



**Memory, the Spirit of the Revolution, and Slave Religion:
The Representation of the Haitian Revolution in
Langston Hughes's *Emperor of Haiti***

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This essay analyzes Langston Hughes's representation of the Haitian Revolution and slave religion in his historical play, *Emperor of Haiti: A Historical Drama*. I argue that Hughes's articulation of the neo-African religion of Haitian Vodou at the interception of the Haitian Revolution to affirm surviving African religious traditions and spirituality on the Haitian soil and

to counter the hegemonic discourse of the Christian religion embedded in the legislations of the legendary 1685 Code Noir (Black Code). Hughes's presentation of the religious story of Haiti contradicts Christian morality and the inspired-Christian universe of the colonial order. I also contend that Hughes uses the singular event of the Haitian Revolution as a historic example to articulate his perspective on race achievement, black resistance, black heroism, and collective self-determination. I suggest viewing Langston Hughes as an interpreter and mediator of the traditions and culture of the black diaspora as we study the rhetoric of *Emperor of Haiti*. I read critically through the text of this drama to discover how the author had engaged revolutionary Haiti and the intersection of black heroism, (ancestral) memory, and history. In other words, I wish to demonstrate the various ways he had represented and memorialized the Haitian Revolution within the rhetoric of collective memory, and the logic black global history of freedom and right of self-determination. Complementarily, I examine the relationship between faith and freedom, history and hope as well as investigate how they are linked to black culture and identity-formation in this story. The essay is divided in two parts. While the first section is a commentary on Hughes's idea of black heroism and resistance, the second looks at the religious rhetoric of *Emperor of Haiti*.

In *Emperor of Haiti*, Hughes expounds critically on the significance of the neo-African religion and spirituality of Haitian peasants. The Vodou religion is presented as a catalyst for freedom, democracy, human rights, and the collective self-expression of the slave population at the initiation of the Haitian Revolution. Hughes associates the slave religion with black identity in the context of African traditions (i.e. the dance, the drum, the music, etc.) in Haiti and in the

diasporic practice of slave culture. He defines black freedom in connection with the freedom of faith, and in relation with the deliberate performance of African spirituality at Saint-Domingue by the enslaved community. He presents black religion in *Emperor of Haiti* as a humanizing force in its colonial context. Religion is also functioned in the drama to assert African diasporic beliefs and customs and to counter the religious exclusivism and intolerance of the imperial system as reflecting in the Black Code. In this way, Hughes attempts to accomplish two things: (1) He is affirming the African presence in the Caribbean nation, and (2) he is articulating a narrative of Haitianism whose religious story contradicts the imperial religion: Catholic Christianity. In both instances, he seeks to define black cultural identity by thought and practice, and achieves what might be called “African Haitianism.” Hughes encounters Africa through the Haitian reality and frames a black internationalist vision through the idea of 1804.

Furthermore, in his interactions with the events leading to the Haitian freedom, Hughes shows the manifestation of black resistance and opposition to colonial subjugation of the imperial Christian West. In this way, he highlights black self-determination and collective agency through the rhetoric of ancestral religious practices. Black religion is depicted in the positive light to provide hope, guidance, and inspiration to African slaves in the instance of the Revolution. The power of the unconscious in the African spirit world of the slaves provided means of mobilizing collectively, and ways of orchestrating new paths to black freedom in the midst of suffering and dehumanization. The Vodou faith in Hughes is served as an emblem of cultural representation, and a vehicle for solidarity among the slaves population within the sphere of colonialism. Through the practice of the neo-African religion and spirituality, Hughes

establishes that the communal interest formed the basis for cultural identity and ancestral affiliation.

Black Heroism, Black Resistance, and Collective Determination

Four years after his 1931 summer vacation in Haiti, Langston Hughes produced in 1935 a historical play entitled *Drums of Haiti*. Hughes reported that after writing his first notes for the play and sketching an outline, it was necessary “to know the scenery and atmosphere of Haiti before actually writing the play” (“Trouble Island:’ The Story of How An Opera Was Created”). Hence, he went to Haiti and stayed there for six months. From Port-au-Prince, the capital city of Haiti, he visited the historic Cap-Haitien, “‘au Cap’ as the Haitians call that city where the slaves, years ago, planned the revolt that shook the foundations of human bondage in the Western world” (*I Wonder As I Wander*). Langston Hughes biographer Faith Berry stated that Hughes began writing about the Revolution in that summer and wrote the drama in Cap-Haitien, the city where he stayed during his sojourn (*Langston Hughes Before and Beyond Harlem* 124). Hughes spent some learning moments with Haitian peasants and lowest class merchants (29-31). He made the following remarks about his activities:

I sat down with the market women and the fishermen and listened to their chatter, of which I understood not a word for many days... I came to know well the fishermen who beached their boats at the foot of our street, and sometimes I went out with them on the sunny sea to fetch in their haul. I spent hours investigating the ruins of old forts on rocky heights overhanging the sea, and whole days lying in the sunshine on the beach. Almost every night I could hear distant drums far away on the plains across the bay, or possibly every near at hand in some outdoor clearing at the edge of town itself. (21-2)

Arna Wendell Bontemps, Hughes’s literary executor and appointed biographer, observes, “Langston Hughes had made many trips. He has sailed to Africa, to Europe several times and to

Asia, but the Haitian Journey seems to have made a lasting impression on him” (“Introduction” *René Piquion Langston Hughes: Un Chant Nouveau* 14). His Haitian experience had indeed awakened in him a fresh urge to understand better the black diaspora and its culture.

Emperor of Haiti is about how Africans achieved freedom from slavery in the French colony of Saint-Domingue-Haiti, and the fall of one of the Haitian Revolution’s most important leaders, Jean Jacques Dessalines. Hughes subsequently revised the play in 1938 under the same name, and in 1949 renamed it *Troubled Island* resulting in an opera (Errol Hill “The Revolutionary Tradition in Black Drama” 415; Leslie Catherine Sanders “Troubled Island: An Opera in Three Acts” 15). The final version was published in 1963. The play is formerly known under the title *Emperor of Haiti: An Historical Drama*. Joseph McLaren in his well-received monograph, *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition, 1921-1943*, states that the play “reflects Hughe’s interest in Pan-Africanism and the African Diaspora” (101). As Berry, he also suggests that Hughes’s prior knowledge about Haiti, his firsthand experience in his trip there provided the impetus for the play and the depiction of the island’s scenery. Errol Hill, in a brief introduction to *Emperor of Haiti*, asserts, “Fascinated with the story of the Haitian Revolution, Langston Hughes sought to bring it to the stage in drama and song” (*Black Heroes: Seven Plays* 4). Arnold Rampersad suggests that Hughes’s ultimate purpose in producing the play was to emphasize “black revolution and heroism” (*The Life of Langston Hughes I: 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America* 331). It is in this historical framework that the historian and playwright, Errol Hill, could declare, “The Haitian Revolution engendered more plays by black authors than any other single event in the history of the race” (“The Revolutionary Tradition in Black Drama”

414). Revolutionary Haiti's influence on Langston Hughes is considerable. I want to recommend three approaches to the text of the *Emperor of Haiti*, and show how Hughes has constructed its various themes and characters. Toward this goal, I shall examine the language, technique, and rhetorical strategies.

Emperor of Haiti can be studied from different angles or perspectives. One can analyse generally the presentation of black leadership in dramatic performance, as the phenomenon of black heroes was essential to Hughes's enunciation of race politics and his negritude discourse. For example, in a 1941 article, "The Need for Heroes," which he publishes in the *Crisis* magazine, Hughes laments that despite the "abundant Hero material," black writers have ignored the heroes of the black race. He mentions John W. Vandercook, a white writer, who wrote the 1928 influential text, *Black Majesty*, on the slave emancipation in Haiti. Hughes establishes that Vandercook made "the blacks out as great fighters and heroes," and his book "concerns Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines, and Christophe of Haiti" ("The Need for Heroes" 184). For Hughes, it is possible that Vandercook would have romanticized the story; he insists that the need for black writers to write about "their own heroes" was critical (184).

It is possible that Hughes was unsatisfied that a white historian has given a full account about the Revolution. Unfortunately, scholarly reports (or popular history books) about the Revolution written by black historians were few in the period, except for Anna Julia Cooper's 1925 Sobornne Ph.D. dissertation on international slavery and the Haitian Revolution—which was probably unknown to Hughes and to most black writers in the Anglophone world (*Slavery and the French and Haitian Revolutionists: L'Attitude de la France à l'égard de l'esclavage*

2006).¹ Jane Nardal, the West Indian intellectual who attended Cooper's doctoral defense in Paris, has remarked that Cooper's well-defended arguments and apologetic position about the significance of the Revolution for black global history and its implications for black resistance against colonialism and black self-determination toward freedom had awakened her consciousness to the need for black internationalism and collaboration among black students in Paris in the 1930s (Vivian M. May *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* 107-140). As we will discuss below, one can perceive why Hughes would be interested in making these themes central in his engagement with revolutionary Haiti. What did Hughes mean by black heroes or black heroism? Hughes turns to Haitian history to describe precisely what he attempts to convey by that idea. He writes:

Haiti glories in a splendid history studded with the names of heroes like Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines, and Christophe—great black men who freed their land from slavery and began to work out their own national destinies a full half-century before American Negroes were freed by the Civil War. Under the powerful leadership mentioned above, the French slave-owners were driven from the island, and Haiti became a free country of dark skinned peoples. Then Christophe built roads and schools, factories and mills. He established laws and constructed a great Citadel on top of a mountain to defend the land and to create a monument in stone that could be seen for many miles away, so that his subjects might look upon it and be proud. ("White Shadows in a Black Land" 52)

First, Hughes uses two specific expressions to underscore his philosophy of black heroism: "great black men" and "powerful leadership" characterize the Haitians named in the text. In other words, heroism must entail "greatness" and "effective leadership." Hughes had in perspective those who had made historic contributions to humanity's progress and changed

¹ For an insightful commentary on Cooper's engagements with the Haitian Revolution, see Vivian M. May (*Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* 107-140).

human history for good. He also had in mind those who had sacrificially given their lives to end human oppression, protect the freedom of their people, and to shape the destiny of humankind. Hughes equates heroism with visionary leadership and the willingness to serve and to commit one's self in the best interest of others. Hughes sees King Christophe as an exemplary character who had demonstrated such virtues and his commitment to the Haitian people in contributing to the social, cultural, and intellectual development of Haiti by establishing laws, creating factories, and constructing roads and schools.

In the referred article above, Hughes continues by noting that the black community had an urgent need for black heroes, “now, this moment, this year.” He insists, “It is the social duty of Negro writers to reveal to the people the deep reservoirs of heroism within the race.” Hughes posits that it was also the function of black literature “to combat—by example, not by diatribe—the caricatures of Hollywood, the Lazy Bones of the popular songs, the endless defeats of play after play and novel after novel.” He reminds his readers that black people “are not endlessly funny, nor always lazy, nor forever quaint, nor eternally defeated.” He lists a number of exemplary heroes such as Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Oliver Laws, etc. who had faithfully served the black community and given sacrificially for the freedom of the race. Finally, Hughes reiterates his message by appealing to the mission of the black writer-activist:

We have a need for heroes. We have a need for books and plays that will encourage and inspire our youth, set for them examples and patterns of conduct, move and stir them to be forthright, strong, clear-thinking, and unafraid... We need in literature the kind of black men and women all of us know exist in life: who are not afraid to claim our rights as human being... We know we are not weak, ignorant, frustrated, or cowed. We know the

race has its heroes whether anybody puts them into books or not. We know we are heroes ourselves and can make a better world. (184)

Hughes had ideologically commented on the objective of black writers in the process of creating heroic lives and in the authentic representation of black achievement and history. In *Emperor of Haiti*, Hughes is committed to achieving these goals and fulfilling the recommendations given to black artists and activist. Hughes had argued for the didactic purpose of literature in the formation of black community and in the making of the future generation. By taking such an approach to writing, Hughes himself was participating in the project of race building or accomplishment and the reconfiguration of black cultural identity. As it pertains to Haitian history, he was suggesting that it was the role of the black writer to depict the Haitian Revolution responsibly in a positive light, and to memorialize this singular story of emancipated enslaved Africans in our contemporary postcolonial time as a story of black freedom and black heroism. The desire was not solely to claim the Haitian Revolution as his own but also as a heritage of the Black Atlantic people. For Hughes, Haiti's contributions to the oppressed people of the world might instigate them in their own struggles for alternative possibilities and futures (David Scott *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* 221). The spirit of revolutionary freedom of this peasant revolution has found an appropriate space in Hughes's impressive dramatic presentation and Dessalines's heroic leadership.

Hughes had stressed the leadership of Jean Jacques Dessalines and the Hughesian heroic characterization of the latter before the Revolution and after Dessalines had assumed the Napoleonic status as "Emperor of the new Black Republic" in the Western world. In the drama, Hughes had deployed captivating rhetorical strategies to exemplify Dessalines's courage and

integrity and his ability to exercise the audacity and hope required to sustain leadership. I would like to suggest further that the rhetoric of *Emperor of Haiti* reveals Hughes's own enthusiasm about the idea of Haitian modernity, black congress, black civilization, and race achievement. Striking expressions such as the following ones mark Dessalines's distinctive personality and illustrate his ability to lead: "Jean Jacques fears nothing in Haiti, or anywhere" (*Emperor of Haiti* 8); "They said Jean Jacques was too much name for a slave to have" (9); "And no one's worked harder preparing for this night. Jean Jacques has not slept for weeks" (11); "A powerful black man in ragged clothing" (12); "He's the finest man in the North Plain. I grew up with him, and worked beside him. He's my friend" (25); "He's not afraid" (25); "No one hates the French more than he does" (11). Perhaps the most revealing and comprehensive statement about Dessalines's aptitude as the new leader of the slave population is spoken from the lips of the elderly Martel—a major character in the story—at the night of the insurrection. Martel spoke in this manner: "We have chosen a man who's young and strong, wise and brave, to lead the slaves of the north to victory in union with all the blacks of Haiti who answer the call of the drums tonight. Your leader is Dessalines" (27). In short, Dessalines's physical fitness and personality are praised, and his potential to command the militant slaves to freedom is extolled. He is depicted as a unifier and as the one who will muster up and motivate the slave community to liberative action. Notably, Dessalines's crafted rhetoric also discloses his right of self-determination, individual agency, subjectivity, and his resolution to free the slaves:

1. 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 (*Emperor of Haiti* 13).
2. 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 to 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! Great Mackandal! Dead leader of rebellious slaves, fight with us now (14).

3. The sacks of sweet white sugar the French ship off to Paris goes stained with our blood (30).

Having presented above Hughes's notion of black leadership and what it should entail, I would like to propose that Hughes's own negritude viewpoint and optimism for the black diaspora is communicated through the Emperor's voice as well as the spoken characters. As an aspect of this same phenomenon, moreover, Hughes has pursued another dimension. He has informed us about Dessalines's grand ambitions to make Haiti a successful and industrialized nation, probably coinciding with Hughes's project of race building and uplifting ideology. Hughes is also concerned to publish Dessalines's incredible sense of mission and his profound dedication to inspire, serve, and lead the slave community to emancipation. Dessalines's self-centered, however, lies in his dream to create a black world for the black people of Haiti, giving them a sense of history and making Haiti a symbol of great progress in the modern world. This sense of Dessalines's pride has perhaps occasioned his ultimate failure:

1. I've told them of this Haiti I would make—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 (*Emperor of Haiti* 36).
2. If I could make Haiti a land where black men live in peace, I'd be content (36-7).
3. The French Napoleon gave himself the name of Emperor. I, too, am Emperor by my own hand (39).
4. I've created the first black Empire in the world (39).
5. Here I am, trying to build a civilization in Haiti good as any the whites have in their lands (55).

Finally, Hughes has underscored the democratic process by which the slaves had elected their chief Jean Jacques Dessalines, dispelling the myth that Africans before their encounter with Europeans and experience with colonialism had no sense of civilization, group leadership, and democratic governance. The first statement occurred in the context of an inquiry to attack at the sound of the drum. Martel, the elderly slave, confirmed to the slave insurrectionist Josef: “Jean Jacques. Tonight in the name of the slaves the council chose him for our leader” (11). This same Martel also reiterated Dessalines’s aptitude to the assembled slaves: “We have chosen a man who’s young and strong, wise and brave, to lead the slaves of the north to victory in union with all the blacks of Haiti who answer the call of the drums tonight. Your leader is Dessalines” (27).

As the slaves strategically plan their fight for future and future alternatives, Hughes highlights the importance of group memory and history, both as a warning sign and as an aspiration for reversal retribution. The author memorializes the Makandalian era—a period of incredible violence in the historical record of the French colony of Saint-Domingue—by making the slaves revisit the horrors of the past at the tragic death of the revolutionary maroon and religious leader, Francois Makandal, and by contemplating upon their own fate: should they fail to succeed. Dessalines reminisces that historical moment in a conversation: “They burned Mackandal for trying to be free, didn’t they? They had no mercy on him” (13) followed by Martel’s panic: “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! (13). What does all that mean for the slave community?

Mackandal is a representation of the past shared by the slave community. He is also a historical example of what could happen to any attempt for freedom. In remembrance of him, the community might find meaning in memory and history as well as inspiration for their present situation. At this juncture in the narrative, Hughes is asserting a point for the equal weight of Mackandal in Haiti's national history the gravity of preserving oral traditions and collective memory. In doing so, he takes us back to where all had begun in 175, what Haitianist historians have identified as the pre-revolutionary era. The memory of Mackandal in the night of the general revolt in 1791 would remind radical slaves how they should act as a potential community of freedom in the presence of the future in their struggle for total emancipation from slavery.

Hughes was also splendid about other black radicals of the Revolution (i.e. Toussaint Louverture, Henri Christophe, etc.) who had engaged in resistance movements against Western hegemony and repression in Saint-Domingue, as Rampersad comments, "leaders who had defied Europe to establish the only independent black republic to emerge from the centuries of slavery in the Americas" (*The Life of Langston Hughes I: 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America* 204). Berry interprets that these freedom fighters "remained Hughes's heroes even as an adult, and he was especially proud that his own great-uncle, John Mercer Langston, had twice served in an independent Haiti as American consul general during the nineteenth century" (*Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* 122-3). The fact that Hughes had learned about Haiti's legendary history from his grandmother had made the black republic for him a dream fulfilled and Haiti an enchanted land for Hughes in his childhood (Berry 121; Rampersad 204; Langston Hughes *I Wonder As I Wander* 15-32). For the author, Haiti symbolizes, as it were for other black writers

in the period of black consciousness in the nineteenth (i.e. Douglass) and twentieth century (i.e. Du Bois, Johnson, McKay, Hurston, Césaire, etc.) respectively, the redemption of black past and “the longing for history” as Édouard Glissant phrases it (*Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* 79). In short, through his creative imagination, Hughes tries to create a permanent vision of the past by engaging the human narrative unfolding in the Haitian experiment. This “prophetic vision of the past” is expressed especially through Hughes’s desire to salvage the history and memory of those who have “been reduced by others to darkness and despair, the recovery of the near or distant past is imperative” (Édouard Glissant in *Monsieur Toussaint: A Play* 17).

Finally, a possible third way of approaching the text is to focus on the conflicts or tension between black and mulatto Haitians, leading eventually to the violent death of the Emperor. According to tradition, after Dessalines had become Emperor of Haiti, he had evenly distributed land to the black peasants and made them proprietors, a privilege they had not enjoyed since slavery. The landowning mulattoes whose white fathers were also landowners were unhappy about the Emperor’s action. Joan Dayan enlightens the matter here:

But it was Dessalines's attempt to redefine the ownership of land that probably cost him his life. In 1804, he had rescinded all transfers of property made after October 1802, thus removing mulatto claims to valuable plantations. In 1805, he decided that all land titles would have to be verified... According to many, this was a direct attack on the *anciens affranchis*, those who had taken, or had been given land formerly owned by their white planter fathers. (*Haiti, History, and the Gods* 26)

The Emperor was also gripped by the promise of modernity and by the idea of black civilization and progress, which he pursued, to the end to construct a stable nation-state equal to that of European origins and “as good as any the whites have in their lands.” Dessalines’s

statement to Martel who had served as his chief advisor had not only revealed the Emperor's vision for a promising Haiti but it had as well demonstrated the frightening relations he cultivated with the marginalized peasants. His mistreatments of the peasants in forced labor as in the days of slavery and the high taxes he imposed on them explained a national crisis in Haiti's postcolonial moments. Below is Hughes's best effort in accounting for this historical period of grave misapprehension between the state and the people in Haiti. It could as well be understood as an epoch human rights and freedom violation. The author presents a leader with good intentions but with incredible impatience and murderous strategy:

You and me work night and day, work hard. But what comes of it? It's every arm in Haiti we need. I have a dream for Haiti, Martel. I mean to see it through. That's why I made a law that all of us must work all day, and those who own land pay a tax that Haiti may have roads and docks and harbors fine as any country in the world. The peasants do not understand. They think I'd make them slaves again. And those to whom I gave the land, they call me tyrant now. How would they have me build, how dam the rivers, how make factories— (*Emperor of Haiti* 35)

Haitianist historians have also noted that Dessalines was not a reconciliator as his predecessor Toussaint Louverture. For him there could be no kinship with a white colonist in the newly established Black Republic in the Western world (Dayan 26). No mulatto could claim that he was entitled to his father's land, and that the land reform was an "attack on the sacred right of property," challenging whiteness itself and the colonial logic (Beaubrun Ardouin *Études sur l'histoire d'Haïti*, vol. 3 270). Dessalines wanted to make the independence of the peasant genuine by making him an owner of land (Dayan 26; Louis Janvier, *Les Constitutions d'Haïti*, vol. 1 43). Beyond the articulated propositions, I would like to propose that the dilemma in postcolonial Haiti during the administration of Emperor Dessalines was also a race problem

underlying the intricate relations between black and mulatto Haitians. Hughes's effort to rehistoricize or recast the predicament in the play is worth noting here. Through the lips of Dessalines's wise advisor Martel, Hughes shows the limits of racially-motivated vengeance; he indeed champions racial harmony:

I know. All my years, before our freedom, I, too, never saw the sun rise but to curse it, but now free men can dream a bigger dream than mere revenge...A dream of an island where not only blacks are free, but every man who comes to Haitian shores. Jean Jacques, I'm old man. But in my old age, I dream of a world where no man hurts another. Where all know freedom, and black and white alike will share this earth in peace. Of such I dream, Jean Jacques. (*Emperor of Haiti* 36)

In passing this particular judgment, Hughes was projecting himself as a race reconciliator. The declaration also exposes Hughes's enthusiasm for interracial friendship and racial tolerance. Giving the racial tension between black and white Americans at the time of the performance of the play in the states, it was probably Hughes's tactic to engage the country in interracial dialogues. As a short commentary, some of the issues dealt in this historical drama were also appropriated in Hughes's *Mulatto* play, without reducing the cultural and historical context of both accounts. *Mulatto* was premiered on Broadway in 1935, following the year *Emperor of Haiti* was staged at Kamaru for a six-day run, November 18 to 23 (Leslie Catherine Sanders *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes Volume 6: Gospel Plays, Operas, and Later Dramatic Works* 1; Joseph McLaren *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition, 1921-1943* 101). First, in both plays the narrative takes place in specific history and time. Second, the drama unveils the development of causal action and effect as the plot and characters unfold. Third, the hero of the story encounters complex oppositions and challenges. His life in the end leads to a human tragedy, as it were for Dessalines amplified by the mulatto hostility. Finally,

each individual play is “of narrative imagination that draws its inspiring significance from its embodiment of a generative and archetypal myth-model—an exemplary story about a past and its relation to the present we inhabit and a future we might look forward to (Scott *Conscripts of Modernity* 171-2).² In *Emperor of Haiti*, Dessalines is that personality, as Toussaint L’ouverture was for C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* (Scott 175-220).

The Spirit of the Revolution and the Law: Slave Religion and Culture

I shall focus now on the religion and the culture of the Haitian Revolution as represented in *Emperor of Haiti*. I want to discuss Hughes’s demarcation of these two inseparable phenomena in the context of the Haitian Freedom and from the perspective of revolutionary slave-peasants. As I have previously observed, Langston Hughes was equally concerned about the culture and traditions of the black diaspora; therefore, he has deliberately chosen to preserve and illustrate the African customs in Haiti theatrically. For Hughes, Haiti was one of the few places in the New World that continues to maintain the permanency of African history, memory, and culture. In this particular story, Hughes was particularly eager about two central issues: the rhetoric of the peasants in the making of the Haitian Revolution, and the practice of African customs mediating through African neo-spirituality and neo-religious rituals, which complementarily set the stage for the “Haitian turn” in world history and Haiti’s birth. How did Hughes then address the experience of African religion and spirituality in Saint-Domingue?

² I am indebted to R. Baxter Miller for Points one and two (*The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes*, 51).

Act One of the play opens in the historic year of 1791 against the scene of an “abandoned sugar mill” (*Emperor of Haiti* 7). It is the memorable night of the general revolt, under the leadership of the religious leader François Boukman whom Hughes calls *Papaloi* (The name for a Vodou Priest in the Creole dialect), the slaves conspired to plan their freedom. Papaloi initiates the first episode of the revolutionary narrative with a prayer delivered in the African tongue and addressed African gods: “Uglumbagolaiti! Solomini! Keetai!” (*Emperor of Haiti* 24). The invocation is quickly followed by another prayer. Mamaloi (a Vodoo priestess), calling on the African god of communication and the master of the crossroads, shouts: “Ledgba! Legba! Legba!” (24). The slave participants collectively joined the ritual. This very act is the process of discovering the community itself and through its contact with the supernatural world. The phenomenon of slave religion is not individual but communal. It also suggests that black religion in this particular historical moment is not practiced in the solitude but in the gathering of the community of the faithful. Hughes is advocating the religious experience of the slaves is not only psychological but also historical. It can also be argued that the source of slaves’ revolutionary tendencies and spiritual radicalism is rooted in their contact with African deities as collaborated partners working cooperatively toward their liberty.

The Revolution begins with scrupulous planning. In the process, the slaves exchanged ideas that evoke African memory in the new adapted land. The young slave Josef who prefers the life of a maroon than anyone in bondage notifies us that his mother who came to “our troubled island” in a slave ship “still remembers Africa” (10). For Josef’s mother, the pain of the New World experience for an African exile is the pain of Africa. Congo, a middle-aged slave,

intervenes and reports that he was old when “that English ship got hold of me. That’s why I can do our dances so well. I learnt ‘em in Africa” (17). The emphasis on the African dance points to Hughes’s interest in black cultural aesthetics—as one of his poems bears the title “African dance”—and principally the revalorization of African traditions in the heat of slavery. In a similar note, the name “Congo” is an invitation to the slave community to remember distinctively their place of origin, and the African image it incites. It also represents an instance, linguistically and perhaps culturally, in which the appellation reflects a precise geographical reality: the presence in Saint-Domingue-Haiti of Africans from Congo (Sterling Stuckey *Slave Culture* 8). The aged-slave Martel could not escape the reality of African past: “Africa! So long, so far away!” (*Emperor of Haiti* 10). He infers that separation from his native and nostalgic land does not mean absolute absence, total separation, nor does it entail loss of (its) memory. The militant slave community who had eagerly anticipated their immediate emancipation became more motivated as the dawn of freedom draws near. Africa plays an important role in their cognitive thinking and process toward liberation. They tie their future emancipation with their remembrance of ancestral freedom. The words from Martel’s lips to Josef broadcast this future hope:

But tonight the moon weeps tears of joy, son, for Africa. And when in its next passage across the sea, it shines on our sweet motherland, it’ll smile and say, “Thy black children in Haiti have thrown off the yoke of bondage, and are men again!” Josef, my children grew up slaves. My grandchildren, too...but yours will be free! (10)

The language of the announcement above probably seeks to draw parallels between the Haitian experience and Africa’s pursuit of self-determination and political sovereignty from Western powers in the twentieth century. In his anticolonial leanings, Hughes indirectly

articulated the role Haiti would play in the struggle for black freedom globally, particularly in the African continent (“And when in its next passage across the sea, it shines on our sweet motherland, it’ll smile...”). Having been well-acquainted with the historical accounts of the Revolution and its symbolic freedom, Hughes knew that revolutionary Haiti was “the sun of hope” for African Americans struggling under the shackles of slavery and racial violence in nineteenth century America (Pamphile *Haitians and African Americans* 8). He therefore anticipates that the Revolution to become “an icon of liberty on the world map” and a radical aspiration for freedom for Africans (“But tonight the moon weeps tears of joy...for Africa”) and the oppressed people in the world in the first half of the twentieth century (Pamphile 8).

Furthermore, writing this play in the 1930s, it was also doable that Hughes has intended the African emancipation in Haiti at the turn of nineteenth century would inspire African decolonization in the 1960s (“My grandchildren, too...but yours will be free!”) and serve as an emblem of emancipation and human dignity. Many black anti-colonialists and anti-imperialists shared this conviction, as it were the case for C.L.R. James when he penned *The Black Jacobins* in 1938 and Aimé Césaire in *Toussaint-Louverture, la Révolution française et le problème colonial* in 1956. All these writers had appealed various ways to the global meaning of the Haitian Revolution and its implications for black freedom and black resistance against man-made oppressions.

Hughes moves on with the plot by quickly disrupting the conversation with another voice: a major character in the saga, Azelia, Dessalines’s wife before he was crowned as Emperor. According to Hughes’s explanation, Dessalines was not present in the first meeting that

orchestrated the general insurrection in 1791. Azelia uncovers to her dialogue partner Josef about Dessaline's furtive activity: "That he'd been to a voodoo meeting" (9). Azelia's insight is critical for several reasons I wish to consider in a few words. First, she notifies us that Dessalines had left the slave plantation at *night* without his master's approval. He in terms violated the rigid codes of Lordship-Servant (or Master-Slave) dialectic and the rules of the Code Noir, which regulated social dynamics in the colonial system. Regrettably, the revolutionary leader was caught in his morning return. Tradition tells us that under the stiff condition of slavery, it was only logical for African slaves to practice their religion clandestinely. The French colonial laws had censured group assembly and religious meetings by the slaves. Second, Azelia links Dessalines's public humiliation to the religious intolerance of the colonial arrangement. She recounts the historic incident in this manner:

Jean Jacques was whipped...Being off the place at night without permission, they caught him coming back this morning...Then they hit him across his mouth...They called all the slaves together to watch him beaten. The foreman gave him fifty lashes, hard. And master and his sons stood around laughed to see a slave with such a fine name taking a lashing. (9).

The phenomenon of religious violence and unfreedom was a common practice in all French colonies in the Caribbean including the Saint-Domingue territory where it was probably more enforced because of its large African population and constant rebellions (Kawas François *Sources documentaires de l'histoire des Jésuites en haïti aux XVIIIe et XXe siècles* 2006). Dessalines was severely beaten for violating the religious rule of terror and the colonial mandate of spiritual absolutism, that is, the legislations of the Code Noir (or Black Code) of 1685 that adjust the spiritual matters and religious worship in the colony, a decree of the French King

Louis XIV. Joan Dayan describes the Black Code as “the most barbaric product of the Enlightenment,” unveiling the dark side of modernity (*Haiti, History, and the Gods* 201). Louis Sala-Mollins writes it was “the worst refinement in wickedness, the most glacial technicality in the commerce of human flesh and in genocide” (Dayan 202; *Le Code Noir, ou Le calvaire de Canaan* 206-281).

Article 2 of the Code requires Christian baptism for all newly arrived enslaved Africans in the island and likewise the dissemination of theological instruction to slaves under the authority of Catholic Christianity. The scripted theological catechism and the theological baptism as a redemptive ritual in the case of the death of a slave rather justified the enslavements of Africans. The stipulations are described in this manner:

All slaves that shall be in our islands shall be baptized and instructed in the Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic Faith. We enjoin the inhabitants who shall purchase newly-arrived Negroes to inform the Governor and Intendant of said islands of this fact within no more that eight days, or risk being fined an arbitrary amount. They shall give the necessary orders to have them instructed and baptized within a suitable amount of time. (John Corrigan & Lynn S. Neal *Religious intolerance in America: a documentary history* 47)³

On the other hand, Articles 3 prohibits all public religious worship and practices other than those of the governing religious authority; and the Catholic religion is said to be the professing faith of the colonial state. The stipulations to that Article are read as such:

We forbid any public exercise of any religion other than the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman; we wish that the offenders be punished as rebels and disobedient to our orders... We prohibit all such [religious] assemblies, which we declare illicit and seditions, subject

³ The Original French text of the Code Noir is automatically accessible: *Le Code noir : Recueil d'édits, déclarations et arrêts concernant les esclaves nègres de l'Amérique* (1685): <http://www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/axl/amsudant/guyanefr1685.htm>. For an insightful commentary on the logic of the Black Code, see Louis Sala-Molins (*Le Code Noir ou le calvaire de Canaan* 2001).

to the same penalty that will be levied even against masters who allow or tolerate them among their slaves. (Laurent DuBois and John D. Garrigus, “The Code Noir, 1685,” *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents* 50)

The Black Code as a Christian-inspired body of laws and other related ones demand unqualified spiritual allegiance and submission in the disciplining, the ordering, and supervision of the religious life of the enslaved. As a result, African spirituality and African diasporic-based religions were not considered “true religion” or genuine expressions of spirituality in the judgment of Enlightenment texts—which we learn from missionary’s texts, journals, and travel documents.⁴ Rather, they were viewed as “fetishism,” “superstition,” “sorcery,” “magic,” and “clan cult.” These ideological constructs and religious mischaracterizations of African spirituality undoubtedly give the idea that Africans and the people of African descent were “the fallen souls,” “lack of religion,” and “absent of spirituality.”⁵ They also suggest that the African had not experienced the divine nor had he practiced the true faith of the Christian West—in the European sense of evaluating what was good, beautiful, religious, and human!

The text of the Code Noir had contributed to “the official criminalization” of slave religion and further to the social and “political marginalization” of the slave population, as it were in the torturing of Dessalines’s corpse, the public burning at the stake the African religious

⁴ See for example: David Chidester (*Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* 1996); V. Y. Mudimbe (*Tales of Faith Religion as Political Performance in Central Africa* 2001).

⁵ For example, see Siba Grovogui (*Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law*, 25-27); Kate Ramsey (*The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* 24-5); David Chidester (*Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* 15-6); V. Y. Mudimbe (*Tales of Faith Religion as Political Performance in Central Africa* 8-9).

leader-maroon François Makanda in 1758 and the decapitation of the head of Dutty Boukman in 1791 (Kate Ramsey, *Vodou and the Power in Haiti: The Spirits and the Law*, 10). This legal code of modernity, “the law of terror,” as Joan Dayan frames it, anticipated the postcolonial religious literature of Haiti and laid the foundation for the violent antisuperstition campaigns—respectively taken place in 1864, 1896, 1912, 1925-30, 1940-2—under which the government-sponsored French Catholic hierarchy and the American occupation (1915-1934) aggressively terrorized and persecuted Haitian peasants and their popular religion.⁶ I suppose that The Code had stigmatized African religion and its ritualism as “spiritually unfit.” It also set the historical context, in which later problems of religious nature confronted the occupied Haiti in the twentieth-century. The appearance of the seminal religious text of Jean Price-Mars’s *Ainsi Parla l’Oncle* in 1928 and other religious texts in the period of the Haitian Renaissance were organized responses to a national religious crisis. Hughes’s *Emperor of Haiti* was also born in this historical context, having first performed in 1936. Therefore, *Emperor of Haiti* might be construed as a counter narrative to the religious orthodoxy in post-American occupation Haiti or a critique of the religious environment of American imperialism in the island.

Having discussed these critical concerns, we must then ask this question: Was there a religious problem in colonial Saint-Domingue before the publication of the Black Code?

⁶ For further study on this issue, see Jean Price-Mars (*Ainsi Parla l’Oncle* 1928, and “Folklore et patriotisme” : Conférence prononcée sous les auspices de l’Alliance Française 1951); J.C. Dorsainvil (*Vodou et névrose* 1931) Jacques Roumain (“A propos de la campagne ‘anti-superstitieuse’:1942); Alfred Métraux (*Le vaudou haïtien* 1958); Milo Rigaud (*La tradition vaudou et le vodou haïtien* 1953);Léon Dénis Pamphile (*La croix et le glaive : l’Eglise catholique et l’occupation américaine d’Haïti 1914-1934* 1991) ; Anne Greene (*The Catholic Church in Haiti: political and social change* 1993) ; Kate Ramsey (*Vodou and Power in Haiti: The Spirits and the Law* 2011).

Although space does not allow us to elaborate historically on the religious context of that colony, nonetheless, I would like to suggest that the problem was not religion per se. The presence of neo-African religion and the practice of neo-African spirituality sandwiched with black radicalism that bore emancipative potential was the colonial anxiety. How did the slaves react to the Black Code in *Emperor of Haiti*? How did Hughes represent the neo-African religion of Vodou and the hybrid spirituality of the Vodou religion and Catholic Christianity?

Hughes explains these various relationships through a series of conversations between the slaves themselves. In their interactions, they underline the intersection of religion, history, law, and bodily discipline. The first conversation involves a lively exchange between Pierre, a child slave, and Mars, an excellent drummer who had lost an arm by a brutal master. Being curious about the missing arm, the innocent Pierre hence inquires about it: “Where’s your other arm, Monsieur Mars?” (23). Mars’s bitter response is illuminating: “The Black Code, son. The French’ve got it all writ’ down that if a slave raise his hand against a white man, they can cut it off. They cut off mine” (23). Mars, who has just described the barbaric nature of the Black Code and the fact he is its victim, exuberantly tells us, “My one good arm is ready” to play the drum to Legba and to begin the Vodou ritual (23).

Second, Hughes is unapologetic about the Vodou faith. He stresses its centrality in the Haitian Revolution. The significant role of slave religion in the struggle for achieving human rights and the slaves transitioning from bondage to freedom is of paramount importance in *Emperor of Vodou*. Since the slaves could not practice in public their religion, Hughes’s effort to enlighten us about the trouble of religious pluralism in the colony is helpful. This insight offers

an important perspective about the ordering of the colonial world: the sharp difference between the Christian and the (African) pagan, the believer and the non-believer, African values and Western values. Finally, Hughes situates slave religion in tension with institutionalized Christianity and its theology of despair. The conflict provides the ground for the slaves not only to reject the imperial religion of their masters but also to construct radically emancipative religious discourses. It also entails the imperative of a decolonized black religious narrative and the beginning of a new religious ethics. The explicit rejection of the “White God” and the Christian vision of life and values further complicate the matter.

In the second conversation, Antoine, once a slave then became a Baron after emancipation, rejects the Christian faith in favor of the Vodou religion. Celeste, a fervent religious slave who frequently converses on religious matters, exalts the African god Legba over the White Christian God. She establishes his supremacy as well as attests that African deities were better. Lulu openly discredits the Christian teaching on hell as a site of torment and human condemnation. According to him, Africans are exempt from it because in the African religious cosmology hell does not exist, contradicting the Christian view of after-life. The conversation is expressed in the following way:

Celeste: Drums is what our gods like, though. Drums is for Legba and Dambala, Nanan and M’bo.

Congo: African gods been knowin’ drums a long time. Them tinny bugles just can’t reach they ears.

Antoine: Goat’s blood, cock’s blood, and drums.

Mars: The drum’s a black man’s heart-a-beatin’. Tonight that beatin’s goin’ to set the Frenchmen’s hair on end.

Congo: This is our night tonight.

Celeste: A mighty night it’ll be, too. Bless Legba!

Congo: We'll remember that tonight.

Antoine: Let the French dwell a thousand years in hell, they'll never forget this night.

Popo: If there is a hell, I hope I meet no Frenchmen there.

Lulu: Hell's a place for Christians, ain't it? Not for us.

Antoine: That's all. Our voodoo gods ain't mixin' with the white gods.

Celeste: Legba's better (22-3).

Additional comments might be made about the implications of the religious rhetoric of the slaves. First, it appears to be an explicit reaction to the tenets of the Black Code and its restrictions. Second, it seems to me the religious conversation indicates that the slaves were unhappy about the religious environment of the colony. Religious homogeneity in the Christian sense and the torturing of the black body are linked. While religious uniformity signals the anticipation of a Christian-inspired world and vision of reality, the physical exploitation of the human flesh was necessary in maintaining that order. Grounded in the logic of imperial vision of history and modernity, the Code Noir created the intersection between faith and bodily discipline, violence and order; it had also mapped out the processes and structures of modernity.

The third conversation is a dialogue between two peasant vendors: an unnamed coconut vendor, and Zoune, a mango vendor. It occurs in the context of a love story: the love life of Zoune. She publicly discloses that she changes men as she pleases. The coconut vendor disapproves the lifestyle perhaps based on Christian ethics: "Well, it ain't moral, the priest says." Zoune quickly defends her choice by accusing her of being a Christian proselyte: "You belong to them white folks' church, don't you? How long you been in there?" Then, Zoune, justifies my argument: "Since before the freedom. My master made all his slaves join the Catholic Church. He said if we didn't, he'd beat the stuffings out of us. I been going to mass mighty near as long as I been colored" (63).

What appears to be clear in the last statement is Hughes's presentation of Christianity as a forced religion to the slaves. He invites us to see another problem: chiefly the relationship between religion and violence. According to this text, African slaves in the colony had been Christianized unwillingly at the threat of death. In addition, Hughes communicates another historical fact that the slaves in the island did not have religious rights and their religious choice was limited both by the will of their masters and the legal restrictions of the Code Noir as we have demonstrated. Hughes further illuminates on the religious culture of the slaves. After giving his acceptance speech as the new leader of the slave population, Dessalines summons the attentive audience to a Vodou ritual: "There on the mountain top we'll sacrifice a goat to Legba. We'll dance obeah" (29). Hughes depicts Dessalines as both the political and the spiritual leader of the slave community. In this way, he could overlap with the Vodou tradition that iconizes Jean Jacques Dessalines as both a Vodou *lwa* (spirit) and the father of Haitian freedom.

Next, Hughes mediates upon the indelible "scars" of the Emperor. He reports that Dessalines could not get over his physical scars from his slave experience. Hughes describes this psychic trauma of colonial memory in a series of statements with the objective to relate physical discipline and history. The conversation involves three separate entities: Azelia, the peasant and black wife of Dessalines before he becomes Emperor; Celine, the cultured and mulatto wife of Dessalines after he achieves his new status as Emperor; and finally the cynic angler who visited the dead body of Dessalines.

1. To his wife Azelia, the Emperor sadly cautions, "Don't touch me! God! My shoulder's raw as meat!" (13).

2. Dessalines himself informs us, “The French, who cut their scars upon my back—too deep to ever fade away! Look!... Look what they’ve done to me! Look at my scars!” (30).
3. The narrator writes, “The body of the Emperor now lies on its face, back bare to the sun. The old welts of his slave days stand out like cords across his shoulders” (73).
4. Azelia, witnessing his dead body laid on the ground, rocks herself into tears and gently with “her arms cover the heavy scars on his back” (73).
5. Celine passes by the dead body and swiftly whispers “those scars!” (74). She let the body unattended.
6. The fisherman comes closer to his body, he declares, “he musta been a slave once—from the looks of his back” (74).

In these series of exchanges, Hughes attempts to mark out the intimate relationship between history and power, the body and cultural memory. First, Hughes reads the history of the Haitian Revolution through its effects on the human body, chiefly through the scars of Jean Jacques Dessalines, the Emperor. Second, he identifies “the French,” as representatives of the colonial institution and those “who cut their scars upon my [Dessalines’s] back” as the same group of colonial authority who practiced traditional violence on slaves’ body. In other words, the colonial agents who unleashed violence on Dessalines’s physical body “leave their marks upon the body, and form or disform it in the course of their passage. Instead of being dead and buried the past lives on in that most intimate of realms, or own physicality” (Nick Shepherd’s “The Politic Body” 2001).

Hughes proceeds by telling about another equally important event. In Dessalines’s inaugural speech, Hughes dramatizes and emphasizes how the body of the newly-chosen slave-leader is served as a map for cultural memory and as a mirror image on the meaning of the (collective) past. In the address, Dessalines offers first a vivid imagery of the harshness of slave life in Saint-Domingue:

Everyday an old man came to dump a pot of yams into a trough where we ate, and the pigs and the dogs, they are, 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. (*Emperor of Haiti* 28)

The Dessalinian narrative calls attention to the inhuman nature of slavery. First, in the economy of slavery, it appears there is no natural distinction between a slave and an animal, as Dessalines puts it “a beast,” or a slave’s body to an animal’s body. (The master “owned them, too,” Dessalines shouts). Second, the colonial authority also drove them both to their respective destination: the sheep to the marketplace and the slaves to the field to produce for the master. Finally, not only is the slave’s body closely connected—even in its early stage—to labor but also to physical control and pain:

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! (*Emperor of Haiti* 28)

Hughes chronicles the story of the Revolution through bodily discipline, violence, and corporal pain personifying through Dessalines’s body. In memorializing the events of the Haitian experience in such a manner, Hughes had offered perceptive information about the historical formation of the Black Republic. Dessalines is personified as “the suffering republic” and as the image of revolutionary Haiti. According to Hughes’s reading of the emblematic meaning of the Revolution’s events, the suffering revolutionary leader had borne upon himself the plight of the

slave population. For Hughes every meaningful event or revolutionary freedom movement such as the Haitian Revolution leaves its own marks, wounds, and scars with us.

Suffice it to say, the reason for making historiography a centerpiece in historical drama such as *Emperor of Haiti* is that social activists and playwrights as Langston Hughes recognizes the phenomenon of ideological history-writing might engender marvelous effect in the stage play (Ivo Kamps *Historiography and ideology in Stuart drama* 3). Yet, Hughes is reluctant not to represent on stage the atrocious war of the Battle of Independence of Haiti, as these tragic events could psychologically impair the spectator. How can any dramatist stage war to the public gaze of a theatrical audience? Can one genuinely perform bloody wars on stage? It is through the constructed personas in *Emperor of Haiti* that the history, collective memory, suffering, and resistance of the slave community are retold rhetorically and creatively “reconstructed in the imagination of the spectator” (Jean Jonassaint, “Tragic Narratives: The Novels of Haitian Tradition,” 206).

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, at the untimely death of Emperor Dessalines, Hughes draws the conclusion that the dream of the Haitian Revolution and its legacy would not fail. Azelia, the former and peasant wife of Dessalines, who had cared for the corpse of the Emperor, is portrayed as the “redeemer” of Haiti’s national history. It is her figurative gesture and deliberate reaction—to the skeptic fisherman who sought to identify the dead body on the ground—at the end of the drama that illustrates her heroism. She looks forward to redemptive possibilities of the Revolution. The fisherman: “he musta been a slave once—from the looks of his back” (*Emperor of Haiti* 74);

Azelia: “He was a slave, once... then a King!” (74). In honor of Dessalines’s contributions to the narrative of human freedom and human rights in Haiti, “the fishermen remove their hats” (74). If Jean Jacques Dessalines could rise up from his humble state of a slave to become Haiti’s first Emperor, therefore the promise of the Haitian Revolution according to Hughes’s ideological interpretation in *Emperor of Haiti* would not die. Azelia’s closing words, in fact, the last words in the story, “Your destiny is in the stars! I live...to kiss...your scars,” anticipates a new beginning for the Haitian people—which we can also presume as Langston Hughes’s last message for the “troubled island” (Langston Hughes *Troubled Island* 51).

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The Haitian Revolution occupies a prominent spot among the most significant events in the history of the African diaspora in the Americas. The former French colony of Saint-Domingue — epicenter of the victorious slave rebellion — played a central role in European trans-Atlantic expansion. The proliferation of human cargo notably expanded the slave sector, which grew from 200,000 slaves in 1765 to 450,000 by the eve of the Haitian Revolution. It is estimated that by the end of the 18th century, Saint-Domingue had 8,000 sugar plantations that were responsible for 30% of the world production of sweeteners and 40% of France's foreign trade, an impressive economic development that was built mostly on the backs of the unfortunate slaves.