Toussaint on Trial in *Ti Difé Boulé Sou Istoua Ayiti*, or the People's Role in the Haitian Revolution

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Min Listoua pa gin patipri pou éro k-chita sou Channmas ap gadé ti nèg anba. Sèi éro Listoua sé pèp la.

[History is not partial to heroes who sit on the Champs de Mars and look down on the people below. The only heroes in history are the people.]

*Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti*, p. 143.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* was published in Brooklyn in 1977 by Kolèksion Lakansièl. It is a rich and fascinating text that has received very little critical attention to date, probably due to the fact that it is written entirely in Haitian Kreyòl and has not been widely circulated. It seems fitting to pause and reflect on Trouillot’s work in 2004, as Haiti’s bicentennial is being simultaneously celebrated and debated, since a quarter-century ago Trouillot advocated the very same type of critical reflection that is crucial to the resolution of complex socio-economic and political problems in Haiti today. In short, *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* interrogates the problems of the present day—that is, the Duvalier dictatorship—in Haiti, based on a thorough exploration of the country’s past—the revolutionary period, in particular.

Trouillot’s text challenges prevailing assumptions that Toussaint Louverture was the most significant leader of the Revolution, traces the genealogy of the corrupt indigenist ideology that has ruled Haiti for two centuries, and identifies some alternative heroes. Even more importantly, perhaps, *Ti difé boulé* underscores the Haitian people’s central role in the (still incomplete) struggle for liberation, in the hopes of inspiring renewed collective action in the twentieth century that will help ensure a better future.
for the country. This paper discusses *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* both in terms of its unusual narrative structures and its critical content, with an eye to explaining how and to what end Trouillot reworks the trope of the Haitian Revolution from exile during the Duvalier dictatorship.

I will begin by situating *Ti difé boulé* in the context of twentieth-century Haitian literary production, given that the text is fictional to some degree (this characteristic will be subsequently addressed). First of all, is it possible to consider Trouillot’s text as Haitian, even though it was published in New York? In answering this question, we can observe that Trouillot’s work belongs to a well-developed “literature of migration”—that is to say, literature produced in French, English and/or Kreyòl by writers of Haitian origin living outside the national boundaries of Haitian culture—in well-established Haitian communities within American cities (primarily Miami, New York, and Boston), as well as in Canada and France. In a recent article called “Haitian Literature in the United States,” Jean Jonassaint discusses the relatively recent phenomenon of this literature of migration:

Haitian literature [...], after the exodus of the years 1960-1980, is radically post-national. Indeed, those works called Haitian (whether written in Haitian [that is to say, Kreyòl] or in French) are more and more the products of transnational writers, who are thus inscribing themselves in more than one literary culture, and their texts are written in more than one language—French and Haitian, clearly, but more and more in English as well, especially in the United States. (p. 432)

This theory of the trans-nationalization of Haitian literature strikes me as both convincing and applicable to other national literatures in the Caribbean—such as Cuban or Dominican, for example—given that writing is increasingly influenced by the experience of diasporic immigration patterns and is often published miles away from its original cultural and/or historical centers.

In emphasizing the “post-national” aspect of Haitian literature, Jonassaint argues that we must re-think the construct of Haitian culture as it relates to the national space in light of the fact that so many Haitians—many of them intellectuals—established themselves abroad, or *lòt bò dlo*, during the Duvalier dictatorship (most specifically) and before. Undeniably, these extensive migratory waves had important consequences for the domain of literary production; first and foremost, the category of “Haitian writer” needs expanding. Jonassaint, himself a Haitian writer working within the American cultural space, explains that Haitian literature has traditionally
been defined as

...literature produced by Haitian subjects in one or another
of the languages of the Haitian space, French and Haitian
Creole. But the American situation leads us to enlarge,
at least provisionally, this defining framework and to
propose a pragmatic definition inspired by, among other
things, Dubois's Bourdieusian analysis of the institution
of literature. Thus Haitian literary production is defined as
any work produced in Haiti or by a Haitian or perceived as
Haitian (at one level or another of instances of production/
legitimization), and Haitian literary production in the
United States is defined as any work by a Haitian living
or having lived in the United States, or any Haitian work
published in the United States. (Jonassaint 432)

Accordingly, Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti qualifies as a Haitian text.
It is worth noting that Trouillot, whose professional field is anthropology
(and who currently resides in Chicago), has published a wide variety of
texts in French, English and Haitian Kreyòl.

Trouillot's work, published in Brooklyn for a Haitian audience, reveals
the linguistic and geographic binary of "inside/outside" facing Haitian
writers today, as described by the Haitian literary critic Maximilien
Laroche (who lives in Canada) in La double scène de la représentation:
Oraliture et littérature dans la Caraïbe. Laroche suggests that writing
from abroad, in more than one language, while bridging the difference
between oral and literary cultures (often with a circular approach), makes
Haitian writers simultaneously modern and post-modern, as they cross and
re-cross the boundaries separating "here/there." Léon-François Hoffmann
points out in Haitian Fiction Revisited that Haitian writers in general are
increasingly compelled to write for a double audience that includes both
fellow Haitians and foreign readers. Much explanation and background are
often required, and even so, many Haitian texts are not understood well
by foreigners. Unfortunately, the publishing market in Haiti is extremely
limited, and the number of bookstores very small. Foreign authors are
preferred to Haitian ones, with French writers receiving perhaps the most
admiration by the Haitian public. As far as literature of Haitian origin is
concerned, works that are published in Paris and Québec are most likely
to reach foreign bookstores. (Hoffmann 27-29) In this context, the cultural
production of the Haitian Diaspora can be seen as a site of articulation that
is significantly changing the contours of Haitian culture (but this question
warrants more detailed treatment than is possible within the framework of
this article). Interestingly, those who migrate from Haiti to lòt bò dlo are often perceived as blan—literally, “whites,” but meaning “foreigners”—by those who live in Haiti.

Some readers will be familiar with the current of literary works by writers of the Haitian Diaspora that have emerged over the past few decades. Trouillot’s *Ti difè boulé sou istoua Ayiti* represents a shining example of the growing trend of the 1970s. According to Jonassaint, this was “an extraordinary decade as regards Haitian literary production in America: more than thirty titles [were published] by some twenty writers, and a public to read them.” (Jonassaint 436) On this subject, Jonassaint continues:

> The 1970’s […] saw the emergence of a number of Haitian-American places of publication, notably in 1975, which was quite exceptional in displaying a certain “taking charge” of Haitian writing in the American space. [In particular, a bilingual French-Haitian] literary journal in New York, *Lakansiel*, which allowed Michel-Rolph Trouillot to experiment with his work in Haitian and to define his aesthetics and his relation to the Haitian socio-political arena. […] It was not by chance that he published his first book, in 1977, under the *Lakansiel* imprint. This was *Ti difè boulé sou istoua Ayiti*, a magnificent historical work written in Haitian from a Marxist perspective, but framed like a popular Haitian narrative. It was the first text of its length in Haitian (some 200 pages), and also, along with [George] Castera’s *Konbélann* (published in Montréal a year earlier), the most significant work in Haitian written by a Haitian in the United States. (p. 438)

Despite its importance within the field of Haitian literature, *Ti difè boulé sou istoua Ayiti* is not an easy text to locate. The book has been out of print for some time, and only a few university libraries count it among their collections. For this reason, and also to facilitate reflection on *Ti difè boulé* and its subject matter, the present discussion will take a narrative approach to the text—I will provide a general summary of its contents, alongside textual analysis.

One might well ask, exactly what kind of text is *Ti difè boulé sou istoua Ayiti*? To begin with, the book resists simple classification in terms of genre because Trouillot plays simultaneously upon the codes of history and fiction. Notwithstanding its written, published status, *Ti difè boulé* reflects many aspects of Haiti’s traditional oral storytelling. At the outset
the narrator, or papa tire-kont, invites his audience to participate in the recounting of the story on a warm evening: "Sa k-vlé palé, palé. Sa k-vlé kouté, kouté." [Those who wish to speak, speak. Those who wish to listen, listen.] (Trouillot 21) This public is composed of a closely-knit group of villagers, or “fanmi” [family], clearly identified as living “an déyò,” or far away from a city; the oral tradition remains stronger “an déyò.” As for the storyteller’s identity, he is none other than Grinn Prominnin—a figure, who, as Laroche explains in Teke, embodies the collective conscience of the Haitian people. Grinn Prominnin can thus “see” for everyone, and he helps others to better understand the reality of the country’s contemporary problems as they learn to identify historical patterns of oppression.

Normally, stories in Haitian folklore that are told according to oral tradition do not include specific information about temporal details, but Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti underlines many important dates in Haiti’s history. It is interesting to note that Trouillot describes the time frame of the Revolution as spanning the years from 1789 to 1820, instead of the generally accepted 1791-1804 (Trouillot 15). Rather than the triumphant proclamation of independence from France made by Jean-Jacques Dessalines on January 1, 1804, the tragic fall of King Christophe is put forward as a marker ending the revolutionary period. Trouillot clearly seeks to emphasize the fact that large-scale social and political upheaval continues in the new republic of Haiti for several decades; as is the case for other major historical events with immeasurable consequences, the revolutionary period appears to be surrounded by a kind of specter that transcends temporal boundaries. (Furthermore, the character flaws of Toussaint Louverture are likened in several ways to those of Christophe.) This problematic past that defies precise definitions is subjacent to the critical discourse reflected in Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti. The Revolution represents “yon kriz-nan-mouèl,” or a profound crisis, that ultimately serves as a departure point (Trouillot 15); Trouillot’s text can be interpreted as an anticipated priz konsyans, or flash of sudden awareness, for the Haitian people in 1977.

A brief synopsis of the seven chapters of Ti difé boulé will bring to light the main questions that Trouillot addresses in his work: interrogating the way Haitian history has traditionally been interpreted and restoring agency, or the capacity to take action, to the Haitian people. The pages which follow will also discuss the circular narrative form that Trouillot employs, which begins with the present moment, goes far back in historical time, and works its way again to the present to draw some tentative conclusions.

Though Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti contains a wealth of well-
documented historical information, with its bibliography listing more than fifty published sources (including classic historical works such as those of Madiou, Ardouin and Sannon, as well as numerous contemporary studies), not one of the works cited is referenced in a footnote. At times, the text is more poetic and descriptive than analytical in tone: for example, interspersed with facts and methodical inventories of complex social or political realities can be found abundant proverbs, word plays, drawings and snippets of songs and chants from popular culture. Each chapter opens with a few lines of verse serving to draw the reader/listener into the story, which is to be interpreted as an oral performance.

Chapter One begins with a declaration of the narrator’s intention: “M-pral fè / youn rasanbléman / pou m’konnin sa k-rivé / fanmi-m yo / anyé ro!” ["I’ll call a gathering / to know what happened / to my brothers and sisters / oh yes!"] (Trouillot 11) The setting is nighttime, after people in the village have finished their work; fireflies are flitting around. A woman called Lamèsi (a central character to the text), appears and announces that Grinn Prominnin, who has been absent for a long time, has returned, bringing news and ideas. To the villagers’ delight, he appears, settles in, and sets his agenda: “Fo n-fè vision tout kriz ki té pasé nan fanmi-a, fò nou chèchè ki mak yo kité nan san nou.” ["We must visualize all the crises that have occurred within our family, we must search for the traces they have left in our blood.”] (Trouillot 14) The causes of this crisis are several. To be sure, France initially curtailed Haiti’s destiny, acknowledging the country’s independence only in 1825, and forcing Haiti to pay an exorbitant sum in order to be recognized. But the problems in Haiti today are not only due to France’s influence, or that of the United States, although Trouillot does not elaborate on that. Sadly, a native class of people has “lévé kokin sou do pèp la” ["mounted an effort to oppress the people"], in effect derailing the entire Revolution (Trouillot 16); they are the main parties responsible for the turmoil that has pervaded Haiti up to the twenty-first century. This is the social class at whom Trouillot levels his verbal cannons in the majority of Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti.

In Chapter Two, Grinn Prominnin returns to discuss colonial times in Saint-Domingue. He outlines the contradictions in the infamous Kòd Nwa, or Black Code, of 1685, showing how it consistently and inevitably favored white owners. In kreyòl, a word play can be made between the terms “code” and “cord” (Trouillot 30), which unfortunately doesn’t come across adequately in translation. Throughout Ti difé boulé, Trouillot plays upon the image of a code/cord that progressively strangles the people. Each socio-economic contradiction passes through three stages (which are informed by Marxist ideology): budding, growing, and unraveling.
The slaves are finally able to crush the Kòd Nwa in 1791, the beginning of the revolution.

In the next three chapters Trouillot cross-examines what Haitians have been taught in school—that is, those who have had the opportunity to attend. Ti difé boulé is itself a pedagogical text, containing many repetitions and several explicit “tests,” reflecting a desire to correct what Trouillot sees as the distorted conscience of the Haitian people. References to personal characters in the text disappear, and Ti difé boulé turns to an analysis of the divisions in social classes during the period of European colonization of Haiti: the blocks of gran kolon yo; lib yo; blan yo [“influential” colonists, freedmen, whites], etc. (Trouillot 57-9) Each block contains its own contradictions, or differing priorities—even that of the slaves: esklav kay; esklav lavil; esklav kòmandè [house slaves, city slaves, commander slaves]. (Trouillot 40) When at last the revolution begins, social coalitions evolve, and the land becomes the foundation of a new culture in Haiti. Land signifies not just dignity, respect and hope, but liberty itself. Trouillot writes, “Pou esklav Sindoming, pou nèg ayisyin jodi-a, parol latè sa-a sé youn parol poto-mitan.” [“For the slaves of Saint-Domingue, for three quarters of the Haitian people today, the notion of land ownership is fundamental.”] (Trouillot 71) After all, no native culture existed in Saint-Domingue when the French arrived, since the Tainos had disappeared when the island was under Spanish rule; Haitian culture was “fèt nan goumin,” or made through struggle. (Trouillot 72)

Chapter Six likens the Haitian Revolution to a cockfight. Toussaint Louverture is described as a cock that has begun to dominate the contest, but there is always a hint of reserve or reproach in Grinn Prominnin’s words about him. Why? Toussaint owes a huge debt to the Haitian people—the masses of slaves—who participated in the Revolution, and Trouillot seeks to demystify Toussaint’s power and return the people’s agency to them, so that they may realize their strength and renew their fight against social injustices in the present. Toussaint skillfully played the big powers (French, Spanish, and Americans; whites versus mulattoes, etc.) off of one another, but his success forever depended upon an underlying organization of slaves. The slave masses had envisioned universal liberty from the beginning, and were always ready to battle to the end. All of the rebel leaders needed their assistance and strength, so the ideology of their organization shifted from time to time to incorporate them. Toussaint only decides to fight for universal liberty in 1793, a full two years after the onset of the Revolution. Trouillot suggests that even the French civil commissioner Sonthonax was more liberal-minded at the outset than Toussaint: early on, he ordered that the slaves be freed, then gave them one-third the profits of the plantations...
where they had formerly worked. In contrast, Toussaint wanted the slaves to win their freedom by their own strength, rather than having their freedom granted by a civil commission.

As the political situation in France became more conservative, so did Toussaint; because of his differences with Sonthonax, he had him expelled from Saint-Domingue. Toussaint also repulsed Hédouville (who was sent by France as an agent of the Directory, charged with implementing reforms) and fought a vicious war in the South against Rigaud, the dominant mulatto general, thus deepening the racial divisions in the general population. Trouillot writes that, although Rigaud took a racist approach himself, Toussaint’s demagogy encouraged this social poison to pit the masses of ex-slaves against the mulattoes, a problem which “fè chimin nan san nou pandan 6 jénérassyon.” [“has been coursing through our blood for six generations.”] (Trouillot 142) According to Ti difé boulé, Toussaint’s primary interests were biznis and lajan [business and money]. So intent was Toussaint on keeping Saint-Domingue afloat economically that he imposed strictures on the ex-slaves through a rural work code, forcing them to either remain on the same plantations they had previously inhabited, or face severe punishment (including death). With these steps taken, the idea of “general liberty” thus begins to lose some of its meaning.

The beginning of the end of Toussaint’s power comes about when the rebel leader falls into the trap of Rigaud in the afè Koray [Corail Affair]. (Trouillot 140-1) He nevertheless continues to fight for several more years. While many people—especially outside of Haiti—believe that Toussaint is worthy of veneration because he supposedly loved all races equally and was extremely just, in reality, “Tousin te antré nan démagoji; apré 1799, té gen konplo toupatou kont li.” [“Toussaint entered into demagogy; after 1799, there were plots everywhere against him.”] (Trouillot 144) The other rebel general, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, while certainly not a saint, did not play upon social tensions in the same way that Toussaint did: instead of using race as a wedge issue, he allowed a group of mulattos—ansyen lib—to join the rebel army, which raised everyone’s spirits and frightened the enemy. In any case, after the war in the South, general liberty became a more universal goal, leading people to finally work together. Toussaint still occupied a position of authority, to be sure, but there remained many contradictions in his camp; “Gin nèg ki té kòmansé di: kouzin, èské se sa libètè-a? Kom ki diré sé pa sa ou té di nou” [“Some people started saying: cousin, is that what liberty is? As in, that’s not what you told us.”] (Trouillot 153) Trouillot outlines here why Toussaint does not merit “hero” status. Instead of attacking his well established—not to mention international—reputation, though, he chips away at it slowly, as if at a wall. Trouillot
writes that, despite the lofty goals of freedom that Toussaint proclaimed, "Fò nou ka ouè tou pikan k-té anba flè-a." ["We must be able to see the thorns beneath the flowers."] (Trouillot 109)

The seventh and final chapter of *Ti difé boulé* is called precisely, "Kouzin / sé pa sa ou té di mouin" ["Cousin / that's not what you told me."] (Trouillot 155) This phrase also happens to be the opening line to a popular Haitian song. What was the reason for the people’s doubt? They had come to believe that Toussaint was no longer telling the truth, and that he had begun to betray them. In any case, the notion of “family” propounded by Toussaint exposes his somewhat warped ideology: over the course of the revolution, he conveniently referred to the new Haitian society as a family in order to conceal the many contradictions of authority existing therein. It is normal, after all, for a father and big brother to *tarode* [beat on] the little ones, is it not? (Trouillot 199) This attitude both demonstrates and justifies their paternal authority. Whatever the case, the ex-slaves of Saint-Domingue wanted their freedom, and believed that it would be guaranteed to them, but Toussaint wanted to advance his own political objectives. His political/ideological strategy worked well in 1793, but not in 1799, when he no longer had confidence in the people, and did not show himself to be worthy of their trust in exchange. In *Ti difé boulé*, the young Lamèsì asks, “Manman, èské Tousin té janm avè-n?” [“Mama, was Toussaint ever on our side?”] (Trouillot 161)

Trouillot proceeds to list the problems with Toussaint’s leadership. First, there is the issue of *viv versus danre* [comestible crops versus subsistence, or staple, crops] (Trouillot 159): people were forced to grow sugar, coffee and cotton, which would earn income for Saint-Domingue, but not sustain their families. Second, in order to guarantee foreign trade for the ex-colony Toussaint imposed import/export taxes that grossly favored other countries (the United States, in particular, which sold arms to the insurgents) and weakened the position of Saint-Domingue. Lastly, and most importantly, Toussaint refused to re-distribute land to the ex-slaves; instead, he made them work the earth against their will. The state—which his ideology came to epitomize—began to take advantage of the people as a matter of course. It was simultaneously a *vèvè*,\(^{10}\) or a matrix holding society together, and a Gordian knot, where the complex and twisted socio-economic contradictions favoring a certain class within the ex-colony were inscribed. “Prémié travay Léta-a, 10 an apré difé té pran nan chan kann yo, sé té inskri dominans sa-a.” [“The first job of the State, ten years after the cane fields were set afire, was to establish this dominance.”] (Trouillot 178-9) Slowly but surely, “Mo libète a pat gen sans” [“The word liberty didn’t make any sense.”] (Trouillot 172, 184)
The execution of Moyiz, Toussaint's adopted nephew, is perhaps most
telling insofar as Toussaint’s shortcomings are concerned. Moyiz was also a
rebel leader, more leftist than Toussaint, and his heart was consistently closer
to that of the people. Toussaint felt threatened by Moyiz’s attractiveness
to the masses, as well as his generous attitude towards the mulattoes,
and ultimately had his nephew put to death—on the pretext that he had
unjustly killed a white man. Trouillot underlines the fact that not all of
Toussaint’s officers agreed with his tactics or line of reasoning, and there
was constant tension between them because Toussaint tolerated no dissent.
As a result, division increased between the ranks of nouveau-lib, or newly
freed, leaders and the masses themselves. One concludes that Toussaint’s
military organization was little more than a façade, in the end—focusing
primarily on at hiding the contradictions within it.

Admittedly going somewhat out on a limb, Trouillot proposes that there
were several rebel leaders who were more left leaning than Toussaint: Belè,
Lamatinyè, etc. Since they consistently defended the people’s interests in
the face of those of France, they represent an alternative list of potential
revolutionary heroes. Even their wives fought with them to defend the
people’s cause. Moyiz, Belè, and Lamatinyè fought a guerrilla war, not a
bourgeois one. When Toussaint killed Moyiz, he crushed the leftist group
in the revolution (Trouillot 188).

Toussaint continued to menace the ex-slaves and to depend on them
to fight against France (though fundamentally his interests were tied to
French culture and identity). But these contradictions were successfully
disguised, and that kept the rebel camp in balance for awhile. Trouillot
writes: “Maskarad espécial sila-a sé té travay Idéyoloji Louvèti-a. É
idéyoloji sila-a té fè travay li si tèlman byin, li kontini viré tounin nan
Istoua Ayiti é l’ap pésisté jouk jounin jodi-a minm si l’chanjé non batèm
li”12 (Trouillot 196). Aspects of this problematic ideology have reappeared
under Dessalines, Christophe, Salomon, Estimé, Duvalier, and Aristide
today (though Trouillot of course does not name the latter two individuals).
The same goes for the paternalistic twentieth-century indigenist discourse,
based upon the same fundamentally patrician philosophy as the government
of Christophe, though in contemporary Haiti, Trouillot implies, the “pòz
gran intéléktyèl” (“bigshot intellectual stance”) is more in favor than the
outdated “aristocratic” one (Trouillot 209). At any rate, the official discourse
is grounded in the notion of “family,” allowing the dominance of one group,
which privileges the organized Catholic religion, the idea of “réspékté byen
an” (“respect others’ property”), and the myth of “nèg kapab” (“strong,
able men”) who possess an inherent right to govern/oppress the people
(Trouillot 204-5).
This inherently conservative and corrupt ideology has long served to reinforce the status quo in Haiti, which is by most accounts the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with a small but powerful elite class that has ruled the republic for two centuries. It is certainly to the advantage of autocratic government leaders if the Haitian people believe that they must respect the way land and property are distributed—instead of demanding and working for reforms—and passively accept the notion that “might makes right.” In light of these circumstances, some have suggested that Haiti has in effect suffered five centuries of slavery instead of three. Indeed, in a New York Times column on January 4, 2004 Robert Fatton writes that Haiti’s history “has been defined by long periods of authoritarianism interrupted by failed attempts at democracy. The paradox of the Haitian revolution is that it was fought in the name of liberty and equality and yet the country has experienced little of either.” The latter phrase echoes the criticism made by Trouillot in Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti twenty-five years before. And by 2004 little, if anything, has changed.

The domain of religion is yet another area in which Haiti has experienced considerable struggle. In Ti difé boulé Trouillot highlights Toussaint’s attempts to crush vodou in Haiti. Toussaint placed Catholicism on such a pedestal, insisting on weekly ceremonies for his soldiers in Latin—to the extent that the institution became ridiculous, much like the church of King Christophe several decades later, which constantly imitated European pomp and circumstance: “Rélijion katolik la té tounin youn véritab griyin dan” (“The Catholic religion became a real mockery/farce”) (Trouillot 200). Toussaint’s Constitution of 1801 declared Catholicism to be the only religion in Saint-Domingue. As for popular religion, it was a force beyond Toussaint’s control; at the same time, however, he liked the idea of the people thinking he was an omnipotent mackandal with magic powers, capable of being everywhere at once (Trouillot 202). He wanted to retain the people’s respect at any cost, even as he outlawed Vodou and persecuted its practitioners. Similarly, in the late twentieth century the Duvaliers ostensibly embraced the Vodou religion, but did so above all as a measure of control, with the leaders of Vodou communities throughout Haiti being co-opted as official spies. Though it has been practiced since the colonial period, vodou only became recognized as an official religion in Haiti—that is to say, on equal footing with Catholicism—in April 2003.

Under Toussaint’s government, the concept of “civil” equality replaced that of “total” equality for the ex-slaves of Saint-Domingue: they were given nominal freedom, but with zero benefits. As Trouillot points out, the main problem was that “égalité vlé di égalité ékonomik tou” (“Equality means economic equality too”) (Trouillot 205). Race became a feudal category,
with workers despised and denigrated. Toussaint himself was eventually crushed by Leclerc’s invasion, but this merely inspired the rasin (roots) to stand up and fight for independence from France, which ultimately led to general freedom in the country (Trouillot 212). Thus, true to the surname of “Louverture” that was given him, Toussaint did indeed open the barrier to independence—like Papa Legba himself—and needs to be appreciated for that (Trouillot is careful to pay him some measure of homage).

At the close of the narrative, Grinn Prominnin declares that he is exhausted, and everyone else must be too, but they must return to discuss the situation tomorrow, in order to arrive at a conclusion. “Sèt koukourouj yo toujou la, e menm zétoual ap bay lali-n gabèl…” (“The seven lightning bugs were still there, and the stars were showing off the moon…”) (Trouillot 213). The scene remains peaceful, the people (apparently) complacent. Trouillot is clearly advocating that, more than 170 years after the revolution, the task of bringing about real social change in Haiti—and seeing the ambitions of the Revolution fulfilled—remains starkly unchanged. Though he does not explicitly state the idea, one can infer that he believes Haiti’s stagnant socio-economic and political situation is due in large part to the setbacks of the Duvalier regime and its dishonest indigenist ideology. The Haitian people must collectively realize the extent of their misery and organize themselves to do something about it: the responsibility belongs to them, not to the outside world. Until they approach the circumstances differently, no amount of foreign aid or intervention will effectively change the situation.

This concluding chapter of *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* is unexpectedly brief, and in the closing paragraphs Trouillot declines from proposing an answer himself for Haiti’s contemporary political situation—which he calls a “maladi fanmi” (Trouillot 213). Instead, he leaves us with a disclaimer: “Rasanbléman sila-a pa fèt pou dénigré ni Touzin, ni Désalin, ni Kristòf, ni Pétion. Min fo mésié sa yo manyè désann sou gazon an pou pèp la ka konprann ti kras, pasé dépi tan yo chita sou chwal yo anlè-a, Chanmas pa jann chanjé figi” (Trouillot 212).

Trouillot proposes that when one revisits the ideology of Toussaint Louverture, and concurrently that of the state of Saint-Domingue, we must not forget that, in spite of all its weaknesses, “libèté jénéral’7’universal liberty” was a huge and powerful unifying factor back then, which everyone needs to respect (Trouillot 212). During the Revolution Toussaint was, after all, betrayed by plantation owners and French and American commissioners alike. Toussaint always maintained some faith in France, even if the masses did not; according to Trouillot he knew in which direction he wanted to go,
generally speaking, but he got lost on the way. To his credit, Toussaint’s experience demonstrated that liberty without political independence was a senseless notion, and others (such as Dessalines) were able to later capitalize on this lesson.

But the seven chapters of *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* nevertheless articulate clearly the weaknesses and contradictions inherent in Toussaint Louverture. Just as the masses of ex-slaves in the Revolution were the only group that consistently envisioned and struggled to obtain a final goal — *libèté jénéral* — the Haitian people today must become a united force capable of working together to bring about the changes that are desperately needed; they must refuse to accept leaders who simply repeat the patronizing discourses and horrifying mistakes of the past. The central caveat of *Ti difé boulé* is, simply: “Fò jé nou byin foubi pou nou ka ouè maladi-a chak foua li réparèt figi-1” (“Our eyes must be wide open to recognize this malady when it reappears”) (Trouillot 213). To be sure, the costs will be high, but as the turbulent events of Haiti’s bicentennial year amply show, the stakes only keep rising. And at the present moment, in the wake of the controversial departure of Aristide from Haiti, and the beginning of the “third Occupation” of Haiti by U.S. military forces, it is difficult to imagine the stakes being any higher.

In guise of a conclusion, I would like to offer the following remarks. In my opinion, *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* is a highly impressive historical/fictional work that deserves to reach a wider audience, through reprinting and/or translation, as well as inclusion in history and literature courses. In this text Trouillot seeks to make Haiti’s history accessible to all Haitians — whether at home or abroad — either on a written or an oral level. His critique of contemporary Haiti is couched in an examination of past failures that can be understood not simply as a repeating cycle of misfortunes, but as a profound sickness in the blood. As he does later in his well-known *Haiti, State against Nation* (which has a much more traditional academic approach), Trouillot demonstrates how the Haitian people have allowed themselves to become accustomed to mistreatment on the part of their leaders, passively accepting and enabling political and socio-economic conditions that have only continued to worsen. His (at times) subtle indictment of Toussaint Louverture prods them to re-think who the heroes of the Revolution really were, and to visualize themselves as a powerful social force. It is worth noting that some of the radical principles put forth in *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* can be traced to (among others) the 1954 text *Aperçu sur la formation historique de la nation haitienne*.
by Etienne Charlier, a Marxist historian whose theories were viewed as extremely controversial.

Trouillot is not alone in seeking to rectify problems in Haitian society through his written work; indeed, the historical/fictional *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* is designed to challenge Haitian history from a variety of angles. In *Haitian Fiction Revisited*, Hoffmann observes,

Haiti and her problems are the obsessive theme of novelists and poets, of essayists and playwrights. Their self-imposed mission is two-fold: on the one hand, to denounce injustices and abuses in Haitian society; on the other, to celebrate their country and defend her against the vicious sarcasm, often racist in character, which foreigners have all too often directed at the Black Republic. (Hoffmann 28)

Haitian literature in general has often been described as being “engagée” (engaged). Aesthetic experimentation, though occasionally attractive to Haitian writers, has been less of a primary concern. (Hoffmann 29) Instead, literature—as well as music and film production—is a site for conflict and criticism. Hoffmann continues, “Rather than being primarily a fiction in which the reader can, if he so desires, trace the implicit analysis of socio-political conditions, the Haitian novel tends to be an explicit discourse on the state of the nation” (Hoffmann 33). While *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* is not a novel, the questions posed by Trouillot’s text participate in the same critical tradition.

Returning to the idea of the people’s role in the Haitian Revolution, I would like to briefly cite Carolyn Fick’s fascinating study, *The Making of Haiti: the Saint-Domingue Revolution from Below,* where she points out that “the role of the masses [in the Haitian Revolution] is rarely studied, except as a footnote.” (Fick 1-2). As she ultimately shows, “it was the self-sustained activities of diverse segments of the population, of largely unknown and obscure individuals, as well as the population leaders who had played a role in the earlier struggles, that [made the actions of the rebel leaders] both practicable and militarily meaningful” (Fick 248). This observation coincides perfectly with the provocative points that Trouillot makes in *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti*.

Despite the fact that so many have for so long sung the praises of Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and their revolutionary colleagues, at a moment when we are observing the bicentennial of a truly extraordinary event in the history of not just Haiti, but the entire Western world, it is essential to pause and ensure that hero-worship does
not overshadow or jeopardize a true appreciation of the political, cultural and artistic power of the Haitian people and the human capital that they represent, both at home and abroad.

Notes

1 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* (Brooklyn: Kolèksion Lakansièl, 1977). Loosely translated, the title in English means “Challenging Haitian History.” In the present study, all translations are mine; citations will reflect the original spelling within Trouillot’s text (although since its publication new official spelling reforms in Haitian Creole have been implemented).

2 Although the emphasis here is on literary texts, I am convinced that the discussion can be appropriately extended to include cultural and scholarly production in other fields—especially given the interdisciplinary nature of much of the contemporary work being done on the subject of Haiti.

3 Jean Jonassaint, “Haitian Literature in the United States, 1948-1986,” in Shell, Marc, ed. American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki to Zuni. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002). Jonassaint’s review treats five decades of Haitian-American literary production, which are divided into four historical periods: “the 1940s-1950s (the Thoby-Marcelin years, and the recourse to translation); the 1960s (the empty years, or the takeover by politics); the 1970s (marked by the emergence of Haitian as a literary language); and the 1980s (the decade of the essay: ‘The Rise of English,’ to borrow Terry Eagleton’s expression).” (Jonassaint, p. 433) By “Haitian,” the author is referring to “Haitian Creole.”


6 The specific problem of Haitian literature of migration is not addressed in this critical study.

7 As far as the end of the 1970’s is concerned, “The [close] of this decade confirms the emergence of the Haitian language, and marks the next period as the decade of the essay and of the emergence of English as the language of choice for Haitians in the United States.” Jonassaint, 438.

8 Maximilien Laroche, *Teke.* (Port-au-Prince: Les Editions Mémoire, 2000, Collection Rupture), p. 45. “...Bwapiro ak Grennpronmennen se konsyans nou: yo wè, yo tande, konsa yo ka konseye nou anvan nou pale.” [Bwapiro (literally, “Beanpole”) and Grennpronmennen (literally, “the Wanderer”) are our consciences: they see and hear, and thus they can advise us before we speak.]

9 “Anyé ro!” is a tricky expression to translate; according to legend, it was the rallying cry of the maroons who gave the signal to begin the revolution in Saint-Domingue, and has since represented a call for action.
Bryant Freeman’s *Haitian English Dictionary* (Lawrence, KS: Institute of Haitian Studies, 2002) explains that a vèvè is “a ritual design traced on the ground of a peristyle to invoke a specific Voodoo spirit.”

Ironically, perhaps, the fact that Toussaint had his nephew killed because he had (supposedly) unjustly attacked a white man is one of the specific reasons given by the Boston abolitionist Wendell Phillips for why Toussaint should be admired internationally. Wendell Phillips. *One of the Greatest Men in History. Toussaint Louverture, as Seen by the Greatest U.S. Lecturer, Wendell Phillips.* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de l’État, 1950).

“This special masquerade/pretense was the achievement of Louverture’s ideology. And it worked so very well that it continued to turn around and around in the history of Haiti, and it persists up to the present day, even if it has changed its real/original name.”

This is one of the premises of Jean Métellus’s novel, *L’année Dessalines*, which was also written during the Duvalier dictatorship and published outside of Haiti. The despicable character referred to as the “Président” embodies all the negative aspects of Haiti’s leaders, past and present. While claiming to be a reincarnation of Dessalines—“la quintessence dessalinienne”—he declares himself to be playing the same role of nation building. In reality, he is destroying Haiti; his insecurity and arbitrariness, even more than his extraordinary cruelty, are perhaps the most tragic elements of his persona. The efficiency of his military killing machine is astounding, as is the numbness of the people who cannot even begin to protest or criticize the government. (Jean Métellus, *L’année Dessalines*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

“This assembly was not called to denigrate either Toussaint, Dessalines, Christophe, or Pétion. But those men must in some way be brought down to earth so that the people can understand a tiny bit, because ever since they sat upon high horses, Champs de Mars has never changed its appearance.”


