Like many games in the Assassin’s Creed franchise, both Liberation and Freedom Cry include snatches of untranslated language. Foreign languages (that is, languages that differ from the player’s designated settings) are typically only translated in brackets within the cut-scenes and only if the player has enabled subtitles, which act like closed captioning. Subtitles provide text for all spoken dialogue in these scripted cinematic interludes and put translations in brackets when that speech has been delivered in a language other than the player’s preferred one. However, foreign languages heard in the gameplay are never translated for the player, and I’m arguing here that this linguistic gulf provides a productive obstacle to the player’s complete absorption into the playable character’s identity.

To fully understand how the community views Aveline, for example, the player needs to understand what the townspeople say to her (and about her) as she passes by. This is something that might be overlooked by most U.S. players, as the majority of these comments are untranslated and in French. If Aveline bumps into a stranger while wearing the lady’s gown, she is treated politely: “Pardonnez-moi, mademoiselle.” There is a polite inflection in the women’s voices and, sometimes, a slightly lustful one in the men’s.

1. This is another hallmark of the franchise. For example, in Assassin’s Creed III, in addition to the use of the Mohawk language for which the game is famous, there are bits of French, German, Russian, and Portuguese. For a sense of how the gamer community views the AC series language options and the lack thereof, see Dustin Bailey, “Assassin’s Creed Odyssey won’t let you play in Greek,” PCGamesN, August 13, 2018, https://www.pcgamesn.com/assassins-creed-odyssey/assassins-creed-odyssey-greek-language.
Yet, when this same lady finds herself in a different part of town (near the cemetery, where there are more people of color, for instance), a black woman says as she passes: “Look at her, making herself out to be a lady.” The game therefore provides a rich diversity of experience, even across the treatment of the single character avatar, but this might be lost on the non-francophone player.

To analyze this element of the game, I performed an experiment in which I stood on a bustling corner in the game’s setting of colonial New Orleans, or, more properly, Nouvelle Orléans, and relentlessly bumped into the townspeople. I performed this same action wearing each of the three costumes. I noted the gendered nature of the responses, looking for differences depending on time of day or location, and indeed there are many. I couldn’t get slaves or people of color to respond to my affronts ever when in the guise of the lady or the assassin in the town square, but when dressed as a slave, and in any area where there were more people of color than whites, I could garner an “Attention!” or a “Je te connais?” [Do I know you?] In the city square, the well-dressed people of color might audibly grunt, but they don’t verbalize their objections. Yet the assassin can provoke a response such as “vous êtes pas bien” [roughly, you ain’t right] when in a less prosperous part of town, but she is still addressed with the formal “vous.” Similarly, while the white citoyens respond to the lady with the utmost politesse, it is not the same for the guards (who will fight her if she arouses their suspicion), sailors, or dockworkers, who may treat her harshly if they aren’t amenable to her charms, such as when she’s on a mission on their turf.

My informal experiment sought to map out how the citizens generally perceive Aveline in her different guises. The vast majority of the responses I elicited were in French; I only noted two in English, both when in the guise of the slave. In Nouvelle Orléans a man warned that I was “courting a beating,” and a guard on Chichen Itza declared, “Remember your place; I won’t tell you twice.” In short, the citizens of New Orleans treat Aveline with the utmost contempt when she is dressed as a slave; with ridiculous,
saccharine deference when she is a lady; and with a mixture of fear, hostility, and resentment when she is the assassin. Shoulder-checking someone while wearing the assassin’s costume, a tri-cornered hat, trousers and waistcoat, might elicit responses that range from the trepidatiously polite “Ô, je suis maladroite, excusez-moi” [Oh, how clumsy I am, excuse me] or “Je m’occupe de mes affaires” [I’m minding my own business], to the more overtly fearful “Pitié, laissez-moi partir” [Please, let me go] and the somewhat ridiculous “Pas le visage!” [Not the face!], to the much nastier “Vous êtes aveugle?” [Are you blind?] and braver “Hors de mon chemin!” [Out of my way!]. The player who doesn’t speak French can tell much about the community’s reaction just from the tones of voice. Many of the people accosted in this way just cry out, wave their arms, and flee in another direction. No translation necessary. But I solicited the help of an undergraduate research assistant who does not speak French to get his read on the gestures. He was unable to distinguish the nuance in how the townspeople treat the slave and the assassin, characterizing both reactions as “hostile,” though the apologetic manner in which they treat the lady was obvious to him. He also noted that “random men greet Aveline” in the lady guise where they don’t when she’s in the other two costumes. But being able to understand snatches of in-game dialogue reveals much more about the society’s perception of Aveline’s personae.

For example, some have suggested that the assassin’s costume might be read as transgender, and it is evident from these encounters that the people don’t quite know what to make of Aveline in this guise.2 One woman, when pushed, cries out, “Qui est cette femme?” [Who is this woman?]. At first I thought I heard her say “ce femme,” which would be an incorrect use of the masculine article with the feminine, implying ambiguity. Upon more investigation, I noted that the townspeople accosted in this manner by the assassin could

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also be prompted to exclaim, “Excuse me, Sir, eh, Madam, sorry” and to wonder aloud, “Why does she wear men’s clothing?” When bumped, one man says, “Ô, seigneur, je suis désolé, désolé” [Oh, lord, I am sorry, sorry]. Is he appealing to the Lord above, or does he mistake Aveline for a nobleman here? If you approach a woman in this form she might exclaim, “Ne m’approchez pas!” [Don’t come near me]. Or you might hear, “Vous devriez avoir honte!” [You should be ashamed]. Is she fearful that the assassin could be an assailant making an attack on her virtue, or is this an accusation of some broader gender-bending impropriety? Perhaps most tellingly, these exclamations often come with insults such as “créature de malade!” [sick creature] or “demon!” Sadly, even Agaté, with whom Aveline falls out over the course of the game, ends by saying she has been “twisted . . . into this monster” and that he should have raised her as his own daughter, a repudiation of her placement in a wealthy white household. Whether this animosity is meant to be the result of Aveline’s class, race, or gender transgression, I cannot say, but it is clear that the people of this world aren’t sure what to make of her. Yet, despite hurling these horrible epithets at Aveline, they still address her with the formal “vous” whereas in the slave costume she is only ever addressed with the informal “tu,” signifying her inferior status.

Addressed sometimes as “Esclave” and other times as “Femme” when dressed as a slave, Aveline’s nudging of the crowd garners direct insults that translate to “Open your eyes, slave!,” “Watch where you’re going, woman!,” and “Pay attention!” The gentlest responses I encountered were an exasperated, “[How about] a little calm, woman?” and “A little respect?” The townspeople are clearly indignant to see this behavior from an enslaved person, claiming “I’ll teach you some good manners!” or “I ought to have you whipped!” Some accuse her of being drunk; others wonder if she’s a pickpocket. She is called a “type of vermin” by one person, and another vows not to waste his time on her “kind.” None of this may be directly surprising, but it is ironic when contrasted with the responses of the seemingly identical cast of anonymous townspeople when they encounter the
same behavior from the same woman wearing a different dress. In this case they bend over backward to take the blame on themselves for the collision: “Veuillez m’excuser, mademoiselle,” “Veuillez accepter toutes mes excuses,” “Pardonnez-moi, madame.” Even when I walked directly up to someone and shoved them, they said things like, “Je ne vous ai pas vue” [I didn’t see you], “I’m sorry, truly!,” or “Our paths crossed.” My personal favorite, which is delivered in a deferent tone without a hint of passive aggressivity, is “J’ai juste ce qu’il faut pour faire disparaître ces bleus” [I have just the thing to get rid of these bruises].

Even with subtitles on, only cut-scenes include the translation of foreign languages, leaving comments such as these as well as the French greetings, asides, and snatches of overheard dialogue entirely untranslated. Although the player isn’t handicapped by a language barrier in Liberation, a knowledge of French will heighten understanding of certain aspects of the game, particularly how the community views and treats Aveline. I also acknowledge that there may yet be more to Aveline’s story that I am missing—several times I was unable to make out what a passing person said to me. It’s entirely possible that there are other languages here, such as African dialects or Creoles. (One slave the player interacts with says that he is Fon and is eager to return to Africa, which may be a clue to some of the other languages heard in the game.) But I’ll leave this topic aside with this last note about the use of speech in Liberation. Flagging the use of language as important in the game, in one instance, a smuggler named Roussillon tries to pronounce a Kreyol word “houng—haung—” and then opts for its (insufficient) translation, “witchdoctor.” The word he was looking for was “houngan.” This word and a few other untranslated, unexplained concepts, like “loas,” signifying Vodun divinities, point to how language makes communities, even within the society of gamers.

In brief, my argument here is that although the uses of untranslated language may be a trademark of the Assassin’s Creed series that lends to its historical realism, it works to particular effect in Liberation and Freedom Cry by emphasizing how a game can stratify
the gamership, using a sieve-like mechanism to allow some to pass (to the next level or to a deeper understanding) and blocking the path of others in a manner that speaks specifically to the poetics of resistance. The issue of audience, that the videogame changes depending on who is playing it, is intrinsic to the medium, but it takes on new complication in games about ownership of racial history and heritage, something which the makers of Assassin’s Creed, a series about people reliving their ancestors’ memories, must surely be aware. The polyglotism of these games strikes me as an acknowledgment of this fact: players will have dissimilar experiences interacting with these narratives. (Perhaps Aveline’s diverse persona system is even meant to suggest this as well, if only in part.) This division of the audience via the incorporation of diverse languages creates a stratification in the gamership. Those fluent in French may understand the comments in the street or the ambient noise of overheard conversations in town, while others may miss the significance of words spoken in French. Nevertheless, this is a productive division that calls to mind the semiotics of slave revolt encountered in other digital games we’ve investigated here: the lamp in a window, the monkey wrench quilt, or the song about a drinking gourd, symbols to some but not legible to all.

In Freedom Cry, the use of untranslated language emphasizes the subject matter of slave revolt. The game dialogue incorporates not only French, the language of the colonists present in Saint Domingue, but also Haitian Kreyol and even some phrases from a Trinidadian dialect. As in Liberation, foreign languages in gameplay are untranslated even if the player turns on the subtitles. In the cut-scenes, use of foreign languages are more spare, but with subtitles on, there is a translation in brackets (such as [Bully!]), but no transliteration of the word heard (in this case “Baa John”) or

3. The dangers of the game’s rendering ownership of black resistance to a wide audience is a thorny issue, and not one I’m equipped to tackle. This broad “problem of white gaming” is handled more deftly in Gray and Mazurek, “Visualizing Blackness.”
any indication of what language the character has spoken (here, Trinidadian Creole). As such, untranslated language lends a kind of mystery to the game, like a door through which the player is not permitted to walk. But the thing about this type of door is that certain players are permitted to pass if they speak the language.

In *Freedom Cry*, the first instance of Haitian Kreyol is heard from the slave whom Adewalé saves from deformation by the overseer. In answer to his question about how to find Bastienne Joseph, she utters a phrase that I would transliterate as “Mwen menm pa l’konnen” [Me personally? I don’t know her]. In today’s Haitian Kreyòl, this would be “Mwen menm, m pa konnen li,” but the bracketed translation is insufficient here—it says only [“Of course not!”]. I’m not exactly sure what accounts for the difference in the Kreyol, but a woman in her nineties whom I spoke to in Port-au-Prince suggested to me that this phrase might be “La Creole Ancienne.” It was what her father spoke, she told me, a creole “plus françisé.” Sometimes the slaves whom Adewalé frees thank him in English, sometimes in French, and sometimes in what sounds like Kreyol. There were times at which I couldn’t tell if what I was hearing was French, French spoken with a heavy African accent, Kreyol, or an older Creole. For one scene in particular, at the Maroon hideout, I enlisted the help of other French speakers and of Kreyol-speaking Haitians, and truthfully, I could get no consensus on whether the passages in question—in which Adewalé eavesdrops on conversations, one seemingly a bawdy discussion about a woman, and another about a drunkard—were in French or Creole or some hybrid. I even made attempts to contact the dialect coach who worked on the game, but the truth is that I prefer to leave this matter a mystery, for the game designers’ choice to leave speech indecipherable or untranslated works as effectively, regardless. It’s a productive blockage that points to the history beyond the game as one that cannot be effectively translated into a playable narrative.

Although I object to the uses of Haiti made in the incorporation of Makandal in *Liberation*, and the commodification of Saint Domingue’s legacy of slave resistance in *Freedom Cry*, I want to
In a review on the site Kotaku, Haitian American games journalist Evan Narcisse writes,

Never in a million years did I ever think I’d hear Haitian Kreyol in a video game. And yet, there it was in Freedom Cry, as lilting and percussive as when my mom spoke it. For the few hours I steered Adewalé through his saga, I didn’t feel horribly under-represented or taken for granted in the medium I write about. It’s a feeling I could use more of.4

In this review, Narcisse makes several good points about the game, for example its deft avoidance of Vaudou, a topic that is too often used to ignorantly demonize the culture, and its incorporation of authentic Haitian music. At the outset, Narcisse claims the game for himself: “The newest chapter of the Assassin’s Creed series gives me some of the things I’ve always wanted in a videogame: a heroic fantasy that lets me control a warrior fighting against slavery.” One of the ways the game invites Narcisse to feel that the game is for him and his Haitian heritage rather than a shallow appropriation of it are these shibboleths, like the songs he recognizes, or the phrases others might.5

There are other instances where uses of Kreyol explicitly divide the gamership into those in the know, who can understand the exchange on a deeper meaning, and those who don’t, who are, effectively, left out of the joke. There are two separate occasions when characters in the game, an unnamed freed slave and Madame Josephe, refer to Adewalé as “Blanc,” the Haitian word for stranger that translates literally to “white person.” Although the player who reads the translation provided ([foreigner]) if captions are

5. Although it concerns the Lakota playing a game about the Mohawk people and therefore doesn’t share the language concerns, see Joe Flood, “Playing Assassin’s Creed 3 on the Pine Ridge Rez,” Killscreen, November 28, 2012 for a discussion of some of the same issues I explore here.
enabled might understand that this indicates that the characters do not fully trust Adewalé, he or she would still likely miss the irony of their referring to the black Adewalé as “white” and all that this term implies in reference to the culture’s sense of solidarity. Because of the society’s general division into an upper-class caste of mixed-race descendants of the colonists and the impoverished free blacks and slaves, this term is fraught with history.

The inclusion of a password early in the game suggests that the game designers were thoughtful in their use of untranslated language. When Adewalé first meets with the intended recipient of the parcel he bears, she gives him a task to prove his trustworthiness. So that he might find his way to the Maroon hideout to deliver a message, Bastienne teaches Adewalé to sing a snippet of song to the field slaves as a passcode to gain access and information. The song is a line from a traditional Haitian lullaby, “Si ou pa dodo crab la va manje w,” which roughly translates to “If you don’t go to sleep, the crab will eat you.” While it is true that recognizing that the song is a lullaby and knowing what it means don’t seem to further understanding of the game, its inclusion here acknowledges that the use of language in the game acts as a kind of password, permitting some players to accede to a different level of understanding.

The interactivity of the structure of the videogame is a complex element in depictions of slave revolt: it can allow a game developer to control historical narratives of slave resistance, reducing matters of deep historical importance to entertainment. As we’ve seen, game texts can also work in a productive manner that emphasizes that such a narrative may speak differently to gamers of diverse ancestry by restricting the player’s access to the full story through the use of language or requiring a labor of cultural recognition on the part of the player to unlock parts of the story. It’s not that these games wholly manage to avoid problematic commodification of black resistance or a troubling appropriation of historical slave revolt, but in certain ways, they employ subversive tactics in a productive manner.