Pawòl gen zèl: Language Legitimation in Haiti’s Second Century

by

Matthew James Robertshaw

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“Le créole, est-il une langue?” mused Haitian poet and public intellectual Georges Sylvain in 1901. As the only language spoken by all Haitians, Sylvain believed that Haitian Creole should be recognized as the true language of Haiti. He called for its widespread use in Haitian literature and education. He and his contemporaries took the first steps toward establishing an authentic national literature, but it was another half century before Haitian authors began to use Creole as a versatile and self-sufficient literary language. The first innovative works of theatre and poetry in Creole did not appear until 1953, and the first Creole novel was not published until 1975. The Bernard Reform, which mandated the use of Creole in education, did not occur until 1979, and Creole was not named an official language, on par with French, until 1987. When one considers the long history of eloquent support for the popular language, it is surprising that Creole legitimation has advanced so fitfully. The country's political elites are often accused of using French to maintain their hold on power, but the Creole legitimation project is not simply a tug-of-war between the elites and the masses. This thesis examines the strategies that Haitians have used to promote the wider acceptance of Creole, and the complex factors that hindered their efforts.
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Introduction

“The français est la langue officielle. Son emploi est obligatoire en matière administrative et judiciaire.”

Haitian Constitution of 1918, Article 23

“The only language that unites all Haitians is Creole. Creole and French are the official languages of the Republic of Haiti.”

Haitian Constitution of 1987, Article 5

The Haitian Constitution has never extended far beyond the realm of wishful thinking. Consistently violated, scrapped and redrafted in the wake of political upheavals, it remains an evasive set of ideals for the functioning of the State. Freedom of speech, for instance, has officially been protected since Jean-Jacques Dessalines’s Constitution of 1805, but censorship and the repression of political opponents has more often been the norm. Free and compulsory primary education has been constitutionally mandated since 1879, but enrolment rates did not exceed 50 percent until the 1990s, and primary completion rates remain staggeringly low. Regardless of their practical application, the sheer number of constitutions (roughly one per decade from 1804 to 1987) provides a helpful gauge for understanding the foremost political concerns at any given point in the nation’s history. In view of the two articles cited above, one may well ask what forces prompted the Haitian government to shift from proclaiming French as

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1 Translation: The only language that unites all Haitians is Creole. Creole and French are the official languages of the Republic of Haiti.
the only official language in 1918 to an emphasis on Haitian Creole\(^2\) as the “only language that unites all Haitians” seventy years later. The process was neither simple nor straightforward.

Language politics are as old as civilization. Benedict Anderson demonstrated how the delineation of imagined political communities on the basis of language is one of the fundamental organizing principles of the modern world.\(^3\) But the worldwide process of vernacular legitimation is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon. Whether it is Bengali, Welsh, Hebrew, Kichwa in Ecuador, Oromo in Kenya, or French in Quebec, the battle for linguistic rights is a global theme. But it is a theme with countless variations. The linguistic hierarchies in any given nation connect to everything from art to business, from education to labour, from politics to religion. Attempts to restructure those hierarchies, therefore, are deeply affected by the complexities of national institutions and identity. In some ways, the story of Haitian Creole legitimation is analogous to the process in other post-colonial nations. But Haiti’s exceptional origins and uncommon linguistic configuration make its case particular.

The Haitian Republic has been described as ‘bilingual’ or as ‘diglossic’: a society wherein a High language (i.e. French) is employed in official contexts and in writing, while a Low language (i.e. Creole) is used in informal settings.\(^4\) In recent years, however, these models

\(^2\) Henceforth ‘Creole.’ There is much debate over what the language should be called. When I was studying Creole at the University of Massachusetts I asked my teachers and other Haitian academics what they thought about the issue. Because it connotes a makeshift language, Patrick Sylvain is adamantly opposed to the use of the term Creole, and calls the language Haitian. As a linguist, Michel Degraff believes that the language should be called what the people call it. Like the word *queer*, he said, Creole can be reappropriated by those who use it, and shed of its negative connotations. Marc Prou summed up his stance with a Haitian proverb: “Zafè kabrit pa zafè mouton,” (The goat’s business is not the sheep’s business). In other words, its up to the Haitian people to decide. Haitian linguist Yves Dejean has argued persuasively for the use of ‘Creole’ plain and simple, and I will follow his example.


of Haiti’s linguistic reality have been challenged. Linguists of Creole like Albert Valdman and Yves Dejean have argued that referring to a nation as diglossic or bilingual implies that a significant portion of the population is able to choose between two languages in a given setting, and in Haiti this is simply not the case.\(^5\) Valdman notes that, in striking contrast to much of the post-colonial world, the language situation in Haiti “stands out by its extreme simplicity […] it is in essence a monolingual country.”\(^6\) Virtually every Haitian speaks Creole as his or her mother tongue. Only a tiny fraction of the population also speaks French well. Along with place of residence (urban vs. rural) and skin colour (light-skinned vs. black) and religion (Christianity vs. Vodou), ability to speak French is one of the primary ways Haitians conceive of the organization of their society.

Despite the overwhelming majority of monolingual Creole speakers (estimated at 85-95 percent throughout the Republic’s history), there has always been an institutionalized bias toward French.\(^7\) Shortly after winning their independence from France in 1804 the founding fathers chose to maintain French as the language of government, the courts, education and other formal settings. Many observers have drawn a connection between this French preference and a longstanding tendency of the Haitian political elite to operate largely in its own interest.\(^8\) French


\(^6\) Valdman, 77.


\(^8\) This self-interest on the part of Haitian state has been described thoroughly in works like Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *State Against Nation*; and Robert Fatton Jr.’s *The Roots of Haitian Despotism* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007).
language exclusivity in education, for example, has been a powerful tool for the preservation of political and economic power in the hands of the privileged few. While upper-class urban schoolchildren are taught French at well-run private schools and at home, the monolingual masses are rarely able to succeed in underfunded schools where lessons are given in an alien tongue. The bulk of the population is thus effectively cut off from any chance at advancing in society, and from any participation in the political process.9

Haiti has never achieved a stable and fully representative democracy, but there have been long strides toward a wider respect for the interests of the masses, with acceptance of the popular tongue as a key tenet. Some have noted that in the absence of a vital political culture, Haiti’s robust literary tradition has often stepped in to fill the void.10 Despite a history of tragically low literacy rates, Haiti boasts an impressive literary corpus. Until the middle of the twentieth century, Haiti published more books per capita than any other Latin American nation.11 Haitian writers of fiction were uniquely positioned to tackle the Creole question for three reasons. First, they lived in the world of words. They had mastered French, but understood the artistic and political value of Creole. Second, the Haitian literary tradition is grounded in a culture that sees

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9 The inefficacy of the Haitian education system has received much academic attention in recent years. See, for example, Emmanuel W. Vedrine, Yon koudéy sou pwoblém lekòl Ayiti (Cambridge, MA: Soup to Nuts, 1994); Yves Dejean, Yon lekòl tèt anba nan yon peyi tèt anba (Port-au-Prince: FOKAL, 2006); Arthur K. Spears and Carole M. Berotte Joseph, The Haitian Creole Language: History, Structure, Use and Education (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).


little value in l'art pour l'art. The suffering of their countrymen is too palpable. Haitian intellectuals were often educated in France, and the French archetype of the socially-engaged public intellectual was easily adapted to the Haitian context. And finally, given the small size of the country’s literate minority, it was not unusual for Haiti’s great wordsmiths to also hold political posts. It is no surprise, therefore, that Haitian writers have increasingly used their platform to speak on behalf of the impoverished masses, and have spearheaded the push to validate the popular language.

Since the start of the twentieth century, countless novelists, poets and playwrights have articulated compelling arguments for the normalization of Creole. In 1901, poet, critic and public intellectual Georges Sylvain initiated the debate. In the preface of Cric? Crac!, his famous collection of Creole fables, Sylvain declared that Haitian Creole was a fully sophisticated language. As the only language spoken by all Haitians, he said, it should be recognized as the true language of Haiti. He called for its widespread use in Haitian literature and education. Some of his contemporaries took the first steps toward establishing an authentic national literature, but it was another half century before Haitian authors began to use Creole as a versatile and self-sufficient literary language. The first innovative works of theatre and poetry in Creole did not

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12 As Lyonel Trouillot explained: “Je pense que c’est un luxe que certaines sociétés peuvent se permettre —parce que tout le monde y mange quand même un peu à sa faim, même s’il y a énormément d’inégalité sociale—c’est un luxe que certaines sociétés peuvent se permettre que d’un vouloir absolument séparer la littérature de l’éthique.” Likewise, in her study of Vodou in Haitian culture, Maya Deren noted that “The man of such a culture must be, necessarily, a pragmatist. His immediate needs are too persistent, too pressing, and too critical, to permit the luxury of idealism […]. He has neither time, energy, nor means for inconsequential activity.” Maya Deren, Divine Horsemen: Voodoo Gods of Haiti (New York: Dell Publishing Co, 1972), 73.

13 Frédéric Marcelin, for example, was the Minister of Finance. Fernand Hibbert served as ambassador to Cuba, and his son-in-law, the celebrated Jacques Roumain, founded the Haitian Communist Party before being send to Mexico as chargé d’affaires. Félix Morisseau-Leroy, an ardent proponent of Creole-language education, held many impressive posts including General Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Directory of the Ministry of Public Information.
appear until 1953, and the first Creole novel was not published until 1975. The Bernard Reform, which mandated the use of Creole in education, did not occur until 1979, and Creole was not named an official language, on par with French, until 1987. When one considers the long history of eloquent support for the popular language, it is surprising that Creole legitimation has advanced so fitfully.

The current study examines the various strategies that Haiti’s progressive men and women of letters used to promote the wider acceptance of Creole, and the different forces that effectively foiled their efforts time and time again. In contrast to many analyses, this paper describes how resistance to change was not simply due to the machinations of the nation’s conservative elite. It is often taken for granted that Haiti’s self-serving politicians are solely to blame for the slow road to official Creole. A typical summary of this position is as follows:

Le statut du créole c’est le statut d’une langue interdite à l’école, refoulée et censurée à l’Église, dans l’administration, dans tous les lieux où s’exerce l’autorité, le prestige, le pouvoir, et où l’ont fait passer la violence symbolique du français comme une chose naturelle. Ce refoulement du créole correspond à une volonté du pouvoir d’anéantir toutes les valeurs propres des dominés, d’induire chez eux un complexe d’infériorité vis-à-vis d’eux-mêmes et de bloquer les possibilités subversives du créole.14

This, however, is only part of the story. This paper takes the view that, in addition to the obstructionism of insular elites, subtle forces embedded in Haitian culture have consistently thwarted change at all levels of society. However eloquent their arguments might have been, Haitian authors were powerless to bring lasting change to policies and practices until a profound shift took place in the heart of Haitian cultural identity.

After a brief overview of language policies in colonial Saint-Domingue and in Haiti’s first century, Chapter 1 examines how Sylvain and his contemporaries opened the Creole debate and founded a national literature in the process. Chapter 2 focuses on the U.S. Occupation of 1915 to 1934, and examines the two conflicting reactions to the American presence: a reaffirmation of the nation’s French heritage on the one hand, and the Indigéniste movement on the other. Each of these ideologies had a profound impact on views of language. Chapter 3 looks at a period that I refer to as the ‘Haitian Sixties’ from 1934 to 1957. This was a time of serious national introspection and a particularly fruitful stage for Haitian letters and for the story of Creole legitimation. Finally, Chapter 4 follows the contest for Creole legitimation into the Duvalier period. The Duvaliers, who had an unquestionably devastating effect on Haitian society, have a more complicated legacy with regard to language. This chapter looks at Creole as resistance, Duvalier’s supposed populism and the shift of power away from the traditional elite to the emergent black middle class, the cultivation of the Haitian identity in the Diaspora, and the Bernard Reform of 1979 to show that Haiti’s infamous kleptocrats unintentionally laid the groundwork for a wider acceptance of Creole. The conclusion briefly comments on developments after 1986, including the granting of official status to Creole one year later, as well as the as yet incomplete struggle to demarginalize the language.

**Historiography**

Any literature review concerning Haitian history must begin with *Silencing the Past*. In this seminal work Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains why the outside world took little interest in Haiti until the middle of the twentieth century. Trouillot explains that the
Haitian Revolution—through which a population of slaves rebelled against their masters and founded an independent republic—was so ‘unthinkable’ that subsequent generations of historians outside of Haiti ignored the new republic.\(^{15}\) Naturally, Haitian intellectuals wrote laudatory accounts of the Revolution, and a few American and European observers wrote histories and social studies which were more or less derogatory.\(^{16}\) But it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that Haiti began garner concentrated academic interest. Influential Caribbean writers like C.L.R. James, Alejo Carpentier, Derek Walcott and Aimé Césaire drew from the Haitian Revolution in their works of history and fiction, and began to popularize a view of the Revolution as an event of world historical significance.\(^{17}\) By 1973, American historian Thomas O. Ott had written a history of the Revolution.\(^{18}\) In the past few decades, as race and the postcolonial perspective emerged as categories in mainstream history, historians moved beyond the Revolution and took to producing more complete and complex histories of Haiti.

Yet in these histories one theme has dominated. Given the striking poverty that continues to define the nation to the outside world, the vast majority of accounts of Haiti’s history have sought to understand the Republic’s inability to develop. To do this, many historians have sketched a broad history of Haiti’s two centuries, focusing on political and economic factors and international relations. The research question has too often been ‘what went wrong?’ as


researchers have looked at Haiti’s history through the lens of present conditions and attempted to lay the blame for underdevelopment either on exterior powers who alternately isolated and exploited the nation, on Haitians themselves, or on a combination of the two.\(^{19}\) Instead of ‘what went wrong?’ this project begins with the question ‘what went well?’, and thus starts by looking at the voices attempting to strengthen democracy in Haiti through linguistic rights. Inevitably however, this leads to another question that must be asked: ‘why did it take so long?’. This second question begins to sound an awful lot like, ‘what went wrong?’ or ‘who is to blame?’. In contrast to a prevailing view of the country’s non-development, which holds that Haiti’s elites have consciously kept the Haitian masses in poverty in order to enrich themselves, this study takes a more nuanced view, showing how diverse aspects of Haiti’s cultural identity have often served to delay or derail the positive changes that might otherwise have occurred.

As noted, most histories of Haiti take a broad view of the country’s political and economic development in their attempts to understand present conditions. Conversely, few academics have zeroed in on Haiti’s socio-cultural, artistic, or intellectual spheres; fewer still have attempted to track the historical evolution of these sectors. To be sure, thematic histories of Haiti are growing in number. Particularly since 1979, when British scholar David Nicholls published his influential work on race relations in Haiti, several interesting and important studies have been produced.\(^{20}\) The evolution of Haitian education and radical politics have been treated


by Léon D. Pamphile and Matthew J. Smith respectively. But there are countless aspects of Haitian society that historians have yet to investigate.

Haiti’s linguistic situation, while it has received much academic attention in recent years, has never been studied as a dynamic historical process. Creole languages in general, and Haitian Creole in particular, have been among the favourite topics of linguists and anthropologists since the 1970s, but other academic perspectives are still somewhat lacking. As “the first book that treats Haitian Creole in its linguistic, cultural, historical, and educational context,” Arthur K. Spears and Carole M. Berotte Joseph’s impressive edited volume *The Haitian Creole Language* (2010) reveals the limits of scholarly dealings with Haiti’s language. Of the fifteen contributors seven are linguists, six are education specialists and two are doctors of languages and literatures. Two chapters deal specifically with historical context, but neither is written by a historian. Emblematic of the dearth of historical studies on Creole generally, the chapter entitled “The Languages of Haitians and the History of Creole” (by linguist Flore Zéphir) summarizes a number of theories of Creole genesis, and then jumps from the plantations of Saint-Domingue straight to the Bernard Reform of 1979. This ‘history of Creole’ ignores two centuries. The linguistic battles of the early to mid-twentieth century are overlooked entirely. This project seeks to fill the gap by examining the bitter and often fruitless debates around the status of Creole, and how this contest evolved over the course of Haiti’s second century.

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The Haitian Creole Language reveals one other tendency of academic approaches to the study of Creole. The book’s stated aim is to prove “that the Haitian Creole language is a full-fledged language, with its own grammar, fully worthy of our respect,” and demonstrate that it is “indispensable for the education of students who speak it.” In other words, the contributors are making the same arguments that Georges Sylvain made in 1901. Scholarly approaches to Creole are quite often imbued with this sort of legitimizing and socially-oriented goals. This type of work is unquestionably important. There is much need for productive and critical voices, given the troubling deficiencies that continue to characterize Haitian politics and education. But the study of Creole, and of Haiti more generally, will never reach academic maturity until we move beyond simply trying to solve problems and toward empirical and dispassionate research. The current study, therefore, takes the principle of Creole as a ‘full-fledged language’ for granted, and seeks to achieve a balanced analysis of its changing role in Haitian society.

24 Spears and Joseph, Haitian Creole Language, xi.
Chapter 1: L’Ouverture, 1901-1915
Sylvain, the École Nationale, and the groundwork for a Creole debate

“J’inclinerais volontiers à penser que le jour où, par l’acquis d’un certain nombre d’œuvres fortes, le créole aura droit de cité dans nos écoles primaires, rurales et urbaines, le problème de l’instruction populaire à Haïti sera bien près d’être résolu.”

Georges Sylvain, 1901

When the people of Haiti celebrated the centennial of their independence on 1 January 1904 they did so with mixed emotions. One the one hand, they could commemorate the anniversary of their victory over Napoleon I and one of the greatest militaries ever assembled. The heroes of the Revolution had placed an irreparable crack in the foundation of the abhorrent international slave system, and established the first republic in which all citizens, regardless of race, were equal under the law. Slavery had since been abolished across the Americas, and Haitians felt they had played a critical role in this world historical transformation. At the start of the twentieth century, as the European powers were redoubling their efforts to subdue Africa, Haitians were increasingly conscious of their role as a test case in human equality. The Republic had patiently won the recognition of France, the Vatican and the United States—though belatedly and with conditions. They had welcomed the likes of Simón Bolívar, Frederick Douglass and José Martí, and had even produced a few homegrown intellectuals who, like Anténor Firmin, had won respect in the wider world. In the light of these accomplishments, some rightly believed that Haiti had much to show for their one hundred years of liberty.
Others believed with equal justification that the country was in worse shape than it had been at independence. A seemingly endless series of insurrections and civil wars had repeatedly derailed development and rendered productive political discourse impossible. Agricultural degradation and excessive taxation had periodically brought segments of the peasantry to the brink of starvation. International recognition had opened up active trade networks, but exchanges almost entirely favoured Haiti’s trade partners. When policymakers in Port-au-Prince tried to address this imbalance, foreign merchants could count on their governments to send gunboats to protect their interests. Government expenditures overwhelmingly went to pay for the increasingly irrelevant military, and to service a crippling debt to France. There was little left over for things like education and health services. Some must have greeted the country’s centennial with cynicism—if not despair.

Amid these challenges, the first decade of the twentieth century also showed signs of change. The centennial coincided with (and perhaps helped to initiate) a brief period of openness, a rarity under Haiti’s ultra-partisan and autocratic political landscape. This moment of tranquility enabled a hitherto impossible level of public discourse, and a number of Haitian customs and institutions came under fire. The decade, not coincidentally, also corresponds with something of a golden age in Haitian literature. Numerous classics were produced in this period, many of which are still studied and enjoyed today. More importantly, it was in this period that literature and social activism were indelibly fused in Haiti. For the first time writers began to depict their milieu warts and all. Over the course of the century that followed, poets, novelists and playwrights were among the most potent critics of the various dictatorial regimes that have plagued the nation, and continue to be at the forefront of the ongoing struggle for Haitian
democracy. The Creole question is central to the democratization of Haitian society. Accordingly, as Haitian wordsmiths took on an increasingly socially-conscious bent, they found themselves in an ideal position to put the nation’s French-language hegemony into question.

This chapter examines the argument for a reappraisal of the Creole language as developed by Haitian writers and intellectuals between 1901 and 1915, and how this project was intertwined with the founding of a national literature. After an overview of the language situation in colonial Saint-Domingue and in Haiti’s first century, we will look at several influential authors who used their works and their platforms to critique the linguistic status quo. Ultimately, due to a combination of bourgeois insularity and pervasive cultural mores, calls for change remained unheeded by the time the nineteen-year U.S. Occupation began in July 1915.

Background: Haitian language to 1900

There are several competing theories on the origins of Haitian Creole. Speculation on the subject goes back at least to 1782, when French naturalist Justin Girod-Chantrans wrote that the “langage créole vient peut-être de la stupidité que les premiers colons supposaient aux nègres. Ainsi, lorsqu’ils voulaient leur faire entendre d’aller quelque part, ils leur disaient, moi vouloir que toi aller là.” Another eighteenth-century observer, French lawyer and historian Médéric Louis Moreau de Saint-Méry, described Creole as “un français corrompu, auquel on a mêlé plusieurs mots espagnols francisés, et où les termes marins ont aussi trouvé leur place.” Since

1 Justin Girod-Chantrans, Voyage d’un Suisse dans différents colonies d’Amérique pendant la dernière guerre; avec une table d’observations métrologiques faites à Saint-Domingue (Neuchâtel: Société Typographique, 1785), 190-191. Italics in original.
2 Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’île de Saint-Domingue, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1789), 64
then, more sophisticated theories have been put forward, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe and compare them here.\textsuperscript{3} It is worth noting, however, that France’s other slave colonies—from the Lesser Antilles and Louisiana all the way to Mauritius—produced creoles that are markedly similar to one another and to the Haitian language. This, some have suggested, shows that Creole may be derived from a transnational trade pidgin.\textsuperscript{4} For our purposes, however, suffice it to say that in Saint-Domingue, in the midst of the day-to-day interchange of French colonists, seafarers and African slaves (each group being linguistically heterogeneous), Creole emerged as the colony’s lingua franca.

Like the language itself, the Creole-French dichotomy also has its roots in colonial Saint-Domingue. The obstinate view of Creole as a half-formed language, a simplistic pidgin incapable of complex expression, was current in the colony. Girod-Chantrans called it “nothing but childish French,” “feeble, dull and muddled” and “lacking grace and energy.”\textsuperscript{5} The opinion, however, was not universal. Moreau de Saint-Méry, who spent much more time in the colony than Girod-Chantans, noted that in some ways it was more expressive than French. He wrote that there are “mille images voluptueuses que l’on ne réussirait pas à peindre avec le français, et que le créole exprime ou rend avec une grace infinie.”\textsuperscript{6} Mixed opinions of Europeans notwithstanding, it was not only the enslaved population who spoke Creole. Girod-Chantrans noted, with some irritation,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} Girod-Chantrans, \textit{Voyage d’un Suisse}, 189, 191. Own translation.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Moreau de Saint-Méry, \textit{Description}, 65.
\end{itemize}
that the colony’s white residents, whether by habit or by preference, spoke Creole more often than French. Yet French-language competence was a clear marker of social status. Slaves spoke Creole (and often one or multiple African languages), while the colonists, educated free people of colour, and the rare educated slave could choose between Creole and French. Literacy and French competence were more or less coterminous. There was no such thing as Creole literacy; it was patently an oral language. When chroniclers like Girod-Chantrans and Moreau de Saint-Méry wanted to render Creole speech into writing, they modified French spellings rather than using a more neutral phonetic system. It was, after all, nearly two centuries before Creole had an official orthography. Creole, then, was the primary spoken language, while French was the exclusive written language in Saint-Domingue.

There were, however, instances when colonial administrators needed to communicate an urgent message to the masses, and pragmatically made use of Creole to do so. In 1793, when the French were on the verge of losing the colony, Civil Commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax abolished slavery in order to win the masses over to the fight against the invading British and Spanish. Sonthonax famously produced a proclamation, written in Creole, to be distributed and read throughout the colony. Nine years later the threat of losing Saint-Domingue loomed once again. Napoleon Bonaparte had sent a massive military expedition to the colony, clearly intending to reinstate slavery. In hopes of avoiding mass resistance, Napoleon issued his own proclamation explaining that the army was only there to protect the colony from invaders. He

7 Girod-Chantrans, *Voyage d’un Suisse*, 191.
8 As a rule, slaves were denied education. In certain unusual circumstances, however, a slave could learn to read, write and speak French. Toussaint Louverture, for example, wrote prolifically and seems to have been influenced by several classic texts.
9 It should be noted that even at the time of revolution a large percentage of slaves had been born in Africa. Among these were Muslim Africans, some of whom would have known how to read Arabic.
10 With the obvious exception of Latin, used by the Catholic Church.
had it translated into Creole, and disseminated through the colony. Thus, even before
independence, the highest authorities understood the necessity of bridging the gap between the
administrative and popular languages. Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines made
effective use of the language to reach the masses during the Revolution and in the first years after
independence.11 But following Dessalines’s assassination in 1806, as the country was divided
between the francophile Alexandre Pétion’s Republic in the south and west and the anglophile
Henri Christophe’s kingdom in the north, Creole was squeezed out of official contexts. Within a
few years of independence French-language hegemony was the rule in Haitian society.

The linguistic marginalization of the vast majority of the country’s population is both a
symptom and a cause of the sharply divided social structure that emerged in independent Haiti
over the course of the nineteenth century. Michel-Rolph Trouillot has masterfully shown how the
country’s socioeconomic organization created a wide chasm between the peasantry and the
“urban parasites.”12 Heirs to a legacy of slavery, the peasantry resisted early attempts to resurrect
the plantation system, wanting nothing more than to be left alone to cultivate their own plots.
The government resorted to generating most of its revenue through indirect taxation, placing
hefty tariffs on exports such as coffee, which translated into a crushing burden for the peasantry.
Lacking access to official channels through which to express their grievances, the peasantry was
gradually reduced to subsistence levels with no means of recourse. In Trouillot’s words: “the

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Haitian peasant was as isolated from the country’s other classes as Haiti was from the rest of the world.”\(^{13}\)

On the other side of Trouillot’s Chasm were the townsfolk. The top of the social strata was occupied by the small merchant class and the upper echelons of the government. In general, Haiti’s elites were educated in France and were imbued with an attachment to French culture that had little in common with the ‘Haitian’ culture of the masses. True, they spoke Creole and many practiced Vodou alongside Christianity, but their identity was divided between here and there. The remainder of the urban population aspired to become part of this cultural elite. The export-oriented economy prevented the accumulation of capital in the county and industries failed to develop, and so the state became virtually the only employer. As such, the vast majority of the urban population saw finding a job in the civil service as their only option. With an endless pool of more or less equally (un)qualified aspirants, partisan politics became and end in itself. Transfers of power almost always occurred by means of a coup with the support of one or other faction. The absence of elections meant there was no need, within political discourses, to speak on behalf of the masses. The economic and political structures allowed the urbanites to enjoy the fruit of the peasantry’s labour without ever having to deal directly with them.\(^{14}\)

\(^{13}\) Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *State Against Nation*, 81.
\(^{14}\) *Ibid.*, 80-81. It bears mentioning that, as Trouillot notes, the social divide was not impermeable. Haiti’s peasant culture made incursions into the urban centres by way of the seasonal market system. Peasants would bring agricultural products into the towns for consumption and for export. In the process, their cultural practices made an impact on urban culture, contributing to a sense of national community. This, however, did little to narrow the divide in Haitian society. In Trouillot’s words: “Though Haiti is split in two it does not consist of two societies. On the contrary: the very mechanisms that have produced the split keep the two parts in an unequal but complementary relationship” (81). And again: “The dissociation of political and civil society was softened on the cultural front by the impact of peasant culture and values on the urban scene. Urbanites could always point to, and at times engage in, practices that sustained the vision of a ‘community.’”(83).
time politicians made passing references to the moun andeyò in their speeches, but for most urbanites these ‘outside people’ were little more than an abstraction.

Nowhere is Trouillot’s Chasm more clearly illustrated than in the Creole-French dichotomy. The concept of language rights did not become part of global human rights discourses until the mid-twentieth century. Not surprisingly, then, not one of the ten Haitian constitutions produced in the nineteenth century makes a single provision for Creole monolinguals. From 1843 there was some variation on an article stating vaguely: “L’emploi des langues usitées en Haïti est facultatif, il ne peut être réglé que par la loi, et seulement pour les actes de l’autorité publique et pour les affaires judiciaires.”¹⁵ But it is clear that, from the outset, there was little attempt to facilitate the participation of the nation’s Creole-speaking masses in public life. There is some evidence that a senator in Pétion’s Republic, Étienne Gérin, called for Creole to be made an official language around 1810.¹⁶ Anticipating Georges Sylvain’s argument by almost a century, Gérin proposed that Creole initially be used in education in order to transform the Haitian masses into active citizens, and he may even have worked on a Creole grammar to facilitate this project.¹⁷ But nothing came of Gérin’s proposal.

After the two Haitis reunified in 1821 successive administrations upheld French-language hegemony. President after president was either uninterested in giving a voice to the masses, incapable of doing so, or did not see Creole as a viable medium for national dialogue. Some leaders were avowedly sympathetic to the language itself; Fabre Geffrard (r. 1859-1867) “used to

¹⁵ Haitian Constitution of 1843, art. 37.
extol Creole as the softest and most expressive of languages.” But rather than normalizing Creole, Geffrard worked to close the gap in Haitian society by bringing French and ‘civilization’ to the masses. Ostensibly populist regimes, like those of Faustin Soulouque (1847-1859) and Lysius Salomon (1879-1888), were no more successful in modifying the linguistic status quo. An illiterate former slave who openly practiced Vodou, Soulouque in no way fit the mould of his French culture imbued predecessors. He ruthlessly curbed the power of the traditional elites, and could have used his dictatorial powers to dismantle the language dichotomy, but failed to enact any significant reforms. Salomon, on the other hand, stands out by the progressive measures that he worked tirelessly to achieve. He focused much energy and resources on rural education, and even disseminated speeches in Creole imploring the rural masses to send their children to school to learn to read, write and speak French. But amid insurgencies and a plummeting economy he too was unable to bring lasting change.

In general, the lamentable state of Haiti’s education system, particularly in rural areas, contributed to the linguistic isolation of the Haitian masses. The belief was that it was up to the schools to teach proper French to Haiti’s children. After that there would be no linguistic divide. But the virtual absence of schools made this solution impracticable. The insufficiency of the public education system was another legacy of the country’s colonial past. Slaves in Saint-Domingue were denied education, while the children of the colonists and of some free people of

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20 St. John, Black Republic, 346-347. The language and content of one speech is worth reproducing here: “Moin l’ouvrí l’école tout patout ou doué voyé pitite ou l’école, parceque si ou fait youn zafaire, yo capable baille ou youn mauvé papié ou va prend li, tandis que si pititie ou connain li, li va dit ou papa zaifaire ou pa bon. Voyé toutes pitites zautes l’école.” Translation: I open schools everywhere you must send your child to school, because if you do some business, they can give you a bad paper that you will take, whereas if your child knows it, he or she will say to you “papa this business is not good.” Send all of your children to school.
colour received basic education from the resident Catholic clergy, and then sought higher education in France. After the Revolution, however, the Vatican refused to acknowledge Haiti’s political existence, and the Church neglected the country for half a century. Successive administrations spoke endlessly of the need for education and framed laws and constitutions around such pronouncements, but were unable to build on the dilapidated foundation left over from the colony. The encouraging initiatives of presidents like Salomon and Geffrard were stifled in the midst of deadlocked partisan struggles and violent regime changes. By 1905 only 3 percent of Haiti’s five to eight year-olds, and only 1.47 percent of rural school-aged children, were in classes.

With the education system in disarray, there was little opportunity for the Haitian masses to learn French and thereby to engage in their nation’s political discourses. But it was not only lack of access that fuelled the linguistic divide. The education system itself, intentionally or otherwise, served to perpetuate the language hierarchy. Primary school followed a classical model of education, teaching in French via rote memorization. Children from Creole-monolingual homes lacked the pedagogical support to succeed in this environment. When added to a lack of faith in the education system and the necessity to earn wages for their household, rural children rarely made it to graduation. Secondary curriculum was purely academic; according to an 1883 ministerial ruling the subjects to be taught in lycées and collèges included: French literature, Latin literature, Greek literature, English literature, Spanish literature, history, geography, the rudiments of philosophy, the principles of Law and Political economics, applied mathematics, accounting and bookkeeping, physics, chemistry, natural history, diction, drawing,

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21 Pamphile, Clash of Cultures, 7.
22 Ibid., 12.
and vocal and instrumental music. As in the colonial period, higher education was pursued abroad. Thus, we find an education system that systematically excluded monolinguals while imbuing the few who succeeded with an attachment to Western culture and the French language.

Haitian literature to 1900

There is one avenue by which the popular language could have made some headway in the nineteenth century, but overwhelmingly failed to do so. In Haitian literature, as in education and politics, Creole was marginalized. There was much formal literature produced in Haiti in the nineteenth century, of which patriotic poetry was the most popular form. Haitian poets tended to emulate trends from France, and were praised for their mastery of the language. In 1899, a lawyer named Louis Borno (who later served as Haiti’s president) lamented the virtual nonexistence of a Haitian Creole literature, saying: “Il y a eu, à diverses époques de notre histoire, quelques tentatives de formation; mais qu’en est-il resté? Rien, que je sache; soit que les incendies, fréquents dans notre pays, aient anéanti les quelques œuvres produites, soit que les héritiers des auteurs, jugeant en toute conscience les manuscrits laissés, aient estimé prudent… d’imiter les incendies.” A handful of poets made use of the popular language; Oswald Durand’s poem “Choucoune” (1883) is the obvious example, along with a few compositions by Massillon Coicou (1867-1908). Yet both wrote primarily in French, and their works in Creole are notable for being exceptional. Borno praised Durand’s “Choucoune” as “un ouverture d’horizons nouveaux,” but mourned the fact that the poet then reverted to writing French poetry.

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25 Ibid., 14.
was also a popular genre in nineteenth-century Haiti. Befitting the oral genre, playwrights made use of the vernacular to show a person’s inferior social standing, or in comedic works which have been compared to vaudeville or blackface. Creole was not used as a self-sufficient language for serious dramatic works. The sources are limited, as plays were not often published, but it seems that the use of Creole in theatre actually lessened after independence. The moderation of the Creole language in this formal oral genre indicates an overall trend, among Haiti’s intelligentsia, to present themselves as Western through and through.

Prose fiction was not a popular genre in nineteenth century Haiti. Only a few Haitians wrote novels in the second half of the century, and they made no use of Creole. With the exception of Émeric Bergeaud’s Stella (1859), none of the novels written before 1901 take place in Haiti; Demesvar Delorme’s Francesca (1872) and Le Damné (1877) are set in Italy and Switzerland respectively, while Louis-Joseph Janvier’s Une Chercheuse (1889) takes place in France and Egypt. Creole would therefore be inappropriate. As with poetry, mastery of the French language was the measure by which prose fiction was assessed. Delorme was praised for demonstrating that “les qualités de pureté et d’élégance propres à la langue française […] peuvent se rencontrer avec bonheur chez un écrivain de race dite inférieure.” This need to disprove the late-nineteenth-century concept of racial inequality was a major driving force for Haiti’s authors. To this end they appropriated the French language and strove to match the literary excellence of their European counterparts. Janvier took on Haiti’s detractors directly in

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28 Nathan Hector, “Demesvar Delorme,” Le Petit Haitien, August-November 1907, 238.
his contribution to a volume entitled *Les Détracteurs de la race noire et de la République d’Haïti*. In his attempt to leverage the French language to redeem the people of Haiti, Janvier made the audacious claim that “La langue française est la langue courante, la seule en usage, et tous les paysans la comprennent.”²⁹ As Léon-François Hoffmann commented, “Only the desire to counter the outrageous arguments of anti-Haitian racists can justify this bare-faced lie.”³⁰ Still, Janvier’s position sheds light on why he and his contemporaries were reluctant to use Creole.

Of course, there was one literary genre in which Creole dominated. Haiti has a longstanding tradition of oral storytelling. The Haitian *mèt kont*, or master storyteller, has been entertaining and instructing children and adults alike for centuries. Countless songs, proverbs, riddles and *lodyans* (folktales) have been passed down from generation to generation. This informal and prevalent literary corpus constitutes the narrative voice, the moral framework and the aesthetic formula on which an authentic indigenous literature could ultimately be built. The native language is so critical to these types of cultural production that collections of Haitian folktales and proverbs were among the only things published in Creole in the nineteenth century.³¹ One of the first known texts in Creole was the song “Lisette quitté la plaine,” as reproduced in Moreau de Saint-Méry’s *Description*.³² Evidently, the literate minority had long seen the artistic value of the popular literary style. But it was not until the start of the twentieth century.

³² Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description*, 65.
century that Haitian authors began to bridge the gap between the nation’s High and Low culture.

It is fitting, therefore, that the debate around linguistic democratization of Haitian society was launched in conjunction with the publication of Lafontaine’s classic collection of French fables adapted to the language and narrative technique of a Haitian peasant.

Cric? Crac! The Creole debate becomes public

In the last years of the nineteenth century Haiti’s cultural elites felt themselves to be in a state of intellectual torpor. Local and foreign critics generally considered literary output to be of low and decreasing quality. In his 1884 tome Hayti; or, the Black Republic, British diplomat Spenser St. John noted that Haitian poetry comprised “some very pretty verses” but “none of any remarkable merit.”33 St. John, who admittedly had little positive to say about the Republic, went on to refer to a French critic who claimed that “the further we recede from the Declaration of Independence the worse the poetry,” and that “as a rule, these Haytian poets express fairly well all tender sentiments, but they are wanting in a careful literary education, and they have not a very exact appreciation of the French language.”34

The opinions of foreigners notwithstanding, by the mid-1890s Haitian men of letters were calling for a cultural renaissance. The literary and social review La Jeune Haïti, founded in 1893, sought to “ramener nos écrivains aux justes sentiments de l’art, bannir de notre littérature les excès de goût et les imitations inintelligentes qui la déparent, tâcher de diriger les esprits vers une conception plus large de la beauté artistique, et surtout, creuser notre vie nationale pour en

33 St. John, Black Republic, 352.
34 Ibid., 352, 356.
extraire tout ce qu’elle renferme d’original et de vraiment esthétique.”

But the would-be renaissance was slow to start, and La Jeune Haïti folded in 1896. In its wake, dozens of literary reviews came and went in Haitian cities over the next two decades, each implicitly or explicitly dedicated to the task of fuelling a renaissance in Haitian letters. The most famous and influential of these organs was La Ronde (1898-1902). Its impact was such that Haitian authors of the turn of the century are referred to as ‘La Génération de la Ronde.’

One of La Ronde’s most distinguished contributors was a thirty-two-year-old lawyer named Georges Sylvain. On finishing his legal studies in Paris in 1887, Sylvain returned to his native land and threw himself into the struggle for a cultural renaissance. In his first contribution to La Ronde, he commented on the penchant of Haitian writers to imitate their French contemporaries, saying: “Imiter, d’autres disent singer notre ancienne métropole nous est passé en habitude chronique; c’est comme une vice de constitution. En vain nous sommes-nous proclamés indépendants: nous avons toujours la France dans le sang.” With France in his blood, Sylvain was not personally opposed to the composition of French-style poetry. His collection Confidences et Mélancolies (1901) is composed of French verses reminiscent of Paul Verlaine and contains an ode to Victor Hugo, a poem about Ovid’s Baucis and Philemon, and two pieces that evoke snowy winter scenes—hardly representative of local colour.

Yet Sylvain was keenly interested in the maturation of Haiti’s national literature. In the introduction to Confidences he commented on the value of this project and how it would challenge the Western world’s conceptions of people of African descent, saying: “Une race à qui

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36 Georges Sylvain, “Pour le Grec et le Latin,” La Ronde, 5 October 1898, 83.
l’on dénie toute aptitude à la civilisation n’a pas le droit de dédaigner la gloire des lettres. La poésie haïtienne est un argument qui peut être à double tranchant. C’est pour nous tous un devoir de patriotisme de ne pas le laisser rétorquer contre nous!”

He addressed Haiti’s young intellectuals directly, urging them in these terms: “Soyez sincères: l’originalité est à ce prix! […] Être soi-même, exprimez du mieux qu’on peut ce qu’on voit, ce qu’on pense, ce qu’on sent personnellement. […] La vraie valeur d’une œuvre d’art se mesure à sa probité.” Thus, Sylvain made a compelling argument for a new originality and a new sincerity in Haitian literature, which would prove the worth of the nation as a whole.

Taking his own advice, Sylvain committed himself to the task of producing a work of literature that was thoroughly Haitian. Such was the origin of Cric? Crac! (1901). Published the same year as Confidences, Cric? Crac! is considered a classic of Haitian literature and an important step in the legitimation of the Creole language. Ironically, however, for all its influence there was very little original about the work. It is presented as the fables of Lafontaine (which in turn had been derived from Aesop) recounted by a Haitian peasant. Furthermore, Sylvain had taken the idea from a Martinican by the name of François Marbot who, half a century earlier, had published his own collection of La Fontaine’s fables adapted to the language of that island. Yet Cric? Crac! was an impressive effort, and it unquestionably appeared in the right place at the right time. Its publication brought the Creole language and oral storytelling styles into discussions regarding the characteristics of an authentic Haitian literature.

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38 Sylvain, Confidences, 40-41.
39 Ibid., 40.
40 Sylvain, Cric? Crac!, 8.
Sylvain knew that to foster an authentic national literature he needed to bridge the gap between Haiti’s High and Low cultures. Fusing the French and Haitian fabulist tradition seemed the logical way to go about it. La Fontaine’s name would legitimize the project to the francophile intelligentsia, and enable Sylvain to bring the Creole language and the peasantry’s narrative tradition into the mainstream of Haitian letters. The work relies heavily on characters, themes, and aesthetics of Haitian folklore. In the words of one critic: “le génie propre de la langue créole, les mœurs et les coutumes du peuple haïtien […] ne permettaient pas à Georges Sylvain de faire une transposition fidèle du fabuliste français, il a fallu donc représenter les situations à la lumière de nos traditions.”41 The success of Cric? Crac! is evinced by its imitators. Authors F. Duplessis, Alcibiade Pommayrac and even the great Oswald Durand soon began publishing their own Creole fables in various newspapers.42 By 1918, Carl Wolff had published his own collection of fables.43

More importantly, the first indications that Creole was a language in its own right, capable of literary expression, are found in Cric! Crac? and the works it inspired. The Haitian Creole orthography received sober consideration for the first time. While the Martinican Marbot had benefitted from the existence of a writing system devised by Catholic missionaries, Sylvain had no such luxury.44 The scope of Cric! Crac? meant some degree of standardization was necessary. Like his predecessors, Sylvain modified the spelling of French words to render the sounds of Creole, but he also made innovations for the sake of clarity and simplicity. He even

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43 Gouraige, *Littérature haïtienne*, 156.
included an ‘Avertissement’ to inform the reader of his orthographic choices. Systematizing the differences between French and Creole was the first step toward recognizing the latter as a full-fledged language. This question would later be central to the debates over the official orthography. At this early stage, however, the orthography was already normalizing to some degree. It was also beginning to diverge from French. It is significant, for instance, that Oswald Durand called his first Creole fable “Guêpe ak’ maringouin.” The Creole word *ak* meaning *and* is derived from the French word *avec*. Its pronunciation and etymology meant it was perfectly logical for Sylvain to use ‘ac,’ but Durand intentionally chose to use *k*, a grapheme foreign to French, in order to emphasize the distinction between the two languages.

In order that his readers not see *Cric? Crac!* as a trifle, as the mere scribblings of a self-interested poet, Sylvain carefully and explicitly attached the work to the embryonic struggle for Creole legitimation. The first phrase of the preface says it all: “Le créole est-il une langue?” He lamented the dearth of Creole literature. He referred to the growing number of works in the creoles of Martinique and Guadeloupe, saying: “La preuve des aptitudes artistiques du dialecte créole est donc déjà faite, sinon par nous, du moins par quelques-uns de nos congénères des îles voisines.” He praised the superiority of Haitian Creole, compared to these others, saying: “le créole haïtien paraît plus libre, plus souple et plus varié que celui des autres pays de colonisation française.” He then cut straight to the point, saying with daring honesty that

Nous n’écrivons pas assez en créole. Nous ne réfléchissons pas que pour élever le peuple à la conception de l’idéal artistique, pour affiner son esprit, pour le moraliser en l’éveillant au sentiment du beau, il faut commencer par lui parler sa

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47 Ibid., 6-7.
He wondered why more authors, in the midst of this ostensible cultural renaissance,
“n’exploitent-ils pas davantage cette veine facile d’originalité,” adding that even the most bland
authors suddenly become interesting, pleasant and witty when they abandon their Parnassian rags
and “consentent à être eux-mêmes et à mettre au service de leurs facultés d’observation les
ressources de l’idiome maternel.” And then he went a step further, expanding the issue beyond
a national literature project, and touched on the broader implications of a revaluation of Creole:
“J’inclinerais volontiers à penser que le jour où, par l’acquis d’un certain nombre d’œuvres
fortes, le créole aura droit de cité dans nos écoles primaires, rurales et urbaines, le problème de
l’instruction populaire à Haïti sera bien près d’être résolu.” Thus, in just five paragraphs,
Sylvain countered two centuries of conventional wisdom regarding Creole.

**L’École Nationale: Politicizing literature**

1901 saw the publication of a second work that further pushed the boundaries of Haitian
literature. While Sylvain looked to normalize the popular language and the narrative techniques
of the peasantry, Frédéric Marcelin (1848-1917) hoped to establish the novel as a Haitian genre
and to use it as a means of critiquing Haitian society. Marcelin had been educated in Paris and
was no doubt well acquainted with the writings of Balzac, Hugo, and Flaubert. He saw how they
used their craft to address the socio-political issues of their day and believed this type of work
could be adapted to Haiti. While Sylvain was proposing a new authenticity in Haitian literature

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by moving away from French language and forms, Marcelin realized that appropriating the
novelistic tradition would automatically result in a uniquely Haitian literary product. As Michael
Dash notes, French Romanticism was “a literary movement whose main emphasis was artistic
individualism,” and so if Marcelin adopted the genre it would amount to “a negation of
imitation.”51 By embracing the Realism and Naturalism of writers like Emile Zola, Marcelin was
able “to deal with Haitian society not as an abstraction, nor in universal terms, but as specifically
determined by certain historical conditions,” and his works acted as “a sociological investigation
of Haitian reality.”52 In so doing, he initiated a major shift in Haitian literature.

Haitian writers had always been hesitant to directly criticize their society because, as
Sylvain had said, it was the duty of the Haitian author to elevate his nation in the eyes of the
outside world and to prove the intellectual capabilities of his race. Generations of Haitian poets
had praised the virtues of the Black Republic and the beauty of her people. Additionally, Haitian
authors were reluctant to directly criticize their governments, as the threat of censorship was ever
present. Constantly fearful of insurrections, presidents used coercive force to stifle any signs of
opposition. Journalists were often imprisoned, exiled or executed. Furthermore, in Haiti it was
understood that to be employed by the government meant loyalty to the administration. It was
common for a civil servant who criticized the Executive to be dismissed or forced to resign.53
Most educated Haitians held government posts at one time or another, and so it was uncommon
for a writer to find the opportunity to pick up his quill in order to challenge the state and its
interests. By 1901, however, Frédéric Marcelin was up for the challenge.

52 Dash, Literature and Ideology, 26.
53 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, State Against Nation, 89-90.
Marcelin had served as a member of the Chamber of Deputies and the Haitian legation in Washington D.C. before the age of thirty, and as Minister of Finance in the 1890s. He was, in other words, familiar with the dire political and social issues facing the nation. Between 1887 and 1901 he wrote numerous treatises dealing with Haiti’s political and economic situation. He had witnessed (and, it must be said, profited from) the unscrupulous machinations that plagued Haiti’s successive administrations, and had seen the casualties of the instability of the state. At the age of fifty-three, knowing that something must be done to save his homeland from certain calamity, he turned to his efforts to fiction. From 1894 to 1903 he lived in Paris, where the topic on everyone’s mind was the Dreyfus affair: the wrongful arrest of a young French military officer of Jewish descent on a charge of treason. Marcelin was undoubtedly affected by the way Émile Zola used his status as a well-respected novelist to level a direct and unambiguous accusation against the authorities—something virtually unimaginable in the Haitian context. In the midst of a call for a national literature that would prove the cultural refinement of the Haitian people, Marcelin’s merciless satire of the country’s political mores fell like a bombshell.

_Thémistocles Epaminondas Labasterre_ (Paris, 1901) tells the story of a young Haitian, the titular Labasterre, the son of a hardworking merchant family. After a picturesque description of Haitian life in the late nineteenth century, the political satire becomes the main focus of the novel. The protagonist falls under the influence of a provocative orator named Télémaque. Together they publish a paper, criticizing the government and calling for reform. A typical Haitian ‘revolution’ results in Télémaque’s appointment as a minister and his true character is revealed—he turns out to be yet another machiavellian demagogue. Labasterre then becomes his

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former idol’s most vocal critic, and ultimately falls victim to the repressive government. He is shot down by an officer amid cries of “Vive la liberté! A bas la tyrannie!” This unmitigated account of the opportunism and injustice that plagued Haiti’s political system at the start of the twentieth century opened the door for a national literature that would serve a new function in Haitian society. For the first time formal literature deliberately targeted the status quo.

Not surprisingly, *Thémistocles* and its sequel *La Vengeance de Mama* (Paris, 1902) were initially met with apprehension and derision. One journalist remembered the uneasiness he felt on first reading *Thémistocles*, saying: “les huit premières pages m’enthousiasmèrent, mais, à la neuvième, je lançai le livre sur la table, en criant: ‘C’est absurde!’ Cependant, le soir, attiré, je repris ma lecture interrompue et j’eus cette même sensation de gêne.”55 Among Marcelin’s harshest critics was none other than Georges Sylvain, who said that although nearly every aspect of Marcelin’s satire were indisputably accurate, in enumerating Haiti’s faults he had failed to grasp the Haitian soul—the true task of the artist as Sylvain saw it.56 Another famous Haitian intellectual, Dantès Bellegarde, characterized Marcelin’s novel as ‘grotesque,’ saying that the author “n’a voulu voir et dépeindre que les mauvais côtés de la société haïtienne.”57

Marcelin responded to his critics in 1903 in a book entitled *Autour de deux romans*. In this tract he laid out his plan for a new literary paradigm. He explained his vision, and his rupture from accepted themes, in unambiguous terms:

> J’ai voulu autre chose. J’ai songé un œuvre assurément plus modeste, moins artiste au sens de notre canevas traditionnel […] mais tâchant de s’approcher tant soit peu de la vérité, qui est la seule chose, quoique nous pensions, dont l’écrivain

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57 Quoted in Marcelin, *Autour de deux romans* (Paris: Kugelman, 1903), 175.
He hoped to furnish “la peinture exacte, fidèle, de nos mœurs, de nos usages, de la riante nature qui est la parure de notre île,” and, perhaps most of all, “inspirer à la jeunesse le dégoût de la politique, du moins telle qu’on la pratique jusqu’à présent chez nous.” In sum, he aimed to adapt the realist novel to the Haitian context in hopes of affecting a profound change in his society. Marcelin’s novels laid the foundation for a Haitian literary movement now known as the École Nationale. Between 1901 and 1908, four novelists (Marcelin, Justin Lhérisson, Fernand Hibbert and Antoine Innocent) produced nine novels, which firmly established Haiti’s novelistic tradition and made a profound impact on the trajectory of Haitian literature.

The École Nationale novelists felt it natural to weigh in on the Creole question. Their attachment to realism meant that Creole words and phrases inevitably found their way into depictions of daily life in Haiti. As satirists, they were well aware of the boundless possibilities for humour to be found in the country’s linguistic dichotomy. Their commitment to political engagement meant that the linguistic isolation of the masses was an easy target. For his part, Marcelin used Creole sparingly. But he took a clear stance on the injustice inherent in the country’s French-language hegemony in Thémistocles. When the protagonist first begins his journalistic career he sits at his writing table consulting his Bescherelle and laments the debilitating local obsession with immaculate French grammar:

Cette diablesse la langue française, qu’elle nous donne de soucis! Les contentions auxquelles elle oblige font suer dans un pays où c’est déjà si facile. Ce n’est tant de l’esprit, c’est de la forme surtout qu’on se préoccupe ici. On s’épluche à coups

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59 Ibid., 28-29.
de lexique. Le javelot ne transperce pas s’il n’est, on le pense au moins, très grammaticalement lancé.⁶⁰

He then drives the point home, echoing Sylvain’s recent prophecy of linguistic revolution, saying, “Oh! bénie l’époque de la future réforme annoncée qui nous permettra d’écrire à peu près comme nous voulons!”⁶¹ As a writer Marcelin had no doubt felt the same desire to put his thoughts onto paper without having to pass through French conventions, and he clearly understood the broader implications of this communication barrier.

The École Nationale sought to destabilize Haitian elitism by lampooning the bourgeoisie and sympathizing with the peasantry and urban poor. Fernand Hibbert was a master of satire, and all of the contradictions of Haitian life come under fire in his novels. Language plays a critical role in his humour and his portrayals of the snobbish insincerity of his class. There are countless examples, but take for instance this short monologue from *Les Thazar* (Port-au-Prince, 1907) in which Démétrius Thazar describes a recent interaction with a group of public officials: “‘Vous ne parlez pas français!’ me disait-on. Je m’efforçais de m’exprimer le plus purement que possible dans la langue de Pascal, de Bousset et de Fénélon, mais c’était en vain: j’étais de moins en moins compris. A la fin, le député Mangoussa me dit: ‘Palé francé cè l’agent!’”⁶² By telling Thazar to ‘speak French’ the officials are in fact looking for a bribe. The humour resides in the fact that Thazar initially accepts the ostensible language barrier. The ruse brilliantly summarizes the absurd linguistic reality in Hibbert’s day. A man tries to defend his rights but the authorities

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⁶⁰ Marcelin, *Thémistocles*, 140.
disregard him by pronouncing him inadequately competent in French. One of the officials then offers him a word of advice—in perfect Creole.

The unparalleled master at the centre of this nexus of literary activism and linguistic legitimation, however, was Justin Lhérisson (1872-1907). Whereas Marcelin, Hibbert and Innocent tended to use Creole sparingly and often included explanatory footnotes, perhaps hoping to court a foreign audience, Lhérisson made no such concessions. Moreover, he was not satisfied just to use the language. Like Sylvain, he experimented with developing a Haitian genre. He referred to his two short works not as novels, but as *lodyans*, from a Creole word describing the oral storytelling tradition. His two *lodyans* are presented as yarns spun by an old Haitian *mèt kont* named Golimin. This allowed Lhérisson to use Creole freely not only in dialogue and the odd untranslatable local concept as the other École Nationale novelists had done, but within the narration itself. This would be the closest thing to Creole-language literature for five decades.

Lhérisson lambasted the francophilia of the bourgeoisie in his first *lodyans, La famille des Pitite-Caille* (Port-au-Prince, 1905). When Eliézer Pitite-Caille and his wife Valléda overcome their humble origins and arrive in high society, they both learn to speak French. Valléda never manages to shake certain rustic idiosyncrasies while Eliézer prides himself on his eloquence: “Il maniait à la perfection l’imparfait du subjonctif les *assiez, issiez, assions* fluaient de ses lèvres abondamment.”

Lhérisson’s most extreme critique of the language hierarchy is embodied in the character of Boutnègre, Eliézer Pitite-Caille’s shrewd campaign manager, a self-proclaimed master of manipulating Haiti’s weak democratic system. Boutnègre speaks in an

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idiom that is somewhere between Creole and French, referred to in Creole as *kreyòl fransize*. He says things like: “Cé pas ça sèlement que je pourrai vous faire, pouvi, naturellement vous mettez-vous comme il faut, à la rhauteur de la situation. Différemment je ne pourerai travailler pour vous,”

and “Dans la polutique, il faut savoi rentrè et il faut savoi sorti. C’est là qu’est restée toute la foce. La polutique c’est ine jouète, — et dans toute jouète, gangnin gain, gangnin pète.”

Boutnègre is a satirical figure par excellence, at once comedic and profoundly unsettling. In the context of Lhérisson’s work he emerges as an example of what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha refers to as ‘mimcry’—the imperfect imitation of the colonizer, which has the effect of putting the validity of the model into doubt.

Lhérisson’s masterful use of language—which makes his *lodyans* virtually inaccessible to non-Haitian readers—attests to his rejection of the Haitian middle class’s all-consuming deference to French culture.

Reactions to the literary movement varied. Some critics opposed the linguistic liberties taken by the novelists. Edgard U. Fanfant had this to say of Lhérisson’s second *lodyans*, *Zoune chez sa ninnaine* (Port-au-Prince, 1906):

Pourquoi Mr. Lhérisson écrit-il ainsi? Nous avons lu de lui des pages d’une assez belle tenue littéraire [i.e. his previous works of poetry, including the Haitian national anthem]. Nous comprenons sans doute que dans un roman haïtien, dans un roman où sont retracées nos mœurs se trouvent des mots créoles. Il est parfois des cas où ils sont nécessaires […] Mais que, sous prétexte de couleur locale, de littérature nationale, on les prodigue ici et là, voilà qui est inadmissible. Non, […] la littérature nationale ne consiste pas à ‘truffer’ le texte français d’expressions créoles. A ce compte, c’eût été bien facile! Et puis ces phrases créoles qui le parsèment donnent au style un air grotesque.

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64 Lhérisson, *Pitite-Caille*, 37. Translation: That’s not all I can do for you, provided, naturally, you rise to the occasion. Otherwise I won’t be able to do anything for you.

65 *Ibid.*, 62. Translation: In politics, one must know when to start and one must know when to stop. That’s where all the power lies. Politics is a game—and in all games there are winners and there are losers.

66 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 123.

Conservative critics saw the École Nationale’s use of Creole as a necessary evil at best, and a degradation of the national literature at worst. Those who considered the use of Creole phrases ‘grotesque’ were no doubt the same cultural elites who opposed the wider use of Creole in education and government.

Others welcomed the change. In a 1907 article about the new literary movement Duraciné Vaval praised the growing acceptability of Creole and tied it to a broader socio-political program.68 “Ne parlous-nous pas journellement le créole?” he said, “Pourquoi avons-nous donc honte d’écrire aussi dans cet idiome?”69 In the same article he juxtaposed Haiti’s linguistic insecurity with the situation in Curaçao, where Papiamentu was taught in schools and used in religious services, and where there were even newspapers published in the language. Evidently the École Nationale sparked discussions about alternative conceptions for Haiti’s language situation. Within a few years observers were noting how close the country had come to normalizing Creole. In 1913 Charles Moravia, an old guard francophile poet, noted with palpable relief that if Duraciné Vaval had been appointed Minister of Education under the presidency of Antoine Simon (1908-1911) “et il n’y à rien d’excessif dans ma supposition,” Haitian students would almost certainly be learning to read and write in Creole—“Quelle catastrophe!”70 Thanks in no small part to the efforts of Sylvain, Marcelin and the rest, Haiti came within a hair’s breadth of a linguistic revolution in 1908.

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69 Ibid., 1305.
70 René Darlouze [Charles Moravia], “Lettre à mon cousin, XVIII,” Le Matin, 24 March 1913, 1.
Conclusion

But, of course, it was not to be. As we know, within ten years French would be enshrined as the official language, and it would be seventy years before Creole-language education would be legally mandated. Justin Lhérisson’s untimely death in 1907 coincided with an ebbing of École Nationale productivity. Marcelin went back to writing political treatises, Innocent stopped writing altogether, and Hibbert’s *Romulus* (1908) was his last novel for 15 years. But in 1907, at the height of École Nationale productivity, there must have been a sense of something new on the horizon. Members of Haiti’s literati had launched an assault on the status quo, and were poised to put an end to the linguistic isolation of the masses. Sylvain and the novelists of the École Nationale had taken the first step toward recasting Creole as self-sufficient language, capable of complex expression and better suited than French to public life in Haiti.

The end of Antoine Simon’s presidency in 1911 marked the end of the relative stability that Haiti had enjoyed for nearly a decade. With six presidents in less than five years, and often violent transfers of power, government institutions collapsed. The discourses opened by the literary movements of the young century were lost in the chaos. Those interested in the Creole question may well have picked up their debates where they left off once stability was reestablished, but they never had the chance. Everything changed, every program for national development was arrested, every conception of Haitian identity was challenged after the U.S. Marines landed in July 1915. The Occupation had begun.
Chapter 2: Kreyòl nan tan bayonèt, 1915-1934
Language and literature under the U.S. Occupation

“The youthful officers, with that quick adaptability which we like to think of as American, had mastered their new calling even to the extent of acquiring that strange series of noises which is dignified in the French West Indies with the name of “creole,” but it would never have been recognized even as a foster-child on Parisian boulevards.”

Harry A. Franck, 1920

“Le créole est-il un langage dont on puisse tirer une littérature originale par laquelle se consacrera le génie de notre race? Le créole doit-il devenir un jour la langue haitienne comme il y a une langue française, italienne ou russe?”

Jean Price Mars, 1928

Most analysts consider the U.S. Occupation to have had a chiefly negative effect on Haiti.¹

Historians tend to point out that the Americans undermined their stated goal of bringing democracy to Haiti by muzzling the press, dissolving the legislature, and installing a succession of malleable presidents, ultimately reinforcing the dictatorial tradition. The Haitian army was disbanded and replaced with the centralized and efficient Gendarmerie d’Haïti (later renamed the Garde d’Haïti), which enabled a new degree of state-sanctioned violence, and paved the way for the dictatorial Duvalier dynasty. The evident racism of the occupiers aggravated deep-rooted colour-based tensions in Haiti, and provoked a strong anti-American sentiment and an understandable reluctance to cooperate. In Trouillot’s words, “observers agree that the

achievements of the occupation were minor; they disagree only as to the amount of damage it inflicted.”

Many Haitian elites initially welcomed the opportunity for national renewal that the Occupation seemed to offer. As the Haitian-American Convention of 1915 outlined, the occupiers intended to “remedy the present condition of its revenues and finances, to maintain the tranquillity of the Republic, to carry out plans for the economic development and prosperity of the Republic and its people.” The Americans, however, had other interests in their takeover of Haiti’s state apparatus. Received wisdom in the early twentieth century held that great nations acquired and maintained empires. The United States had entered the imperial arena in earnest in 1898 with the occupation of the Philippines and Cuba and the annexation of Puerto Rico, Hawaii and Guam. Germany traditionally had economic ties to Haiti and, although the United States had not yet entered the Great War in 1915, they were nonetheless anxious to curb German influence in the Americas. To influential American corporations like the United Fruit Company, Haiti’s climate and close proximity promised easy access to products like sugar, rubber, sisal and bananas once Haitian agriculture was modernized. Self-serving ambitions on the island quickly took precedence over any ostensible goals of spreading liberal democracy and improving the lot of the average Haitian.

The occupiers’ conduct toward the Haitian people often revealed the racism that was so pervasive in American society. One of the architects of the Occupation, Secretary of State Robert

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3 Haitian American Convention of 1915, Preamble.
Lansing, maintained that “The experience of Liberia and Haiti show that the African race are devoid of any capacity for political organization and lack genius for government. Unquestionably there is in them an inherent tendency to revert to savagery and to cast aside the shackles of civilization which are irksome to their nature.” The paternalism and severity of policies like the infamous corvée system, by which Haitian peasants were forced to work on road construction without pay, sparked guerrilla resistance and political opposition. The occupiers’ failure to understand Haitian culture permanently jeopardized the legitimacy and efficacy of their efforts.

If the Occupation is generally seen as a failure, its effects on the status of Creole are more ambiguous. Despite overseeing the passing of the Constitution of 1918, which named French the official language for the first time in Haiti’s history, the occupiers could not avoid using the popular language. Like Napoleon Bonaparte a century before them, the Americans learned that the most efficient way of dealing with the masses was by circumventing the official language altogether. Marines stationed in the countryside were encouraged to learn Creole. This meant that for the first time there was a large-scale project to develop the materials and practices necessary for teaching the language. In their attempt to revitalize Haitian agriculture the occupiers worked to reform rural education and tried to bring Creole into the classroom. These seemingly positive steps, however, were undermined by the the occupiers heavy-handed methods and the resultant animosity that characterized the Haitian responses to the American presence.

Haitian opposition to the Occupation manifested itself in two contradictory ways, each of which had repercussions for the status of Creole. Initially, Haitian intellectuals tended to cleave to their French cultural heritage as a way of contesting the validity of the Occupation. By

emphasizing their Latin refinement in opposition to Anglo-American materialism and coarseness of manners they inadvertently curtailed the embryonic Creole movement. By the late 1920s, however, an alternative form of opposition was taking root. The Indigénistes rejected both the American interference and the reduction of Haitian culture to its French roots, and strove for a new national solidarity based on a shared African heritage. Creole had a major role to play in this project. Surprisingly, however, the Indigénistes had a smaller immediate impact on the status of Creole than one might expect. This chapter examines how the Creole movement transformed over the course of the Occupation. New parties took up the cause of language reform, but new obstacles also cropped up. In some ways, by the end of the Occupation the possibility of a linguistic revolution was even more remote.

_Occupying Creole_

The Haitian Constitution of 1918 (which was devised by the Americans, who then pushed it through Haiti’s legislative system via a sham referendum) made French the official language of Haiti for the first time in the nation’s history. Article 26 states: “Le français est la langue officielle. Son emploi est obligatoire en matière administrative et judiciaire.”6 This was a departure from American policy at home, where English has never been officially recognized, as well as in the recently acquired American protectorates. The 1899 Malolos Constitution of the Philippines, for instance, stated that: “El empleo de las lenguas usadas en Filipinas es potestativo. No puede regularse sino por la ley y solamente para los actos de la autoridad pública y los asuntos judiciales. Para estos actos se usará por ahora la lengua castellana.”7

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7 The Malolos Constitution, art. 93.
Organic Act of 1900 did not establish an official language but stipulated that: “All legislative proceedings shall be conducted in the English language,” yet strangely it only required that legislators be able to “speak, read and write the English or Hawaiian language.”\(^8\) In other words, American policy in other de facto colonies was sensitive to the linguistic situation on the ground. The Haitian Constitution of 1918, conversely, ignored the Haitian reality.

In the early stages of the Occupation, Americans often made no distinction between French and Creole, considering the latter to be a rustic dialect of the former. Take, for example, this humorous anecdote by the travel writer Harry A. Franck. While travelling through Haiti in 1919, Franck encountered a Marine lieutenant who claimed to have “several books on ‘creole’ and was preparing to learn it.”\(^9\) Intrigued, Franck asked to see them, upon which “The lieutenant cast aside a soaked tarpaulin and handed me half a dozen French grammars such as are used in our own schools.”\(^10\) But the conflation of the two languages is not the only explanation for Article 26. It may be understood as a concession made by the Americans to Haitian elites who feared Anglo-Saxon incursions would uproot Haiti’s French cultural heritage. In nearby Puerto Rico, the English language had already won co-official status with Spanish via the Foraker Act of 1900 and educated Haitians were justly anxious that the Occupation would spell the erosion of their own cherished culture. Article 26 was a promise to respect that culture.

Despite formally endorsing the traditional French-language hegemony, the Marines stationed in Haiti discovered that in order to efficiently accomplish their planned infrastructural and administrative reforms they would have to make use of the popular language. But the

\(^{8}\) The Hawaiian Organic Act, arts. 44 and 60. Emphasis added.
\(^{10}\) *Ibid.*
violence and disorder of the early part of the Occupation evince the difficulty with which the Americans adapted to the new context. In the fall and winter of 1921-1922 a Select Committee of the United States Senate undertook an inquiry to understand failings and abuses on the part of the Marines in the early years of the Occupation. The language barrier comes up time and again. Initially, the American officers of the new Haitian Gendarmerie attempted to avoid the issue and simply make themselves understood in English. The head of the Gendarmerie, Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler, remembered that “in the early days, early in 1916 […] none of us spoke their language, yet we taught them to drill in English.” It soon became apparent that this one-way communication was inadequate and in some cases exacerbated the harsh treatment of Haitians by American officers. An African-American missionary to Haiti, Reverend L. Ton Evans, explained that: “Many of our American marine officers have confessed to me that when they came first to Haiti, inexperienced, somewhat prejudiced, ignorant of the language (obliged to use any kind of interpreter), they often misunderstood them, wrongly abused these men.”

Evidently the use of ‘any kind of interpreter’ was not a sufficient solution to communication problems. In his statement to the Select Committee a Haitian lawyer pointed out that even with interpreters, “misunderstandings have been prevalent between the Haitians and Americans. While they [the Americans] think they understand French and that they understand Creole, they do not, and the interpreter will often change for the worse the word preferred by the

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Haitians.”\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, just because someone was a native Creole speaker did not guarantee he was a skilled interpreter. One American officer, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander S. Williams, recalled that his interpreter “did not seem well to translate central Creole.”\textsuperscript{15} Another maintained that: “a man [who] can interpret for a native living in Port-au-Prince is not necessarily an accurate interpreter for one living 100 miles away.”\textsuperscript{16} Within a few years, it was clear to the Americans that the language barrier required more than just stopgap solutions.

Some Marines took it upon themselves to learn the language. According to Williams, as early as 1918 “the gendarmerie had in nearly every commune an American gendarmerie officer who, by this time, had learned to speak Creole in most cases very well, always sufficiently well to make himself understood.”\textsuperscript{17} But after five years, as a result of the Select Committee’s findings and the reorganization of the Occupation under the new High Commissioner John H. Russell, the U.S. administration started to encourage the Marines to learn Creole. In 1921, a team of American medical officers collaborated to publish a short manual for learning the language. In the preface of \textit{Lessons in Haitian Creole}, Dr. W. L. Mann noted the unavailability of “any other reading material which will serve as an outline on studying the Creole language,” and hoped that the present work would “facilitate and expedite the adaptation of the American military personnel to the conditions in Haiti.”\textsuperscript{18} By 1923 a school for American officers had been set up,

\textsuperscript{18} N.M. Shaw, \textit{Lessons in Haitian Creole with Some Information Regarding the Republic of Haiti} (Port-au-Prince: Edmond Chenet, 1921), ii, iii.
which offered courses on “both French and creole patois.” Reverend Evans noted that “With better knowledge of the language and the Haiti Negro’s characteristic things changed, with excellent results.” It is perhaps not coincidental that the most peaceful chapter of the Occupation—between the end of the Caco Wars in 1920 and the student strike of 1929—corresponds with this push to teach Creole to the Marines.

By publishing some of the first grammar books and designing courses to teach the language, the Americans contributed mightily to the linguistic infrastructure of Creole. Moreover, while foreigners had previously considered Creole to be a dialect of French, the Americans necessarily abandoned this narrow-minded view and had no choice but to treat it as language. In other words, the language went through a rapid process of legitimation in the eyes of this group of foreigners. This process is evident in the words used to refer to the language. Over time, American observers shifted from calling it *patois*, or “*creole*” (in quotation marks) in their reports and started referring to it as Creole—capitalized and without qualification, the same as any other language. John H. Russell’s annual reports are a good example of this phenomenon: in his report for 1923, he referred to Creole as *creole patois*; in 1925 and 1926, he wrote *creole*; in 1928 he used both *Creole dialect* and *Creole*; and by 1929 it was simply *Creole.*

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Whatever the Marines’ motives were in Haiti, by the 1920s the American public began to demand democratic returns for the Occupation. The Haitian fiasco was an election issue in 1921, and the newly-elected Harding administration aimed to overhaul the Occupation. By the mid-1920s it must have seemed to the occupiers that the way forward for Haiti involved a wider acceptance of Creole at all levels of society. Samuel Guy Inman, the executive secretary of a missionary organization, visited the island in 1919 and reported that: “Those who have only this patois (great majority) can take no part—no intelligent part in a government, even though called a Republic, whose official language is French, which they can never understand.”

The next step, as Georges Sylvain had proposed two decades previously, was to bring Creole into the classroom. African-American journalist James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1920: “In order to abolish Haitian illiteracy, Creole must first be made a printed as well as a spoken language.”

Once again, the time was ripe for a linguistic revolution in Haiti. But, as was the case with so many of the Occupation’s programs, the Americans’ methods provoked opposition from the Haitian people, and the revolution failed to materialize.

*The French connection*

Whereas at the start of the twentieth century it had been Haiti’s own eminent poets and novelists who had fought for a wider acceptance of the popular tongue, in the 1920s the Americans were taking the lead in the Creole legitimation project. With the arrival of the Marines Haiti’s men of letters overwhelmingly abandoned the endeavour. After 1915 the use of literature as a tool for the

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legitimation of Creole fell out of fashion. Two main factors contributed to this shift. Firstly, the Creole legitimation project—which had never been a coordinated program—lost its leadership. Justin Lhérisson had died in 1907. Frédéric Marcelin followed in 1917. Georges Sylvain turned definitively to journalism, becoming one of the most outspoken critics of the Occupation. Sylvain remained a friend of the Creole language and even aided the Breton Bishop of Cap-Haïtien in the publication a Creole catechism in 1922. But he scarcely wrote a single poem after 1915. Fernand Hibbert, for his part, held significant posts in Dartiguenave’s administration, and published no works between 1910 and 1923. His final novel, *Les Simulacres* (1923), was a scathing attack on the Occupation, yet it made relatively little use of Creole.

The second and more significant reason for the hiatus in the Creole literature project is that once the Occupation took root members of the Haitian intelligentsia came to reaffirm their emphasis on Haiti’s French cultural heritage. In the early years, when many Haitians were still optimistic about the promise of the Occupation, this was a relatively benign reaction to the American presence. Haitian elites considered French culture to be superior to “the crude materialism, rough Anglo-Saxon mentality of North Americans,” which was “scornful of subtlety, ignorant of refinement and convinced that all civilization is primarily materialistic.” They fully intended to guard their culture against American incursions. They were hopeful, nonetheless, of the material progress the Americans would bring.

As the Occupation lingered on, however, the racism and heavy-handed methods of the Marines began to provoke widespread opposition. In particular, the corvée system and the

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execution of resistance fighter Charlemagne Péralte in late 1919 solidified the near-universal anti-American sentiment in Haiti. In the 1920s French-cultural ideals were a mainstay of the nationalist position. Haitians scoffed at American calls to ‘civilize’ Haiti, seeing their own civilization as superior to that of the United States. As one Haitian journalist explained: “Economic Americanization, yes, but for God’s sake, let’s keep our French culture,” and insisted that Haiti “remain Latin and French at the spiritual level.”

The literature of the period is deeply marked by this tendency. Haitian poetry saw “a revival of traditional pieties,” a return to the “technical conservatism” of the nineteenth century. In this phase of Haitian literature, which Michael Dash describes as a littérature de circonstance, Haitian authors “resorted to an erudite and ornate French literary code as a means of self-defence.” One wrote in order to prove one’s intellectual depth, and thus to contradict the foundation of the Americans’ civilizing mission. An emphasis on ‘elegant’ language and classical forms meant that, once again, Creole was excluded from formal writing. The handful of novels written in the period which, though less constrained by stylistic formality, nonetheless showed nothing of the liberal use of Creole of their École Nationale forbears. The few romans de circonstance were plainly anti-Occupation and generally presented the nation’s French cultural heritage in a positive light. Ever the critic of the attitudes of his milieu, Fernand Hibbert satirized this reaffirmed attachment to French culture in Les Simulacres, with one character ultimately conceding that “le français que nous parlons et écrivons n’est pas plus le français de France que l’anglais des États-Unis n’est l’anglais des Îles Britanniques—et j’ajoute que rien n’est plus

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27 Le Temps, 22 July 1925, quoted and translated in Pamphile, Clash of Cultures, 87-88.
28 Dash, Literature and Ideology, 55, 54.
29 Ibid., 54.
ridicule q’un puriste haïtien.”

The literary productions of Hibbert’s contemporaries attests to the aptness of his satire.

In the 1920s, then, there were two parties claiming to know what was best for Haiti. The American military officers overseeing the Occupation believed Haitian institutions and practices must be scrapped and reestablished according to pragmatic American capitalist views. But Haitian nationalists were not willing to lose their souls in the bargain. They believed that their Haitian identity, conflicted as it was, was too precious to be sacrificed in the name of economic prosperity. This meant that it was the Americans who were expanding the use of Creole, while Haitians were reinforcing the privileged position of French. Nowhere was this conflict more pronounced than in the education struggles of the 1920s.

**The battle for Haitian education**

The Haitian-American Convention made no reference to education. Consequently, Haitian observers assumed that the right and responsibility to educate the Haitian masses would remain with the Department of Public Instruction. By the early 1920s, however, the occupiers began to realize that their efforts would be fruitless unless something was done about the country’s education system. The American administrators became convinced that the levels of agricultural production that they had envisioned could never be met by Haiti’s uneducated peasantry. Furthermore, they believed that the classical-style education of Haitian schools was a major obstacle to development. In his report for 1925, High Commissioner Russell explained that Haiti’s education system had “led to the creation of a class of young men who desire to take up

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professions such as law and medicine,” and who “do not know how to use their hands and have no idea of the dignity of labour,” concluding that “it is among these men that revolutions are bred.” The proposed solution was a reorientation of the nation’s education system. The classical curricula would be scrapped in favour of agricultural studies in rural schools and industrial courses in the towns. According to Russell this would “undoubtedly go far toward permanently stabilizing the Government and bringing happiness and prosperity to the Haitian people.”

From the Haitian perspective, however, this classical-style education system was sacrosanct. One American report noted that Haitians had a “justifiable pride” in the “long list of distinguished Haitians who have been trained within their walls.” Admittedly it was idealistic, but it was an ideal that the people of Haiti were unwilling to concede. In the context of the generalized racism that marked the occupiers’ dealings with the country, Haitians saw the American plan to dismantle the education system and replace it with purely vocational and practical instruction as a affront to their race. Similar protests were taking place in the United States where Booker T. Washington’s insistence on vocational training for young African-Americans stood in contrast to W.E.B. Du Bois’s preference for the liberal arts. In both countries there was an underlying implication that the study of literature and the humanities was not suited to people of African origin.

Consequently, for the first seven years of the Occupation the Department of Public Instruction and the occupiers were at an impasse. The famous and fiercely nationalist education ministers Louis Borno (1915-1916), Dantès Bellegarde (1918-1921) and Fernand Hibbert

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(1921-1922) opposed numerous education reforms proposed by the Americans. The Haitian-American Convention was clear: education was not in the Americans’ jurisdiction. The ministers insisted that with French techniques and increased funds they could solve Haiti’s education problems themselves. To their credit, Haiti’s education budget was considerably less than in other regions of U.S. imperial influence. In adjacent Santo Domingo, for instance, the education budget for 1920 was $1,500,000 while in Haiti, which had triple the population, it was $340,000. But the Americans did not trust Haitian administrators to use increased funds wisely, and they certainly did not want to see them spent on the counterproductive classical education model. With no compromise forthcoming, the stalemate continued.

Things changed, however, in 1922 with the American-orchestrated election of Louis Borno as President of Haiti (1922-1930). As education minister Borno had opposed the American reforms, but now he was willing to collaborate. With the government’s approval, the Marines took control of rural education. Rather than dismantling the existing system the occupiers established a parallel education system in the country through the framework of the Department of Agriculture, circumventing the Department of Public Instruction altogether. The new Service Technique de l’Agriculture et de l’Enseignement Professionnel set up primary and secondary schools in rural areas, as well as an Agricultural College at Damien.

As the Service Technique’s chief priority was to efficiently impart agricultural methods to the Haitian masses, they had no qualms about using Creole. To be clear, there was no question of teaching Creole literacy or producing textbooks in the language. But the Service Technique

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34 Pamphile, Clash of Cultures, 54-55.
schools were the first in Haitian history to use Creole as a language of instruction unreservedly.

Russell’s report for 1925 contains the following comment on language use in the classrooms:

> One hundred lessons in agriculture have been prepared, printed, and distributed for the use of teachers and students in these schools. These lessons, all in French, can only serve as textbooks for the few students who can read. For all others they serve as definite outlines for the teachers who teach the subjects orally. To those students (the majority) who do not even know French, agriculture is taught orally in creole.\(^{35}\)

By 1929, the results seemed to justify the policies. Russell noted that “This phase of instruction and its results vindicate the policy of teaching agriculture and manual training in the primary classes through the medium of their native Creole language before the children know how to read or write French.”\(^{36}\) The Service Technique also made use of Creole in various public service projects aimed at illiterate adults. Weekly talks on “agriculture, sanitation and public health” were given to peasants on market days.\(^{37}\) Radios were installed in public places for weekly broadcasts “in Creole dialect of the simplest sort.”\(^{38}\) Educational silent films were presented across the nation in cooperation with the Public Health Service, and were explained by the operator “in language appropriate to the audience.”\(^{39}\) Never before had there been such an extensive program to breach the linguistic isolation of Haiti’s monolingual majority.

To the casual observer, the Service Technique might seem like the fulfillment of Georges Sylvain’s proposal to use Creole to solve Haiti’s rural education problem. In actual fact, there were serious problems with a national education program under the direction of an alien presence, and operating through a government ministry other than the Department of Education.

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Samuel Guy Inman, who generally supported U.S. involvement in Haiti, noted perceptively in 1930 that “one feels that the whole fundamental principle of pedagogy is being missed by this well intentioned group, directed by a military officer who naturally looks at all problems from a military standpoint, and fostering a program seemingly based on the idea that the Negro is inferior and must remain subordinate to the white.”

Rather than promoting education for its own sake, the policies of Service Technique were firmly rooted in an economic development program that would be favourable to American interests. According to the Director General of the Service Technique, the Alabaman agronomist George F. Freeman, the primary purpose of popular education was to turn rural children into “productive units in the national economy.”

Nor was widespread literacy a fundamental concern. As John Russell explained, “even if after leaving school the child should lapse to illiteracy through nonuse of reading and writing, he will at least have his agricultural training which in the farm work in which he is constantly engaged will remain with him and will be useful to him throughout life.”

Despite the seemingly revolutionary use of Creole to the classrooms of Haiti, any potentially positive steps were overlooked as popular opinion turned against the Service Technique. A British Minister to Haiti noted in 1929 that the “Service Technique has not a friend on the island.” Haitians resented the two-tiered education system which amounted to a “too early determination of the type of education which the child shall ultimately pursue.”

Furthermore, they opposed the virtual neglect of schools affiliated with the Department of Public Instruction (despite a sharp increase in government revenues), as well as the numerous American

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41 George F. Freeman, quoted in Pamphile, *Clash of Cultures*, 81.
‘experts’ who were paid handsomely out of the Haitian treasury.\textsuperscript{45} By the early 1930s there were constant denunciations of the “présence de la force militaire américaine […] sans nécessité, vexante et dangereuse,” and the underlying racism of the education reforms.\textsuperscript{46}

Ultimately the Service Technique provoked the pivotal student strike of 1929 which triggered the Haitianization of institutions and the withdrawal of the Marines over the next five years. As with so many of their projects, the occupiers left education in worse shape than it had been when they arrived nineteen years earlier. Rather than normalizing the use of Creole in the classroom, the Occupation firmly associated the language to a style of education that many Haitians perceived to be watered down at best and appallingly racist at worst. This peculiar perceived connection between the Creole language and the United States became one more obstacle that those in favour of Creole legitimation would have to overcome.

\textit{Indigénisme and its limits}

Whereas Haitian nationalists of the early years of the Occupation emphasized their French heritage, by the late 1920s an alternative strand of opposition had begun to emerge, one that would contribute greatly to the changing perceptions of Creole among Haiti’s intelligentsia. Under the leadership of one of Haiti’s most prominent intellectuals, the physician and ethnographer Jean Price-Mars (1876-1969), the younger generation began to oppose the elites’ attachment to France nearly as much as they opposed the Occupation. As far back as 1919 Price-Mars had written, in his \textit{La Vocation de l’élite}, that the Occupation was a direct result of the

\textsuperscript{45} Pamphile, \textit{Clash of Cultures}, 106, 110, 118.
\textsuperscript{46} “La Chambre d’Haïti demande la fin de l’occupation des États Unis,” Le Matin, 1 July 1931, 1.
disdain that Haiti’s elites felt for their own compatriots.\textsuperscript{47} He proposed a new appreciation for Haiti’s peasant culture upon which an authentic national identity could be built. To that end, he set to work on a thorough study of Haitian folklore, published in 1928 as \textit{Ainsi parla l’oncle}.\textsuperscript{48} In this highly influential work Price-Mars accused Haiti’s elites of ‘collective bovarysme’—the state in which a society imagines itself differently than how it actually is—and meticulously collected and analyzed countless fables, legends, proverbs, riddles and beliefs in the hopes of showing that Haitians were not simply ‘coloured Frenchmen,’ but that their culture was a rich, syncretic blend of French and African traditions.\textsuperscript{49}

Naturally, the language of Haiti’s masses was an indispensable part of Price-Mars’s analysis. Curiously, however, Price-Mars was not, at least in the 1920s, an outspoken proponent of Creole legitimation. Later, he would fall more squarely in the pro-Creole camp, but in 1928 his views of the language were somewhat mixed, praising its subtlety and expressiveness while referring to it as primitive, at times almost as a necessary evil:

\begin{quotation}
Pour le moment, il est le seul instrument dont nos masses et nous, nous nous servons pour l’expression de notre mutuelle pensée; instrument primitif à bien des égards, mais d’une sonorité et d’une délicatesse de touche inappreciables. Tel quel, idiome, dialecte, patois, son rôle social est donc un fait dont nous n'avons pas le pouvoir de nous dégager.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quotation}

Admittedly, Price-Mars was writing in a time when the language had no orthography, hardly any formal literature, and when linguistic theory still considered some languages pure and some primitive. Chomsky’s revolution was some thirty years off. Price-Mars himself had worked to

\textsuperscript{47} Jean Price-Mars, \textit{La vocation de l’élite} (Port-au-Prince: Edmond Chenet, 1919).
\textsuperscript{48} Jean Price-Mars, \textit{Ainsi parla l’oncle: Éssais d’ethnographie} (Compiègne, France: Imprimerie de Compiègne, 1928).
\textsuperscript{50} Price Mars, \textit{Ainsi parla}, 29.
learn French, and could use it like an academic, so its understandable that he might retain some of his class’s bias toward the language. Regardless of his specific views of Creole in 1928, *Ainsi parla l’oncle* triggered an intellectual movement through which Haitian intellectuals began to reject the ‘bovarysme’ of their class and turn a sympathetic gaze toward their homeland.

This new intellectual movement was reflected and articulated in Haitian literature. Influenced by Price-Mars’s writing, as well as the radical writers of the Harlem Renaissance and post-war Paris, Haiti’s Indigéniste poets rejected formalism, and reinvigorated the movement to create a uniquely Haitian literature. Writers like Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, Émile Roumer and Normil Sylvain drew inspiration from Africa and from the Haitian peasantry. Not surprisingly, they made much use of Creole. Like Price-Mars, however, they showed some hesitation with regard to the language. They tended to write in French, but used Creole when it served their particular experimental or evocative purposes. As is always the case with vernacular literature, the Indigéniste poets undoubtedly felt a tension between authentic expression and the possibility of international acceptance. Still, just as Price-Mars opened the door for a new conception of Haitian identity, the Indigéniste poets reopened the door to the use of Creole in literature.

As an artistic and intellectual movement, Indigénisme was short lived, losing steam with the end of the Occupation. But it laid the foundation the two dominant trends in Haitian literature and politics post-Occupation: Marxism and Noirisme. Beyond that, Haitian Indigénisme contributed greatly to international movements like Pan-Africanism and Négritude. As for its impact on the Creole question, Indigénisme played a critical role in weakening the cultural dislocation that had characterized elite discourses for much of Haiti’s history, and had been

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51 Dash, *Literature and Ideology*, 93, 95.
reaffirmed since the start of the Occupation. It was, therefore, an important step in the long process of Creole legitimation.

**Conclusion**

The effect of the U.S. Occupation on Haiti’s culture and national identity can hardly be overstated. The Creole legitimation project was shelved as Haitian thinkers reaffirmed their French heritage in order to negate the logic of the Occupation. In an unexpected turn of events the Americans picked up where the pro-Creole camp had left off, seeing what most Haitian elites had failed to notice—the dire need for communication with Haiti’s monolingual masses. Yet the American project to open lines of communication, like so many aspects of the Occupation, was implemented in such a way that it belittled and ostracized Haitians, and ultimately left the situation rather worse than it had been before the Occupation. Now those calling for Creole in the classrooms would have the additional challenge of disentangling their proposed reforms from the legacy of the infamous Service Technique.

The Indigéniste movement was a key part of this disentanglement. Price-Mars and the Indigéniste poets were among the first to challenge the logic that held that Haitian development must be based on French models. They laid the groundwork for a more objective debate around the status of Creole. By the end of the Occupation, however, when most of the Indigéniste poets moved on to other things, a sustained literary corpus in Creole was still some twenty years off, and official Creole was further still. It would take more than a new intellectual vogue and a few poems to dismantle Haiti’s centuries-old language hierarchy.
Chapter 3: The “Haitian Sixties,” 1934-1957

“When I raised the question as to the possibility of writing simple Creole and teaching adults to read Creole, considering that 85 to 90% of the population spoke only Creole and could not read, I was met with ridicule. ‘To begin with you could not write Creole. How would you possibly write such and such a sound? In any case, even if you could write Creole satisfactorily and if people could be taught to read and write it, the government would never allow it, since French is the official language.’ Met with this rebuff, we stopped talking about it.”

Ormonde McConnell, recalling 1937

“M ap ekri yon liv nan lang pa m
Mesye a yo mèt ri
M konn sa m ap fè
M gen 2 ou 3 bagay pou m di
M gen yon koze pou m koze
Ak moun pa m”¹

Félix Morisseau-Leroy, 1953

The end of the Occupation initiated a time of self-reflection throughout Haitian society. The years 1934 to 1957 were a period of intense discourse and intellectual productivity, enabled by long stints of political stability and relative civil liberty. It was by no measure a free and democratic society; authoritarian practices, extreme poverty and civil rights abuses continued to plague the nation. But compared to the repressiveness of the recent U.S. Occupation and the upcoming terror under the Duvalier regime, these twenty-three years were a rare period of openness and new possibilities. Press freedom was reestablished and party politics, hitherto unknown in the county, took shape. Ideologies like Marxism and Noirisme (a Haitian brand of

¹ Translation: “I’m writing in my own language/The gentlemen may laugh/I know what I’m doing/I have two or three things to say/I have something to talk about/With my people.”
black power) gained sizeable followings across the social strata. Matthew J. Smith calls the era “modern Haiti’s greatest moment of political promise,” and Michel-Rolph Trouillot refers to “an ideological tidal wave unprecedented in Haitian history.”

The worldwide spirit of change and revolt had a profound effect on Haiti during this twenty-three-year period. Hence, these years may fittingly be labelled the “Haitian Sixties.”

The years 1934 to 1946 share many continuities with the Occupation. Presidents Sténio Vincent (1930-1941) and Élie Lescot (1941-1946) were members of the traditional light-skinned elite, and very little changed in the economic or social structures of the country during their rule. Vincent was elected in the first relatively free election since the arrival of the Marines on an anti-Occupation platform, yet his policies were largely determined by a continued affiliation with the United States. In the heated years leading up to and including the Second World War, Vincent and Lescot adopted increasingly autocratic methods, and worked to curb the growth of radical politics at home. At this, however, they were largely unsuccessful. Two major currents of radical opposition emerged in the period: Marxism and Noirisme.

Haiti’s small but influential Marxist groups criticized Vincent’s policies as the reassertion of the Haitian elite’s traditional economic exploitation of the masses that had been temporarily blunted during the Occupation. Despite Vincent’s attempts to stamp out communism in the Republic, Haitian leftists organized to force Vincent’s resignation in 1941. The Noiristes believed the principal problem with Haitian society was the disdain that the light-skinned elite

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felt for the black masses and their African mentality. Drawing from and politicizing the works of Jean Price-Mars, the Noiristes believed that the disenfranchised dark-skinned majority must control the nation. The emerging black middle class saw themselves as the natural leaders of an authentic, regenerated Haiti.6

The Noiristes won a major victory in 1946, after a coup d’état toppled Lescot’s government. An expansion of civil liberties resulted in an explosion of newspapers and political parties.7 In this new climate of openness Noiriste rhetoric gained currency, and by August the Haitian Senate elected the first black president since before the Occupation, Dumarsais Estimé (1946-1950). Estimé’s election signalled a major sea change in Haitian politics, and was a moment of great hope for a large section of the population. His government created new social programs and made commendable attempts to include the masses in public life, but Estimé was unable to bring lasting improvements to the lives of the masses. The post-war economy went into decline, while factional struggles derailed reforms. Ultimately, Estimé was overthrown in another military coup d’état, and General Paul Magloire came to power. Magloire’s presidency (1950-1956) was characterized by a shift away from the radicalism of the 1940s, and an increase in state-sanctioned violence. Nonetheless, until 1957 intellectuals and artists still enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom, and some of the most significant works of Haitian literature were published during this final chapter of the Haitian Sixties.

Given the circumstances of the period, it is no surprise that the Creole movement grew to maturity in the Haitian Sixties. Several critical contributions to the Creole legitimation project

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5 Smith, Red and Black, 24.
6 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, State Against Nation, 192-193.
7 Smith, Red and Black, 83.
occurred in these years. First, in the late 1930s, two Haitian scholars, Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain and Jules Faine, undertook the first serious scientific studies of the language, its history and grammar. Second, the first comprehensive Creole orthographies were developed. Third, in cooperation with the Estimé government, UNESCO carried out a pioneering experiment in Creole education. And finally, Félix Morisseau-Leroy and his peers inaugurated a sustained literary corpus in Creole. These initiatives could well have occasioned Georges Sylvain’s linguistic revolution, but, once again, history got in the way. The election of François Duvalier in 1957 put a definitive end to the Haitian Sixties. Yet even before 1957 the linguistic revolution was by no means inevitable. It is significant that all three of the constitutions produced in this period (1935, 1946 and 1950) maintained the French official language clause from the Constitution of 1918 verbatim. This chapter examines the four major contributions to the Creole project, and the factors that continued to forestall the linguistic revolution.

**Creole goes to the academy: Comhaire-Sylvain and Faine**

In the 1930s there was still a widely-held belief that creoles and pidgins were not in fact languages. Creole genesis was often described as a process of reduction. In 1936, for example, historian Franck L. Schœll explained that Haitian Creole was merely French with “une grammaire très simplifiée, une syntaxe primitive, l’élimination de tels mots secondaires: auxiliaires, particules de relations, etc…, la réduction des verbes et des pronoms personnels à une seule forme, sans compter, de nombreuses élisions, aphasis et apocopes.” If Creole was nothing more than a rudimentary form of French, the logical implication was that Haiti’s

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linguistic problems would be solved if the population would just finish learning French. Creole legitimation was therefore a fool’s errand. For those seeking a linguistic revolution, it was necessary to prove once and for all that Creole was an autonomous language.

Two Haitian scholars answered the call simultaneously in the middle of the 1930s. Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain’s doctoral thesis *Le Créole haïtien: Morphologie et syntaxe* (Wetteren, Belgium, 1936) and Jules Faine’s monograph *Philologie créole* (Port-au-Prince, 1936) are often cited as the first scientific treatises on the language. They applied techniques of modern linguistics to show empirically that Creole is a language in its own right and not merely a simplified French dialect. Comhaire-Sylvain and Faine’s analyses differed on several key aspects; they came to vastly different conclusions on the origins and genetic composition of the language. Taken together, however, they provided a dialectical framework for the Creole debates of the 1940s and 1950s.

Faine and Comhaire-Sylvain both affirmed in no uncertain terms that Creole is a full-fledged language. In Comhaire-Sylvain’s introduction, she calls Creole “la langue populaire et familière de la république d’Haïti” and then summarizes the country’s linguistic dichotomy, making a neat distinction between the two languages. Faine was even more explicit in his pronouncement. He explains that in Haiti, “parallèlement au français, existe une autre langue, la vraie langue du pays, usitée, celle-ci, dans toutes les couches sociales, parlée par trois millions et demi d’haïtiens: c’est le créole.” They both delved deep into the syntax and morphology of the

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language to show that it is a rational and sophisticated linguistic system, quite distinct from
French, and fully capable of complex expression.

Beyond this fundamental assumption, however, the two studies diverged considerably. Specifically, they disagreed on the language family to which Creole belonged. Faine saw it as “Une langue néo-romane issue de la langue d’oïl, en passant par les anciens dialectes normand, picard, angevin, poitevin, et composée en outre de mots empruntés à l’anglais et à l’espagnol et, dans une faible mesure, à l’indien caraïbe et à des idiomes africains.” Comhaire-Sylvain, conversely, explained that “Nous sommes en présence d’un français coulé dans le moule de la syntaxe africaine ou, comme on classe généralement les langues d’après leur parenté syntaxique, d’une langue éwé à vocabulaire français.” In other words, Faine minimized the overall influence of African languages on Creole while Comhaire-Sylvain saw Creole as an essentially African language, but one that was relexified with a French vocabulary. Both of these theories have since been contested, but in the 1940s and 1950s they laid the foundation for two conflicting schools of thought regarding Creole.

Just as the American Occupation had extended the use of Creole while simultaneously delegitimizing the project by associating the language with a watered down education program, Comhaire-Sylvain and Faine’s joint legacy proved to be similarly paradoxical. Without question they brought unprecedented weight to the view of Creole as a true language. Their books were reviewed in popular American and European academic journals, and many Haitian and foreign

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12 Faine, Philologie, xi.
13 Comhaire-Sylvain, Créole haïtien, 178.
linguists and anthropologists subsequently took up the study of Creole. But their contradictory conclusions prompted something of a schism in the Creole movement and, in some ways, slowed down the very process they were hoping to usher into a new phase.

In the 1940s and 1950s those studying Creole typically aligned themselves with one or other point of view. Shortly after Faine and Comhairé-Sylvain published their influential works a Haitian intellectual named Charles Fernand Pressoir turned to the study of Creole. Although he was more willing than Faine to acknowledge African influences on the language, he ultimately saw Creole as a Romance language, saying that “il est sorti du français comme les langues néo-romanes sont issues du latin.” American linguist Robert A. Hall, despite collaborating with Comhaire-Sylvain on his 1953 book, also believed that “Haitian Creole is to be be classed among the Romance languages, and specifically the northern group of the Gallo-Romance branch.” It bears repeating that, like Faine, these scholars by no means saw Creole as a dialect of French. It was, in Pressoir’s words, “une langue au même titre que le français et l’anglais,” or, as Hall put it, “It is not a dialect of French but an independent language, about as closely related to French as (say) modern Italian is to Latin.” Unlike the francophile Haitian nationalists of the Occupation, they firmly believed Creole should be used in education and supported the creation of a standard

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Creole orthography to aid in that goal. But their view of Creole’s kindred relationship to French affected the way they approached these issues.

In the late 1930s, when the American influence was still palpable, Comhaire-Sylvain’s perspective had great resonance in Haiti. By focusing on Creole’s non-European linguistic roots she did for the language what Price-Mars had done for the culture more broadly. Not surprisingly, those affiliated with the Indigéniste and Noiriste movements tended to adhere to Comhaire-Sylvain’s perspective. In 1938 the founders of the Noiriste newspaper Les Griots, ethnologist Lorimer Denis and François Duvalier, made the Price-Mars/Comhaire-Sylvain connection explicit in the Declaration that opened the newspaper’s second issue: “Les mille et une tribus venues d’Afrique ont fusionné leurs cultes respectifs arrivant par ainsi à un syncrétisme religieux: le Vaudou. Mais dans le domaine linguistique il fallait que les multiples dialectes suivissent le même processus jusqu’à l’élaboration d’un patois: le créole.”18 In 1939, novelist Phillip Thoby-Marcelin restated the position thus: “en dépit de son vocabulaire empruntée à certains dialectes français, le créole demure par ses formes grammaticales (système de conjugaison et de déclinaison), son caractère agglutinatif, une langue africaine.”19 As the Noiristes gained political clout in the time leading up to the ‘Revolution of 1946,’ the Africanist view of Creole became associated with a political position and the two views of the fundamental nature of the language grew more and more polarized.

As the Creole legitimation project developed throughout the Haitian Sixties, it did so in the context of two opposing theories regarding the fundamental character of the language. Faine

and Comhaire-Sylvain dealt a serious blow to the argument that Creole was not a proper language, but they also unintentionally hampered the Creole movement by dividing it between their incompatible theories. It is worth noting that neither Faine nor Comhaire-Sylvain was adamantly committed to an extreme position; Faine revised his thesis in his next study—\textit{Le créole dans l’univers}, published just three years after \textit{Philologie créole}—and Comhaire-Sylvain later admitted that her mentor had insisted she include the definitive statement about ‘an Ewe language with a French vocabulary.’

But it was too late. The schism meant that the Creole movement would thenceforth face opposition from within as well as from without.

**Créole or kreyòl?: The search for an orthography**

It might seem surprising that a finicky disagreement over theoretical linguistics could have practical implications for the democratization of a country, but in Haiti that was precisely what happened. The clear division of those working on the Creole question into two camps meant that all of the as-yet unsettled aspects of the vernacular legitimation project would now be approached and evaluated from two contradictory frames of reference. This is clearly illustrated in the Haitian Creole orthography debates which began in the 1940s and have not been entirely resolved to date. The seemingly straightforward task of creating an orthography became a matter of bitter controversy. Anthropologists Bambi Schlieffen and Rachelle Charlier Doucet have explained that although the processes of transforming a spoken language to written form have often been viewed as scientific, arbitrary, or unproblematic […] in Haiti] arguments about orthography reflect competing concerns about representations of Haitianess at

the national and international level, how speakers wish to define themselves to each other, as well as to represent themselves as a nation.\textsuperscript{21}

Of course this is not unique to Haiti. Orthographic debates have been a feature of many postcolonial nation-building projects in the twentieth century. In Bangladesh, for instance, the Language Movement opposed the adoption of the Arabic Script for the Bengali language, while the Turkish government has discriminated against the Kurdish minority by banning the use of the letters $x$, $w$ and $q$, which exist in Kurdish but not in Turkish. In the Haitian case, orthography debates were complicated by the predetermined categories that resulted from the Faine/Comhaire-Sylvain schism.

Writers had been taking the trouble to render Creole into writing for centuries. Inevitably this meant that a makeshift writing system had emerged organically. The obvious lexical connection between the two languages and the French-language education of Haiti’s literate minority resulted in a method of transcribing Creole speech based on French orthographic rules. Creole writing was comprehensible to those who could read French, but different writers’ relative fidelity to French etymology on the one hand and to Creole phonology on the other meant there was little consistency between authors. Regional and social variations in Creole speech complicated the matter further still. For example, the Creole word zwazo meaning bird or birds and derived from the French \textit{les oiseaux} was rendered ‘z’oéseaux’ by Oswald Durand in 1896, ‘zouèzeaux’ by Georges Sylvain in 1901, ‘zouézo’ by Earl C. Beaulac of the U.S. Marine Corps in 1921, and ‘zoiseaux’ by Jules Faine in 1936. In view of such fluctuation, those

supporting the wider use of Creole in official settings were increasingly aware of the necessity of an agreed upon orthography.

There had been at least one attempt at standardization prior to the Haitian Sixties. In the early-1920s a Haitian engineer named Frédéric Doret published some Creole-language instructional materials and proposed an orthography. Doret adhered as nearly as possible to French orthographic rules as he was primarily interested in using Creole as an aid in the learning of French. In the midst of the education struggles of the 1920s his work was largely ignored.22 It was not until after Faine and Comhaire-Sylvain published their influential studies that interest in Creole standardization began to increase.

For their part, Faine and Comhaire-Sylvain’s orthographic choices highlighted their contrasting views of the language. Faine rendered his Creole text in a modified French orthography and laid out a reasoned argument for his choice.23 He anticipated the impending debates, saying that etymology and phonetics were the two typical bases for writing systems and that each had its advantages and disadvantages. He pointed out many cases where French orthography would not work for Creole transcription, but ultimately decided that French etymology should be the primary determining factor in making the writing system since Haitian schools would continue to teach French. Comhaire-Sylvain made no formal proposal of her own, but of course she had to represent the language in some way. She opted for an ostensibly neutral phonetic transcription. The effect, however, was a version of Creole that was decidedly un-French in appearance. For sake of comparison, consider the following: for the Creole phrase *kisa ou te manje* (what did you eat) Faine would write ‘quiça ou té manger’ while Comhaire-Sylvain

would render the same phrase ‘kisa u te mâžé.’ Again, neither was trying to cause controversy. Comhaire-Sylvain made no comment on the how the language should be written and Faine was careful to present his suggestions as tentative, noting that “En matière d’orthographe, c’est l’usage seul qui, en définitive, fixe les règles.” Regardless, subsequent commentators on the orthography question were sharply divided over how French the language should look.

The most extreme anti-French proposal came predictably from a member of the Noiriste movement. Théodora Holly was a teacher, an intellectual, a women’s and children’s rights activist, a Pan-Africanist and a regular contributor to _Les Griots_. She was affiliated with the international organizations like the United Negro Improvement Association and the International Council of Women of the Darker Races. Her brother, Arthur Holly, was a racial theorist and an ethnologist who wrote on Vodou and Haiti’s African heritage. In 1938 she penned an article about the Vai syllabary—a non-Latin writing system developed in the early nineteenth century by the Vai people of West Africa—and wondered whether “un alphabet syllabique entièrement original […] créé exprès pour le dialecte haïtien” could help to solve the problem of illiteracy in the country.

Nothing seems to have come from her proposal.

A representative of the other major ideological current of the day, Marxism, also proposed an orthography. Christian Beaulieu was one of the founders of the Parti Communiste Haïtien along with his friend Jacques Roumain. An educator who had studied at Columbia University, he was undoubtedly influenced by John Dewey’s Progressive Education Movement which rejected classical European models and emphasized active learning. In 1939 he published an article entitled “Pour écrire le créole” as a response to those who opposed Creole-language

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24 Faine, _Philologie_, 79-80.
education on the basis of its lack of an orthography. Like Faine, he weighed the pros and cons of etymological and phonetic orthographies, noting that one might be seduced by the simplicity and ease of learning of the latter. Ultimately, though, he committed to a French-based system because in his view the preponderance of homophones that Creole has inherited from French would make a phonetic system confusing. He gives the example of the phonemes /ba/ and /ka/ which each have six meanings in Creole. He then laid out a list of forty-seven rules for adapting French spellings to Creole. He admitted his system was not perfect, but insisted it was superior to the ‘current anarchy.’ Beaulieu’s work won some followers, but his premature death in 1943 put an end to the project.

The first widely used Creole orthography was developed between 1940 and 1943 under the direction of a Northern Irish Methodist missionary named H. Ormonde McConnell. In his missionary studies McConnell had learned French via the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) before relocating to Haiti in 1933. He quickly learned that French competence alone would be inadequate for his work with Haitian peasants. He began inquiring about the use of Creole, but was met with a typical response. In his memoirs he recalled that

The use of Creole in church was unthinkable. When I raised the question as to the possibility of writing simple Creole and teaching adults to read Creole, considering that 85 to 90% of the population spoke only Creole and could not read, I was met with ridicule. ‘To begin with you could not write Creole. How would you possibly write such and such a sound? In any case, even if you could write Creole satisfactorily and if people could be taught to read and write it, the government would never allow it, since French is the official language.’ Met with this rebuff, we stopped talking about it. But we didn’t stop thinking and praying about it.

27 Beaulieu, “Pour écrire,” 598.
Around 1940 he began working on an orthography. As a foreigner, McConnell was outside of the Faine/Comhaire-Sylvain divide. His main concern was the efficient teaching of Creole literacy for the sake of spreading the gospel. He was aware of Faine’s orthography but believed it was useless for Haitian adults who would likely never learn French. Consequently, McConnell’s orthography was the first attempt to standardize a phonetic writing system for Creole.

Without a doubt McConnell contributed significantly to the Creole legitimation project. One of his most vocal critics conceded that “malgré ses erreurs […] le Pasteur McConnell demeure un pionnier qui a droit à la reconnaissance des Haïtiens.”29 He helped to establish the first Creole newspaper in 1940. He oversaw the printing of Creole-language books on agriculture, arithmetic and hygiene. He helped to break down the stigma around the use of Creole in Christian religious practices. He set up several learning centres which taught thousand of adults to read and write Creole and held public demonstrations of the effectiveness of the method.30 He met with Vincent and Lescot and representatives of the Department of Public Instruction, and supervised a state-sponsored adult literacy program beginning in 1943. His effect on the popularization of written Creole can hardly be overstated. His foreignness, however, meant that most of the Haitian population ultimately rejected his particular version of Creole.

McConnell based his methods on the work of an American missionary and literacy activist named Frank Laubach. Laubach had developed his method of teaching literacy in the Philippines in the 1910s. McConnell began corresponding with Laubach in 1939 and arranged for him to visit Haiti in 1943. While in Port-au-Prince, Laubach suggested a handful of minor

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29 Pressoir, Débats, 68.
changes to the system, which was thenceforth known as the McConnell-Laubach orthography. Ironically, although Laubach’s suggestions were intended to facilitate subsequent French learning (replacing u with ou and sh with ch), his contribution meant the orthography was forever associated with the United States. Those who preferred a French-style orthography thought it looked ‘too English’ with its abundant ks, ws and ys, while those with a Noiriste bent criticized the system as a Trojan Horse which would enable continued U.S. influence in Haiti.\textsuperscript{31}

To their credit, the association between McConnell and Lescot’s pro-American economic policies was not unwarranted. In addition to aiding American Protestant missionaries, McConnell was contracted by the Société Haïtiano-Américaine de Développement Agricole (SHADA) to publish a Creole language learning manual in English for Americans with agriculture interests in the country.\textsuperscript{32}

The rural masses, who could have benefitted most from McConnell’s work, rejected the orthography for more complicated reasons. Rural Haiti in the early 1940s was deeply affected by the so-called anti-superstition campaign of 1941-1942. Orchestrated by French members of the local Catholic clergy, the campaign resulted in the large-scale, systematic destruction of Vodou temples and sacred objects. The raids have been explained as a reaction by the Catholic Church to the loss of its privileged position in Haitian politics, and to the growth of Noirisme as a political option.\textsuperscript{33} Interestingly, Matthew J. Smith points out that another instigating factor for the campaign was the growth of Protestantism in rural Haiti—which was of course intimately tied to McConnell’s work.\textsuperscript{34} This “trilateral religious conflict,” to borrow a phrase from Laurent Dubois,  

\textsuperscript{31} Pressoir, \textit{Débats}, 67.  
\textsuperscript{32} McConnell, \textit{Haiti Diary}, 69.  
\textsuperscript{33} Nicholls, \textit{From Dessalines to Duvalier}, 181.  
\textsuperscript{34} Smith, \textit{Red and Black}, 48-49.
simultaneously forced Haitian Catholic churches to begin using Creole in their masses.\textsuperscript{35} In any case, President Lescot gave only tacit support to the anti-superstition campaign, but his presidency was forever associated with the event. As a result, Lescot was tremendously unpopular among Haiti’s rural population by the time he launched his adult literacy campaigns and rural education reforms. Consequently, McConnell’s writing system failed to take root in rural Haiti.\textsuperscript{36}

Ultimately the Haitian government abandoned the McConnell-Laubach orthography altogether in 1951. Haitian linguist Yves Dejean considers it to have been a perfectly good writing system, and has stated that the official rejection was due to “la pression d’une faction d’une intelligentsia totalement incompétente en matière d’invention de système graphique et assez peu pénétrée des intérêts de la masse haïtienne.”\textsuperscript{37} As we have seen, however, it was not only the traditional francophile intelligentsia who had problems with the writing system. Its associations with the United States and President Lescot, and its non-French appearance made it incompatible with Haitian identity as perceived by several different groups within the society. Regardless, by the early 1950s another orthography was quickly surpassing McConnell-Laubach as the preferred system.

In 1947 Haitian philologist Charles Fernand Pressoir published his \textit{Débats sur le créole et le folklore}, and summarized the problems the McConnell-Laubach system. He said that it was a nearly perfect phonetic system, but it failed to take into account that “le créole est une langue

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{35} Dubois, \textit{Aftershocks}, 37; Smith, \textit{Red and Black}, 50.
\end{footnotes}
mixte dans un pays à traditions françaises.” He took particular issue with McConnell’s
treatment of nasalization and his use of the non-French grapheme w. McConnell had used a
circumflex to represent nasal sounds, but Pressoir argued that Creole must not use a French
diacritic for a completely different purpose. To illustrate, McConnell had written the Creole word
konprann meaning understand as ‘kôprân’ while Pressoir preferred ‘konprann.’ Interestingly,
Pressoir had no problem with the non-French grapheme k, but he suggested that w be replaced
with corresponding French multigraphs: ‘wa’ became ‘oi’ and ‘wè’ became ‘ouè.’ In the end, his
proposed Creole orthography was essentially McConnell’s phonetic system but with minor
concessions to French which were meant to facilitate the learning of the latter language. More
importantly, it was Haitian in origin and thus won support from those who had opposed the
‘foreign’ McConnell-Laubach system. Pressoir collaborated with the Minister of Education Lélio
Faublas and a special commission and finalized the so-called Faublas-Pressoir orthography in
January of 1951.

At that point it must have seemed like the orthography debates had been resolved. Indeed,
the Faublas-Pressoir system was used in official contexts for the next 24 years. But universal
consensus was a long way off. Protestant missionaries continued to use the McConnell-Laubach
system, while the local Catholic Church published materials in its own French-Style
orthography. Haitian authors like Emile Roumer and Jacques Stephen Alexis continued using
their own invented orthographies. Well-intentioned foreigners like Robert A. Hall, Margaret

38 Pressoir, Débats, 67.
39 Dejean, “Comment écrire,” 200. The Faublas-Pressoir orthography is also know as the ONEC (Office
nationale d'éducation communautaire) and ONAAC (Office nationale d’alphabétisation et d’action
communautaire) orthography.
40 Schlieffen and Doucet, “The ‘Real’ Haitian Creole,” 185; Emmanuel Védrine, Annotated Bibliography
on Haitian Creole (Coconut Creek: Educa Vision, 2004), 401.
Churchill and Paul Berry continued to suggest improvements to the writing system. This orthographic patchwork outlived the Haitian Sixties, so that by the time Duvalier came to power one could reasonably spell a word as common as the indefinite article *yon* at least seven different ways (*yon*, *youn*, *you*, *yioun*, *ou*, *oun* and *gnou*). Clearly one cannot speak of a standardized orthography in this period.

**First-language education in the Haitian Sixties**

The absence of consensus over the orthography was a major impediment to the linguistic revolution that seemed primed to occur during the Haitian Sixties. The orthography question was intimately connected to the matter of education. In 1939 Christian Beaulieu noted that “l’argument suprême auquel semblent s’accrocher désespérément les adversaires de l’Enseignement par le Créole est l’absence d’une orthographe spéciale.” Until the language was standardized any attempt at teaching first-language literacy in Haiti would be bogged down in the morass of linguistic controversy. Nonetheless, the period saw some small but important steps toward first-language instruction becoming a real possibility in Haiti.

In the years following the Occupation there were diverse voices calling for Creole in the classroom. Several aforementioned writers made bold denunciations of the present system and compelling arguments for first-language education. Jules Faine, Christian Beaulieu, François Duvalier and Lorimer Denis had all made such statements during Vincent’s presidency. Vincent, like countless presidents before him, made minor attempts to reform education, but his administration does not seem to have made any attempt to formally introduce Creole in

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42 Beaulieu, “Pour écrire,” 589.
education. When his term ended in 1941, denunciations of the state of education were as prevalent as ever. That year, American sociologist James G. Leyburn published his celebrated study *The Haitian People*, and made this pessimistic observation:

A practically insoluble problem, given current attitudes, is that of the language to be used in rural schools […]. Now every Haitian, high and low, knows Créole, so that the question immediately arising is: Why should not the rural teachers teach in Créole? The answer involves every sort of inward prejudice, yearning, and instilled doctrine. The teacher is almost sure to be struggling up to the élite class, and to require him to deny himself the luxury of speaking French (to him almost a patent of nobility) would be heart-rending. Likewise, he would have his ‘good’ reason for teaching school in French: the unity of the country demands a single language; all schoolbooks are in French, none in Créole; and Créole has no literature, nor even an accepted spelling. The fact remains that except in rare instances all schoolteachers use French to their pupils, and not one peasant out of a hundred can even guess what is being said in that language.43

That same year, a young writer named Félix Morisseau-Leroy, who had just visited Cuba and observed the superior quality of education on that island, denounced the Haitian system saying,

Pour les 90% du peuple haïtien, le français est une langue morte, dont les mots ne provoquent aucun réflexe. […] Pourquoi l’instruction primaire n’est-elle pas donnée en créole? On objecte qu’il est difficile d’écrire le créole. Le créole, issu du français avec des apports de l’espagnol, de l’anglais, etc. est aussi difficile d’écrire que n’importe qu’elle autre langue. On objecte que le livre créole n’existe pas. De jeunes écrivains s’offrent pour les écrire. On trouve d’autres objections.44

Evidently the old arguments against first-language education in Haiti were still commonplace forty years after Georges Sylvain made his prescient proposal. What is interesting in both excerpts, though, is that neither Leyburn nor Morisseau-Leroy laid the blame on the conservative elites. Leyburn—whose study focused primarily on the Haitian ‘caste system’—saw rural teachers as the most resistant to the use of Creole. Morisseau-Leroy was never the one to avoid

criticizing the establishment, but he too concluded that “l’opposition à l’enseignement par le créole, la lenteur mise par les jeunes pédagogues haïtiens à expérimenter l’enseignement par le créole viennent plutôt d’un faux orgueil que de l’obscurantisme des générations passées.” In other words, even if the policy-makers had sanctioned the use of Creole in schools, they would not be able to implement it unilaterally. It was becoming clear that the linguistic revolution would depend on the cooperation of all classes.

This may help to explain the failure of Lescot’s education reforms in the early 1940s. Under the leadership of Education Minister Maurice Dartigue, Lescot’s administration made a small but significant concession to Creole in the classroom. The Réforme Dartigue called for teachers to use Creole for the first two to three years of schooling in order to aid monolingual students in their transition to exclusively French-language education. But the memory of the Service Technique meant the rural masses were skeptical of government attempts to set up a two-tiered education system like the one that the Americans had established. Lescot’s education reform in the early 1940s failed partly due to its association with his post-Occupation pro-American economic policies. The use of the ‘too English’ McConnell-Laubach orthography only served to emphasize the fact.

The Lescot period is also noteworthy for the story of Creole because it marks the true beginning of adult literacy programs in Haiti. We have already seen that Ormonde McConnell worked with the Lescot government to launch an adult literacy campaign in the early 1940s with meagre results. It was significant, however, in that subsequent administrations have carried on

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45 Morisseau-Leroy, Destin, 47.
the work to teach Creole literacy to uneducated adults.\textsuperscript{47} It came to be expected of them. For
many years adult literacy programs were virtually the only non-controversial avenue for the
official use of Creole.\textsuperscript{48} Other non-governmental groups also took up the project. Besides
Christian missionaries, Marxist organizations and the young labour movement under its
celebrated leader Daniel Fignolé provided adult literacy classes in the 1940s.\textsuperscript{49} The proliferation
of adult literacy programs is an important aspect of the Creole legitimation process because it
provided a benign locus for discussions of things like orthography and pedagogy. Even when
there was no chance of Creole becoming the language of instruction in Haitian primary and
secondary schools the question of adult literacy was a convenient, non-threatening way to
approach the issue.

After Dumarsais Estimé’s election in 1946 effective education reform became a real
possibility. Whereas Lescot had to contend with the memory of the Service Technique and the
anti-superstition campaign, the urban and rural masses generally saw Estimé as a president who
had their interests in mind. The very fact that a dark-skinned man from humble origins had
become president seems to have initiated a major change in perceptions of education among the
popular classes.\textsuperscript{50} For the first time in generations, rural Haitians were willing to trust their
government. Primary school enrolment is estimated to have risen 45 percent during Estimé’s
term in office.\textsuperscript{51} He even made history in 1947 when, under his leadership, Haiti became the first

\textsuperscript{47} Paul Berry, “Literacy and the Question of Creole,” in \textit{The Haitian Potential: Research and Resources of Haiti}, Vera Rubin and Richard P. Schaedel, eds. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1975), 97; Devonish, \textit{Language and Liberation}, 55.


\textsuperscript{49} Smith, \textit{Red and Black}, 123.

\textsuperscript{50} Kléber Viélot, “Primary Education in Haiti,” in \textit{The Haitian Potential: Research and Resources of Haiti}, Vera Rubin and Richard P. Schaedel, eds. (New York City: Teachers College Press, 1975), 113.

\textsuperscript{51} Smith, \textit{Red and Black}, 112.
nation in the world to request and receive financial and technical assistance from the newly-established UNESCO. It seems evident that Estimé had the will and the popular support to fundamentally reform education in Haiti, yet he ultimately failed to bring lasting change.

Curiously, he seems to have made no attempt to bring Creole to Haitian classrooms.\textsuperscript{52} This is all the more surprising when one considers the outcomes of UNESCO’s Pilot Project in Fundamental Education, which was carried out in the isolated Marbial Valley in southern Haiti from 1947 to 1953. The Pilot Project was an ambitious attempt to adapt modern education techniques to the particularities of Haitian culture and society. Local and foreign experts were recruited. UNESCO sent the celebrated Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux to do a field survey of the underdeveloped and overpopulated valley over the summer of 1948. The language problem quickly became apparent. “Any program for popular education in Haiti must use Creole if it is to make contact with the people,” said Pilot Project assistant director Emmanuel Gabriel, a Haitian specialist in fundamental education.\textsuperscript{53} In September 1948, ten new education centres began teaching Creole literacy to children and adults. The Marbial experiment quickly became a centre of interest for those concerned with Haitian education reform, as well as parties with a stake in first-language education elsewhere in the world.

Unfortunately, though perhaps inevitably, the UNESCO team was distracted by the orthography question. In the June 1949 edition of their monthly journal they made the following comments on the issue:

preparing books and readers in Haitian Creole poses a knotty problem. The fact is that Creole, which is a mixture of ancient French and West African tribal languages has been written in at least four different ways with different alphabets.

\textsuperscript{52} Paul Berry, “Literacy,” 97.
The orthography and grammar have never been satisfactorily established. This explains why one finds signs and posters, written in Creole, which spell UNESCO in different ways. ‘Ounesco,’ ‘Unesco,’ and even ‘Inesko’ are thus commonly seen.54

In 1948 the Faublas-Pressoir system had yet to be finalized and Haitians were still bitterly divided on the subject, so the Pilot Project staff did what seemed natural. They hired a foreign expert to settle the matter. Robert A. Hall, an American linguist from Cornell, was called in to do a comprehensive study of Creole grammar and vocabulary and to develop a standardized alphabet. Hall collaborated with Alfred Métraux, Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain and Ormonde McConnell to produce his impressive study *Haitian Creole: Grammar, Texts, Vocabulary* (1953).55 That said, Hall and UNESCO do not seem to have sensed the way the orthography debates were going. The McConnell-Laubach orthography had been rejected because of its association with the United States and because the strongly phonetic system made it look ‘too English.’ Yet UNESCO hired Hall, an American, who produced an orthography that was virtually identical to the McConnell-Laubach phonetic system. Hall’s work had little impact on the development of a standardized Creole orthography, and the educational materials UNESCO produced were obsolete within a decade.56 Worse still, when the Pilot Project received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, much of it went to cover Hall’s fruitless orthography project.

Despite UNESCO’s misreading of the orthography question, the positive results of their Creole literacy program were an important contribution to the normalization of first-language education in Haiti. In 1949, on the basis of their findings, the UN published a hefty 327-page

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report detailing their recommendations to Estimé’s government. The authors succinctly problematized Haiti’s language dichotomy with regard to modern pedagogical techniques. They acknowledged the “inestimable value” of French, which “opens the doors to the greatest treasures of western civilization,” but went on to insist that it was not an acceptable medium for a Haiti’s national education system, saying:

The undeniable fact is that at present all Haitians speak and understand Creole, but that French has very little functional use in the lives of the peasants [...] In their formative years most Haitian children think, feel, and express themselves in their mother tongue, which is Creole. [...] Learning is based on experience. It is an elementary law that one passes from the know to the new and unknown. A language that is not spoken or used cannot serve as a vehicle for direct vicarious experience.57

By summarizing a fundamental principle of modern pedagogy, they delineated the futility of Haiti’s French-based education system. Accordingly, they made a number of recommendations, including a nation-wide Creole and French literacy project overseen by a “committee of interested Haitian leaders,” the formation of a new department of literacy within the Ministry of Education, and the publication of textbooks and weekly periodicals in Creole.58

With such a clearly defined program, and with the will and popular support to implement it, why did Estimé fail to bring about a fundamental change in Haitian education? In one account of the period, Jamaican language rights activist Hubert Devonish’s maintains that Estimé and his fellows “did not see it in their own best interest to pursue a language policy which would have significantly attacked the linguistic status quo at that time.”59 While it is true that the administration was culpable of certain well-established forms of corruption, self-interest is not an

58 Ibid., 46-50.
59 Devonish, Language and Liberation, 57.
adequate explanation. Estimé’s inability to institute first-language education is part of his larger failure to improve social conditions more generally. The radical coalition that led the Revolution of 1946 fell apart shortly after Estimé’s election. The end of the Second World War and Estimé’s attempts to nationalize Haitian banking and agriculture resulted in dramatic economic decline as exemplified by the collapse of the banana industry in 1949. Furthermore, he was unable to curb the power of the military, which ultimately forced him from office in the spring of 1950. He had received the UN’s report less than a year before.

Once General Paul Magloire took power the hopes for a linguistic revolution in education seemed to slip away. Despite his decidedly authoritarian style and his initial widespread popular support, Magloire too failed to revitalize Haitian education. Amid economic collapse (though with a façade of prosperity), a cozy alliance with the traditional elites, and a gradual shift away from the radicalism of the 1940s, Magloire was unable or unwilling to implement the UN’s suggestions. During his term the voices calling for Creole in the classroom were as loud and numerous as ever. In a speech for the 150th anniversary of Haitian independence the great Jean Price-Mars damned the education system as “simplement odieux,” and “la plus flagrante et la plus dangereuse des injustices en plein 20e siècle.”

The following year *Time* correspondent Edith Efron wrote:

> In most primary schools throughout the Republic one may find ill-paid middle-class teachers proud of their relative mastery of the French tongue, conducting their classes in this language in front of a group of awestruck uncomprehending children […]. No Creole texts are used by the Haitian school system; the language of the country is unused, untaught.

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The Magloire administration did make some minor contributions to Creole education. As noted, they arranged a temporary ceasefire in the orthography debates by giving official support to the Faublas-Pressoir system. The eponymous Lélion Faublas worked tirelessly as director of the government’s adult literacy campaign, and oversaw the publication of textbooks and periodicals in Creole. But Haitian children continued learning—or failing to learn—in French.

**Félix Morisseau-Leroy and the (re)birth of Creole literature**

By far the most significant contribution to the Creole movement from the Magloire period, however, had nothing to do with public policy. The early fifties witnessed a surge of creativity among Haitian authors, and resulted in a corpus of Creole-language literature as had never been seen before. There had long been impassioned pleas for the use of Creole as a formal literary language. “Notre créole nationale méritait une place dans l’Art, dans l’universelle République de lettres,” Louis Borno had said in his preface to *Cric? Crac!*, and the sentiment was echoed time and again through the twentieth century. Yet it was not until 1953 that the first foundational works of a self-sufficient Creole literature finally appeared. As a result, after five decades of slow progress at the hands of waffling governments, linguists, foreign missionaries and international organizations, Haitian authors reclaimed their place as the vanguard of the Creole project.

Of course the popular language had never disappeared from Haitian literature. It is significant that the works of the École Nationale proved to have staying power. Justin Lhérisson, the most avid user of Creole, earned a particular place of esteem in the nation’s literary culture.

*La Famille des Pitite-Caille* was republished in 1927 and *Zoune chez sa ninnaine* in 1953. A

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63 Borno, Short Preface to *Cric? Crac!*, 17.
biography of Lhérisson appeared in 1941 and *Pitiite-Caille* was adapted to the stage two years later. Poets and playwrights continued to dabble with Creole, and the few novels published between 1915 and 1950 tended to include the occasional Creole phrase or song. Such was the case with Jacques Romain’s acclaimed *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1943). The most important linguistic feature of the novel, however, was Roumain’s use of creolized French. He devised a brilliant solution to the age-old problem of authenticity versus accessibility by applying Creole rhythms and syntactical features to French dialogue. The international success of the novel was a boon for Haitian literature generally, but one is left to wonder whether Roumain’s innovative linguistic compromise forestalled the birth of a serious and sustained Creole literature.

The call for Creole to be used as a formal literary language was finally answered in the early 1950s by a forty-year-old civil servant named Félix Morisseau-Leroy. Morisseau, as he was known, had taught mathematics in his hometown of Jacmel, and had seen first hand the inherent problems in the Haitian education system. Like Christian Beaulieu and Lélio Faublas, Morisseau had earned his Masters in Education at Columbia University and was thus acquainted with modern pedagogical theory including John Dewey’s Progressive Education Movement. He had held posts in the Ministry of Education, and had been involved with UNESCO’s Pilot Project in Marbial. It is no wonder he was passionately committed to first-language education.

He understood, however, that one of the major arguments against Creole education was that there was no Creole literature on which to base it. Morisseau was himself an author; he had

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published a collection of poems in 1940 and a novel in 1946, both in French. As such he understood the tension Haitian writers felt between artistic authenticity and the hopes of finding an audience abroad. He came to believe, however, that it was foolish for Haitian authors to think that they would only be accepted in the wider world if they wrote in polished French. Two characters in his 1946 novel Récolte discuss this idea:

—Tu penses qu’il faudrait essayer d’écrire en créole ?
—Oui, pourquoi pas? Jean Rictus a écrit en argot. Il a dit tout ce qu’il a voulu dire.
— Tu crois que le créole ne risquerait pas d’isoler le poète haïtien davantage du reste du monde?
—En tout cas, ceux qui écrivent de petits sonnets insignifiants dans le plus pur français classique ne sont pas moins isolés, puisque, dis-toi bien, aucun lecteur étranger sérieux ne perd son temps à lire ces singeries, à moins que ce soit pour en rire.66

Furthermore, in his view the role of the author was primarily to bring about social change, and not simply to win acclaim. As he wrote in 1939: “l’écrivain qui ne se sent pas une mission sociale n’est pas digne de notre respect.”67 With all this in mind, Morisseau turned resolutely to producing literature in Creole by the early 1950s.

In 1953 Morisseau produced two works in Creole: Dyakout, a collection of poetry, and Antigôn, a play adapted from Sophocles’s classic tragedy Antigone. He wanted to prove that the language was capable of infinitely complex expression, and therefore a suitable medium for literature. The poems in Dyakout are considered the first to use Creole as a true literary language, and not as merely a way of depicting Haitian reality. As Haitian Creole poet Georges Castera later explained, “c’est dans Dyakout que l’on trouve les premières tentatives de métaphores non

lexicalisées, c’est à dire des métaphores qui ne font pas du fond de la conversation courante.’”

While others used Creole in their writings, Morisseau simply wrote in Creole. *Antigòn*, too, was intended to show the expressive capacity of the language. He considered Sophocles’s play to be the pinnacle of world literature, and he believed that even that complex tragedy could be successfully adapted to the Haitian language. He wanted *Antigòn* to be a literary success to contest the assumption that one had to write in French in order to win accolades. Other Haitian authors would then abandon their misgivings regarding Creole, and a robust literature in the language would take shape.

These literary goals were coupled with Morisseau’s socio-political motivations. Many of the poems in *Dyakout* draw themes from the plight of the Haitian peasantry and urban poor. *Antigòn* is an open criticism of the endemic corruption in Haiti’s political structure. Apart from their content, the two works were also radical in form. In conceiving *Antigòn* Morisseau specifically chose to work in the oral genre of theatre so that his literature would be accessible to the illiterate masses. He famously staged the play before audiences of thousands of rural people. By bringing a literary masterpiece to the illiterate majority he symbolized and contributed to the major social transformation that Haiti desperately needed. His non-oral work was also explicitly connected to the wider movement to promote written Creole. *Dyakout* was dedicated to Creole-education advocate Christian Beaulieu, and initially Morisseau used Beaulieu’s proposed orthography. After Lélio Faublas cautioned Morisseau that writing in an

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orthography other than the official Faublas-Pressoir system was equivalent to “writing merely for the intellectuals who do not really need Creole anyway,” Morisseau took his advice.72 Years later, when the government adopted a new system, Morisseau promptly switched over.73

Morisseau fulfilled his artistic and socio-political goals. Antigòn was a major hit. One reviewer was moved to confess that “Le créole est donc apte à l’expression des sentiments les plus graves, les plus nuancés, les plus hauts.”74 Another said: “Morisseau-Leroy has successfully shown us the richness of our national language […] proving that it can serve not only for simple folklore song, but is rich enough and deep enough to express the beauty of foreign masterpieces.”75 Yet another referred to it as “the play by which he made Creole a recognized literary language.”76 It went on to play in Paris, New York City, Montreal, Accra, Dakar, Miami and Kingston.77 Its success immediately prompted other writers to follow Morisseau’s lead. Franck Fouché staged a Creole version of Sophocles’s Oedipus Rex just three months after Antigòn’s debut.78 Others produced ambitious plays, poetry, short stories and translations in Creole with greater and greater frequency over the subsequent years. For his part, Morisseau went on to write dozens of additional works in the language, and his name is permanently linked to the Creole movement.

In the 1950s, thanks to the efforts of Morisseau and his fellows, literature returned to the forefront of the Creole struggle. This shift turned out to be more significant than they could have

72 “The Patriotic Educator, Mr. Lélio Faublas,” Haiti Sun, 7 October 1956, 6.
73 Nzengou-Tayo, “Haitian Literature,” 156. Dyakout was, in fact, originally published as Diacoute, but in subsequent publications Morisseau revised the title to fit the accepted orthography.
76 “Bonhomme’s Soul Enters Into His Creole Acting,” Haiti Sun, 27 September 1953, 8.
anticipated. Unbeknownst to them, by the end of the decade their government would achieve a hitherto unknown degree of inefficiency and disregard for the interests of the Haitian people. Meaningful education reforms and processes of democratization were suspended indefinitely once François Duvalier came to power in 1957. With political channels cut off it would now more than ever be up to Haitian authors to carry the Creole movement. Many writers and intellectuals, including Félix Morisseau-Leroy, went into exile where they continued publishing and engaging with Haitian identity politics from abroad.

Conclusion

The Haitian Sixties were a time of great hope, of important changes, and of frustrating setbacks for the Creole legitimation project. The intense nationalisms that had emerged during the Occupation developed into productive discourses following the American withdrawal, and the relative stability and openness of the period allowed for new voices to be heard and new views to be articulated. The Creole question came back into vogue, and there were several significant developments regarding the Creole movement. Due to various complex factors, however, the linguistic revolution had still failed to occur by the time of the political crisis that brought François Duvalier to power in 1957.

Creole received formal academic attention and was thus scientifically established as a true language. Yet these earliest linguistic works on the language unintentionally caused a schism in the Creole movement, pitting those who considered it a Neo-Romance language against those who saw it as fundamentally African. This initial split was further complicated by divisions regarding the orthography. Creole receive its first exhaustive and systematic writing system in the
early 1940s, but the ‘foreign’ look of the phonetic orthography provoked hostile reactions. The inability to reach a consensus forestalled the coordination of the Creole project. First-language education made important strides in the period, and was endorsed by an international organization, but a lack of cooperation from across the social spectrum delayed its implementation. Finally, the movement gained an invaluable asset when the first major works of formal Creole literature appeared in 1953. But despite the best efforts of writers like Morisseau French still held a privileged position in Haitian literature and nearly all official contexts.

Had the election of September 1957 turned out differently, the legitimation of Creole might have taken a more direct route. Had, for instance, popular labour leader Daniel Fignolé been successful in his bid, the Haitian Sixties might have extended into the 1960s. Fignolé enjoyed extensive popular support, he wrote passionately about education reform and was well-acquainted with the utility of Creole. But of course it is fruitless to hypothesize about alternative outcomes. One must remember that Duvalier too had promised education reforms and massive literacy campaign. In any case, coherent platforms and ideological debates did not play much of a role in the fateful election of 1957. As we know, to the unimaginable detriment of the nation, François Duvalier was the victor. Like so much else in Haitian society, the Creole project suffered tremendously in the time immediately following the election. Yet, as we shall see, the totalitarian Duvalier dynasty ended up having some uncharacteristically positive effects on the status of Creole.
Chapter 4: Kreyòl anba Duvalier, 1957-1986
A circuitous solution to the Creole problem?

“Nou di ke kréol pa doué ékri gnou lot jan ke fransé. Tou sa, se blag…
Nou pase toua zan lékol pou nou aprann ke (an, en, ant, ent) fè an. Tou sa se pèdu tan… Si sé tout bagay sa-a yo ké nou vlé pou gnou adult ki pa gin tan pou li pèdu, ale chita lékol aprann, nou se gnou bann ransè… Si dépi dizuitsankat nou té ékri pou pèp-la nan gnou jan pi fasil, pèp la ta konnin li. Bay moun la pè, mètè litératu fransé sou kote jouk nou kapab fè gingnin souasant kenz pou san moun nan pei-a konnin li… Pèp la bezouin li e li bezouin konprann sa li li e sa li tandé… Moun pa doué fè edukasion gnou pèp nan gnou lang ki pa lang li.”
Anonymous, *Haiti Sun*, 1957

“L’usage du créole, en tant que langue commune parlée par les 90 pour cent de la population haïtienne, et permis dans les écoles comme langue instrument et objet d’Enseignement.”
Bernard Reform of 1979, Article 1

By any measure, the Duvalier Era was a particularly devastating chapter in Haiti’s tumultuous history. After his election on a Noiriste and populist platform on 22 September 1957, François Duvalier proceeded to expand the power of the Executive, gradually eroding the strength and independence of all other institutions in the Republic. He crippled the legislature and judiciary along with the military and the Catholic Church. He decimated the press and set up a state-run media. He exercised an unprecedented degree of state-sanctioned violence through his

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1 Translation: You say Creole must be written like French. What a joke… You spend three years in school to learn that “an, en, ant, ent” are pronounced an. What a waste of time… If that’s the kind of thing you want an adult with no time to waste to go to school and learn, you are a bunch of fools… If we had written for the people in an simpler method since 1804, the people would know how to read… Give them a break, put French literature aside until we are able to achieve 75 percent literacy… The people must not be educated in a language that is not their own.
paramilitary Tonton Macoutes. Purges were severe and seemingly arbitrary resulting in an intense climate of terror. Through a centralized system of economic redistribution he bought an extensive base of supporters and informants. Thousands of intellectuals and professionals went into exile and were soon followed by hundreds of thousands of working class Haitians. Duvalier named himself President for Life in 1964, but even his death in 1971 did not spell the end of his stranglehold on the nation. Nineteen-year-old Jean-Claude Duvalier succeeded his father and, despite the exhausted population’s initial hopes for change, the totalitarian system remained intact until the younger Duvalier was finally ousted in 1986. Altogether, the Duvalier dynasty executed tens of thousands of Haitians, triggered the exodus of as much as 15 percent of the population, and amounted to nearly thirty years of complete and utter chaos.

Out of this chaos, however, came some unexpected victories for the Creole legitimation project. As a self-proclaimed spokesman for Haiti’s black masses, François Duvalier used the arguments of the Creole movement to build support among disenfranchised Haitians. His Constitution of 1957 was the first to mention the language. But Duvalier’s regime quickly derailed the project, sending many would-be reformers into exile and neglecting to act on education or other democratic reforms. The characteristics of his regime, however, translated into some inadvertent extensions of the use of Creole in Haitian society. Black petit bourgeoisie ascendancy and the intellectual exodus meant that there were more and more high-level civil servants with limited education, and so it became necessary to use Creole in formal administrative settings. The nationalization of the Catholic clergy, which happened to coincide with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), increased the use of Creole in that institution. Harsh censorship and the government stranglehold on the media, furthermore, contributed to an
increased use of Creole in illegal media such as radio programs and subversive literature. This had a long-lasting effect on the image of Creole as the people’s language.

The mass exodus under Duvalier resulted in whole Haitian communities taking root in cities in the United States, Canada, Europe and Africa. These exiled communities continued to articulate their cultural identities and grapple with the Creole question. Exiled poets like Félix Morisseau-Leroy and Georges Castera kept writing in Creole while academics like Yves Dejean and Pierre Vernet continued to study the linguistic properties and socio-political possibilities inherent in the broader use of the language. Furthermore, as the Haitian immigrant population in the United States grew, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 opened up opportunities for Creole to be used in education in schools in Boston, Miami and New York City. The achievements of exiled Haitians served as a useful model for developments in Haitian education during the so-called ‘liberal phase’ of Jean-Claude Duvalier’s presidency and again after his fall from power.

While progress relating to the Creole movement was mainly circumstantial under the elder Duvalier, his son’s regime went further by officially endorsing the language in two groundbreaking ways. First, the government launched a project to settle the ongoing disputes over the orthography once and for all. In 1978 the orthography was standardized after four decades of heated debate. Second, the Bernard Reform of 1979 mandated the use of Creole in the Haitian education system. In theory, this was an unprecedented move to democratize the nation’s schools. The practical results were less impressive, but the strange fact remains that one of the most anti-democratic regimes in Haitian history did more to modernize the country’s schools than the administration produced by the celebrated Revolution of 1946. The Duvaliers made
every effort to maintain autocratic control, but nonetheless their administrations witnessed shifts in the status of Creole that would later be critical for meaningful democracy to emerge in Haiti.

**Papa Doc: Le médecin malgré lui**

At the time of François Duvalier’s election interested observers were hopeful that he would make good on his campaign pledges and fulfill the promise of the Revolution of 1946. Those calling for the wider use of Creole must have been particularly encouraged by the constitution that his administration ratified three months after the election. The Constitution of 1957 was the first in Haitian history to explicitly refer to the majority language. Article 35 reaffirms that French is the official language, but goes on to decree that: “La Loi viendra déterminer les cas et les conditions dans lesquels l’usage du créole sera permis et même recommandé pour sauvegarder les intérêts matériels et moraux des citoyens qui ne connaissent pas suffisamment la langue française.” This significant, albeit minor, concession to Creole was an indisputably critical step for the legitimisation of the language. Now that Creole had constitutional protection it would be impossible for subsequent administrations to scale back language rights without appearing anti-democratic. Indeed, after the end of the Duvalier dynasty constitutional provisions for Creole expanded considerably.

Furthermore, within the first year of his term Duvalier announced an ambitious and comprehensive five-year campaign to eliminate illiteracy in the Republic. Duvalier presented a bill which stated in unambiguous terms that “la Démocratie en Haïti demeurera purement formelle aussi longtemps que les Masses urbaines et rurales resteront affligées de la plaie de

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2 Haitian Constitution of 1957, art. 35.
l’ignorance résultant de leur analphabétisme.” The bill specified that the literacy campaign would initially make use of Creole, saying that “La désanalphabétisation du peuple par la langue vernaculaire: le créole, est une fonction sociale obligatoire et un devoir sacré.” Duvalier addressed the public in conjunction with presenting the bill and defended the use of Creole in the literacy campaign. He acknowledged that this measure might provoke some backlash, but explained that

Notre objectif tend vers la connaissance de l’inconnu vers le connu et doit, avant tout utiliser les voies et les moyens qui correspondent mieux aux réalités de notre pays. L’expérience de l’enseignement rural a démontré amplement la futilité d’une transposition pure et simple dans nos campagnes des méthodes d’éducation urbaine, sans tenir compte des conditions radicalement différentes dans lesquelles nos masses paysannes évoluent.

He was not saying anything new, but his words reveal how coherent and powerful the Creole argument had become. Before his absolute disregard for democracy had become apparent, at a time when his grip on the nation’s highest office was far from secure, Duvalier managed to appropriate the Creole movement to add legitimacy to his regime. He was presenting himself as the spokesman for the country’s monolingual masses, as the man who would finally incorporate the popular classes into the political process.

Despite such hopeful signs, Papa Doc soon began to show his true colours. The president became bolder and bolder in his use of repressive force, first executing his political rivals or forcing them into exile, then turning to the opposition press, and finally settling into a pattern of scapegoating and downright terror. As he moved to curb the power of all other institutions in the

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4 Ibid., 2.
society, Duvalier transformed the very structure of the state apparatus, resulting in what Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes as a ‘centrifugal structure.’\(^6\) All power at every level of society was derived directly from the Executive. This system was crippingly inefficient. Duvalier’s refusal to delegate responsibilities meant that even if he had been interested in meaningful reforms they would have been impossible to carry out. Previously, even the most self-serving governments had at least kept up the pretence of working to improve the country. With Duvalier, the façade of productive government activity was abandoned altogether, and bald-faced profiteering became the norm.

In this political climate the Creole movement, which stood for equality in stark contrast to Duvalier’s ambitions for the nation, was decimated. The literacy campaign never materialized, and the education system limped on as ever before.\(^7\) Any attempts to address education came at the hands of foreign organizations and religious institutions. Yet foreigners were not immune to Duvalier’s repressive tendencies, and many left the country. Ormonde McConnell remained until 1970, and managed to set up an “ultra-modern” school in Port-au-Prince in 1960.\(^8\) Nouveau Collège Bird was intended for the children of affluent urban families—among its pupils, none other than a young Jean-Claude Duvalier—but McConnell hoped that revenue from the private collège could help fund rural education programs.\(^9\) McConnell hired numerous idealistic Swiss pedagogues, many of whom found the local turbulence unbearable and soon fled the country.\(^10\) The success of the collège (which still stands in Port-au-Prince today) allowed McConnell and

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\(^6\) Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *State Against Nation*, 171.  
\(^7\) Nicholls, *Dessalines to Duvalier*, 227; Devonish, *Language and Liberation*, 59.  
\(^8\) “Ultra Modern Methodist College Bird,” *Haiti Sun*, 26 June 1960, 4.  
\(^10\) *Ibid.*, 113, 144.
some of his Swiss colleagues to establish a normal school in Pétionville to train rural teachers. It seems, however, that many newly-minted young literacy experts used such credentials as their ticket out of the country and went to teach in Africa.  

Among the first Haitians to go into exile were a number of intellectuals and activists who had been key figures in the Creole project. Félix Morisseau-Leroy left in 1959 to stage Antigòn in Paris. He did not return until 1986. Other Creole-language authors with a progressive bent followed Morisseau’s lead, such as Paul Laraque in 1961 and Franck Fouché in 1966. Daniel Fignolé, the pugnacious labour leader and champion of education reform, left for New York in 1957 and stayed until 1986. Meanwhile, new pro-Creole voices emerged to fill the void. In the mid-1960s a Haitian Catholic priest named Yves Dejean began translating the Bible into Creole and was consequently inspired to take up the study of the structure and educational value of the language. In 1965 a twenty-four-year-old teacher named Jean-Marie Denis, better known as Jan Mapou, founded an artistic collective called Mouvman Kreyòl Ayisyen (Haitian Creole Movement) in the hopes of exploring and promoting Haiti’s culture and and language. Both Dejean and Mapou were forced into exile in 1969. It would be erroneous to say that Duvalier targeted the Creole legitimation project specifically as it was never a formal program, but those calling for democratic language reforms were clearly at odds with the Duvalierist system.

Under these circumstances the conscious endeavour to valourize Creole in Haitian society was stifled. Yet the unprecedented character of the Duvalier regime had some unexpected effects on the uses and perceptions of the language. The Noiriste philosophy that brought both Estimé and Duvalier to power hinged on the idea that the emergent dark-skinned petit

bourgeoisie were the rightful holders of political power in the country. The relationship between
the Duvalier regime and the traditional elites was characterized by mutual distrust at best and
open hostility at worst. Duvalier and his colleagues depicted the nation’s traditional light-skinned
elites as out of touch with the interests of the masses, and thus used blackness as a tool to
legitimize their leadership.\textsuperscript{12} As a result, the administration drew from a lower social stratum
than had previous governments. Whereas one’s command of French had once been the key
credential in the allotment of government posts, the colour of one’s skin now held greater
importance; as a result, the collective French-language competence in the government decreased.
Duvalier himself was often mocked for his stilted French.\textsuperscript{13} Creole was consequently adopted in
formal government settings out of sheer necessity. Thereafter, Creole remained an accepted
medium for political discourse, despite being generally absent from government publications.\textsuperscript{14}

Duvalier’s clash with the Catholic Church also had implications for the status of Creole.
Haitian nationalists had long resented the foreign influence that came at the hands of the resident
French Catholic clergy. Duvalier acted on this resentment to further his own purposes of
consolidating power and removing centres of opposition. Between 1959 and 1964 Duvalier
engaged in a heated struggle with the Church. In 1960, he expelled the Breton archbishop
François-Marie-Joseph Poirier. He and his administration were subsequently excommunicated.
The President continued to persecute the Church until 1965 when the Haitian government began
working to repair relations with the Holy See. Duvalier was committed to indigenizing the local
clergy. Coincidentally, that same year the Second Vatican Council passed the \textit{Ad gentes} decree

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Michel-Rolph Trouillot, \textit{State Against Nation}, 192-193.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Devonish, \textit{Language and Liberation}, 59; Dejean, “An Overview,” 74.
\end{itemize}
which stated that the Catholic Church must work to replace missionary clergy with native
clergy.\textsuperscript{15} The two parties came to an agreement and the first Haitian-born archbishop of Port-au-
Prince, François Wolff Ligondé, was appointed in October of 1966. A Church hierarchy
populated by Haitians would also enable the fulfillment of another ordinance from the Vatican
Council, that of \textit{Sacrosanctum Concilium} encouraging the use of vernacular languages in the
Mass.\textsuperscript{16} Creole had been widely used in Catholic services since the eruption of the ‘trilateral
religious conflict’ in the early 1940s, but Duvalier’s hasty implementation of the \textit{Ad gentes}
resolution meant that clergy drew from lower social strata. Creole language use necessarily
became further entrenched in the Haitian Church and further legitimized in Haitian society.\textsuperscript{17}

Ironically, it was the revitalized Church with its massive popular support that ultimately
spearheaded the movement to topple Jean-Claude Duvalier. Creole was an indispensable part of
the Church’s mobilization against the younger Duvalier, and one of its most important tools in
spreading the message was the radio. It was during the Duvalier years that Creole-language radio
became a firmly established form of political subversion. Radio had grown into a popular form
of entertainment through the 1940s and 1950s, but broadcasts were strictly in French and there
was little of substance on the airwaves. When Duvalier came to power, however, clandestine
stations began to emerge and broadcast anti-Duvalier messages in Creole.\textsuperscript{18} In 1962 the
communist poet René Depestre started a daily Creole radio program which infiltrated the Haitian

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ad gentes}, Chapter 1.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Sacrosanctum Concilium}, Chapter 1.
\textsuperscript{17} Dejean, “An Overview,” 74; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, \textit{State Against Nation}, 219; Nicholls, \textit{Dessalines to
Duvalier}, 221-228; Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, \textit{Haiti: The Breached Citadel} (Toronto: Canadian Scholars
Press, 204), 134-135.
\textsuperscript{18} Diederich and Burt, \textit{Papa Doc}, 107.
airwaves from the safety of Havana. In the mid-1960s formal Haitian broadcasters like Jan
Mapou and Jean Dominique began using Creole and turning from entertainment programming to
news and opinions. This was a dangerous move. Both Mapou and Dominique were arrested and
forced into exile, their equipment destroyed by Duvalier’s thugs. But the shift was already in
motion. Creole quickly became the primary language of Haitian radio and later television, no
doubt spurred on by advertisers hoping to reach a mass of monolingual consumers.

Perhaps more importantly, the growing association between Creole and resistance had a
significant effect on Haitian perceptions of the language. Of course, the language had been the
vehicle for the Haitian Revolution itself, but in a century and a half Creole had lost much of its
association with revolutionary activity. The Haitian government had often been accused of using
Creole to keep the Haitian masses in their place. Now, however, the language was being used to
challenge the status quo. Setting the language in opposition to the Duvalier regime helped break
the stigma that linked Creole to ignorance and submission. Radio was the most effective medium
for spreading anti-Duvalier messages in Creole, but periodicals like the communist newsletter
Demokrasi and formal literature like Frankétienne’s works of theatre and his Creole novel Dezafî
(1975) also cast aspersions the regime. The Duvaliers censored such voices ruthlessly, which
inevitably only served to validate the message and the medium. Through popular protest slogans,
graffiti, hip-hop, and the Creole-language radio broadcasts of radical priests like Jean-Bertrand
Aristide, the association has remained firm since the Duvalier Era. Today, Haitian writers tend to
write in both French and Creole, but the latter language is generally preferred for explicitly

\[20\] The Agronomist, directed by Jonathan Demme (New York City: THINKFilm, 2004), DVD; Jan Mapou,
\[21\] Paul Berry, “Literacy,” 112.
political works. The recasting of Creole as a language of resistance—and by extension a language of democracy—was yet another way François Duvalier unintentionally supported the Creole movement.

*Lòt bò dlo: The Creole movement abroad*

Nowhere was Duvalier’s unintentional contribution to the Creole legitimation project more evident than in the Haitian Diaspora. It is estimated that as much as 15 percent of Haiti’s population left the country during the Duvalier years. As a result, Haitian communities were firmly established in places like Miami, New York City, Boston, Montreal, Paris and Dakar. These communities turned out to be important centres for the revaluation of Creole. According to Haitian-American linguist Flore Zéphir,

> Haitians in the United States develop strategies that allow them to cope more efficiently with the harshness of life in America. One such strategy is to promote among themselves a sense of being a distinct ethnic group […] in order to become a more potent force in social and political affairs. To some extent, they are realizing that a fragmented Haitian immigrant community does not serve Haitians’ quest for equal opportunity and social mobility. In this context, Haitian Creole has emerged as an ethnic marker, and has taken on more prestige than it has, and perhaps will ever have, in Haiti.

In other words, since Creole is the only language common to entire Haitian immigrant communities, it has become a valued aspect of Haitian cultural identity abroad. While at home the promotion of Creole is divisive, uprooted Haitian communities have found the language to be indispensable for building unity.

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Haitian poets and playwrights continued to produce works in Creole as a means of unifying their communities, promoting their culture, and further demonstrating the expressive capacity of the language. Félix Morisseau-Leroy spent much of his exile in newly-independent Ghana and Senegal where he worked with indigenous theatre companies to promote the local languages, but also found time to compose numerous Creole plays and poems. Georges Castera worked with a Haitian theatre troupe New York City and published several Creole poetry collections. Jan Mapou and others associated with Mouvement Kreyòl Ayisyen established artistic cooperatives in New York and Miami, producing countless works inspired by Haiti’s peasant culture. Justin Lhérisson’s enduring *La Famille des Pitite-Caille* was even published in serial in New York City’s Haitian newspaper.25

Undoubtedly the forced exile of so many writers forestalled the growth of a grassroots reading culture in Haiti. One critic noted in 2004 that “dispersion and diaspora have been especially debilitating for the development of Kreyòl literature, since the vast majority of its speakers and hence those who might best appreciate it are themselves trapped within Haiti and cut off from these writers.”26 Yet the freedom to write without fear of censorship or repression enabled many exiled Haitian authors to redouble their productivity. Being away from home in communities where Creole took on a new positive and unifying role it became natural to use the language as a way of clinging to their national identity. The corpus of Creole literature grew dramatically. In Emmanuel Védrine’s *Annotated Bibliography on Haitian Creole*, for instance, the compiler lists only seven Creole poetry collections published in between 1804 and 1957.

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26 Lang, “Primer,” 136.
During the nineteen years of the Duvalier dynasty, he lists forty-four collections, nearly half of which were published outside of Haiti.\(^{27}\)

It was not just poets and playwrights who used their time in exile to carry on the work of the Creole project, academics in the Diaspora also sought new opportunities to study and promote the language. Many Haitians made the most of their forced emigration by pursuing higher education. Countless others, conversely, used their pursuit of higher education as an excuse to leave the country. An estimated 80 percent of the country’s educated professionals left the country in the 1960s, so that by the 1970s there were surely more Haitian academics in the Diaspora than in Haiti.\(^{28}\) Among these were linguists and education specialists who took up the scientific study of Creole under the auspices of respected North American and French universities. Two noteworthy examples are Pierre Vernet and Yves Dejean.

In 1966 a twenty-three-year-old language teacher named Pierre Vernet fled the country and made his way to the United States where he taught literacy to disadvantaged youths in New York City. He soon relocated to Paris to study at the Sorbonne where he earned degrees in psychology, education theory and Creole linguistics. He returned to Haiti in the late 1970s and was closely involved with new developments in education (to be discussed below), and was one of the founders of the Faculty of Applied Linguistics at the Université d’État d’Haïti.\(^{29}\) As for Yves Dejean, he spent the 1970s working toward a PhD in French linguistics at Indiana University under the celebrated creolist Albert Valdman. Dejean held several teaching posts in New York City’s public schools and colleges while he completed his dissertation *Comment écrire*.


\(^{28}\) Heinl and Heinl, *Written in Blood*, 587.

le créole (1977). He finally returned to Haiti in 1986 to teach some of the first courses offered in Creole at the State University. Vernet and Dejean have been among the most committed advocates of linguistic rights in Haiti. They have published widely in French and Creole and worked with government agencies to shape education and language policy. Of course, they may just as well have undertaken such work if it had not been for the Duvaliers, but exile gave them the opportunity as well as a palpable new incentive to commit themselves to the linguistic revolution. Both men understood that the best way to defy the Duvaliers was to cultivate democracy in Haiti by bringing literacy and effective education to the masses. In Dejean’s words: “Lang kreyòl tout Ayisyen, se nan chemen sa a pou yo pase pou yo rive devlope tout konesans ak tout teknik ki kapab louvri barye pwogrè pou tout pèp nou a.”

The mass migration of Haitians to the United States also resulted in an unexpected opportunity for experiments in Creole-language education. In 1968 the Johnson administration passed the Bilingual Education Act which recognized the right of students with limited English proficiency to learn in their mother tongue alongside English as they transitioned to life in the United States. Initially the Act only had practical implications for Spanish-speaking students, but as Haitian families arrived in in greater and greater numbers in the 1970s and 1980s, there were some attempts by Haitians and Americans to adapt the model to the needs of this growing community. Unfortunately the results left much to be desired; by 1997 one critic noted that “although the American education system is attempting to respond, it has not yet succeeded in

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31 Yves Dejean, Chapit 1 - Yon lekòl tèt anba nan yon peyi tèt anba. Audio recording. Miami: CT Publications, 2011. https://soundcloud.com/ctpublications/chapit-1-yon-lek-l-t-t-anba. Translations: The Creole language of all Haitians is the road for them to take to develop all understanding and all techniques capable of removing barriers to progress for the whole population.
effectively addressing the specific needs of monolingual Creole-speaking Haitian students.”

But the failure to educate monolingual Haitian students in the United States, as well as certain consequent attempts to address related issues, ultimately served to inform developments in Haiti’s own education system.

To be sure, the failure of Haitian students to thrive in American schools was partly due to discrimination. Besides being effected by poverty and the feelings of isolation and vulnerability that often come with being an immigrant, Haitian students were sometimes misclassified simply as ‘black’ and treated like English-speaking African Americans. At the same time, however, many specific issues that plagued education in Haiti were replicated in the United States. The first schools to set up bilingual education programs for their Haitian students did so on a French-English model. Predictably, these programs were ineffective. Subsequent attempts to establish a Creole-English model were hampered by the lack of qualified teachers and Creole-language resources. Having come from a system that emphasizes memorization and rote repetition, Haitian students felt alienated in bilingual education programs that were based on a participatory model. Limited parental involvement also impeded the development of effective programs. While Haitian parents attach great importance to school, for a number of cultural and socioeconomic reasons they are not generally involved in their children’s education. All of these factors complicated the integration of Haitian children into the American education system.

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As the Haitian population of New York City, Boston and Miami continued to swell (in 1976 there were 150,000 Haitians in New York City alone), various groups developed strategies to respond to these issues. From 1981 to 1984 the New York-based Haitian Parent and Teacher Training (HAPTT) program worked to equip both teachers and parents in the hopes of ameliorating bilingual education programs in the City. The HAPTT translated school board documents into Creole and held various workshops and conferences exclusively in the language. At the same time the Indiana University Creole Institute (IUCI) partnered with the U.S. Department of Education to run summer institutes to train teachers for work in Creole-English bilingual education programs in the three main Diaspora cities. In 1991 two Haitian expatriates, Maude Heurtelou and Fequière Vilsaint, founded a publishing company, Educa Vision, to address the desperate need for of Creole-language education materials in the Miami-Dade school district. There have been many other organizations and programs since the 1980s, and although Creole-English bilingual programs in Boston, Miami and New York have tapered off in recent years, the pedagogical developments made respectable contributions to the equitable education for Haitians in the United States.

Since many of the problems facing Haitian students in American schools were connected to issues in Haitian education, many of these initiatives ended up being adapted to the Haitian context. The experiences of the HAPTT were disseminated to other Diaspora centres and to Haiti.

34 Heinl and Heinl, Written in Blood, 586.
via its Creole-language newsletter *Lyezon*. With funding from USAID, the Indiana University Creole Institute went on to organize conferences on Creole instruction in St. Thomas, Seychelles and Port-au-Prince. The Haitian Minister of Education and other policymakers and Creole advocates attended these conferences, which coincided with the pivotal Haitian education reform of 1979. Educa Vision has expanded considerably and, in addition to serving students in the United States and Canada, it now provides materials for the Haitian Ministry of Education. The changing status of Creole among Haitian communities in the United States in the context of the superior resources and relative political stability has generated critical support for the normalization of mother-tongue instruction in Haiti, and the legitimation of the Creole language in general. Thus, when François Duvalier triggered the mass exodus of his countrymen he directly but wholly unintentionally initiated a process that would play an important role the linguistic democratization of Haiti.

*Baby Doc, and an unexpected victory*

While the developments in the Creole movement during the elder Duvalier’s presidency had occurred in spite of the regime, the younger Duvalier’s administration actually allocated a remarkable amount of attention and resources to improving the status of Creole. This may seem surprising considering that most analysts see Jean Claude Duvalier’s fifteen-year presidency as little more than an extension of his father’s regime. There are indeed many continuities between the two halves of the dynasty. The nineteen-year-old Jean-Claude was named President

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39 “History and Mission.”
40 “About Educa Vision Inc.”
for Life and carried on many of his father’s practices. Political repression was as bad as ever. Corruption was worse. Downtrodden Haitians continued to leave the country in droves. It is undeniable that Baby Doc was as uninterested as his father in bringing meaningful democracy to Haiti. Why then did the younger Duvalier’s government enact unprecedented reforms aimed at removing the country’s centuries-old language barriers?

One of the principal differences between the two regimes was the younger Duvalier’s cozy relationships with the United States and with Haiti’s traditional elites. Jean-Claude accepted massive sums of foreign aid from the United States. In 1975, for instance, the U.S. contributed $35.5 million in aid to Haiti, whereas its annual contributions averaged about one tenth of that total under Papa Doc. Much of these funds were siphoned off by administrators, but an intimate relationship with the U.S. Government and other foreign organizations meant that the regime had to at least seem to be working in the interest of the Haitian people. Particularly during Jimmy Carter’s presidency (1977-1981) with its emphasis on human rights, Haitian society went through a period of modest liberalization. At the same time the traditional economic elites, who had lost much of their political influence during the François Duvalier years, recovered some of their sway under the Baby Doc’s presidency. Questions of industrialization and agricultural modernization once again came to the table. As we have seen, economic revitalization programs in Haiti have historically been connected to attempts to improve rural education. This was the context of the renewed commitment to the Creole problem on the part of the Haitian government in the 1970s. However superficial their resolve may have been, the new tone of Baby Doc’s presidency opened the door for two critical developments in the Creole movement.

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Both developments came about under the auspices of the Institut Pédagogique National. The Haitian government established the IPN in 1972 with the mandate to oversee education reform. This in itself was nothing new. Previous administrations had set up countless committees, commissions and bureaus to deal with problems in education. The IPN, however, benefitted from the political climate of the 1970s and from the unprecedented amount of academic research regarding Creole coming out of North America and Europe. Naturally, renewed attention was given to the language question. In the 1974-1975 school year the respected Centre Haïtien d’Investigation en Sciences Sociales (CHISS) undertook a project to study bilingual education in the Haitian context. Under the direction of Hubert de Ronceray (PhD, Université Laval), with funding from the IAF, the project was intended to scientifically analyze the effectiveness of vernacular instruction, and to “secure the facts from emotional and political prejudice.”  

CHISS selected 150 rural children for a nine month experimental program. One group received instruction in Creole with French taught as a foreign language while a control group was taught using traditional methods. The study concluded that “une méthode d’enseignement bilingue s’appuyant sur le créole comme langue de base et le français comme langue étrangère aboutit […] à des résultats beaucoup plus convaincants que ceux des méthodes traditionelles et importées.” In the light of such data it was becoming increasingly apparent that Creole would be a necessary feature of the IPN’s prospective reform.

Like those involved with the UNESCO pilot project, the IPN felt the need to address the orthography question. Although the government had adopted the Faublas-Pressoir orthography in

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43 Hubert de Ronceray and Serge Petit-Frère, _Projet expérimentale sur le bilinguisme Créole-Français au niveau de l’enseignement primaire en Haïti_ (Port-au-Prince: CHISS, 1975), 1.
44 Ibid., 25.
1951 many other writing systems were still in use in Haiti and the Diaspora. As late as 1974, for example, the Centre des Recherches en Sciences Humaines et Social (CRESHS) proposed yet another more French-based orthography. The IPN decided to settle the question once and for all. In early 1978, under the guidance of the IPN, the Minister of National Education Raoul Pierre-Louis assembled a focus group to revise the Faublas-Pressoir orthography and address the remaining ambiguities. The significantly named Gwoup Rechèch pou Etidye Kreyòl Ayisyen (Research Group for the Study of Haitian Creole), or GREKA, was made up of Haitians who were intimately connected to the Creole question: Pierre Vernet, Ernst Mirville (a psychiatrist and linguist who had cofounded the Mouvman Kreyòl with Jan Mapou), Pauris Jean-Baptiste (a protestant minister and the director of Ormonde McConnell’s training school for rural teachers), as well as Emile Celestin Mégie and Jean Robert-Limontas (both affiliated with the Office National d’Alphabetisation et d’Action Communitaire). Three of the members (Mirville, Jean-Baptiste and Mégie) were also published Creole poets. The group met weekly for three months in early 1978 and worked out the details of the new writing system.

The so-called IPN orthography was essentially a compromise between the McConnell-Laubach and the Faublas-Pressoir systems. It was more or less phonetic, using McConnell’s ks, ws and ys, but made a few concessions to French orthographic rules including Laubach’s ou instead of u and Pressoir’s digraphs for nasalization. Since 1979 it has become the standard in Haiti and in the Diaspora. It is used in government publications, educational materials, in Catholic and Protestant churches, and by most academics and Creole-language authors. There are

45 Devonish, Language and Liberation, 61.
still a handful of unsettled questions around the orthography (such as the use of hyphens and apostrophes), and one still hears the odd critic of the system, but most parties have accepted the orthography if only, like Yves Dejean, “to put an end to ‘useless’ discussions.”

For its part, the Haitian government officially recognized the IPN orthography in 1979 in conjunction with the other major development in Creole movement: the Bernard Reform. Joseph C. Bernard was appointed Minister of National Education in April of 1979 and within a month he announced the reform that would bear his name. The Reform comprised several ambitious resolutions for of the restructuring of the education system, but its most striking aspect had to do with Creole. The consequent decree stated that Creole would be the language of instruction and a subject of study throughout primary education, while French would be taught as a subject and introduced as a language of instruction in year six, after which each language was to be used for a minimum of 25 percent of weekly instruction. The underlying logic was evident; the Reform was intended to transform the Haitian masses into productive members of a modern economy, while at the same time cultivating a population of balanced bilinguals. This would be an ambitious undertaking in any country.

Needless to say, it did not work out as planned. Limited resources, as well as resentment and lack of enthusiasm on the part of teachers and school administrators were major obstacles. There was much opposition from all levels of society. One of the most vocal opponents to the Reform was the celebrated historian Hénock Trouillot who said in 1980:

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48 Haitian Government, Décret organisant le système éducatif haïtien en vue d'offrir des chances égales à tous et de refléter la culture haïtienne (Port-au-Prince, 1982), 12.
Comment un créolisant pur peut-il s’informer sur son propre pays, quand tous les organes valable d’information sont écrits en français? Les feuilles créolisantes sont plutôt minables. Il est vrai, à la radio, des speakers le renseignent en créole. Mais pour les écouter, il n’a pas besoin d’apprendre à lire et à écrire une langue vernaculaire sans orthographe fixe, sans syntaxe élaborée et dont la littérature est à peine vagissante.50

Evidently the old arguments lived on. Longstanding anti-Americanism also fuelled opposition. The involvement of American institutions in the planning and implementation of the Reform struck some observers as suspect, and they believed it was part of a scheme to gradually dislodge French from the island and ultimately replace it with English.51 Curiously these arguments overlook the fact that universal French competence was one of the chief goals of the Reform. Regardless, private schools provided a convenient way for those with the means to oppose the Reform. The countless ecclesiastical and NGO-run schools were unaffected by the new policy, and enrolment in these schools increased from 50 to 80 percent of the primary school population after the Reform.52

Resistance also came from those who would have benefitted most, namely the rural and working class monolingual Haitian families. Received wisdom that French was their children’s only avenue for social advancement was still entrenched in the popular psyche. Furthermore, as Haitian children from more affluent families enrolled in the French-language private school in greater numbers, the legacy of the infamous two-tiered Service Technique must have been palpable. As Marc Prou notes, “the Haitian masses’ resistance toward a government-sponsored

education reform project can be understood as a way of conveying their discontent with the modus operandi of the state.” For generations the popular classes had conceived of the government as an intrusive force, and were instinctively and understandably reluctant to cooperate.

But it was old-fashioned politics that ended the Reform before it began. It took three years for Joseph Bernard’s proposal to be translated into concrete legislation and by that time the so-called ‘liberal phase’ had come to an end. With Ronald Reagan’s election the Duvalier government fell back into old patterns. The crackdown on students, opposition groups and the Creole-language media in the month following Ronald Reagan’s election is well documented. As broadcaster Jean Dominique later noted, “It was the end of the Haitian spring.” In this context the Bernard Reform lost steam. In 1982 all reform activities were suspended without explanation. The government promulgated yet another constitution in 1983, in which it reaffirmed the right to education and gave a further concession to Creole, saying “Les langues nationales sont le français et le créole. Le français tient lieu de langue officielle de la République d’Haïti.” Yet as with the elder Duvalier’s Constitution of 1957 this was mere lip service. The Reform remained suspended until the year after Jean-Claude Duvalier’s fall from power.

When the Reform was relaunched in 1987 it still faced many of the obstacles it had encountered at its inception. Political instability, corruption, civil unrest and limited resources continued to pose challenges. Clearly the goals of universal enrolment and universal literacy

54 Fontaine, “Dialectic,” 41; Bellegarde-Smith, Breached Citadel, 134.
55 The Agronomist.
56 Prou, “Attempts,” 43.
have yet to be achieved nearly four decades later. In light of this, some have qualified the Bernard Reform as a failure. Recent studies, however, have taken a more sympathetic view. Uli Locher points out that the Reform “started pedagogical innovation in the public sector, has channeled no less than $200 million into public education, and has helped to push demand for education to unprecedented levels.”\(^{58}\) Prou, likewise, states that the Reform “helped to create an environment for open dialogue on the true meaning and the roles of language, national public education, and global development in an emergent democracy.”\(^{59}\) Attitudes toward the language have gradually changed over the past four decades, and today nearly every school in the nation uses Creole in the early grades.\(^{60}\) All things considered, it is undeniable that the Bernard Reform and the other developments in the 1970s and early 1980s had a major long-term impact on the status of Creole.

**Conclusion**

Thus, in the midst of one of the darkest chapters in Haitian history, the process of Creole legitimation made some of its greatest strides. Two of Haiti’s most anti-democratic presidents indirectly instigated changes in their society that would be necessary for a democratization process to occur. It is worth pondering whether these changes would have taken place without the Duvaliers—if, in Bernard Diederich’s words, François Duvalier had been “just another of the in-and-out Presidents Haiti has known through its history.”\(^{61}\) To be sure, the Creole movement’s progress had been slow for decades. Elie Lescot’s education reforms and adult literacy projects

\(^{58}\) Locher, “Education,” 179.

\(^{59}\) Prou, “Attempts,” 54.

\(^{60}\) Locher, “Education,” 193.

had failed to convince the masses. Dumarsais Etimé had used the same Noiriste rhetoric as Duvalier, and had ostensibly been committed to democratic reforms, but he scarcely left a mark on the Creole question. The standardized orthography produced by Paul Magloire’s administration never achieved hegemony. It is no doubt conceivable that if Haitian politics had carried on as usual from 1957 the Creole movement would have continued to limp along frustratingly slowly. Something had to change.

When François Duvalier drastically transformed Haitian politics he opened unexpected avenues for the advancement of Creole. His official recognition of the language, shallow and self-serving as it was, meant that subsequent administrations would not have the option to fully disregard the popular tongue. When he curbed the power of the traditional elite, Creole necessarily made headway in the public arena. The creative outburst of clandestine opposition helped recast Creole as a modern language of democracy. The mass exodus provided a new locus and a new impetus for experimentation with Creole in literature and education, and for socio-linguistic research on the language. By the time of the ‘liberal phase’ of the Baby Doc regime the Creole movement had gained considerable momentum, and official programs to make greater use of the language began to take shape. All things considered, attitudes toward and uses of Creole changed much more during the thirty years of the Duvalier dynasty than they had in the preceding three decades. Of course the Duvaliers negatively affected Haitian development in countless other ways. They left the country’s economy, its institutions and its international reputation in shambles. But it is difficult to imagine such a significant advancement for the status of Creole taking place without the fissures caused by the utter chaos of the Duvalierist tragedy.
Conclusion

When Jean-Claude Duvalier fled the country on 7 February 1986 it triggered a moment of widespread optimism in Haitian society. Within hours of his departure boisterous celebrations erupted in the streets of Port-au-Prince. A jubilant outburst of songs, poetry and plays commemorated the latest liberation of the country. Within weeks community leaders like Jean Dominique, Daniel Fignolé and Félix Morisseau-Leroy returned home after years in exile. But as has so often been the case in Haiti, this moment of optimism soon proved disappointing.

Spontaneous demonstrations quickly turned violent as crowds let loose twenty-nine years of pent up frustration. François Duvalier’s gravesite was destroyed, and street signs bearing his name were vandalized. For weeks crowds hunted down known Macoutes and other Duvalierists and beat them to death. The interim military government responded to growing disorder by adopting repressive tactics, and proceeded to fix the first multi-candidate election in thirty years. Electoral fraud, coups d’état and foreign interference have continued to plague the democratic system. Transfers of power have seldom been smooth or peaceful. At the time of writing (November 2016) Haiti has been without a democratically elected head of state for over a year.

The promise of 1986, however, was not entirely unfulfilled. The twenty-nine-year Duvalier dictatorship served as an acute point of reference for those selected to draft the Constitution of 1987. The so-called ‘liberal’ Constitution forbade “any person well known for having been by his excess zeal one of the architects of the dictatorship and of its maintenance for the last twenty-nine years” to hold public office for the subsequent ten years.\footnote{Haitian Constitution of 1987, art. 291.} The document

\footnote{Haitian Constitution of 1987, art. 291.}
severely limited the power of the Executive, set up a Permanent Electoral Council to oversee
elections, and enshrined sweeping protections for human rights. The liberal Constitution won
support from virtually all factions of the national community. Although the government has
often failed to live up to the Constitution’s high standards, the document differs from its
predecessors in that it has not been replaced in nearly thirty years. Today it has achieved
something of a sacrosanct character. When opposition politicians or journalists wish to criticize
the government they habitually cite the Constitution of 1987.

As noted, the Duvalier constitutions had given lip service to the popular language. The
framers of the 1987 Constitution went a step further and—after almost eighty years of official
French—granted official language status to Creole. French was maintained as one of two official
languages, but Creole was singled out as “Sèl lang ki simante tout Ayisyen nèt ansanm.” The
document gives further support to the language by ordering that those being arrested or
imprisoned must be made aware of the cause in Creole, and that all information pertaining to
national life be disseminated in Creole. It also calls for the creation of a Haitian Creole
Academy that will “bay lang kreyòl la jarèt pou li fikse epi pou li ba li tout mwayen lasyans pou
li devlope nòmal.” In other words, the legal status of Creole improved drastically in 1987.

Again, the Haitian government has never quite lived up to the high standards of the liberal
Constitution. Today, most government documents are still published only in French. The criminal

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3 The current constitution is sometimes referred to as the Constitution of 2012, but it is essentially the
1987 document with minor amendments.
4 Haitian Constitution of 1987, art. 5. Translation: The only language that unites all Haitians.
6 *Ibid.*, art. 213. Translation: …strengthen and standardize the Creole language and enable its
development through scientific means.
justice system is so disorganized that arbitrary arrests and pretrial detention are commonplace. The Akademi Kreyòl Ayisyen (Haitian Creole Academy) did not come into existence until 2014—nearly thirty years after the Constitution ordered its creation. Instability and lack of resources are undoubtedly part of the problem, but these shortcomings are also related to the ongoing struggle for Creole legitimacy. As we have seen, the forces opposing a wider acceptance of Creole are obstinate and diverse.

When Georges Sylvain proposed the wider use of Creole in literature and education he could scarcely have imagined how fitful the process would be. When he and his contemporaries broke with literary custom and used Creole in their works, they established a tradition that put literature at the head of the Creole movement and nearly witnessed a transformation in the status of Creole in the first decade of the twentieth century. But the chaos of the early 1910s destabilized the movement. The U.S. Marines consequently occupied the country, and Creole fell out of favour as Haitians clung to their French cultural heritage in opposition to the American presence. When the Marines tried to institute Creole-language education as part of their economic and agricultural program for the country, the language became stubbornly linked to inferiority in the minds of Haitians at all levels of society. Subsequent attempts to bring Creole into the classroom—from Lescot’s reforms of 1943 to the Bernard Reform of 1979 and beyond—met opposition from parents and teachers who were imbued with the memory of the racist two-tiered system of the Service Technique.

The Indigéniste movement helped reopen discussions around Creole, and when the Occupation ended in 1934 there was a surge of interest in the language. Academics like Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain and Jules Faine gave critical support to the Creole movement by undertaking
empirical studies of the language, but inadvertently sowed discord within the pro-Creole camp by presenting contradictory positions on the fundamental character of the language. This division exacerbated debates around which writing system should be used for Creole, which ultimately went unresolved for half a century. The implication of foreigners like Ormonde McConnell, Franck Laubach and Robert A. Hall in the orthography project only provoked nationalist and anti-American sentiment and further forestalled the process. Much optimism surrounded the Revolution of 1946 and the subsequent election of Dumarsais Estimé. Estimé had an important impact on the democratization of the education system, and won international support for Creole education via the UNESCO pilot project, but his term was cut short and he was unable to challenge the linguistic status quo directly.

The early 1950s saw a renewed and sustained commitment to Creole-language literature on the part of many Haitian authors. Once again literature returned to the forefront of the Creole movement. The movement, however, was thrown into disarray when François Duvalier came to power in 1957. The democratization for which the Creole movement stood was the antithesis of Duvalierism, and the increasingly coordinated movement was severely crippled under the new regime. However, Duvalier’s Noiriste rhetoric, the ascendancy of the black petit bourgeoisie, the nationalization of the Catholic Church, and the use of Creole as a tool of resistance all had unexpectedly positive effects on uses and perceptions of Creole. The emergence of large Haitian communities in the United States and elsewhere allowed for a surge of socio-linguistic studies of Creole, which ultimately contributed valuable resources and research to developments during the ‘liberal’ phase of the younger Duvalier’s presidency. In this uncharacteristically progressive period the orthography was standardized and the government officially backed Creole-language
education. By 1987, with the passing of the ‘liberal’ Constitution, the linguistic revolution was complete—at least on paper. But entrenched prejudices continue to subvert the linguistic democratization of Haiti.

In spite of ongoing setbacks, encouraging developments have taken place in recent years. As noted, the Akademi Kreyòl Ayisyen has been active since 2014. The AKA is a government institution mandated to protect the linguistic rights of all Haitians. It serves as the governing body for the language, and encourages and assists in the publication of all types of documents in Creole. It is made up of thirty-three Akademisyen, all of whom have been working for the advancement of Creole for many years. The Akademisyen include linguists, educators, clergymen, legislators, poets and translators, several of whom have previously been mentioned, such as GREKA member Pauris Jean-Baptiste, Educa Vision founder Fequière Vilsaint, MIT linguist Michel Degraff, members of Pierre Vernet’s Faculty of Applied Linguistics and of Jan Mapou’s Sosyete Koukouy. The AKA runs conferences, workshops and other events across Haiti and in diaspora cities and also aims to be a leading voice in the wider Creolophone world.

One of the most promising and widely publicized activities for the promotion of Creole education is the Lekòl Kominotè Matènwa (Matènwa Community School). Matènwa is a tiny community on the island of La Gonâve off the coast of Haiti. The school was founded in 1996 by Matènwa-born rural literacy expert Abner Sauveur, and was developed in cooperation with the community itself. It operates entirely in Creole. Breaking from tradition, lessons follow a participatory model and incorporate games and technology. Students are encouraged to think critically and ask questions. The school benefits from an association with Akademisyen Michel Degaff. Degaff is a pioneer of STEM education in Creole. He works directly with the Matènwa
school to develop methods of teaching through games and other engaging activities. The rate of success of the Matènwa model is remarkable, and has resulted in its being replicated across La Gonâve and elsewhere in the country.

Finally, it must be reaffirmed that attitudes toward Creole across the social strata are qualitatively different today than they were half a century ago. When Haitian poet Lyonel Trouillot was asked in 2011 what had changed in Haiti for the better in his lifetime, his response had to do with Creole: “Dans le milieu dans lequel je suis né quand on parlait créole en public dans mon enfance […] on se faisait rabrouer par nos parents ou par les amis de nos parents. Aujourd’hui, les Haïtiens peuvent parler librement leur langue à tous les niveaux de la société—au niveau privé, au niveau public, et ça c’est quelque chose de positif.” Not only is Creole widely accepted, it is increasingly considered inappropriate to speak French in many contexts. For the first time in history, a generation of Haitian children is growing up without being chastised for speaking their language. One can only imagine that prejudices toward Creole will continue to diminish through Haiti’s third century.

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