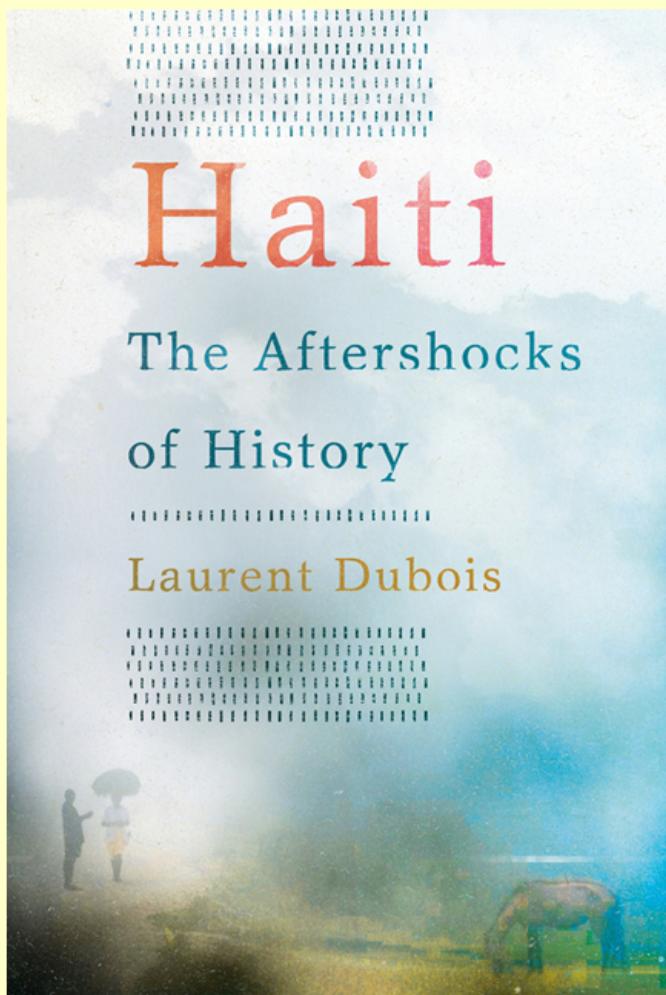


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## INDEPENDENCE

“In the end,” Jean-Jacques Dessalines announced on January 1, 1804, “we must live independent or die.” Six weeks earlier, Dessalines, the revolutionaries’ general-in-chief, had secured the decisive defeat of the French forces at the Battle of Vertières. Now, surrounded by the main commanders of his army, he called into existence a new nation: Haiti. On the same day, those commanders named him “Governor-General for Life” of the newborn country, making him its first head of state.<sup>1</sup>

Like the majority of the population he spoke to, Dessalines had once been a slave. The slogan “Liberty or Death,” printed above the official independence decree, had a particularly potent meaning in Haiti. Defeat at the hands of the French would have meant literal death for the revolution’s leaders, and a return to slavery for the rest. In victory, they guaranteed themselves the freedom to build new lives and a new society.

Haiti’s independence had been won at a terrible cost. The new nation’s ports and many of its plantations were in ashes. Combat, hunger, and disease had killed vast numbers of people—as many as 100,000 during 1802–03 alone. As Dessalines surveyed the new country, he saw a land haunted by the dead. “Men and women, girls and boys, let your gaze tend on all parts of this island: look there for your wives, your husbands, your brothers, your sisters . . . what

have they become?” He also invoked the memory of those who had died as slaves on the plantations, their misery the wellspring of the colony’s fabulous wealth. The French “barbarians,” said Dessalines, had “bloodied our land for two centuries,” and their influence would not be easy to throw off. “Le nom français lugubre encore nos contrées,” Dessalines declared—“The French name still glooms our lands.” The unconventional transformation of the adjective “lugubre”—“lugubrious”—into a verb captured just how deeply the history of French colonialism shadowed the newborn country. Against all this loss, the new country’s leader offered an absolute commitment to a liberated future. “We have dared to be free,” he proclaimed; “let us be thus by ourselves and for ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

The expulsion of the French seemed to hold out the promise of a completely new system for organizing the Haitian society. But as Dessalines quickly realized, the colonial order could not be exorcised by fiat or decree. The Haitian population and its leaders, after all, inherited a finely tuned plantation machine, a place whose entire mode of being was driven by the production of sugar and coffee for export. That was the initial condition from which the new country had to be built, and it proved inescapable. Colonial Saint-Domingue had been constructed around a hierarchical social order, an autocratic and militarized political system, and an export-oriented economy. From the moment of its founding to the present day, Haiti would find itself burdened by all three.

At the same time, however, the Haitian Revolution was an act of profound—and irreversible—transformation. Few other generations in history have achieved what the Haitian revolutionaries managed to do. If not for their victory, slavery would almost certainly have continued in the colony for at least several decades more, as it did in all the societies that surrounded them. By defeating the French forces, they created a space where former slaves could exercise cultural and social autonomy to a degree unknown anywhere else in the Americas. While Dessalines and other Haitian leaders eloquently articulated a passionate refusal of slavery, it was the people of Haiti

who truly gave content to that refusal. Melding traditions and beliefs carried from Africa, the spirit of resistance born on the plantations of Saint-Domingue, and the confidence and knowledge gained from the triumph over the French, they created a new culture and way of life driven by an unceasing emphasis on independence and personal freedom.

Despite its drama and historic importance, many of the most important aspects of Haiti's revolution are startlingly difficult to document. We know much about its leaders, who left plentiful records of their actions and perspectives; we know far less about the experiences and the views of the masses of slaves who so dramatically changed the world in which they lived. Yet it was the culture of these masses, forged in bondage—the Kreyòl language, the Vodou religion, the focus on community, dignity, and self-sufficiency—that ultimately enabled them to destroy slavery and produce something new in its place.



Haiti has had many names. When the Atlantic currents brought Columbus to its shores on his first voyage, he baptized the island La Española, which in English became Hispaniola. The small outpost that Columbus set up on the northern coast of Hispaniola was the first European settlement in the Americas, though an ill-fated one: by the time he returned, all the settlers had been killed by indigenous inhabitants. The Spanish soon built a new settlement on the southeastern coast of the island, however, which they dubbed Santo Domingo, after the revered founder of the Dominican order. The town gave its name to the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo, which, centuries later, would become the Dominican Republic. French colonists, arriving on the western half of the island in the late seventeenth century, took the Spanish name and translated it, giving the title of Saint-Domingue to what would soon become their most precious American territory. Of course, long before the Europeans appeared,

the indigenous inhabitants had their own names for the land. Among them, as early Spanish chroniclers noted, was Ayiti—"land of mountains." It was this name that the founders of Haiti reached back to in 1804, seeking to connect their struggle for freedom from slavery with the earlier battles of indigenous peoples against Spanish invaders.<sup>3</sup>

The island of Hispaniola was the starting point for European conquest of the Americas. By the middle of the sixteenth century, Hispaniola's indigenous population of perhaps 500,000 to 750,000 people was almost completely eliminated through war, forced labor, and disease. Santo Domingo became America's first colonial city, with a cathedral and university, and the Spanish imported African slaves to work on sugar plantations. As Spain conquered vast territories on the mainland of South America, however, Santo Domingo lost its importance, becoming mainly a stopover point for Spanish ships on their way to Europe. The ships' cargoes of silver drew English and French pirates to the region, and the Spanish government, unable to protect settlements on the western half of Hispaniola against pirate raids, removed them altogether. Soon French settlers from the famous pirate haven of Tortuga, just north of Hispaniola, moved in on the Spanish territory and began building plantations on the island's northwest coast. For a few decades they remained essentially illegal squatters, but in 1697 Spain officially ceded the territory to France.

By the late seventeenth century, the English and French empires in the Americas were increasingly fixated on growing one particular crop: sugar. The geographical fault lines that lie under Haiti and the rest of the Caribbean created a series of islands that turned out to be the perfect place for the cultivation of sugarcane. Haiti had the region's highest mountains, which sent water down to a series of large, flat plains. These abutted well-protected bays, ideal for anchoring ships. The island, furthermore, is situated right at the end of a highway crossing the Atlantic: a strong current flows from Europe directly toward it. Another set of currents lead from Africa straight to Haiti as well. The territory became one of the key points in the

“triangle trade” that created the Atlantic economy of the eighteenth century: manufactured goods were brought from Europe to Africa, slaves from Africa to the Americas, and slave-produced crops from the Caribbean back to Europe.

French Saint-Domingue grew to become the most profitable colony in the world. By the late eighteenth century, it was the world’s largest producer of sugar, exporting more of it than the colonies of Jamaica, Cuba, and Brazil combined. At the same time, Saint-Domingue also grew fully half of the world’s coffee. It was a small territory, covering only about 10,600 square miles—about the size of Massachusetts. Yet it was more valuable to France than all the thirteen colonies of North America were to England.

An official estimate of the colony’s population in 1789 reported that Saint-Domingue contained 55,000 free people and 450,000 slaves. But because slaves were taxed, they were also broadly undercounted; in all likelihood there were at least half a million of them. The slaves outnumbered the free population by ten to one in the colony overall, and by a much higher proportion on many of the plantations. In the parish of Acul, where the 1791 insurrection began, there were 3,500 slaves surrounding 130 free people.<sup>4</sup>

The free population was also deeply segmented and divided. It included fabulously wealthy white planters and powerful officials; poor white migrants managing slave gangs or working in the ports; and what were known as “free people of color,” men and women of African descent who were not slaves and who indeed often owned slaves and plantations themselves.\* According to official estimates,

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\* Historians often refer to the free people of color as “mulattoes,” but that can be misleading, since not all were of mixed European and African ancestry. Skin color was certainly important: light-skinned men and women gained certain social privileges thanks to the fact that they were considered closer to being white. But there were also free people with no European ancestry, and some who were African-born but had managed to gain freedom and grow wealthy in Saint-Domingue. Officials at the time, and historians writing since, often use the term “free blacks” to describe the latter group, but here I will use the general term “free people of color” to designate all those people in the colony who were partly or wholly of African descent and were not slaves.

the colony's free population was divided more or less evenly between whites and people of color. Notably, the free men of color made up a large portion of the local police as well as of the colonial militia. The major task of that militia force, in Saint-Domingue, was not to defend the colony from external threats but to protect the territory from its potentially overwhelming enemy within: the slave majority.<sup>5</sup>

Although the colony produced some cotton, indigo, and a great deal of coffee, most of the slaves toiled on sugar plantations. Harvesting cane is backbreaking work, made risky by the razor-sharp spines of the tall stalks and the insects and snakes nested in the fields. Once cut, cane has to be processed quickly, so enslaved workers—usually women—worked day and night feeding the cane stalks into large stone mills, where it was all too easy for hands and arms to be pulled in and crushed. Other slaves supervised vats of boiling cane juice that produced the sugar crystals. A small number of slaves also worked as artisans, constructing barrels and buildings, or as domestics in the opulent plantation homes. A privileged few occupied positions as *commandeurs*, slave drivers transmitting instructions from masters and managers to field hands and making sure that these orders were followed. The drivers were viewed with both respect and fear—they were the ones who whipped any slaves who disobeyed—and were informal leaders within the plantation. It was a well-ordered system, a combination of “field and factory,” in the terms of anthropologist Sidney Mintz, that brought together advanced technology and carefully designed labor management. But it also exhausted the soil through one cane harvest after another, and began a process of deforestation as swaths of trees were cut down to build plantation houses and the thriving port towns.<sup>6</sup>

Although masters controlled slaves in part through the promise of material rewards—extra food, better work, and sometimes even freedom—they depended most of all on terror. Slaves were branded with their masters' initials (often after having been already branded once by slave traders in Africa) and quickly learned that any resistance would be met with whipping or worse. Each plantation in

Saint-Domingue had a post ready for public punishments, which were carried out in front of the assembled workforce. Some contemporaries described brutally creative tortures devised by particularly sadistic masters, such as cutting off arms and legs, or burying slaves up to their necks and leaving them to be attacked by biting insects.

Slaves died in stunning numbers in the colony; each year, between 5 and 10 percent of the slave population succumbed to overwork and disease. Death outpaced births, and only a constant stream of imports sustained the laboring population. Some contemporaries were dismayed by the brutality and inefficiency of the system. They proposed reforms they hoped would increase the locally born slave population: a few weeks of rest from field labor for pregnant women, and rewards for those who had several children. But it was cheaper to let slaves die and buy more from Africa, so that is what the planters did.

Of the half-million slaves in Saint-Domingue on the eve of the 1791 revolt, about 330,000 had been born and raised in Africa. Most of them were quite recent arrivals; more than 40,000 had stepped off the slave ships just the previous year. Their African background—as well as their experience of the Middle Passage and plantation labor—shaped their politics, their practices, and their hopes for what life after slavery should be like. Though they were at the bottom of the social pyramid, they profoundly influenced the society's culture and therefore its future.<sup>7</sup>

The largest number of slaves in the colony came from the central African region broadly known as the Kongo. Captured by slave raiders or in battle, they were shipped to Africa's Atlantic coast and then loaded onto slave ships for the weeks-long voyage to Saint-Domingue. Arriving in Saint-Domingue, they found themselves in a cosmopolitan world, a *mélange* of different languages and cultures. None of them would likely have defined themselves as "Africans," but rather as members of particular groups or kingdoms: Kongo, Ibo, Fon, Poulards. And the newcomers were immediately mixed with enslaved people who were "creoles," born in the colony itself.

Creoles and African-born slaves had very different perspectives, to be sure, but at the same time they also shared a great deal. Most creole slaves, after all, had African parents, while the African arrivals necessarily became creolized, part of a New World culture in formation. “I’m a Creole-Kongo,” a Vodou song declares.<sup>8</sup>

As they suffered together through the trauma of plantation life, Africans and creoles developed their own rituals of healing, mourning, and worship. Such ceremonies, along with dances and communal meals held on the margins of plantations, carved out a place where the enslaved could temporarily escape the order that saw them only as chattel property. The rituals combined religious practices from a wide variety of African traditions, including Christianity: the royalty of the Kongo had converted to Catholicism in the sixteenth century, and that religion was widely practiced in the region. Over time, the hybrid form of worship became known by the West African name of Vodou. It was an extremely open and fluid religion, welcoming new arrivals. Contemporary Vodou bears the traces of this openness: its pantheon includes many different *lwa*, or gods, who share certain rituals but also retain their distinctiveness. The different *nanchons*—nations—of *lwa* bear signs of their varied origins in different parts of Africa, and Vodou songs often emphasize the way in which many groups came together to create one common tradition of worship. One, called “Sou Lan Mè”—“On the Ocean”—uses the experience of the Middle Passage as a metaphor for the broader creation of a new life in Haiti. In the hold of the ship, on the turbulent waters of the Atlantic, it announces, “we all became one.” Sung within Vodou ceremonies, the song is another reminder of the way in which the new culture was born out of a common experience of captivity, exile, and ultimately resistance.<sup>9</sup>

Saint-Domingue also gave birth to a new language: Kreyòl. What began as a rough-hewn form of communication for the linguistically diverse population of the colony—speakers of French, dialects such as Breton, and different African languages—became the native tongue of most children in the colony, slave and free alike, who

developed and solidified the language. By the mid-eighteenth century, Kreyòl was spoken by almost everyone in Saint-Domingue, from wealthy masters to African-born slaves. It was the lingua franca of the plantations and the towns alike, and poetry, songs, and plays were written and performed in Kreyòl.<sup>10</sup>

Born in the harsh world of the plantations, these cultural achievements turned out to be potent political weapons. Masters and officials had always tried to contain the slave majority as much as possible. Colonial laws restricted the movement of slaves, mostly keeping them under constant surveillance on the plantation, and severely punishing any runaways, known as maroons. But slaves nonetheless found opportunities to circulate and thereby build connections with slaves from other plantations. The development of Kreyòl and Vodou facilitated such connections, creating communities of trust that stretched between different plantations and into the towns. These communities were what made it ultimately possible for the conspirators of 1791 to organize a coordinated assault on masters, sugar, and slavery.

The 1791 uprising also drew on a particularly useful skill that many of the recently arrived slaves had brought across the Atlantic. The slaves who arrived in Saint-Domingue from central Africa in the late eighteenth century came from a region torn apart by civil wars. Many were former soldiers, sold to European slavers after being captured in battle. They were well versed in the use of firearms and experienced in military tactics involving small, mobile, autonomous units. The governors and masters of Saint-Domingue had seen only living merchandise stepping off the African ships docked in their harbors, and they were confident that their methods for controlling these slaves would work as they always had in colonies throughout the Americas. What the masters didn't see was that the boats had brought literally thousands of soldiers to their shores. The new arrivals carried in their minds all the tactics and experience required to start—and win—a war. All they needed were weapons and an opportunity.<sup>11</sup>



In the middle of 1789, news of the French Revolution began arriving in Saint-Domingue from across the Atlantic. The upheaval in France sent shock waves throughout the world, but it created a particularly significant opening in Saint-Domingue. It weakened the French empire's central government and its system of colonial rule. At the same time, the revolution produced and sent into circulation a new, radical language of rights that could be put to use in contesting the existing social order. Among the first to take advantage of this new situation were Saint-Domingue's free people of color, who saw an opportunity to remedy their exclusion from the colony's political life. It was their initiative that launched what can be considered the first stage of the Haitian Revolution—though no one at the time would likely have predicted that these events would lead to the end of slavery, and eventually of the colony itself.

In the prospering territory of Saint-Domingue, many free people of color had become quite wealthy. White planters who fathered children with their slaves rarely acknowledged the mixed-race offspring officially, but it was relatively common practice to free them and give them land. By the time of the revolution, some families of color had been free for two or three generations. They bought their own plantations and slaves, and they became particularly involved in the colony's lesser crops: indigo, cotton, and especially coffee. The plains that were best for cultivating sugar were mostly controlled by French colonists, but even in the mid-eighteenth century there was still plenty of land to be had in the mountains of Saint-Domingue, and these plots were ideal for coffee growing. Some free people of color who got into the coffee boom early made fortunes as a result; others invested in waterfront property in Port-au-Prince and ended up perfectly positioned to become successful merchants in the port town. Since there were almost no schools in the colony, such families often sent their children to France, where they received elite educations.<sup>12</sup>