerful truth to be that “we have a past without heroes” (46) and that past and his shadows should not haunt “us.” It seems like Walcott would rather that black people learn from the past. Though it may be in the Negro’s best interest to dig up his past, according to Walcott, he should not let it become a burden; it should be reclaimed. Therefore, the Negro who digs up his past should not look for authenticity because that is a dead notion.

Furthermore, Walcott explores the struggle for Haitian slaves to build an identity for themselves. His representation of the different groups of people on the island, and their struggle to reconcile the reality of the two worlds they take part in create a racial tension in the play that is unlike what readers witness in both Hughes’ and Easton’s plays. Instead, his play attempts to explain why Haiti has lost its role in human history. Walcott centers the play on the notion of authentication as he portrays Haitians as a racialized group whose progress depends on modernization. The play suggests that the error of the revolution was in trying to make Haiti an “authentic” black nation. Consequently, Walcott’s assessment of the Haitian earth is that it is wasted and uncultivated. In the words of the Baron who could not have been happier leaving the

island, Haiti is a land of barbarity. He says, “The more I know the men who inhabit it, the more I congratulate myself on leaving it... when one is what you planters are, one is born to own slaves. When one is what the greater part of these slaves are, one is born to be a slave. Gentlemen, madame, in this country everybody is in his place” (Walcott 326-327). But where does that leave the mulattoes and those like Dessalines who believe that they were born to be men? These are the intricacies that Walcott chooses to work out in the play. He does not believe that one can choose to be one thing and not the other; that a person has a specific place in society. In fact, all the groups in the play fail to be one thing or the other specifically because they were so intent on defining each group separately.

For example, characters like Dessalines, Yette and Anton perished because their issue in the play was with race, not place. Each one of these characters rejects their racial status as they try to build their own identity. For example, Dessalines understands that the future of the black race depends on the preservation of its language. Through his reproachful speech to Christophe he accentuates the importance of language to a free nation. He says:

We are tribesmen, *compère*, Congolese, Arrabas, we have chiefs we have kings, no plebiscite! Mulatto words! Senate, plebiscite! You think Boukman would have said it? Smile! If we surrender to this kind of language we surrender to their idea of civilization, and that way, in spite of victory, I tell you, we would have won nothing. We will remain one hundred, two hundred years from now, waiters, maids, servants, parrots, and monkeys. Plebiscite! They will make mulattos of everybody. Earth-

colored people who produce nothing. I would slaughter every one of them again. (Walcott 374)

Dessalines is a man of action who is fighting for the rights of blacks. These fanciful French words were meaningless to him. He hates empty words. More than empty words themselves, he hates the French who speak them. He is certain that he, not the French, is destined to rule Haiti. To him, what Haiti needs is a black emperor who has no ties with the French. He figures that the only way to really generate future black leaders is by speaking the slaves' language, by honoring Africa. Dessalines rejects civilization if it means acting like the French. As he delicately puts it, "all this shit comes from speaking French like Frenchmen" (Walcott 372). He thinks that Toussaint is so often misunderstood because he speaks the French language. Toussaint who adapts to the ideals of the French empire is accused by Leclerc of biting the hand that feeds him. Leclerc chastises him for mocking and defying "the same empire that protects the black race from genocide" (Walcott 393). Dessalines, however, rejects those ideals by ripping "the white heart from the flag of France" (Walcott 368). This imagery finds significance in Leclerc's speech to Toussaint before he turned him over to the First Consul. He says:

Under the French flag with its three colours, its three principles, you straightened up from animals to men. It is our discipline that straightened your spine. It is our laws, our books, our courts, our language, our uniforms, our architecture that you would like to practice now, isn't that correct? Then why be wolfish, why bite the hand that fed you? That taught you to add and write? (393)

Leclerc's words to Toussaint, though hurtful and reproaching, are the absolute truth. They help us make sense of David Scott's anti colonialism argument. He argues that colonialism helps shape the natives' identity as it continues to force them to choose between two worlds. The natives "need" the oppressor's language, but reject their ideas. They use their oppressors' books for education, but create their own poetry. Their laws and their courts marginalize and imprison them because they don't accept their cultures and traditions. They wear their uniforms and marvel at their architecture in an attempt to "leap outside history, rather than be enslaved or intimidated by it" (Fox 334). Those like Walcott, who know where they are, but not who they are, those who are rootless must be willing to see the "New World as without history, as a new start" (Breslin 322). Therein lies Walcott's complexity. He is a whitewashed West Indian writer who must display black solidarity. To do so, he must come to terms with his hybridity. He must be the voice of his people in spite of his canonical education.²³ His play serves as a juxtaposition of Easton's and Hughes' plays. He looks at race not as something to transcend like Easton does, and not exactly as something to save like Hughes does, but more like a conscious construct that is indefinable and ambiguous.

²³ Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) argues that black people of the Antilles specifically, often reject and neglect their own civilization in favor of the white European civilization that often feels out of reach. To them, true civilization is acquired only when they are accepted into the exclusive white world. However, once in there they struggle to discover the meaning of a black identity for living in a white world does not magically make them white; it makes them a remarkable Negro who "has" nothing in common with real Negroes. At least, Fanon tells us, that is what they are told by "open minded" and discernible Europeans who seek to convince them that they are unlike what they claim to be "the ordinary Negro." Fanon claims to be speaking only of the Antillean who does not think of himself as a black, but as an Antillean because, as he mistakenly figures, the Negro lives in Africa. And so, as an Antillean he behaves subjectively but intellectually as a white man because "as long as he remains among his own people, the little black follows very nearly the same course as the little white" (149). Regardless, states Fanon, "he is a Negro. That he will learn once he goes to Europe" (148). Though Fanon wants to associate this behavior specifically to the Antilleans, it rings true to many other black communities and nations.

For example, Walcott tells the tale of the tragic mulatto who struggles to find his or her “natural” order in the New World through characters like Yette and Anton. Unlike her husband Pompey who cultivates the earth to keep it fertile, Yette does it expecting to crossover. Being a planter was supposed to be her way of nurturing her black side, but as she soon finds out, being a mulatto meant being the offspring of hatred. There is no neutrality and there is no compromise. Both sides have to be catered to even as they clash. Hard as she may try, she will always be a mulatto. Anton is another mulatto with a hybrid status who strives for wholeness. He is very torn. He does not know where he stands and whether he is a man of action or thought. He reproaches the Western Culture and regards its obsession, its experience with art, particularly ideas and philosophy, as a failure. He wants to be a writer, but does not know if a man said to be without rights, a bastard, is entitled to ideas. This is his lamentation to his white lover:

I look at my hand and I abhor my own colour; it is mixed, a compound,
like the colour of the earth. And I put my pen aside, and I live apart from
thought. I have read all of them, Rousseau, Voltaire, but it is as if I'm not
entitled to thought, to ideas. Entitlement, entitlement, enlightenment,
enlightenment. White is the colour of thought, black of action. And I'm
paralyzed, madame, between thought and action. Perhaps I should not be a
writer but a soldier. Perhaps I should be there with them. A bastard.

(Walcott 306)

Anton is the contradiction of two clashing cultures. He laments the futility of his existence and reckons that the only way to assert his livelihood is by joining the mulatto army to defend himself against “those who are now butchering those who have mixed

blood” (Walcott 359). He feels betrayed by the blacks and seeks to find his natural order in the New World just as Yette has done. Therefore, it is through these characters that Walcott addresses his hybridity complex. He struggles with his identity as a Saint Lucian. Coming from a family of European and African descent, Walcott seeks to remake his own history. He is not looking to crossover, rather he wants “to enhance racial pride and courage” (Walcott 409) as to construct a national identity.

Walcott’s representation of the Haitian Revolution adds to my reading of Hughes’ *Troubled Island*, and Easton’s *Dessalines* in the way all three of them turn to Haiti to understand and maybe to retrieve the loss of their “cultural originality” (Fanon 18). This thesis has analyzed how each author displayed black pride. When looking at all three of these authors, who were not at all contemporaries, we find that they were drawn to Haiti for diverse reasons. In all three plays we observe three authors trying to figure out what it means to be black. Each of these plays have a different focus: Easton’s *Dessalines* succeeds in converting Dessalines from a self-proclaimed heathen to a humble servant of God; Hughes’s dirgeful and grievous enactment of the first Black emperor turns Dessalines into a tragic character; and Walcott’s *Haitian Earth* produces hatred and betrayal that are intractably rooted in the soul of Haiti (seemingly). These authors figured that they had to dig up their past in order to understand and talk about the present. The future of the race relied on that. It is exactly as Schomburg asserts: “for the Negro to have a future in America, he must remake his past” (963). He must take it upon himself to expose the real enemy and to contribute to the ongoing movement. We understand why they turned to Haiti. Haitians were, after all, the first group of blacks who fought and sacrificed everything for equality and liberty. They took a decision that the rest of the

world was not ready to honor, and the word fraternity in their mantra is a plea for a much needed solidarity from blacks everywhere.

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