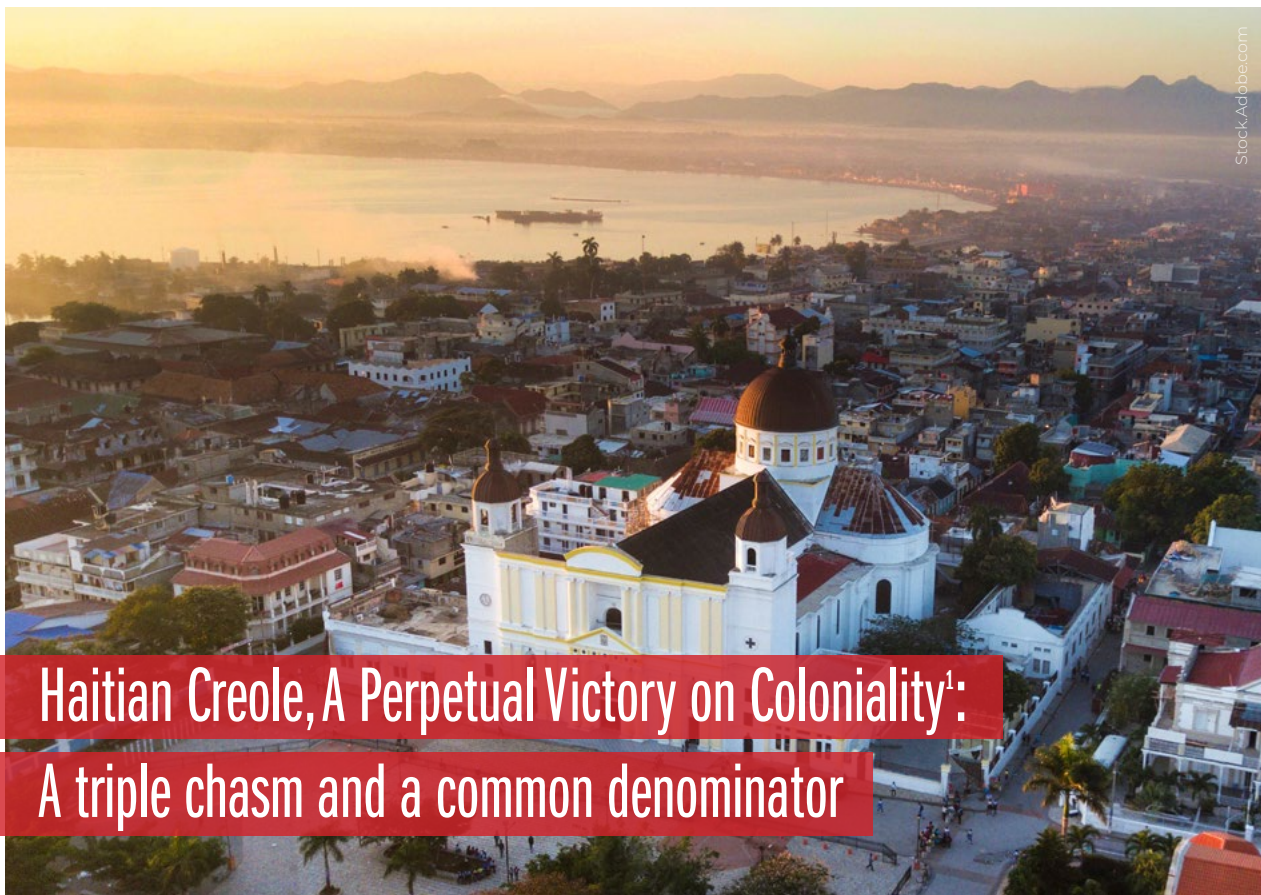




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Haitian Creole, A Perpetual Victory on Coloniality¹: A triple chasm and a common denominator

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Abstract

This article examines Haitian history and identity through the lens of Haitian Creole as both a cultural creation and a victory against coloniality. Jean Casimir argues that Haiti cannot be understood solely through frameworks imposed by European colonial states, but rather through the fractures and continuities that have shaped the nation since its revolutionary origins. Three ruptures are central: the divide between state institutions and colonial structures, the separation of coastal elites from rural “outside people,” and tensions among leaders of varied social and educational backgrounds. These fractures did not create rigid hierarchies but revealed tensions within a society bound by collective pride in autonomy and resistance.

Modern Haitian generations navigate a dual heritage: an imposed Eurocentric education system and a resilient culture transmitted through family, community, and Creole. Western institutions produced elites who saw themselves as guardians of civilization, yet their communities expected them to protect traditional structures. This duality produced a hybrid political and cultural agency, neither fully colonial nor wholly detached.

Haitian Creole, born from diverse European and African languages, became central to national identity. As a counter-language, it unified the population while excluding the colonial state. Creole preserved autonomy, provided categories of self-understanding beyond colonial modernity, and rejected imposed racial hierarchies. Unlike French, it captured the lived experience of the oppressed, becoming a vehicle of sovereignty and resistance.

Post-independence governments faced the paradox of ruling within colonial matrices while representing a decolonial nation. Communal property, counter-plantation economies, and cultural self-sufficiency clashed with efforts to integrate into global capitalist systems, tensions that resurfaced during the U.S. occupation, foreign oligarchies, and narco-politics. Yet Creole-speaking communities sustained a sovereign worldview. The article concludes that Haitian Creole crystallizes Haiti's historical experience, rejecting slavery and colonial modernity while offering strategies for future decolonial renewal.

European states imposed themselves on Haitians without giving them an opportunity to express their rejection and to chart their relations with them. The path taken to establish our difference deserves to be scrutinized. It shows a split between the state and the colony, and the assets we use to salvage our identity.

A second fracture, this time among us, sets aside the population of the seaports, intermediaries of the colonial state, and the former enslaved who, probably since the 1791-1804 revolution, started to perceive themselves as "the outside people", the real inhabitants².

A third departure can be observed among the leaders: we had illiterate³ generals of rural origin, and literate leaders from the seaports, who succeeded each other in power, maintaining a sneaky prejudice of color, which did not lead to a feeling of superiority of one or the other strata. Intellectuals were certainly convinced that the bearers of the Western civilization should occupy higher social echelons, and in fact, they praised themselves as obvious proof that Blacks could achieve the highest excellence granted to Culture, with capital C. But this superiority could be achieved by people of any skin color.

The scale of people's skin color did not correspond to differences in the production of material life nor in any extravagant economic success. Levels of living, modest all throughout society, were nonetheless several times higher to those of residents of the 18th and 19th century Caribbean living in chains or barely freed. A common pride united the Haitian leaders, and the indefatigable use of gun boat diplomacy by the colonial empires testifies that they could not breach their autonomy.

My generation of urbanites, schooled in staunch Eurocentric institutions, was groomed to be part of a Westernized elite, destined to lead our compatriots toward civilization, if not away from abject poverty, understood up to now as our underdevelopment. Our parents grew up during the 1915 US occupation

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of Haiti, under the guidance of grandparents who were, in turn, the products of the golden age of the counter-plantation system⁴. This epoch covers from 1870, the execution of Sylvain Salnave to 1908, the fall of Nord Alexis. Hence, those who raised my parents, at the beginning of the 20th century, were self-confident people, proud of themselves, mainly from inland towns.

They were taught to respect their elders and stick to their advice. The zones of local sovereignty, bypassing the conflicts created by colonial domination, were not discussed, especially in front of 'foreigners', while the rules of the modern world, from which there was no escape, were applied religiously, like those of the Latin and Greek versions that were inflicted upon them. A structural gulf separated their private and community life from the modern state and the public life it promoted.

At the turn of the 20th century, it was customary to send at least the eldest male child to school and to make the necessary sacrifices for him to succeed within the outward oriented society. The survival of an urban cohesive family unit rested on the integration of this child into the modern world. A religious silence surrounded any information gathered at the school system disrespectful of existing community arrangements.

Western institutions (churches, schools, civil and military bureaucracy) led the supposedly “erudite” members of the community to consider themselves an elite. But the community expected them to simply guarantee the survival of the family, as structured. A feeling of superiority and even of self-sufficiency gave precedence to respect for traditions that were not obscured by any mastery of Western culture.

Two Cultures and One Public Administration

The agency of my generation of urbanites is rooted in the dual layer of values and norms of a dominant and an oppressed culture. This generation indeed had a greater mastery of the dominant culture than the rest of the population. The crux of the matter, however, is to determine what this Western knowledge was used for.

The few Haitians who survived the passage of the Spanish from Castile, rebuilt themselves as modern France emerged. They evolved by synchronizing the two façades of the colonial universe, the one that colonialism found in place and the one dictated by the public life it implanted. The incessant need for collective torture to implement its diktats testified to the inflexible resistance of the colonized; and, conversely, their tireless re-existence confirmed the modesty of their success in the face of colonial brutality.

Originally, an adult population comprising essentially male European marginals – sailors, pirates, and filibusters from the western sea coast, Jews, Huguenots and other heretics, – settled on the western coast of Haiti. They imagined new forms of living and a language, Haitian Creole, different from what obtained in their mother country.

The first authorities from Paris arrived with Bertrand d'Ogeron in 1665, together with the commercial mercantilist companies. They initiated a modern economic development with White slaves (36

month indentured) but soon intensified this growth with the absorption of African born persons. The transformation of these captives into slaves was presented as a civilizational mission. Their ensuing invisibility allowed colonialism to dress itself up as colonization, leading to a historical narrative that pretended to obscure and to criminalize and deny the victims' agency.

The slaves, as inputs of colonial enterprises, were commodities renewed on the market according to the ups and downs of their demand and supply. Their lives had a meaning in as much as it enhanced material production. Similarly, the State ignored the well-being of the poor settlers (petty Whites); its objectives being the only compass of the colonial administration.

Given the short life expectancy of the enslaved, their supply had to be constantly renewed. Their conversion into slaves accelerated, but the blindness of the state canceled the need for supervising this process too closely. So, as the colony grew richer, local communities tended to satisfy their needs without state intervention. They became better equipped every day to provide for themselves or to challenge official policies. Their Creole language, a marker of identity, was absent from the colonial administration.

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As a language, Creole cements the components of the nation and keeps them away from the thinking of the French state. It testifies to its absence in private and community life, as well as in the conflicts between local social forces. This language carries contradictions with the political power, as well as the acrimonious relations of its speakers with slave traders and the international community. The relexification of the concept “White” to signify the “foreigner” testifies to the role that it plays.

A second set of contradictions refers to the management of power within the state, i.e. the equally bumpy interface of local forces. The indigenous army that created the state in 1804 was born from the mutineers of the colonial army. It got the better of the French after having treacherously assassinated the Guinean leaders. The new nation did not invent a specific name for this appendage of the colonial army; it retains the indigenous qualifier that Creole uses nowhere else.

Madiou’s definition of what the indigenous person⁵ is distorts the reality that the population constructs. Beaubrun Ardouin, for his part, reported that the Civil Commissioners informed the National Assembly that “it is with the natives of the country, it is with the Africans, that we will save France’s property in Saint-Domingue” (Dezobry and E. Magdeleine 1853, pp.179). In the same sentence, he unties the concept from the people’s place of birth, and reintroduces the Blacks in front of the Whites, in a community that exclude the foreigner, the ‘White’.

This falsification of reality that Haitians construct escapes a thinker as shrewd as C.L.R. James, who translates the term as “the native army” (1980). This narrative enshrines the invisibility of the majority of African-born Haitians and blunts their agency. It is easy to understand why the word indigenous has no meaning for them and why they do not use it in their speech.

Through this army, unable to integrate the popular vision of the world, the birth, organization and management of the state/public administration were monopolized by the Eurocentric oligarchs who led it. They dreamt of Haiti’s participation in the club of colonial powers; and the assiduous courtship made to them by the French state ended up mirroring the country in the famous debt of independence.

The national majority can only observe this militarized façade seduced by the siren song of deceitfully civilizing people. The oligarchs who could have become national elites cut off the branch on which their eventual ascendancy rests to secure the control of public administration.

Liberty and Death

The confinement of political authorities in the imperial language ignores or obscures the relevance of the categories and institutions produced by the experience of the subordinate classes. In their language, they do not in any way qualify their rejection of the foreigner. The logic of popular institutions escapes the objectives of state codification, which it dodges and even challenges through family and community education.

Moreover, the prestige, conferred by the state to French, tended to endow this language with a role it certainly cannot play in Saint Domingue. Creole resulted, first, from a combination of languages from the western sea coast of France, that, at the time of their encounter in the island of La Tortue, were reproducing their difference with Francien, the language of *l’Île de France*, and their opposition to the institutions sponsored by the crown (the opposition of the Huguenots and the Jews to the Catholics is a point in case). In any event, the influence of Francien on the regional languages did not cross the Atlantic.

It can be assumed that this predisposition to linguistic autonomy is reinforced by the arrival of newcomers who speak a variety of West African languages. Their gradual appropriation of Creole thus forces the observation and narration of local behavior from points of view that are increasingly divergent from that of the State. Creole, an autonomous vehicle of communication, prunes and redefines the official vocabulary that does not fit in with the local experience.

For Haitian Creole-speakers, the colonial social structure is absurd. The words ‘person’ (moun), Nèg (negro) or ‘Christian’ are synonymous. These concepts emerge from local community relations where the fundamental dichotomies of modernity and colonialism do not operate⁶. Thus, the transmission by the state of its extreme contempt for the so-called inferior races and mestizos does not cross the language barrier⁷.

Given the small number of Francophones in the colony, the state could not develop a school system adapted to the locality. Formal education remains restricted to the metropolitan setting. Aimed at improving public order, it served the civil servants whom the state sent to France to learn how to administer a colony. This is the case for the sons of senior officers such as Toussaint and Christophe.

The rejection of colonialism is constitutive of Haitians as a people. It keeps in check their participation in the institutions of the colonial period, based on the consummation of their existence. The magnificence of the pearl of the West Indies is coupled with the annihilation of the inhabitants like the faces of the same coin. A school system based on the enrichment of the planters by the extermination of captives can teach nothing to their children, even if they are freemen or freed slave. The ambiguities in the definition of the *cultivators*⁸ deceive no one, and the number of maroons (bandits) under the government of Toussaint was higher than under that of the French General Rochambeau.

The enslaved population became aware of its situation in an anti-colonial world, and therefore outside of modernity: they were 'people from the outside'. Torture transforms her into conscripts of this modernity⁹, slaves or cultivators, a mass of disposable goods used as inputs to the plantation system. They are certainly too fragile to prevent this development, but they reserve revenge for themselves. They are sovereign beings, living in prison, certainly, but endowed with a self-propelled power to act, existing and re-existing as such, independently of the modern world.

For a local community to become the central agent of its political regime, it must be aware of its agency, of its successes and failures. This process involves the joint management of freedom and death, or the choice to be an autonomous person, even when one chooses to be killed. Haitians cannot escape the policies of their aggressors, but they are fighting tirelessly for their freedom. Freedom **or** death is a slogan of the fight. Freedom **and** death together depict their daily conditions of living.

Language, In Lieu of decolonial Options

A decolonial reading of Haitian history shows that we created ourselves as a collectivity by transcending circumstances superimposed by Europe. The latter

tried to produce slaves, while we invented our person by rejecting this repugnant proposition.

After independence, governments claimed to run a modern, *unthinkable* and *irrational* black state. *Unthinkable*, because the international community set itself up by constructing the black man as a slave. *Irrational* for a nation that emerged at war against any compromise that contains the slightest whiff of this absurdity. This was the dilemma of the new state: its governments navigated a colonial matrix of power with a resolutely decolonial nation.

After the victory of 1804, the sharecropping promoted by Pétion contradicted the development of large plantations, encouraging an inward-looking economy, based on a system of undivided family property. Thereafter, governments strive to prevent the West from physically establishing a foothold in Haiti and leave the well-being of the population to the care of local communities. Haitians unable to integrate into the modern world while respecting their value orientation adapted their counter-plantation, fragile and isolated, to the diktats of an expanding imperialism.

The American occupation of 1915 inflicted the physical presence of foreigners by imposing their access to land ownership and the development of a plantation economy. State racism was reintroduced, and community life was persecuted by governments, Christian churches, and the school system. But the structural obstruction of undivided family property system diverted the development of plantations to neighboring territories that siphon off 'cheap' labor. Then, for a short period, the export of tourist services replaced those of agricultural products.

Self-proclaimed urban elites initiated in managing government institutions were humiliated in the press. They negotiated a subordinate participation in the administrative machinery, while forbidding the invader from any entry into their private lives. The essential thing about an educated person remained his conformity to the rules of the local community. This was the revenge of oppressed culture. Dispositions taught by the Eurocentric school system disseminated a set of information that was essential to take advantage of colonial tutelage. But graduates of the school system learned at home to jealously guard the assets of the family and the local community. They went to school to serve as shields for local traditions.

Faced with the resistance of my parents' generation, the American Occupation grafted onto local society a brand-new economic oligarchy, coming from the South of the United States, the British West Indies and the Levant. After the Second World War and the short-lived breakthrough of the tourism industry, Haiti found itself with its comparative advantages defined by the liberal market economy: cheap labor and proximity to consumption centers. Labor rushed to find job opportunities abroad, while the traditional import-export sector was gradually turning to the lucrative transfer of narcotics.

The surplus captured by the public administration was no longer enough to woo the votes of the inhabitants by regularly offering a minimum of social services. The narco-state, for greater efficiency, was gradually privatizing its monopoly on public violence.

But the communities still mastered the transmission of the local culture and language. The latter ended up monopolizing the public sphere and demanding the presence of its values in the management of power. Arbitrariness was obvious in the face of the demands of a sovereign world. A narco-state in a poor country could not solve this crisis.

By 1791, Creole had proved to be the most Haitian contribution to the production of national identity. It was the precipitation of its historical experience, its trials and errors, its successes and failures. It was imposed on the day when, faced with the danger of total extermination announced by Napoleon, the local forces put aside their differences to drive out the French state. Once this was done, this uncomfortable truce moved towards a semblance of a solution until the end of the following century. In 1915, the United States of America landed, the banner of its manifest destiny unfurled from coast to coast.

The deterioration of the national economic situation initiated by the invader is accelerating and is leading in the first quarter of the twenty-first century to a threat of disappearance like that of the end of the nineteenth century. Just as in the twilight of French colonization, the national language sounded the rallying point against the allied imperial powers in the famous 'Core Group'¹⁰.

The reflection I submit concerns a limited aspect of the history of Haitians: the need to manage

our two cultures. I suggest that a twofold path be opened before us: the first is to deepen our studies of Creole and to become aware of the norms and values that identify us and testify to our strength, and the second invites us to promote in our country all the imperial languages that can help us to recover and engage in the national struggle our diaspora in the Dominican Republic, in the Bahamas, the United States, Latin America, and France. Through it, we will participate in the struggles of the wretched of the earth who engage in it. More united, the nation and its allies will be able to negotiate a way out of the crisis.

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Endnotes

- ¹ This reflection continues on from my previous work (see *Casimir 2018, pp. and Casimir 2018, pp. 281-328*).
- ² In Creole “abitan”, meaning *settler* in English.
- ³ They were rather a-literate, speaking an unwritten mother tongue.
- ⁴ A way of living opposite to slavery plantation, based on reciprocity and cooperation.
- ⁵ Madiou, referring to the events of 1802, wrote: “*Dès à présent, nous entendons par indigènes, non seulement les Noirs et les hommes de couleur nés à Saint-Domingue, mais encore les Africains transplantés*” (Translates as, “From now on, we understand by indigenous, not only the Blacks and colored people born in Saint-Domingue, but also transplanted Africans”.) (Madiou 1848, pp.162).
- ⁶ The different meanings of the word race put in evidence the incompatibility of the local and imperial vision of the world. The *White* race built its modern supremacy while exploiting *inferior Indian and Black races*. In Creole language, the word *Blan* (White) does not refer to a race or to a color. Moreover, Haitians kept the old French meaning of the word race. It refers to consanguinity of extended families.
- ⁷ One observes, indeed, a preference for intermedium shades of skin color between black and white, with no implication of feelings of inferiority or superiority among the people of these shades of colors.
- ⁸ After general emancipation, the former slaves were called “cultivators”
- ⁹ The expression is borrowed from Scott (2004).
- ¹⁰ The set of Ambassadors of the Great Western powers called themselves ‘Core Group’ without specifying of what they are a core. They represent the major donors of assistance to the bankrupt narco-state.