

FROM SACRIFICE TO SOLIDARITY:

THE TRUTH POLITICS OF HAITIAN LITERATURE

Nick Nesbitt

Princeton University

- 14 The problem of truth is fundamental to thinking about the place of Haiti in the modern world, both in relation to politics and literature, the two domains that will concern me here. The problem of truth lies at the core of the political subjectivation that determined the course of Haitian Revolution.¹ The problem in that political sequence was fundamentally one of remaining true to the abstract assertion of 1789: that all human beings, generically, are understood to be full and undivided subjects of right. Not a racial politics, nor a cultural one, 1804 was a politics of truth that created an entirely new subject of universal right as the political summation of the radical enlightenment.

Though I have argued (2008) that the Haitian Revolution should be understood as an archetypal sequence of populist reason,² it is clear that the final moments of the revolution bear witness to the limitations of this explicative paradigm. In particular, what Aimé Césaire famously called the final “sacrifice” of Toussaint Louverture should be understood, critically, as the logical culmination of this populist politics. While politics (*le politique* in Jacques Rancière’s terms) must unquestionably address itself only to matters of pure, undivided equality, in the defense of the demand for universal justice, populist logic clearly remains entrapped within a vision of politics as negotiation.³ Negotiation, not for the distribution of wealth, rights, and benefits, as in the Habermasian model but negotiation over a more fundamental struggle for hegemony over symbolic goods: who will have the right to decide how to define the signifiers of the political themselves—liberty, justice, equality? While the logic of populism clearly describes the politics (*la politique*) of this negotiation and struggle, it tells us nothing about how we are to proceed with reference to an axiom of political truth, indifferently to those making differential claims on political truth.

Moreover, populist logic is fundamentally *sacrificial*. The struggle for hegemony calls upon each party in the chorus of dissonant voices to sacrifice its cause, to give up on its desire, and to fall in line under the hegemony of the auratic leader. This is precisely the demand Toussaint Louverture made to the people of St. Domingue upon coming to power after 1794: give up on your *bossale* ideas of what general liberty might mean (refusal of plantation labor, reappropriation of surplus profit as labor-free time), and get to work under my model of political freedom as subjectivation to the law of neo-plantocratic order.⁴ Toussaint remained faithful to this sacrificial model of populist politics to the end, however, and in his famous, unfathomable final act, found himself devoured by the same sacrificial political logic he had so successfully implemented over the previous decade.

POLITICAL DISSIDENCE AND SACRIFICE

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Alberto Moreiras has made the claim that “all political subjectivation occurs under a logic of sacrifice.”⁵ Moreiras’s statement invites us to further interrogate the place of sacrificial logic in any politics of truth. Let me begin by looking at Toussaint’s so-called sacrifice, a decision that has confounded historians of the Haitian Revolution since its conclusion. A bit of background: after Napoleon’s troops, led by Leclerc, arrived in St. Domingue in February 1802, Toussaint was led, following a series of intensive battles, to surrender to the French in May 1, after which he retired to his plantation at Ennery. On June 7, 1802, Toussaint received a letter from General Brunet, who invited him to meet Leclerc. All those around him warned him not to go, and Toussaint himself could not possibly have been unaware of the danger of responding to this invitation. Aimé Césaire, in the fifteenth chapter of his *Toussaint Louverture*, describes Toussaint’s decision in terms worth citing at length:

A la lecture de cette lettre trop honnête, il ne faut pas douter que Toussaint se défiât. Il sentait que c’était un piège...Et pourtant il irait. Il savait...Mais il irait: il le fallait. Lorsqu’il fut arrêté, tous les mémorialistes témoignent qu’il put être irrité, mais qu’il ne fut pas surpris... Comment expliquer son attitude?...Il se pénétrait peu à peu de cette idée que sa disparition seule pouvait la parfaire...Cela supposait son sacrifice, son acceptation de disparaître. (311)

Why did Toussaint proceed with this sacrifice? Césaire tells us little, saying only that “La liberté générale, plus que jamais, son maintien était conditionné par l’union, par l’unité du peuple haïtien...J’y vois mieux qu’un acte mystique: un acte politique” (*Toussaint* 313). In what way would Toussaint’s self-sacrifice and disappearance constitute a “political act”? Césaire says only: “Sa personne...faisait obstacle à l’indispensable fusion” (312). In fact, I would argue that the risk Toussaint took goes to the heart of the process of political subjectivation.

I have argued that when Toussaint publicly announced his devotion to the cause of “liberty and equality” on August 23, 1793, he effectively became one of the first politi-

cal dissidents of the modern era.⁶ The logic of this act would come to typify the act of modern dissidence as a whole: the invocation of the rule of law and right as it has in fact been formulated and promulgated by the oppressor himself, and holding him to the letter of these claims. Dissidence, however, has had a bad press since the 1970s, when the defense of lone voices such as Solzhenitsyn on the part of the *nouveaux philosophes* and their followers came to stand for the collapse of insurgent, broad-based politics after 1968.⁷ In fact, I would respond to this legitimate critique of a certain dissidence that instead, *all* political subjectivation occurs as a process of dissidence. In this view, one would have to accept Moreiras's thesis but with a proviso: yes, all political subjectivation is subject to sacrifice, but merely as liminal contingency, not as constituting in itself, in any way, the political itself. Sacrifice is the *void* of the political, its unnamable, and the *risk* of self-sacrifice, which may or may not occur, is simply its operative presumption, one which tells us nothing about the mode of political subjectivation and fidelity itself.

- 16 To become a political subject is to subject oneself to a standard/image/measure of truth, say for example, "Freedom and equality of all." It is to become cognizant of a measure of this Truth (Declaration of Rights of Man), and to perceive in what way one's world fails to measure up. It is, in the words of the Czech phenomenologist and dissident Jan Patočka, to perceive the superiority of the measure over the measured.⁸

Secondly, political subjectivation is the attempt to force the world, in some way, to become more congruent with this measure. There are as many ways to undertake this project as there are political subjects, from the non-violence of Gandhi and King to the anti-systemic violence of the slaves of St. Domingue. But these all imply what Patočka famously called living in Truth, that is, proceeding *as if* the world were in fact a true one.

If one's world refuses to conform to this measure, the political subject runs the risk of self-sacrifice, to the point of death. Hegel, speaking of the Haitian Revolution in the *Phenomenology*, was the first to describe this risk. Accepting the implications of such a possibility, in fact, was what happened to Toussaint. In going to meet Leclerc, he behaved *as if* St. Domingue were subject to the rule of law, including the most fundamental one, that humans be free from slavery. He persisted in this truth, despite the fact that he knew he would most likely be captured.

Self-sacrifice is not a fatality of political subjectivation, however. It is only its outermost possibility, that the subject takes in risking her life in order to live, to however small a degree in truth. In fact, the attempt to make the world conform to one's measure can be successful, even if universal freedom and equality remain forever a horizon and ideal. In fact, in many situations one can observe an increase in measurable freedom relative to a transcendental measure after a given political intervention. The creation of the slaveless state of Haiti in 1804 is one of those moments.

Dissidence is not a choice limited to depoliticized, hopeless situations and isolated, romantic figures such as Soljénitsyne. Dissidence is the basic comportment of political intervention into a given situation. It is not determined by the social status of

dissidents, whether they are rich or poor, black or white, active participants in a political elite or the excluded of a society. It is not defined by whether dissidents resort to bloodshed or subscribe to a philosophy of non-violence. It is not limited to lone individuals, but can involve any number who become subject to a specific measure of freedom and equality. Dissidence is defined, above all, by an individual or group's critical action under the guidance of some universal, transcendental claim to truth.

In his samizdat lessons on Platonic dissidence entitled *Plato and Europe*, Patočka lists six criteria of living in truth, each of which corresponds to choices Toussaint made.

1. The measure is superior to the measured. The measure is firstly self-conceived, immanent yet transcendental to any given, historical situation.

2. Truth is mathematical. It is based upon the axiom of radical, undivided equality, as formulated in such Haitian axioms as *tout moun se moun* or the axiom of *liberté générale* articulated in 1793.

3. To live in truth means to remain faithful to that transcendental measure, to “embody what is eternal within time” and to “stand firm when the care of the soul becomes dangerous for a human being” (Patočka 87).

4. True life can only occur in society, not in isolation, but that society must be true. There is, as Adorno liked to say, “no truth in untruth.”

5. The goal of politics is simply to create a society in which living in truth does not put one in mortal danger: a society in which none are enslaved, or a society in which one can walk to a meeting without being taken prisoner with no due process, charge, or trial and summarily shipped to a Guantanamo or Fort de Joux.

6. And finally, Patočka makes an outrageously provincial claim: “What is characteristic of Europe as Europe is that its distinctive principle is: generality” (221). Clearly this is not just politically incorrect. It is an utterly absurd statement, made from a transcendently Hegelian point of ignorance of the claims of Africans, among others, to the history of human rights since Soundiata Keita's famous *Charte du Mandé* of 1222 (cf. Nesbitt 45). And yet, within the context of the age of Revolutions from 1789-1804, an axiom did indeed come overseas from France to the Caribbean, in defiance of all the racial politics and economic injustices of the time: this was a phrase, a concept that only took on its full meaning in St Domingue, an ocean away from the racism of the Revolutionary French Assembly: *liberté générale*.

The dissident puts her own life rather than that of others at risk in fidelity to this truth. In order to escape from the solipsism and relativism of a merely personal, subjective truth claim, dissident activity crucially depends upon publicity, on the active, dialectical discussion of what it means to live in truth within a community. It was thus crucial that Toussaint's capture be immediately known all across the island. It doesn't matter, and we'll never know, what he was thinking when he went to that meeting; what matters is that the news of his capture (as well as the news that slavery had been reinstated by Napoleon in Guadeloupe) galvanized the resistance to Leclerc's troops. Within three months, the finest army in the world was routed in its

first defeat and the modern world's first slave-free state inaugurated on the ashes of the most profitable colony the world has ever known.

EDWIDGE DANTICAT: TRUTH, DISSIDENCE, POLITICS

The politics of the Haitian Revolution have come to inform the writings of Edwidge Danticat in a complex manner.⁹ Rather than through direct invocation of this history, her writing makes reference to the criterion of truth, a truth beyond all racialized and tribal identity, as the foundation of all politics. The logic of political dissidence and a fidelity to truth informs the totality of her work, up to and including her recent memoir *Brother I'm Dying*. A fidelity to truth continues to be the most distinguishing characteristic of her politics as a writer.

18 Danticat's most recent collection of stories, *The Dew Breaker*, from 2004, describes the traumatic legacy of torture, political violence, emigration, for a group of Haitian and Haitian-American subjects whose lives intersect throughout the collection. The focus of the narrative centers on the experience of a Haitian who immigrated to New York in 1967 to escape his past as a torturer working for Duvalier's Tonton Macoutes.¹⁰ The volume's opening story, "The Book of the Dead," is set in the present, describing a trip this man (he is not named except as "my father" "the barber," or, in the final and longest story of the volume that give it its title, as "the Fat man") makes with his daughter from New York to Florida to deliver a statue the daughter has carved for her patron, a famous Haitian-American television star named Gabrielle Fonteneau (Oprah). Along the way, the father disappears with the statue, only returning to announce that he has unceremoniously thrown it in a lake. He then goes on to reveal to the daughter that he cannot bear the sight of this statue, that it embodies the lie that his life has become since leaving Haiti three decades before. Far from being the victim of the Duvalier regime as his daughter had always believed, he reveals to her that "your father was the hunter, not the prey" (21). He had been a prison guard who tortured and killed countless prisoners before he escaped that former life, coming to New York to start anew as a barber, in this life with his wife and daughter, his "ti bon anj" or "good angel," as he likes to say, who can redeem him from his past deeds. The deep scar on his face is the only objective testimony he bears to this past; not the sign of his victimization, as his daughter Ka had always believed, it is instead mute testimony to the torturer that he was.

Successive stories in *The Dew Breaker* offer the reader a complex and variegated constellation that moves across time (from Duvalier of the 60s to the present) and space (New York, Florida, Haiti), to introduce the reader to those whose lives have been transformed by the life-shattering effects of social violence. Unlike Danticat's recent historical novel *Farming of Bones*, *The Dew Breaker* maintains a resolutely subjective and intimate perspective. History and the larger social forces of dictatorship and totalitarianism that have so structured Haitian experience of recent generations

are everywhere present in these stories, yet they hover just offstage, outside narrative perception, ready at any moment to explode into the lives of individuals such as the mother and ten year-old son who hide under their bed as protesters march by celebrating the fall of Duvalier *fits* in 1986. Here as elsewhere in Danticat's work, this intimate perspective is, for this reader, more than a rhetorical ploy striving to capture the sensibility of the *lecteur*. It reveals an ethical comportment, the author's steadfast refusal to capitulate to the very social violence to which these stories testify; this is a violence that obliterates the singularity of every life experience, those most intimate and cherished details that constitute any identity. These details of memory and memorabilia comprise a life-story, structuring a coherent and continuous self across the multiple displacements that are recent Haitian experience: loss of life and limb, of loved ones, the destruction of one's home and the traumatic projection, naked and violated, into a foreign terrain of emigration and status as a permanent "alien" in the world.

Danticat is a master of the smallest detail; she focuses on those most intimate and subjective of experiences, the smells, sounds of memory that survive in the face of violence. Within this process, fidelity to the subjective experience of intimacy is pre-eminent. The sphere of the intimate, of love, of sexuality, of pleasure, constitutes a reserve in the ever-renewed struggle against the encroachment of a social world and its looming threat of brutal devastation. This fidelity in Danticat's prose to the most intimate details affect and emotion, of sense and sensibility, while quite simply enormously satisfying for the reader, also makes tangible the vast scope of the Haitian contribution to modern experience. This contribution ranges from such an intimate and miniaturist poetics of lives torn apart to the vast promise of the modern world to found an order in which such human singularity can not only survive, but flourish to fulfill the promise contained in every singular existence. The contemporary dysfunction of civil society in Haiti, such that the social world threatens to destroy human intimacy and dignity in every instance, Haiti first instantiated for global modernity the promise of society, of the political, to found the world of every person, without exception of race, sex, or any other discriminatory mark, upon the freedom of the human individual. It was the creation of Haiti in 1804 that first operated a juncture between the intimate, personal experience of destruction, suffering, and torture that was slavery, and the promise of a free society. It was Haiti that first told the world that the freedom of the few (white, male, propertied) cannot be predicated on the unfreedom of the many. It was the declaration of Haitian independence that said that autonomy must be more than the subjective independence of one's conscience in an unfree world. This vision of freedom as mere freedom of conscience in the face of social injustice, in place since Augustine, received its most drastic negation in the Haitian Revolution, when it became radically politicized as the intersubjective project to found a fully autonomous community. The Haitian Revolution showed how it was possible to draw a link between the subjective freedom of any subject and the social conditions that necessarily grounded that freedom.

One of the many paradoxes of Danticat's focus on the most intimate details of subjective experience, of intimacy, is that this focus in some sense bears truer testimony to the historical reality of Haitian experience than any sociological treatise on the dysfunction of Haitian society. While it may be that any politics of truth must remain oriented to the imperative of absolute equality and justice, beyond all claims of identity and racial politicking, a politics of truth must also be informed by the failures and suffering of those who have perished in its pursuit. The violence of a politics of pure abstraction itself replicates the sacrificial logic it seeks to escape. Instead, Danticat teaches us that we must remain faithful to those who have perished, and that if we can know truth as the axiom of pure, eternal equality, time (as loss, as disappearance, as suffering and the eventual obliteration of lived experience) must nonetheless carry forward untruth as itself constitutive of truth.¹¹ If truth and error are internally related, and not standing in abstract opposition to one another, then failure must itself be bound to the process of its overcoming as a fidelity to truth.

- 20 This implies in turn a genetic model of truth, one that takes time and failure to be fundamental to truth itself, and, finally, an awareness of the place of the past and our fidelity to its failures, losses and suffering as irremediably linked to the constitution of truth itself. The content of any conceivable political directive or program, such as that of universal emancipation in the Haitian Revolution, must necessarily be structured by the experiential content of slavery itself (cf. Bernstein 336-41).

Danticat's lyrical evocation of human intimacy, in which the political is constantly kept at bay to fend off looming destruction, testifies as if a cipher of the systematic destruction of the promise of the Haitian Revolution since 1804. This promise, to refound social relations not upon individual claims to property—whether the latter is human or not—but upon the sustained and revered dignity of every human individual, has been systematically destroyed from within and without Haiti since 1804 by the terrified nations whose economic prosperity was built first upon slave labor (in the nineteenth century) and later upon the destruction of autonomous communities that goes by the name of open markets (with these markets to be opened at the point of a gun, if need be).

The luxurious intimacy of Danticat's writing testifies, negatively, to the radical destruction of this promise of autonomy since 1801. Human intimacy remains perhaps the sole preserve of autonomous experience in the land that CNN will never tire of identifying as "the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere." This intimacy is perhaps the sole refuge of freedom, as I've said, but also of justice and redemption. Attention to the recent history of Haiti since the fall of Duvalier in 1986 also testifies to the radical vitiation of social justice for all the crimes *The Dew Breaker* ceaselessly personalizes. Think only of massacre, such as the one that occurred in Raboteau in 1996, when gunmen showed up in this fishing village in the night to gun down any real or imagined political activists in cold-blood. The assassins and muses of the neo-Macoute order are today returned to power by fraudulent elections, underwritten by UN, French, Canadian, and US complicity, clearing the way for the unhindered mis-

direction of relief funds and the reformation of the oppressive Haitian Armed Forces. Justice, then, seems able to sustain itself only within the intimate sphere as if on life-support, jealously guarded from the intrusion of a state and social world that has again and again shown that its only potential is to eradicate the hope of redemption.

The story at the center of *The Dew Breaker*, both structurally and perhaps as well in terms of its representation of intimacy, is entitled “Monkey Tales.” It spans some eighteen years, from February 7, 1986, the day Jean Claude Duvalier fled Haiti, to February 7, 2004, when the narrator Michel, now a grown man living in exile in New York, recalls that earlier, formative day back in the Haiti of his childhood.¹² After cowering under his bed with his mother that day as an uncomprehending twelve year old, Michel appears in front of the house, where Monsieur Christophe, who controls the neighborhood’s supply of drinking water, calls him over to help close the tap the crowd has opened in its celebration. It gradually becomes clear that Michel is Monsieur Christophe’s unrecognized son, and the complexities of unattributed patrimony that structure a child’s life in ways he cannot fathom interlace with the unfolding of a revolution in the street around him.

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It was too painful for me to be reminded that I had a father who lived and worked so close to me and still didn’t call me his son. I didn’t understand why my mother had to struggle to earn money when she could have asked him for it...I didn’t understand why Christophe hadn’t offered my mother money to feed and clothe me, why he only sold her water at a discount and did not offer it to her outright since it was water that I, his son, could also use. (160)

The story is, in fact, a tribute to Jacques Roumain’s masterpiece *Masters of the Dew*. As in Roumain’s novel, the power relations of Haitian society focus on a community’s access to water. The narrator’s best friend, moreover, is himself named Romain. Romain is six years Michel’s senior, and he quotes Voltaire to his younger friend (“C’est à ce prix qu’ils mangent du sucre en Europe”). The two friends share the bond of absent fathers who do not recognize them; since Romain’s father is a notorious Macoute the crowds are searching for that individual that day, hoping to track him down and kill him in violent retribution. Romain has not seen his father for months, and openly despises, yet is obsessed by, him. He regularly watches him, from a distance, in the parades of macoutes that reinforced Duvalier’s reign of terror. Like Romain, Michel had lived under the spell of his mysterious birth:

People had often whispered things around me, from the girls in the neighborhood who coyly commented how much I looked like Tobin [Christophe’s legitimate son], the child of the wife, the ‘inside’ child, to even Tobin himself, who was sometimes kind to me and sometimes refused to look me in the eye as though we were rivals, to [Christophe’s] wife who refused ever to come anywhere near [Christophe’s] tap station in order to avoid facing her husband’s indiscretions and their living results. (159)

The Dew Breaker tells the story of violence that snuffs out lives with the flash of a gun, violence that refigures in an instant the lives of those who live on afterward with only the memory of the departed to sustain them. Most of all, however, it stands as

a mediation on the possibility of a radical break in this cycle of seemingly unending violence that has structured Haitian life since long before the first great slave revolt of August 29, 1791. Although he never knows it, the former torturer at the center of the book has in fact been discovered in his new life as a barber in New York. “Night Talkers” tells the story of Dany, who witnessed the killing of his father by the fat man one night when he was six years old. Since that night, he had tracked down his father’s killer, and taken a room in the basement below the barbershop. The story describes his return to Haiti to tell his aunt that he has found the killer. He dreams one night, talking out loud to describe how he had finally sneaked upstairs one night back in New York to kill his father’s killer, but had suddenly checked himself.

22 Looking down at the barber’s [sleeping] face, which had shrunk so much over the years, he lost the desire to kill. It wasn’t that he was afraid, for he was momentarily feeling bold, fearless. It wasn’t pity either. He was too angry to feel pity. It was something else, something less measurable. It was the dread of being wrong, of harming the wrong man, of making the wrong woman a widow and the wrong child an orphan. It was the realization that he would never know why—why one single person had been given the power to destroy his entire life. (107)

The phrase “the Dew Breaker” refers literally to the Tonton macoutes who would sneak into homes under cover of night to snatch people away to die in prison like Fort Dimanche. But it is also a gesture of hope, for the possibility of redemption for those who have committed such violence, for the possibility of the radical transformation of Haitian society that Jacques Roumain described in *Masters of the Dew*. Above all, it is an affirmation of the hope and possibility to which Haitian culture has never ceased to testify; the hope that in a life of seemingly universal and unending violent destruction, whether under slavery before 1791, or under the dictatorships since 1804, that a break can occur, a rupture in being, and that society can be radically transformed and the violence of the past redeemed: “I’m free. I finally escaped” (237), says the former torturer to the woman he encountered as he ran from the prison where he had just shot her brother; this woman who will transfigure his life. “He would tell her the truth later, much later, once he’d told her stories of other things, about his mother, his father, the garden, Léogane. What made him think there would be a later?...Because she also looked as though there was something she was anxious to tell...It was obvious that she now felt she’d been there to save him, to usher him back home and heal him” (237).

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NOTES

1. This essay develops the themes I explored in my most recent book, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (2008).
2. See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.
3. See Jacques Rancière, *Aux bords du politique*.
4. On this new political order in the 1790s St. Domingue, see Carolyn Fick, "The Haitian Revolution and the limits of freedom: defining citizenship in the revolutionary era."
5. In discussion in the conference "Comparative Imperialisms" at the Centre for Modern Thought, University of Aberdeen, May, 2007.
6. See *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*.
7. See Marcel Gauchet, *La démocratie contre elle-même*.
8. See Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*.
9. On a similar topic, see Valerie Kaussen, *Migrant Revolutions: Haitian Literature, Globalization, and U.S. Imperialism*.
10. For a discussion on Duvalier's regime, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation. The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*.
11. This is where I would want to build on Valerie Kaussen's outstanding, original critique of Danticat and the politics of trauma and memory: Yes, we undoubtedly witness in Danticat an erasure of large-scale insurgent politics along the lines of both the Haitian Revolution and the ongoing struggle to democratize a merely formal, distributive democracy (when it is not routinely overthrown in pursuit of kleptocratic militocracy); yet I would maintain that no politics of truth can hope to have any precise content, to say nothing of an ethical orientation, without maintaining a principled fidelity to

the failures and sufferings of the past, understood as the empirical substance of experiential content itself.

12. For a subtle political study of Haiti's grassroots democracy movement (mid 1980s-present) exposing the numerous malicious forces fighting to subvert democracy and human rights in Haiti, see Peter Hallward, *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment*.