



Slavery & Abolition

A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies

ISSN: 0144-039X (Print) 1743-9523 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fsla20>

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To cite this article: Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel (2015) Creolizing Freedom: French–Creole Translations of Liberty and Equality in the Haitian Revolution, *Slavery & Abolition*, 36:1, 111-123, DOI: [10.1080/0144039X.2014.888869](https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2014.888869)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2014.888869>



Published online: 18 Feb 2014.



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Creolizing Freedom: French–Creole Translations of Liberty and Equality in the Haitian Revolution

Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel

During the Haitian Revolution, members of the French government produced official proclamations containing laws that sought to regulate liberty and define citizenship for the ex-slaves. The proclamations were in turn translated from French into Creole to be read aloud. The signatures of Sonthonax and Bonaparte on these Creole documents bear witness to the role of translation as a vehicle for the movement of revolutionary ideals between France and Saint-Domingue. Through rhetorical strategies like omissions, repetition, and call-and-response, the anonymous translators often subverted French power and authority, producing Creole versions of these official proclamations that were often more inclusive and created space for the audience of ex-slaves to participate in debating and defining their liberty, equality and citizenship.

In his 1938 account of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, C.L.R. James established the French and Haitian revolutions as inextricably intertwined events. His chapters 'The San Domingo Masses Begin' 'And the Paris Masses Complete' reveal the continuity in debates, ideas and movements that occurred in revolutionary Saint-Domingue and France in the eighteenth century.¹ James's work, although largely ignored for decades, eventually opened the way for contemporary historical accounts of the interconnected nature of the two revolutions. To date, however, these accounts have emphasized French language texts as primary sources for the events and debates occurring on both sides of the Atlantic at this time. My focus here is on Creole language sources because they give us access to that most elusive aspect of the Haitian Revolution: the debates and conversations taking place among the enslaved population, or what Carolyn Fick has called the revolution from below.² Public legal decrees and declarations issued by the French colonial

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administration in Saint-Domingue and translated into Creole are a rich source of information because they provide a unique opportunity to examine the complex interplay of the French and Creole languages in Saint-Domingue and the effects of translation on the political and philosophical debates that marked the revolutionary period on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Creole translations of the *Proclamation Le Cap*, issued by civil commissioner Leger-Félicité Sonthonax in 1796 and the declaration *Aux Habitans de Saint-Domingue* issued by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802, are among some of the first written works in Creole.³ Consequently, they shed light on the linguistic evolution of Haitian Creole, and the debates taking place in the public sphere during the Haitian Revolution. Through these Creole language texts, we witness the processes of acceptance, disavowal and transformation through which Creole-speaking translators and their audiences in Saint-Domingue engaged with the colonial French administration's articulations of liberty, equality and citizenship, and sometimes subverted them in order to further their own revolution against slavery as a system of racialized inequality. In her collection *Textes anciens en créole français de la Caraïbe: Histoire et analyse*, Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux explains the presence of Creole texts during this turbulent time:

During the first abolition of slavery, texts containing information for the slaves were written in Creole and posted at different locations. We recognize only the official signature, for example 'Bonaparte, First Consul' or General Leclerc [...]. However it is clear that the author is someone else, someone who certainly spoke the local Creole, or at least well enough to undertake this writing.⁴

Hazaël-Massieux further speculates that Creole translators were often white. The written record today bears very little trace of their identities or of the reception of these texts at the public readings.⁵ However, relegating these texts to the dustbin of history for lack of a more complete written record would be to perpetuate what Michel Rolph-Trouillot has aptly called silencing the past.⁶

The Creole-speaking voices that emerge in these translations are impossible to pin down because they resist the easy binary categories that often characterize accounts and analyses of the Haitian Revolution: black/white, master/slave and French/African. Instead, these translations speak to the constant flows and exchanges among these various groups in a language that was itself still emerging in this period as a result of these exchanges. Consequently, the Creole texts present a sometimes-baffling combination of voices and ideas and remind us that translation is above all an act of mediation. The translators often transformed the tone and meaning of the original French text using strategies like rhetorical questions, rephrasing and outright omission, in ways that subverted the authority of the French author. Sonthonax's translator, for example, transforms Sonthonax's one-paragraph preamble into an 11-paragraph text by rephrasing, repeating and adding information. In *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, Colin Dayan examines the mediatory roles of secretaries like Boisrond-Tonnerre and Juste Chanlatte in the production of public speeches and declarations by Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Dayan identifies echoes of Jacobin rhetoric 'recycled as formulas or favored shibboleths' by the leaders of newly independent

Haiti and argues that ‘we should not underrate the horror of this ventriloquy: the implications of a liberation cannot be glorified except in the language of the former master.’⁷ If the black generals’ desire to mimic the French linguistic style of Jacobin leaders speaks to their alienation as Deborah Jenson suggests, then what are we to make of French leaders like Sonthonax and Bonaparte who also found it necessary to render their proclamations in Creole for mass dissemination?⁸ Might these translations not suggest a grudging recognition of Saint-Domingue’s ex-slaves as Creole-speaking interlocutors in the debates on liberty, equality and citizenship taking place on both sides of the Atlantic? A close comparison of the French and Creole versions of each proclamation reveals both what is lost and what is gained in the process of translation. The Creole texts often divest the speaker – in this case Sonthonax or Bonaparte – of his singular authority and replace the single voice of power with a more general call for participatory citizenship.

Sonthonax’s *Proclamation Le Cap* was particularly important in the volatile context of revolution because Le Cap in the northern province was the cultural and economic capital of Saint-Domingue, and consequently the site of some of the fiercest physical and intellectual battles of the revolution. As republican forces and royalist planters – the latter allied with the British – battled for control of France’s most prosperous colony, Sonthonax invited the slaves to fight on the republican side in exchange for their freedom. To this end, he declared freedom for the northern province in 1793, independently of the French National Assembly, which ratified abolition in 1794. The two civil commissioners in Saint-Domingue, Sonthonax and Polverel, issued numerous proclamations in this period and in the years to come – including the 1796 *Proclamation Le Cap* – as they sought to phase out slavery and define a new legal status for the ex-slaves who would in turn provide a steady supply of labour and military force. The *Proclamation Le Cap* in particular sought to reassure the newly emancipated former slaves in this key province of their liberty and to counter rumours to the contrary. It was, therefore, a crucial tool in attempting to keep the French Republic’s grip on Le Cap in the face of attacks from French royalist and British forces, by reaffirming the emancipation of slaves in order to gain their support. The importance of this message necessitated a Creole translation to be read aloud to the formerly enslaved population.

Napoleon Bonaparte’s 1802 proclamation *Aux Habitans de St. Domingue* is particularly striking because it provides us with the rare opportunity to study questions of authority, authorship and translation in a Creole text bearing only the signature of Bonaparte. This proclamation undertook a similar project to Sonthonax’s *Proclamation Le Cap*. Bonaparte also sought to reassure the ex-slaves that France had no intention of re-establishing slavery. However, by 1802, the First Consul’s support for slavery elsewhere in the French colonies, particularly in Martinique, was a legitimate source of concern for many in Saint-Domingue. Bonaparte hoped that his proclamation would lull the rebelling ex-slaves with a false sense of security and would consequently give the upper hand to the French forces led by his brother-in-law General Leclerc, sent to arrest and deport the black generals who were governing much of Saint-Domingue and to re-establish the First Consul’s unilateral control over the colony.

My choice of these two texts is strategic because they reveal a clear evolution in the ways in which liberty and citizenship were negotiated at different stages of the Haitian Revolution. Despite their similar goals of reassuring ex-slaves of their liberty, the two proclamations also present key differences in defining this liberty, differences that reveal the evolving attitudes to authority and the shifts in power that occurred at different stages of the revolutionary period. Sonthonax presents himself as a benevolent paternal figure, seeking only to guide the ex-slaves through their rights and responsibilities as newly freed citizens of the French Republic. Bonaparte positions himself differently in his 1802 proclamation, directly challenging the authority of the black military generals who had by now governed different regions in Saint-Domingue for a number of years. Ultimately, Sonthonax's 1796 proclamation, Bonaparte's in 1802, and the myriad other assurances of liberty in between, show that the former slaves of Saint-Domingue remained suspicious of France's intentions throughout the revolution. Liberty, equality and citizenship as both philosophy and reality, were constantly in flux and participants in the revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic were continually re-defining and re-shaping Enlightenment discourse. Translators contributed to this discourse by rendering the original proclamations into Creole, but also by adding, subtracting and sometimes contradicting the French through translations that diverged, sometimes drastically, from the original works.

The first point of divergence between the French and Creole versions of the *Proclamation Le Cap* is the definition of liberty. Juxtaposing the French and Creole texts reveals a crucial distinction between being granted freedom and taking back freedom. Sonthonax begins by refuting the rumour that his colonial administration intended to overturn the 1793 emancipation proclamation. The Creole translation conveys the same refutation. However, a side-by-side comparison of the imagery and tone used in each document shows important differences in the definitions of this liberty. The French proclamation begins as follows: 'Informed that malevolent people propagate mendacious and atrocious speech daily among the public, particularly that *the French Republic has not irrevocably given back freedom to black men, our brothers, a freedom of which they should never have been deprived*' (emphasis mine).⁹ Sonthonax addresses slavery as a moral issue and asserts that the formerly enslaved population of Saint-Domingue should never have been deprived of their liberty. His use of the verb *rendre* (to give back) to describe the emancipation proclamation is telling of his view that liberty is given and taken away by a central French authority. In addition to invoking la 'République française' (the French Republic) in the extract quoted here, Sonthonax also refers to 'la loi du 16 Pluviose' (the law of 16 Pluviose), 'la constitution française' (the French constitution) and 'les principes du gouvernement français' (the principles of the French government) throughout the proclamation, as the institutions that grant and legitimize liberty in Saint-Domingue. The civil commissioner presents liberty as contingent on the will and desire of French imperial power. A different definition, however, emerges from the Creole translation, which opens with the following lines:

We have just been informed that there are wicked people, friends of the English, people who do not want to see you free, who seek to deceive you and make you believe that *the Republic no longer has the intention of supporting your freedom* (emphasis mine).¹⁰

The translator essentially conveys the same message categorically refuting the rumour that France no longer intends to uphold the liberty of Saint-Domingue's ex-slaves. However, the verb *rendre* (to give back) is translated here as *soutenir* (to support) and places France literally in a supporting role. Thus in this version, the notion of *la liberté* bestowed by France gives way to the phrase 'liberté vous-autes' (your liberty) where slaves are at the forefront of the struggle for their freedom, and French authority plays a secondary role. The contrasting tones of the French and Creole texts reinforce these opposing views of liberty. The tone of Sonthonax's proclamation is unmistakably formal and authoritarian, using such language as 'discours mensongers et atroces' (mendacious and atrocious speech). The translator, on the other hand, appears more invested in the oral genre and does not shy away from direct name-calling when identifying the suspected sources of the rumours: 'monde méchant, zamis des anglais' (wicked people, friends of the English). The conversational tone gives the Creole text more of an inclusive, informal feel and supplants Sonthonax's authoritarian voice.

These conflicting representations of France's role in the liberation of the former slaves of Saint-Domingue give rise to equally conflicting definitions of equality in the French and Creole texts. In the French proclamation, Sonthonax declares '*black, yellow, white*, all are citizens and have perfectly equal rights; talents, merit and degree of instruction alone distinguish individuals and elevate them to higher ranks' (emphasis in original).¹¹ Sonthonax's declaration of racial equality is quite radical and goes against the grain of much of eighteenth-century thought. As Susan Buck-Morss asserts in 'Hegel and Haiti', although abolitionist movements such as the French Amis des Noirs 'decried the excesses of slavery, a defense of liberty on the grounds of racial equality was rare indeed'.¹² Racial equality, however, does not translate into class equality for Sonthonax. Instead, power and authority remain in the hands of those who have access to education, talent and merit (it is unclear how this last one is determined). A different image of equality emerges in the Creole text, not through translation but rather through the translator's own additions to the original. The translator-turned-author rejects the definition of equality conveyed in the French text with the strong affirmation that 'black, white or red, all are equal, no one surpasses the other'.¹³ The Creole text contains no caveat or provision for social stratification along the lines of education or that elusive determinant, merit.

The striking difference in the definition of equality between the French and Creole texts should not be dismissed as simply poor translation. As Laurent Dubois cogently argues, the participants in the French and Haitian Revolutions constantly negotiated the meaning of the republican ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity even as these ideas moved back and forth between colony and metropole. For Dubois, 'the crucial point is not that ideas from Europe might have inspired insurgents in Saint-Domingue but that insurgents in Saint-Domingue made use of, and profoundly

transformed, the very meaning of republic.¹⁴ The *Proclamation Le Cap* and its Creole version attest to the fact that translation was one means by which this transformation of ideas occurred. Rather than reproducing an identical Creole-language copy of Sonthonax's French proclamation, the translator produces an 'original copy', which while conveying the bare bones of the initial text, also weaves in elements that reflected and potentially influenced the ideas and events of the revolutionary period in Saint-Domingue. The Creole translation of Sonthonax's proclamation disavows class hierarchy and attests to the fact that the Haitian Revolution was shaped not only by slaves' desire to take back their freedom, but also to overthrow the system of racial and class inequality.

If the *Proclamation Le Cap* and its Creole translation diverge on the definitions of liberty and equality, they also present fundamental differences on how to achieve these republican ideals. Beyond declaring absolute equality for all as seen above, the translator-turned-author reformulates Sonthonax's claim of preparing the *Proclamation Le Cap* in order to educate gullible ex-slaves who would be easily manipulated by the scheming English. The Creole version replaces this top-down approach with a call for island-wide literacy so that the former slaves can discern for themselves the difference between truth and rumour. Here too, juxtaposing the two texts is highly instructive:

Further informed that these men, skilled at putting on different masks, are taking advantage of some of our lesser-instructed brothers in order to masquerade as visionaries and prophets; that with the help of the veil of religion they keep them away from work; Convinced of the necessity of forestalling the cruel effects of such machinations, we declare the following:¹⁵

The paper recommends that we teach all black, red and white children to read, so that wicked people will no longer be able to deceive them; the paper recommends that we send some of your children to France to be raised among French whites in the principles of liberty and equality, and to teach them that all free people must work, they must not be lazy just because they are free¹⁶

In these closing lines to the preamble, Sonthonax presents himself as a teacher or a guide, one who will steer ex-slaves away from false teachings. By referring to his target audience as 'nos frères peu instruits' (our lesser-instructed brothers), the civil commissioner reinforces his earlier assertion that access to education allows some members of a society to rise to power and with this power comes the responsibility to guide the uninstructed. In his view, his role is not only to grant liberty but also to teach the ex-slaves how to be free. Sonthonax would later declare in a letter to the colonial minister in Paris in 1796 that a European was needed to command Saint-Domingue if the island's newly freed inhabitants were not to become 'a horde of savages ungoverned by laws'.¹⁷ For many in Saint-Domingue, both black and white, Sonthonax was the father of liberty. Among the black population he was nicknamed Papa Sonthonax.¹⁸ Likewise on learning of Sonthonax's imminent and definitive departure from the island in 1797, the municipal administration sent him a letter entreating him to stay, emphasizing his legacy on the island as:

He who first dared to speak of liberty when everyone else was still fighting for slavery, he who has just proven that free hands are better for fertilizing the soil of the tropics than enslaved hands, he who more than anyone else brought Saint-Domingue out of the chaos into which it had been thrown by the errors of the governors of this nascent liberty.¹⁹

For Sonthonax and his supporters, this nascent liberty needed the firm guidance that only the civil commissioner could provide through such instructions and laws as the *Proclamation Le Cap*.

In the Creole version of the proclamation, the translator initially appears to confirm Sonthonax's role as teacher and guide, only to later subvert it by calling on ex-slaves to have their children educated so that they can take decisions for themselves. The translator first echoes Sonthonax's project of guiding ex-slaves away from the so-called manipulative rumours, by reinforcing the idea that 'les principes de liberté et de l'égalité' (the principles of liberty and equality) – a strikingly French phrase in the middle of a Creole text – are the intellectual property of France alone and that knowledge of these principles can only be acquired through education in France. However, it is important to recognize that this call for education, particularly for an island-wide children's literacy project, would be a revolutionary concept at this time. A slave by definition was expected to follow orders and did not have the right to exercise any autonomous faculty of discernment. The new generation of French-educated people of colour, on the other hand, would no longer need figures of colonial power like Sonthonax to guide them away from rumours and towards the truth. This autonomy and self-determination are crucial first steps in restoring the agency and humanity of the slave. Where Sonthonax's proclamation inscribes itself in the Enlightenment philosophy by identifying religion as a regressive force, the Creole translation bypasses the discussion of religion altogether and goes directly to the heart of Enlightenment ideology: by emphasizing education as a tool to analyse the empirical evidence that would allow ex-slaves to *conné* (to know) the true meaning of liberty. The specific skills of reading and writing would empower the new generation of free people of colour and allow them to arrive at their own knowledge and truth.

Napoleon Bonaparte's 1802 proclamation *Aux Habitans de St. Domingue*, like Sonthonax's proclamation, sought to reassure Saint Domingue's ex-slaves of their continued liberty. Bonaparte entrusted his proclamation to his brother-in-law General Leclerc, whom he also tasked with restoring the First Consul's grip on power in the colony by arresting the black military leaders like Toussaint, Dessalines and Christophe who had risen to considerable power. Toussaint's 1801 constitution in particular was a slap in the face for Bonaparte, for while it did not declare independence from France, it made the colony of Saint-Domingue 'subject to its own particular laws' administered by governor-for-life Toussaint L'Ouverture.²⁰ The constitution placed the question of citizenship and autonomy squarely on the table. Consequently, unlike Sonthonax, who positioned himself as the founder of liberty and issued numerous laws and instructions aimed at guiding the ex-slaves through their responsibilities as new citizens, Bonaparte chose to assert his power in the new political configuration of Saint-Domingue

through this short, pithy statement that got directly down to the business of reaffirming his place as First Consul of France and the colonies.

In order to ensure that this crucial message reached a wide audience in the colony, Leclerc had the proclamation translated during the voyage to Saint-Domingue.²¹ Composed aboard a ship somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean by an anonymous translator and bearing only the signature of Bonaparte, the Creole version of the proclamation *Aux Habitans de Saint-Domingue* is the symbol *par excellence* of the flow of revolutionary ideas between metropole and colonies. If the Atlantic triangle represents the passage of people and goods between Africa, Europe and the Americas, translation provides a channel through which the debates on liberty, equality and citizenship travelled between France and the colonies in the age of revolution.²² Ironically, in rendering Bonaparte's French proclamation into Creole, the translator ultimately subverts the First Consul's project of asserting his unilateral power over Saint-Domingue through the use of rhetorical questions that make the process of defining liberty and citizenship more participatory and democratic.

A striking example of the subversive power of rhetorical questions occurs in the very first line of the text. Bonaparte begins his proclamation with the following firm, unequivocal assertion: 'Inhabitants of Saint-Domingue, regardless of your origin and color, you are all French, all free and all equal before God and the Republic.'²³ Like Sonthonax, Bonaparte professes that liberty and citizenship are inextricably intertwined. He opens with this assurance of French citizenship for all in order to later remind his readers/listeners to pay allegiance to France and to submit to his authority rather than that of the local leaders like Toussaint and Dessalines. In a letter to Toussaint that Leclerc transported along with the proclamation, Bonaparte articulates even more categorically that the population of Saint-Domingue could not enjoy liberty without citizenship; the latter defined as absolute submission to the authority of the First Consul.²⁴ He orders Toussaint:

Tell them that if liberty is their primary possession, they can only enjoy it in their capacity as French citizens, and that any act contrary to the interests of the homeland, to the obedience they owe the government and the Captain General [Leclerc] who is its delegate, will be a crime against national sovereignty which will eclipse the services they have previously rendered and will make Saint-Domingue the stage of an unfortunate war in which fathers and children will slit one another's throats.²⁵

Bonaparte's penchant for violent imagery as seen in the closing lines of this paragraph would prove to be particularly problematic in his proclamation *Aux Habitans de Saint-Domingue*. His particular brand of paternalism – different from Sonthonax's because it was usually accompanied by violent threats – meant that this letter was not well received by Toussaint. Bonaparte's letter provides further proof that his eagerness to remind the ex-slaves that they were now French citizens was ultimately a way to assert his power in the colony. The primary duty of citizens, according to Bonaparte, was to obey the First Consul's laws and decrees and not those of local military leaders. Indeed in the letter, Bonaparte questions the legitimacy of Toussaint's constitution. By affirming, therefore, the citizenship rights and duties of all inhabitants of

Saint-Domingue in his proclamation, Bonaparte attempts to gain the upper hand in the on-going contest for power and control over Saint-Domingue's military and labour forces.

The Creole translation, however, omits Bonaparte's unequivocal declaration of French citizenship in its opening lines and emphasizes instead liberty and equality: 'Whoever you are, whatever color you may be, whatever your father's origins, we do not look at that: we only know that you are all free, all equal, before God and in the eyes of the Republic.'²⁶ The translator displaces the question of citizenship to the end of the first paragraph and transforms it into a question: 'Come now you of Saint-Domingue, Are you not French too?'²⁷ Given the oral delivery of this text, we can only imagine here that the person who reads this declaration aloud to his/her compatriots pauses for the question to take effect, eliciting some response from the audience. By transforming Bonaparte's original assertion into a rhetorical question, the translator invites the audience to participate in the political debate raging in both France and Saint-Domingue, on French citizenship and rights. This subtle shift is particularly powerful in the context of the Haitian Revolution given that power over the newly emancipated population was hotly contested at this time. If Bonaparte's aim was to demand unquestioned obedience from his subjects in Saint-Domingue, then asking the ex-slaves to decide for themselves whether or not they were French citizens is the ultimate subversion of Bonaparte's imperial power in the text.

In addition to reformulating the definition of citizenship, the Creole writer also transforms the definition of liberty in a manner similar to Sonthonax's translator and creates some tension between liberty granted and liberty gained. In the French version, Bonaparte exhorts his readers/listeners: 'If you are told; *These forces are here to deprive you of your liberty*; Respond; *The Republic will not allow it to be taken away from you.*'²⁸ The text with italics in the original mimics a dialogue as Bonaparte ventriloquizes this imagined exchange over contested freedom and attempts to reaffirm the liberty of the former slaves by prescribing their words and thoughts through his use of the imperative *Répondez* (respond). The translation departs from this structure and rather than dictate to its audience the best response to the rumours in question, it invites them to reflect on and analyse empirical evidence even if it is to arrive at the same conclusion:

... but do not believe those who will tell you that whites want to enslave you again: they are lying rather than believe them, respond and remember that it is the Republic that gives liberty and that knows how to prevent anyone from taking it away again.²⁹

The translator here addresses an audience of equals capable of drawing on past experience (the verb *songer* means to remember) and responding for themselves based on their analysis of France's track record on liberty. This shift again subverts Bonaparte's prescriptive, authoritarian voice and rather engages with a politically conscious audience of participants active in the debates of the day.

Ultimately, the translator divests Bonaparte of his authority by refusing to convey the First Consul's incendiary descriptions of his ability to punish those who go against his

decree. In the original text, disobedient subjects of the French empire in Saint-Dominique would feel the full wrath of the Republic: 'The anger of the Republic will devour him as the fire devours your dried cane.'³⁰ Bonaparte employs the metaphor of pre-harvest burning, a practice which is used to remove dead leaves and other dry material from the cane field to facilitate harvest, in order to convey the scorching retribution of the Republic. The image of burning cane fields is a particularly explosive one in the context of anti-slavery rebellion in the Caribbean because slaves often began revolts by burning sugar cane fields. Throughout the revolution, local commanding generals employed a combination of guerrilla warfare and scorched earth campaign. Bonaparte's metaphor is an all too vivid reminder of burning cane as an act of resistance and rebellion against slavery. The translator omits Bonaparte's creative imagery and simply states that the French government would punish those who do not obey the decree. It is possible that the Creole-speaking translator, closer to the reality and tensions of Saint-Dominique at this time, was aware that Bonaparte's appropriation of the revolutionary image of burning cane could potentially backfire and lead to violent reprisals against Leclerc and his forces. The suggestion that the revolutionary blaze would now turn on the former slaves would likely have worsened the already high tension over emancipation that the proclamation sought to diffuse. The translator disavows Bonaparte's authoritarianism and replaces it with a call for democratic participation as seen above in the invitation to listeners to 'remember and respond'.

In their proclamations, both Sonthonax and Bonaparte affirmed the liberty and citizenship rights of the ex-slaves. The translators went a step further by employing rhetorical strategies that actually put these revolutionary ideals into practice, calling on their audiences to participate in defining their rights and the limits of French power. As Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux has shown in her extensive collection of Creole-language proclamations, the practice of translating important documents from French to Creole during the Haitian Revolution was widespread and has left behind a substantial corpus that bears witness to the participation of Creole-speaking ex-slaves, not only in the violent battles for freedom, but also in the debates and conversations that sought to articulate and imagine what that freedom would look like even as it was unfolding. Of particular interest for future analyses is the proclamation issued by civil commissioners Sonthonax and Polverel on 2 July 1793 barely two weeks after their June 21 emancipation proclamation.³¹ The French and Creole versions of this proclamation serve as rich primary sources because they describe, in very different terms, the attack on Le Cap by General Galbaud. They also reveal the constant negotiation of freedom and rights between ex-slaves and the colonial administration, a struggle that would continue throughout the course of the Haitian Revolution, not only on the battlefields of Saint-Domingue, but also in translation.

Notes

- [1] C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).
- [2] Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990).

- [3] See Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, 'Proclamation Le Cap'. In Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux, *Textes anciens en créole français de la Caraïbe: Histoire et analyse* (Paris: Éditions Publibook, 2008), 211–15 and Napoléon Bonaparte, 'Aux Habitans de Saint-Domingue'. In Hazaël-Massieux, *Textes anciens en créole français de la Caraïbe* 217–18. Scholars of Caribbean Creole languages and linguistics often point to the poem *Lisette quitté la plaine* as the earliest Creole text dating circa 1757.

[4]

Lors de la première abolition, des textes en créole ont été placardés dans les différents lieux pour l'information des esclaves. On n'en connaît que le signataire officiel: par exemple 'Bonaparte premier Consul' ou le General Leclerc [...]. Mais il est évident que le rédacteur est autre, quelqu'un qui parlait certainement le créole local, au moins suffisamment pour entreprendre cette rédaction.

Hazaël-Massieux, *Textes anciens en créole français de la Caraïbe*, 185. All English translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

- [5] Deborah Jenson and Colin Dayan briefly discuss the roles of Toussaint's and Dessalines's white secretaries. Like the translators, these secretaries remained largely anonymous throughout the eighteenth century. It is, however, likely that both translators and secretaries were drawn from the same pool of whites outside the planter class who spoke and wrote some Creole. See Deborah Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative: Politics, Sex, and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011) and Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- [6] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995).
- [7] Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 4–5.
- [8] Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative*, 26.
- [9] 'Informée que des malveillans répandent journellement dans le public des discours mensongers et atroces, notamment, que la République française n'a pas rendu irrévocablement la liberté aux hommes noirs, nos frères, qui n'auraient jamais dû en être privés'. The French versions of the proclamations analysed here often feature eighteenth century French orthography. Readers will notice slight differences as compared to contemporary standard orthography, e.g. 'malveillans' today written as 'malveillants'.
- [10] 'Yo sorti verti nous que gagné monde méchant, zamis des anglais, monde qui pas voulu voir vous autes libre, qui cherché trompé vous, et faire craire que la République pas gagné encore l'intention de soutenir liberté vous-autes'.
- [11] 'noirs, jaunes, blancs, sont également citoyens et parfaitement égaux en droits; que les talens, le mérite et le degré d'instruction peuvent seuls distinguer les individus et les porter de préférence aux places'.
- [12] Susan Buck-Morss, 'Hegel and Haiti', *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 828.
- [13] 'Tout monde noir, blanc ou rouge, tout égal, que n'a point yon qui passé l'aute.'
- [14] Laurent Dubois, 'An Enslaved Enlightenment: Rethinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic', *Social History* 31, no. 1 (2006): 12.
- [15] Informée en outre que ces hommes habiles à saisir tous les masques, abusent de la crédulité de quelques-uns de nos frères peu instruits, pour jouer auprès d'eux les inspirés et les prophètes ; qu'à l'aide d'un voile religieux, ils les éloignent du travail; Convaincue de la nécessité de prévenir les cruels effets de pareilles machinations, arrête ce qui suit:

[16]

Papier la recommandé nous de faire apprendre à lire à tout les petits monde noir, rouge et blanc, afin que monde malouc pas capable trompé yo encore; papier la recommandé nous de voyer quelques petits vous en France pour y élevé yo parmi tout blanc France dans les principes de liberté et de l'égalité, et pour faire yo conné que tout monde libre doit travail, et que yo pas doit paresseux à cause yo libre.

[17] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), http://www.amazon.com/Avengers-New-World-Revolution-ebook/dp/B002OSXRWY/ref=sr_1_1_bnp_1_kin?ie=UTF8&qid=1373100169&sr=8-1&keywords=avengers+of+the+new+world location 2732.

[18] In *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James writes repeatedly of Sonthonax's 'love for the blacks' but also describes him as 'dictatorial and self-willed', 172–5.

[19]

Celui qui le premier ose parler de liberté lors qu'on combattait encore pour l'esclavage, celui qui vient de donner des preuves que des mains libres sont plus propres à fertilizer le sol des tropiques que des mains esclaves, celui qui plus que tout autre à tiré St. Domingue du cahos où l'avaient jettés les erreurs et les gouverneurs de la liberté naissante.

Administration Municipale, *Au Citoyen Sonthonax*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, NAF 6846.

[20] Louis Joseph Janvier, *Les Constitutions d'Haïti 1801-1885, Tome I* (Paris: C. Marpon et E. Flammarion, 1886).

[21] Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 3450.

[22] In addition to physical movement of texts, the idea of temporal and linguistic movement is also pertinent here because there are at least two available translations of Bonaparte's proclamation. The original or early translation dates back to 1802 and is written in the relatively Gallicized Creole of that period. The second translation is undated and appears in the 2010 publication *Solèy ho*, a two-volume collection of original Creole texts as well as Creole translations of literary works and political documents, presented as a pedagogical language manual for high school students in Guadeloupe and Martinique. Both translations remain anonymous, retaining only the signatures of Bonaparte, Secretary of State Hugues Maret and Captain General Leclerc. Although a footnote to the 2010 translation states that the orthography has been modified to fit contemporary standard forms, it remains a useful text that allows us to trace the linguistic evolution of Haitian Creole and the shifting articulations of liberty, equality and fraternity that accompany this evolution. See Mirna Bolus et al., *Solèy ho: tèks é dokiman pou krèyòl an lékòl-la dépi koumwayen jis tèwminal* (Gwadeloup: Édison Nestor, 2010), 70.

[23] 'Habitans de Saint-Domingue, Quelles que soient votre origine et votre couleur vous êtes tous français vous êtes tous libre, et tous égaux, devant Dieu et devant la République.'

[24] Napoléon Bonaparte, 'Au Citoyen Toussaint-Louverture', in *Recueil de Décrets, Ordonnances, Traités de Paix, Manifestes, Proclamations, Discours de Napoléon Bonaparte, et des Membres du Gouvernement Français, Depuis le 18 Brumaire, an 8, (novembre, 1799) Jusqu'à [la Dissolution du Dit Gouvernement]*, ed. Lewis Goldsmith, (London: R. Juigné, 1813), 259.

[25] Dites-leur que si la liberté est pour eux le premier des biens, ils ne peuvent en jouir qu'avec le titre de citoyens Français, et que tout acte contraire aux intérêts de la patrie, à l'obéissance qu'ils doivent au gouvernement, et au capitaine-général, qui est le délégué, serait un crime contre la souveraineté nationale, qui éclipserait leurs services, et rendrait Saint Domingue le théâtre d'une guerre malheureuse, où des pères et des enfans s'entrégorgeraient.

[26] 'Qui ça vous tout yé, qui couleur vous yé, qui côté papa zote vini, nous pas gardé ça: nous savé tan seleman que zote tout libre, que zote tout égal, douvant bon Dieu et dans zyé la République.'

[27] 'Vini don zote de Saint-Domingue: es que vous pas Français itou?'

[28] 'Si on vous dit; *Ces forces sont destinées à vous ravir votre liberté*; Répondez, *La République ne souffrira pas qu'elle vous soit enlevée.*'

[29]

... mais pas crere ci la yo qui va dit zote, que blanc velé fere vous esclave encore:
ya manti plitot que crere yo, repond, et songé bien que cé la République qui baye
liberté, et qui va ben savé empêché personne de pren li encore.

[30] 'La colère de la République le dévorera comme le feu dévore vos cannes déséchées.'

[31] Étienne Polverel and Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, *Proclamation: Nous, Étienne Polverel & Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, Commissaires Civils, que nation Française voyé dans pays-ci, pour mettre l'ordre et la tranquillité tout par-tout* (Cap-Français, 1793).