

PATHWAYS

A JOURNAL OF HUMANISTIC AND SOCIAL INQUIRY



VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2

Published January 2020

RUTGERS
Graduate School of Education



THE
ANDREW W.
MELLON
FOUNDATION

An Autopsy of the Black Revolution: Looking at Henri Christophe through the Césairean lens

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Abstract: In his play *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, Aimé Césaire shows how Henri Christophe is incapable of establishing an anti-colonial black state because he adopts the colonial structure where his subjects are forced into free labor therefore perpetuating slavery. Instead of considering the immediate needs of the country, Christophe attempts to bring Haiti up as an equal competitor in the industrialized West despite its embargo and looming threat of reoccupation. Christophe becomes a slave master (the ultimate capitalist), thriving on the exploitation of his subjects to build the Citadel. This article looks at how Césaire's play brings nuance to "post-colonial" discourse, showing how the initial victims of colonialism can perpetuate this framework if they profit from it. It also highlights the significance this piece of Haitian Revolutionary literature has on global black liberation literary movement. While the play goes beyond the accuracy of true historical events, Césaire contextualizes what dismantling colonialism potentially means.

The literary canon inspired by the historical memory of the Haitian Revolutionary era spanned across multiple black intellectual and artistic movements. The challenge of these works was to promote a sense of identity and solidarity amongst blacks within a world built on black inferiority. These anachronistic literary texts firmly belong in our post-colonial discourse. They respond as to "the effects of racialized forms of 20th century industrial capitalism, and efforts to develop and practice freely their own cultural identities."¹ C.L.R. James, Langston Hughes, Alejo Carpentier, Emeric Bergeaud, Derek Walcott, and Aimé Césaire are some of the many contributors to this canon. They reconfigured the literary landscape by engaging in radical expressionism, conveying their frustrations of the systemic oppressions they faced in their societies that were embedded by white supremacy and colonial based economies.

The Haitian liberation project became a point of reference, for writers and thinkers across the diaspora, in building their worth in anti-black, post-enslaved societies. In his play *Tragedy of King Christophe*, Césaire processes his understanding of Haiti's infancy in the same way C.L.R.

¹ Nicolas M. Creary, "Literary Cultural Nationalists as Ambassadors across the Diaspora" (Boydell & Brewer, University of Rochester press) 278

James reconstructs our political-historical understanding of the Haitian Revolution in the *Black Jacobins*, with the goal to “animate his utopian hopes for a possible alternative future”². In a 1970 interview, James said, “We in the West Indies are very much aware of the contrast between what the white men says and what he does, because we are western civilized in our orientation.”³ While the objective of *Black Jacobins* was to show the cultivation and sophistication of the event and its agents (comparable to the French Revolution), Césaire explores its ramifications on the black psyche. Through *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, Césaire examines the systemic depths of colonialism at the individual level and how it manifests in the freed structure Christophe struggles to make. In venturing further from the despotic persona of Henri Christophe, Césaire shows how Christophe is incapable of establishing an anti-colonial free black state because he is a conditioned capitalist victimized by colonialism and slavery.

In *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, Césaire critiques the inequality of the bourgeois and working class by narrating the story of Henri Christophe. He dramatizes the fall of King Christophe due to forcing his emancipated Haitians into free labor in order to build the largest fortress in the western hemisphere. Christophe sees the Citadel as a culmination of black splendor and excellence. Christophe believes that his way of governance is the only way for Haiti to survive. Any alternative views “are an act of defiance against me, against my person; these are measures to which my dignity will never submit.”⁴ Instead of considering the immediate needs of the country, Christophe as Césaire presents him attempts to bring his kingdom as a competitor to the industrialized west by a system of defense to protect the island from being reclaimed under slavery. Once an emancipated slave, Christophe becomes a capitalist as he thrives on the exploitation of his subjects to build the Citadel. He establishes a structure where the concentration of power goes to him, causing an eventual rebellion. We will begin by taking a close look at the play itself, seeing how Christophe’s growing self-hatred, despotism, and misery stems from his evolution into the ultimate capitalist. We will examine how Césaire’s play brings nuance to post-colonial discourse, showing how the initial victims of colonialism can perpetuate this framework if they profit from it. And finally, the significance of the Haitian Revolutionary literary canon has in our discourse of black liberation.

The drama begins right after the assassination of Jean Jacques Dessalines, Haiti is being fought over by two power heads, Pétion and Christophe. Both have vastly different visions for the future of the island. Christophe envisions Haiti as a powerful monarchical military state (like England) while Pétion envisions a democratic structure closely resembling plans of French Jacobins as France was going through the same systemic conflict. The political conflict is caricatured in the play’s prologue of Haitians betting on two chickens named after these two leaders in a cock fight. This foreshadows the fight between the old monarchical order and the new republican order with the constant looming threat of civil war and reoccupation of a western power. Christophe is ruling over the northern of Haiti at the beginning of the drama while Pétion runs the south as a republic. The play chronicles Christophe’s coronation and early rule, prioritizing his reign over the construction of the citadel. Despite the fortress of liberation, hymns are woven throughout the play as a constant reminder of the past Haitians can never escape.

² Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, (Duke University Press, 2004) 23

³ James, C.L.R. “C.L.R. James interview on his book “Black Jacobins’.” *YouTube*. Uploaded by AfroMarxist, June 24, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUnO8lfoVBk>

⁴ Aimé Césaire, *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, trans. Paul Breslin and Rachel Ney (1963, reprinted, 2015) 10

What began as a symbol of independence, quickly turns into one of slavery as Christophe seeps deeper into his obsession of his legacy.

Christophe claims in the first act, while he celebrates the anniversary of his coronation with his court. "I say the Citadel, the liberty of all people. Built by the whole people, men and women, children and elders, built for the whole people."⁵ The citadel was projected as a monument that would protect Cap-Haïtien from possible attack of western powers that would reinstitute slavery upon occupation. Christophe claims to be a leader who caters to the people's needs when he says, "I am not a mulatto, I don't sift my words. I'm a soldier, an old master-at-arms, and I'll speak plainly: The Senate's amendment to the Constitution is an expression of distrust in me, in my person."⁶ Like many other Haitian revolutionaries, Henry Christophe was a self-made man. As CLR James writes in *The Black Jacobins*, "Christophe, ex-waiter, could neither read or write, but he also astonished the French by his knowledge of the world and the ease and authority with which he ruled."⁷ Christophe believes that in order for Haiti to thrive as a new nation he must dictate the people of Haiti, as he is part of them. As the play progresses, Christophe sinks further into madness, using brutality and forced labor to expedite the citadel's completion. Through the interactions between King Christophe and his subjects (courtiers, peasants, soldiers, ladies) the people become synonymous with the needs of production of the citadel as they are forced to work. This "political centralization" is inevitable, with the growing of production according to Marx, causing separate independent districts "to lump together under one code of laws, one national class-interest, one frontier, and one customs-tariff."⁸ Christophe's expectation of the citadel being rapidly built toward which he expects his subjects to strive. He militarily enforces labor onto the peasants to build the citadel, diminishing the clear distinction between the peasants and the aristocracy prevalent at the beginning of the play.

The construction of Christophe's citadel is dependent on the labor of his subjects yet as the drama unfolds, he speaks about and to the Haitian people as inferiors. This play highlights one of the major reasons this fails which was because of the disconnect between Christophe and his subjects. "—miserable beggars! What would they bring here but disorder, negligence, laziness led by the coxcomb whose sole exploit was to sprawl in the bed of Pétiou, —they're termites, all of them termites, that's what they are."⁹ This very similar to the Christian Reverend Muller's words that Césaire quotes in *Discourse on Colonialism*, "humanity must not, cannot allow the incompetence, negligence, and laziness of the uncivilized peoples to leave idle indefinitely the wealth which God has confided to them."¹⁰

Under his regime, Haitians were not allowed to practice voodoo. Voodoo is a powerful ancestral faith that withstood even under French rule. It was a force that united enslaved Haitians and promoted their independent will and spirit, enticing to rebel against the system to which they were only commodity. The irony of Christophe's banishment of voodoo is that it was a vital source of community, faith and communication for him in the early days of the revolution. Now, it is a threat to his control. As the Citadel's production grows rapidly, conditions worsen, and tensions arise.

⁵ Césaire, *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, 40

⁶ Césaire, *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, 10

⁷ James, C. L. R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1989) 257

⁸ Marx, Karl. *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>. Assessed September 14, 2019

⁹ Césaire, 91

¹⁰ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 1972) 4

In desperation to finish the Citadel, Christophe decrees that women and children must work on building the citadel as well. Within the same scene, he also forces peasants to marry each other so they are not to have children out of wedlock. This shows that the peasants have forgone the right to free will. This leaves an opening to abuses of power and little repercussions for those that enact it to the detriment of the workers. As said in Césaire's writes in his "Discourse on Colonialism", a capitalist society "is incapable of establishing a concept of the rights of all men, just as it has proved incapable of establishing a system of individual ethics"¹¹

We see the true character of Christophe as Césaire views him. Christophe assumes the role of the capitalist, prioritizing the completion of product (the citadel) over the well-being of his workers (soldiers, peasants, builders, etc.). "It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves."¹² In attempting to impose a capitalist framework on a peasant society and exploiting his subjects to produce a citadel, King Christophe's system of governance fell by the hands of his own people. "Henri Christophe dreams of constructing a grandiose Citadel that would broadcast to the world Haiti's glory in becoming the first free Black republic after a hard-fought revolution against France in the early nineteenth century."¹³ Casting the Citadel as a symbol of the labor of nation-building, Christophe likens himself to an engineer, the "builder" of the Haitian people.

In this drama, the goal is to establish an impenetrable and self-sustaining state. This is portrayed in a soliloquy in the conclusion of the first act, where Christophe becomes crazed by the glory of his vision of the citadel as he spews,

It sounds its charge through the fog. Its lights blaze at nightfall! It cancels the slave ship!
--My friends, who have drunk bitter salt and the dark wine of the sand, both I and you
thrown down by the heavy swell, I have seen the enigmatic prow, with spray and blood in
its nostrils, beat through the wave of contempt! May my people, my black people, Salute
the fragrance and flood tide of the future!¹⁴

What is striking about this scene is that we see a physical manifestation of his citadel for the first time (it is projected against the background for the audience to see it) through his eyes. The citadel becomes a symbol of accomplishment built by hands who forcefully took their freedom. The symbolism of the citadel outsizes the iconic figure of the slave ship that carried inconceivable suffering and inferiority as well as a symbol of the tumultuous passage stealing them away from the homeland. Once it is completed, the ocean that surrounds the island becomes a trap for any French ship that would venture in the waters of the young nation.

Toward the end of the play, there is a revolt of the workers that Christophe sends his army to put down. Surprisingly, they were unable to and the beating of the mandoucouman (sacred and military drum of retreat) launches Christophe into an angered soliloquy, symbolizing the retreat of the old order. He utters these last lines before he kills himself, "Africa! Help me to return, carry me like an aged child in your arms, —as when the morning comes, one strips off the dreams of the night—of my nobles, my nobility, my scepter, my crown."¹⁵

¹¹ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 37

¹² Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 16

¹³ Christina McMahon, "Theater and the Politics of Display the Tragedy of King Christophe at Senegal's First World Festival of Negro Arts" (Indiana University Press, 2014) 287

¹⁴ Césaire, *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, 40

¹⁵ Césaire, 93

This line expresses the deep yearning of Christophe that in establishing a powerful black state, he would bring his kingdom of northern Haiti back to the pre-colonial valor of Africa. In taking on the black man's burden, Christophe attempts to "uplift his racial brethren and, in so doing, help them take Africa back from the colonizers."¹⁶ Christophe is committed to prove to the world that Haiti will not crumble under western retribution pressures but develop it to become an equal competitor in the modern sphere therefore the black man is equal to the white man. But there is something satirical in his dying words because in becoming the "capitalist", he can never return to Africa, he can never return to what ancestral heritage that links him to his people. He forgets his original vision which is that the Citadel would be a symbol of the extraordinary capacity and resilience of the Haitian people. In becoming the master, he reinstates the slave framework that can no longer survive in a gradual progressive world.

The historical significance of this play goes beyond its accuracy to true events. Throughout such literatures, we can see how writers have contextualized their modern ideas and reflections of their past which contributes to the collective memory. In linking Haiti to artistic liberation and identity in these anachronistic tales, the black revolution ignites a consciousness of self-liberation and reappreciation of blackness. As Césaire said, "Haiti, where negritude stood up for the first time and said that it believed in its humanity."¹⁷ Yet at the same time, the important question that Césaire is enticing us to ask is whether we can ever truly be free of colonialism if we cannot see any other way than being colonized? Despite destroying France's economy, weakening the power of Napoleon Bonaparte and bringing about the only self-emancipated nation in the world; *The Tragedy of King Christophe* shows that decolonization is not be a viable solution to dealing with structural ramifications of colonialism. (exploiting the cultures that have been there before). Césaire's play leaves behind this open-ended question. Haiti "is a reminder that colonialism can be defeated and that the often-claimed superiority of so-called whites is a myth. Paradoxically in its relationship to France and to the United States, it is also a reminder that the era of colonialization, in the forms of cultural and economic imperialism, is not over."¹⁸

About the author:

A child of Haitian immigrants, Johanna Piard has a B.A. in English with a minor in History at Florida International University (FIU). The vision of becoming a professor emerged as she learned more about the work of her grandfather, who founded the first girl's high school in Les Cayes, Haiti.

As she is about to carry over the legacy of teaching which has been omnipresent in her family for generations, she has worked as a student associate at the Historic Hampton House, a once prominent Black hotel that housed many luminaries of the Civil Rights Movement. She taught young Black students about the history of Black Miami as they embody the future of the Black experience. Currently, she works as a Teacher's Assistant at the FIU Writing & Rhetoric Program while also completing her Masters degree in English. She also works as a contract writer for Audastio, a podcast company centered on telling grassroots stories of Miami promoting education, advocacy and innovation in a variety of fields.

¹⁶ Jeannette Eileen Jones, "Written on the Wall: Pan-African Dreams of African Empires and Republics." (University of Georgia Press, 2010) 85

¹⁷ Césaire, Notebook of a Return to the Native Land

¹⁸ Hurley, "Césaire's 'Toussaint Louverture': A Revolution in Question" (*Présence Africaine*, 2004) 200

Her interests for her master's thesis centers on her research on the Haitian Revolutionary canon and African Diasporic literature that focus on black identity, sexuality and liberation.