Towards the end of Derek Walcott’s *The Haitian Earth*, his 1984 play on the events of the Haitian Revolution, Jean-Jacques Dessalines declares: “I am the beginning. And I am the end. Haiti is me” (*Haitian Trilogy*, 426). Coming from him, it is a curious phrase in the context of the Haitian Revolution. In the chronology of events, Dessalines usually makes his appearance mainly after Toussaint Louverture, and also after precursors like Mackandal and Boukman. On the other hand, many histories of the revolution also focus on what comes after him: particularly Henri Christophe—his kingdom and conflicts with Pétion. It is true that Dessalines’s importance, as the one who brought his country to independence, cannot be underestimated. But that climatic event usually finds its place towards the end of the narrative, after much else has happened, if we are dealing with a history of the revolution (that is the case in C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins*); or it occurs in the second chapter, after Louverture’s struggles, if we are dealing with a broader narrative of Haiti’s history as a nation. In the chronology and the symbolic hierarchy of Haitian heroes, Dessalines often occupies a second place, after Toussaint, and even after Christophe.

However, Dessalines’s words are true about Walcott’s play: *The Haitian Earth* does begin with Dessalines, and in doing so it is different from all other accounts of the Haitian Revolution. The play opens with Dessalines, fictionally presented as a buccaneer, alone on a beach. A wild boar attacks
him, and after a fierce battle Dessalines kills the animal, exclaiming: “My friend, I think God send you as a sign. Nothing can kill me. My name is Dessalines. Jean Jacques Dessalines. Nothing can kill me. [. . .] I will drive the French pigs into that sea. And when I come back here, on this same beach, I not going to look like this. The next time you see me, I will be a king! The hills, the sea, will echo with my name. Dessalines! Dessalines!” (Haitian Trilogy, 302–3). From that moment on, Dessalines’s presence in the events that follow is ubiquitous: sometimes overt, sometimes in the shadows. He finds his way to the initial rebellions of free people of color, saying: “I’m walking to my throne” (307). Thus, there is a sense of almost supernatural determinism in Dessalines gradual takeover of Haiti’s destiny.

In order to fully appreciate Walcott’s gesture in The Haitian Earth, we must remember that, somewhat paradoxically given his seminal role, Dessalines has rarely occupied the central stage in Caribbean accounts of the Haitian Revolution. Commenting on this curious phenomenon, Joan Dayan highlights the fact that Francophone Caribbean writers like Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant turned their attention to Louverture and Christophe (both of them in Césaire’s case), and suggests that the reason may have to do with Dessalines’s reputed brutality, and that perhaps “they had difficulty (in spite of their rhetoric or their desire) acknowledging the chief who called his people to arms with the command, “Koupe têt, boule kay” [“Cut off their heads, burn their houses”], a command recast by Haitians today as “Koupe fanm, boule kay” [“fuck their women, burn their houses”] (Haiti, 20). In The Kingdom of this World, Alejo Carpentier barely mentions Dessalines in passing, characteristically attributing the final defeat of the French to a great coalition of Vodou loa (gods). On the other hand, C. L. R. James does not hide his limited appreciation for the figure of Dessalines. Even as he acknowledges that Toussaint gradually lost touch with the people while Dessalines rose as their natural leader, James is careful to declare: “Yet Toussaint’s error sprang from the very qualities that made him what he was . . . If Dessalines could see so clearly and simply, it was because the ties that bound this uneducated soldier to French civilization were of the slenderest. He saw what was under his nose so well because he saw no further. Toussaint’s failure was the failure of enlightenment, not of darkness” (Black Jacobins, 288).

To be sure, this does not mean that Dessalines has been totally absent as a protagonist in literary accounts of the revolution, although, interestingly enough, it is easier to find him in that role in works written by African American authors in the United States. Chief among these is Langston
Hughes in his play *Emperor of Haiti*, from 1936, which was also performed under the title *Troubled Island*, becoming an opera with that second title in 1949. Before Hughes, African American author William Edgar Easton published a play titled *Dessalines: A Dramatic Tale* (1893), offering an idealized version of the Haitian emperor; and writer John Matheus, also linked to the Harlem Renaissance, wrote the libretto to the opera *Ouanga: a Haitian Opera in Three Acts* (c. 1929; performed in concert version in 1932; staged in 1949), which also centers on Dessalines. An interesting aspect of these works is that, in the context of African American struggles against racism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dessalines, as the hero who finally achieves Haitian independence, becomes a source of black pride in spite of (and in Hughes’s case, arguably because of) his fierce resolve to eliminate white oppression in Saint Domingue by any means necessary. Philip Kaisary suggests that

*Emperor of Haiti* should be considered a prescient and significant attempt to secure and rehabilitate Dessalines’s place in black history, making it clear to an African American audience that accepting the prevailing opinion of Dessalines as a butcher and an embarrassment could no longer be accepted. (*Haitian Revolution*, 52)

Perspectives on Dessalines in the Caribbean (leaving aside his gradual rehabilitation within Haiti itself, to which I will return in the next section) have been more skeptical, and literary works of the region tend to either place him in a secondary role or display the traditional hostile view of the emperor. The portrayal of Dessalines most often than not reflects his reputation for blind violence, racial hatred, and sheer brutal ambition.

Whether that reputation is fully deserved has been questioned, and I will return to that issue below. However, it is in the context of that negative symbolic valorization that Dessalines’s central and unusual role in Walcott’s play reveals its full significance. For Walcott’s play does not attempt to vindicate Dessalines; in fact, it takes his violent reputation as its point of departure, thus presenting through him a somber assessment of the revolution and its aftermath. Moreover, even though Dessalines’s role in *The Haitian Earth* becomes almost unbearably cosmic—he is indeed the alpha and omega of the revolution—it is in fact a logical expansion and deepening of the role he plays throughout Walcott’s *Haitian Trilogy*, the series of dramas the Saint Lucian poet wrote on the Haitian Revolution, and which were published together in one volume in 2002.
In 1948 Walcott became one of the first major twentieth-century Caribbean writers to address the revolution and its protagonists in a literary work, his play *Henri Christophe*. As the title indicates, the play focuses on the figure of Christophe; however, Dessalines already plays an essential role in it, one that in some ways encapsulates his symbolic embodiment of all that was “barbaric” or corrupt in the revolutionary struggle. *Henri Christophe* opens with the news of Toussaint’s death in France, as Dessalines takes control of the revolution. It is a beginning that is already full of ominous implications for Haiti, but it is still more traditional than that of *The Haitian Earth*, which opens with a prescient Dessalines before the initial slave revolts. Throughout the first half of *Henri Christophe*, Dessalines’s acts of violence multiply: his massacre of whites after independence, his contempt for common people (he rejects “talking politics to savages” [14]), his thirst for power, his vanity, and his virtual re-enslavement of the newly freed slaves. So appalling is Dessalines’s rule that it horrifies Christophe himself, even though he is also quite ambitious and ruthless. While conspiring against Dessalines, Christophe declares: “Blood grows into a habit with a born butcher; / He has grown into something monstrous” (41). Pétion, who is already engaged in a power struggle with Christophe which will divide the country in two halves, replies: “To think that for two days he has been / Martyring children with a tired sword! He is a model / Of horror. Dessalines is only a beast; / He goes to blood with the joy that I go to a feast” (41–42). Thus, Dessalines figure stands apart from those of Christophe, Pétion, and most definitely Toussaint. Dessalines comes across as irredeemably bloodthirsty and cruel.

*Drums and Colours* (1958), Walcott’s epic pageant written to mark the opening of the first West Indies Federation, includes a segment on the Haitian Revolution in a play that traces historical moments from the “discovery” by Columbus to the execution of George William Gordon in nineteenth-century Jamaica. Although Dessalines does not have a lengthy role in the Haitian segment, he represents again the blind barbarism of a general guided at best by a desire for revenge against whites, at worst by personal ambition.

We see Dessalines in the midst of the conflict between Toussaint and the mulatto Rigaud, celebrating and drinking as he states: “Up in the north two thousand whites are slaughtered” (Walcott, *Haitian Trilogy*, 239); “It is a new age, the black man’s turn to kill” (240). In addition to Toussaint Louverture, who embodies a higher moral ground in Walcott’s plays, Christophe plays again the counterpart to Dessalines. Addressing Dessalines during the war against Rigaud, Christophe complains: “This butchering of mulattos you call assault” (238); and he replies to Dessalines’s enthusiasm at “the black man’s
turn to kill” by stating: “Then we are no better. Revenge is very tiring” (241). Of course, such moral misgivings will not stop Christophe from joining Dessalines in the betrayal of Toussaint and from pursuing power relentlessly himself. However, Christophe comes across as an initially noble soldier who is gradually corrupted by power; Dessalines’s animalistic violence seems to be his true nature. In the last section of the chapter I will return to Christophe’s words about revenge being tiring, for they connect to ideas that run deep in Walcott’s work, and they constitute one of the core issues explored in his Haiti plays. A concern with the place of revenge, justice, and forgiveness in emancipation struggles links those plays to several of Walcott’s major essays, particularly “The Muse of History” (1974), a piece that in some ways works as the interpretative key to his Haitian plays. But first I want to make a small detour into some alternative perspectives on that figure that incarnates all brutality and despotism in so many accounts of the revolution, including Walcott’s plays: Jean-Jacques Dessalines himself.

A Maligned Hero?

It would not be fair to evaluate Walcott’s portrayal of Dessalines exclusively on its historical accuracy or lack thereof: the character allows the playwright to make important points about what, in his view, went wrong, or not, in Haitian and Caribbean history. Of course, the question of fidelity to historical sources is not unimportant either, even as it necessarily begs the question of the reliability of those historical documents themselves, particularly when they deal with figures whose historical role has provoked strong passions for and against them. In this regard, even with the best intention not to distort the historical records, both historians and creative writers must inevitably deal with interpretations of historical events and figures (including the very notion of what and who constitute significant events or figures).

In the case of Dessalines, the fact is that the negative portrayal is not exclusive of Walcott—as indicated above, it is a fairly generalized assessment of the revolutionary hero that Walcott incorporates into his plays. Given Dessalines’s importance as the figure who led Haiti to independence and whose name still reverberates in the nation’s national anthem, *La Dessalinienne*, it is appropriate to examine at least some of the objections to such a lopsided view of Haiti’s first emperor. Needless to say, many of the negative portrayals of Dessalines were in fact produced by Eurocentric or racist historians, both in Europe and in Haiti.
Joan Dayan has made the interesting point that, of all the heroes of the Haitian Revolution, Dessalines was the only one that was deified in the Vodou pantheon. After his murder, he was brutally dismembered, but as Dayan indicates:

Popular vengeance turned Dessalines into matter for resurrection. Dessalines, the most unregenerate of Haitian leaders, was made into an lwa (god, image, or spirit) by the Haitian people. The liberator, with his red silk scarf, was the only “Black Jacobin” to become a god. Neither the radical rationality of Toussaint nor the sovereign pomp of Christophe led to apotheosis. Yet Dessalines, so resistant to enlightened heroics, gradually acquired unequaled power in the Haitian imagination. (Haiti, 17)

Thus, in spite of his reputed cruelty, Dessalines achieved a unique lasting place in his people’s imagination and devotion.

Two factors contribute to a more positive assessment of Dessalines and of his hallowed place in his people’s imaginary (without in any case totally erasing his violent legacy): his views on race, and his intended policies of land distribution. With regard to race, Dessalines was uncompromising in his attempt to vindicate the pride and dignity of the former black slaves. The slaveholding society that the French imposed on the island was brutally racist; it kept a strict hierarchy in which whites were at the top and black slaves at the bottom. Free people of color made intense efforts to dissociate themselves from the slaves and be accepted as legitimate members of white society. After the French Revolution, free people of color sent delegations to France in order to have authorities recognize their rights as land and slave owners. Their role in the Haitian Revolution was consistently ambiguous, and in 1799 Toussaint was engaged in a bloody war against free people of color in the south led by André Rigaud. It was during that war that Dessalines gained his reputation as slayer of free people of color and whites, as a hater of everyone nonblack. Pétion himself (with Rigaud and Boyer) came back to the island as part of Leclerc’s expedition (one of whose purposes was to reinstate slavery), and he did not join the revolution until he realized the French could not defeat the former slaves.

It is certainly true that Dessalines was brutal in his subjugation of people of color during the war against Rigaud. However, the question remains of whether he was violent out of sheer racial hatred or whether he would have been as violent against any enemy attempting to challenge the liberation struggles of the slave masses. The popularized story goes that Tous-
saint himself was appalled by Dessalines’s violence in the south; when faced with the results of Dessalines’s handling of the people of color rebellion, he quipped: “I said to prune the tree, not to uproot it” (James, Black Jacobins, 236). However, Berthony Dupont suggests that such a position on Toussaint’s part might have been either a political ploy or quite simply “opportunist and contradictory” (Jean-Jacques Dessalines, 100). Toussaint ordered, or was presumably aware of, many of the executions he later criticized, and it is not impossible that he might have benefited from having Dessalines get the blame while he, Toussaint, reaped the benefits. In The Haitian Earth Walcott has Dessalines say of Toussaint: “Ho, ha! He kills ten thousand mulatto citizens / And shrugs his shoulders and says he hates excess! / I love this hypocrite!” (365). The phrase also appears in almost identical form in Drums and Colours (Haitian Trilogy, 242).

Another detail that problematizes the view of Dessalines as a racial butcher is his attitude towards race after independence. It is true, on the one hand, that he allowed, and perhaps encouraged, massacres of whites after the end of the war. But such violence occurred mainly against landed colonists, who still held claims of ownership over the land and of racial superiority (and implicit ownership) over the former slaves. Such claims could play into the ever-present threat of a French expedition coming to reclaim the former colony for France. In his attempt to vindicate the identity of those who were for centuries mere owned objects within the colonial society, Dessalines declared that all Haitian citizens, without distinction, would be officially “black.” But Dessalines made sure that that racial category honorifically included the Polish soldiers who had defected from the French Army and taken the side of the revolting slaves during the war. He was also quite willing to gain the favor and protect the business interests of American and British merchants, white powers that could strengthen his position against the French. Such moves suggest a more cunning and flexible view of race than the essentialist stance that is usually associated with him.

In her lucid examination of Haiti’s early constitutions, Sibylle Fischer writes about Dessaline’s 1805 document that

[the constitution] performs one of the most troubling paradoxes of modern universalist politics—the paradox that the universal is typically derived through a generalization of one of the particulars. Calling all Haitians, regardless of skin color, black is a gesture like calling all people, regardless of their sex, women: it both asserts egalitarian and universalist intuitions and
puts them to a test by using the previously subordinated term of the opposition as the universal term. *(Modernity Disavowed, 233)*

Indeed, in conjunction with some of his political gestures after independence, Dessalines’s constitution becomes, as Fischer aptly calls it appropriating Doris Sommer’s term, a “foundational fiction” (229): a document notable for expressing and trying to articulate the aspirations of a people who, up to that point, had been relegated to the very margins of humanity. As such, Dessalines’s attitudes to race display a vision that attempts to both appropriate and subvert the relation between the universal and the particular which, as we have seen in previous chapters, is deeply imbricated in the logic of coloniality and has preoccupied numerous anticolonial thinkers.

The second factor that may have contributed to a more positive view of Dessalines in popular imagination is his attempt to deal with the land problem in Haiti by expropriating lands from former colonists and by strictly tossing aside spurious claims to land ownership from people of color descendants of former colonial owners. In Dessalines’s view, such lands would become property of the state. That approach gained him the enmity of both people of color who claimed hereditary rights to lands owned by former slave owners, and of military officers who wanted personal rewards for their participation in the Revolutionary War. It may have been that attempt to redefine land ownership that ultimately cost Dessalines his life.

Again, it must be realized that much of the “bad press” against Dessalines comes either from French sources or from a discontented Haitian elite unwilling to give up privileges after independence. Even seemingly arbitrary acts like crowning himself emperor become more difficult to judge when one realizes that, as Berthony Dupont indicates *(Jean-Jacques Dessalines, 297)*, Dessalines became emperor when he learned that Napoleon was about to do the same thing in France (this is a connection that Fischer also highlights *[Modernity, 231]*). The act can be interpreted then as an attempt to send a clear message that Haiti and France were now two sovereign countries on equal footing: both had emperors to lead them. In this regard, it is significant to notice that Dessalines did not create a royal court with its nobility, as the slightly less maligned Christophe did after him, and that he always made a point of displaying his lack of refinement.

Within Haiti itself, the fortunes of Dessalines’s reputation were initially uncertain. For decades there was little mention of, or sympathy for, the slain “Liberator.” Gradually, and often in conjunction with political ploys and
interests of the moment, Dessalines’s figure took its place among the officially celebrated founders of the nation (Dayan, Haiti, 16–29). In 1904, La Dessalinienne, written by Justin Lhérisson and composed by Nicolas Geffrard, was adopted as the national anthem of Haiti.

It is possible that none of the later attempts at reinterpretation, or his lofty rebirth as a Vodou loa, amount to a full exoneration of Dessalines’s violent acts, of which there were definitely plenty. By all accounts he was fierce and ambitious, but a case can be made for a more careful and balanced examination of his life and possible motives, an examination that more likely than not would diminish the moral distance between him and figures like Christophe, Pétion, and even Toussaint Louverture. In the meantime, we are left with the reality that Caribbean literature, in spite of often running ahead of historiography and scholarship in the reassessment of the past, has not yet fully come to terms with the figure of Jean-Jacques Dessalines and what he represents. In Walcott’s plays, as we will see below, Dessalines occupies one pole of a moral spectrum that finds Toussaint Louverture at the other extreme, with Christophe and other revolutionary leaders occupying diverse slots in the space between. From that partial perspective, the fact that Dessalines moves from a secondary role in Henri Christophe to a cosmic ubiquitous presence in The Haitian Earth can only imply an increasingly tragic view of the Haitian Revolution and its Caribbean aftermath in Walcott’s oeuvre.5

However, one may also take a different approach and suggest that Dessalines and Louverture represent opposite ends of a spectrum that must be deconstructed: the spectrum of Caribbean heroism. From that perspective, Dessalines’s excesses simply constitute the tragic summit of the authoritarianism and blindness that are implicit in the very worship of heroes that has dominated Haitian and Caribbean history. It is that rhetoric of violent and mostly masculine heroism as the only solution to the region’s historical problems that Walcott confronts in his Haitian plays. In that regard, Toussaint is not that far from Dessalines, and indeed in two of the plays Dessalines refers to Toussaint’s “hypocrisy” (242; 365). The problem then is not a contrast between enlightened heroes and barbaric heroes, but the violent narrative on which heroism as a model depends. For Walcott, Dessalines is simply the most revealing example of a violent grammar that includes all the other heroes and which, even if one acknowledges its historical successes (Haiti’s independence, for example), needs to be questioned and challenged in the contemporary Caribbean. Not surprisingly, as we will see in the next
section, it is also a problem that brings to the foreground the often-invisible category of gender in discussions of coloniality, since the rhetoric of heroism often devalues and excludes any concepts or approaches constructed as “feminine.”

“... for a future without heroes” (Another Life)

In his foreword to The Haitian Trilogy, the volume that compiles his three plays that deal with the Haitian Revolution, Derek Walcott states: “The Haitian revolution, as sordidly tyrannical as many of its subsequent regimes tragically became, was an upheaval, a necessary rejection of the debasements endured under a civilized empire, that achieved independence” (viii). Walcott’s words reveal tensions that are in fact part of his outlook on much of Caribbean history beyond the Haitian Revolution. It is not hard to agree with the basic idea conveyed by Walcott’s statement, for it simply acknowledges that the revolution’s excesses (particularly those of its subsequent regimes) can be regretted even as the achievement of independence and liberation from slavery can be celebrated. I do want to highlight, however, Walcott’s choice of two words in that context: “necessary” and “tragically.”

On the one hand, a retrospective look on history inevitably regards its events as necessary, for once they happen they are inalterable. That in itself might be a banal statement (although, as we will see in the case of Glissant, inalterable is precisely what history is not, and the Martinican writer sees his literature precisely as an attempt to accomplish a “prophetic vision of the past,” in which a reassessment of the meaning of past events and the unveiling of roads taken and not taken open up the possibilities of freedom in the present). However, the need to accept what is already history, not to turn the present into a resentful struggle with what cannot be undone is far from banal for Walcott, but rather one of the constant obsessions in his work, and an issue that has often found him at odds with his Caribbean peers. As I will explore in more detail in the next section, the need to find peace with the past in order to unleash the creative possibilities of the present is one of the main issues that the Haitian Revolution brings up for Walcott, and it is the basis for his criticism of figures like Christophe and particularly Dessalines.

The “necessary” upheaval of the revolution is also related to its “tragic” character. “Tragic” here refers both to its generic meaning as sad and unfor-
tunate and to its meaning as a literary genre. Both *Henri Christophe* and *The Haitian Earth* are tragedies (as is Césaire’s *Tragedy of King Christophe*): both present heroic figures that, while not lacking nobility and pathos, possess insurmountable tragic flaws. Moreover, in both plays characters fight against the unbendable will of indifferent, sometimes cruel gods: mainly the historical forces of war and empire, but also the demons of the human soul—ambition, cruelty, desire, and cowardice. Like the classical tragic heroes, the characters in these plays fight against forces that they have little chance of defeating. To be sure, there are tentative and not unimportant victories—just like Oedipus frees Thebes from the plague by solving the sphinx’s enigma or Prometheus manages to bring the divine fire to humanity, these men are instrumental in the deliverance of thousands of slaves, and in the renewed deployment of the possibilities of their human dignity. But just as in classical tragedies, these men’s downfall is often provoked by inner demons that are often inextricably intertwined with their heroic virtues. In *Henri Christophe*, Vastey, Christophe’s secretary, tells the king as they wait for the rebel forces that will exterminate them: “Hither a new king, and another archbishop, / Monotonies of history . . . / We are finished, Majesty, / We were a tragedy of success” (103). What makes Christophe (and Haiti) truly tragic is that their tragedies are not those of defeat (which would be merely sad), but rather brought about by the very qualities and conditions that made their success possible.

In that regard, more readily than James’s *The Black Jacobins*, Walcott’s plays may reflect David Scott’s praise of tragedy as the genre that can most eloquently portrays “the paradoxical reversals that can unmake and corrupt our most cherished ideals” (*Conscripts of Modernity*, 190). Although in her important work on West Indian drama, Judy Stone follows the lead of *Henri Christophe*’s Shakespearean epigraph (from *Hamlet*) in suggesting that, in contrast to James, “Walcott chose for his Hamlet the enigma, the lesser man bur more complex mortal” (*Theatre*, 95), John Thieme aptly points out that “the play incorporates intertexts from both *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, and Christophe has more in common with the protagonists of these plays than with Hamlet. Like both of them, he is a killer-poet who walks to a throne through blood” (*Derek Walcott*, 48). And while I agree with Scott that Hamlet’s self-reflective doubt makes him a better figure for Toussaint as an embodiment of the “historical conflict between the old and the new” (*Conscripts*, 133), at least as represented by James, the distance between Hamlet and Macbeth serves as a cautionary warning about the use of wide categories
like “tragedy” in the description of events like the Haitian Revolution. Which notion of tragedy or which tragic character we are talking about, as well as which precise moment, historical character, or vision of the revolution are important considerations to keep in mind.

Another detail in Walcott’s foreword’s assessment of the revolution deserves closer attention. The “debasements” of colonialism and slavery were apparently inflicted by a “civilized empire.” Walcott’s words could be read as ironic, and indeed they are. Like Carpentier and many others before him, Walcott is fully aware of the hypocritical claims of an enlightened Europe that has inflicted so much misery on its colonial dominions around the globe, sometimes using the spreading of those enlightened values as justification. But Walcott’s words are not merely ironic, for he remains clearly steadfast in his unwillingness to totally discount a European culture to which he owes so much in all realms of human experience, not the least the aesthetic. It is another topic that has remained constant throughout Walcott’s career, from the “The Muse of History,” in which the daffodils of colonial education were more real in his young imagination than any Saint Lucian flower (What the Twilight, 62), and the early poems in which he remained divided “between this Africa and the English tongue I love” (Collected, 18). In the next section I will focus on how Walcott’s Haitian plays are an integral part of his polemics against both Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. In the rest of this section I want to return to Walcott’s confrontation with a Caribbean tradition of “tragic heroism” in his Haitian plays.

In his essay “What the Twilight Says: An Overture,” originally published as the prologue to his collection Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays (1970), Walcott comments on his youthful fascination with heroes of the Haitian Revolution. Such fascination was not without its somber overtones; it came, according to Walcott, from his frustration with the insular colonial world around him:

At nineteen, an elate, exuberant poet madly in love with English, but in the dialect-loud dusk of water-buckets and fish-sellers, conscious of the naked poverty around me, I felt a fear of that darkness which had swallowed up all fathers. Full of precocious rage, I was drawn, like a child’s mind to fire, to the Manichean conflicts of Haiti’s history. The parallels were there in my own island, but not the heroes . . . those slave-kings, Dessalines and Christophe, men who had structured their own despair. Their tragic bulk was massive as a citadel at twilight. They were our only noble ruins . . . Now one may see such
heroes as squalid fascists who chained their own people, but they had size, mania, the fire of great heretics . . . To put it plainer, it was something we could look up to. It was all we had. (What the Twilight, 10–13)

One can certainly recognize the attitude of the young Walcott in his first play, *Henri Christophe* (1948). Edward Baugh has aptly and succinctly traced the development of Walcott’s vision in Haitian plays, from the tragic and grandiose heroism of that first play, through the focus on Toussaint’s more rational form of heroism (an equally brave but more enlightened leadership) in *Drums and Colours* (1958), to the focus on common people as the true heroes of history in *The Haitian Earth* (1984). While I definitely agree with Baugh’s account, we must not discount the remarkable consistency and continuity of Walcott’s positions through several decades.

Already in the first play Dessalines appears as a bloodthirsty butcher, criticized by no other than Christophe himself for his use of race as a justification for his violence. Dessalines tells Christophe: “You mock my color. You cannot think a black king real” (48), to which Christophe replies: “I am black, too, but today I am ashamed. You have red work in your hands” (48). In this first play, the representation of Dessalines, with his vengeful concept of race, establishes a pattern that will remain consistent until and throughout the third play. In spite of his misgivings, Christophe himself will virtually re-enslave his own people, and the contrast and continuity between those two characters will continue in the other two plays. Provocatively, in *Henri Christophe* it is the white Archbishop Brelle who pleads for reason and reconciliation. He blames Christophe for “with hammer and hatred breaking / What Toussaint built, exploding / Where he created” (91). Toussaint never appears as a character in this first play, but he already embodies the role of rational builder and constructor that he will retain in *Drums and Colours* and *The Haitian Earth*.

We will return to the subject of racial politics in the next section, but for now it must be emphasized that, regardless of the validity of any criticism of the revolutionary leaders, their use of racial categories was certainly not arbitrary: racial essentialism was built into the very fabric of the colonial regime and, beyond that, into the very logic of coloniality. In a regime where slaves were racialized objects and non-Europeans were at best racialized subjects, it is not surprising that the turning upside down of received, oppressive racial categories would be deployed as a central strategy of emancipation, even if that approach might be criticized from a contemporary perspective as simply inverting, not dismantling, the oppressive structure. As John Thieme has
pointed out, one limitation of Walcott’s first play on Christophe is that in its fascination with the “Manichean conflicts” of Caribbean history it does not clearly present that Manichean worldview “as an attribute of colonial discourse . . . a psychological trap, a product of colonial brainwashing” (49). Walcott’s later works will increasingly focus on highlighting that corrupting effect of that colonial logic.

Leaving momentarily aside racial politics, the pressing question that Walcott’s Haitian plays pose is: What is the relation of history’s self-appointed heroes to their own people, Haiti’s newly freed black slaves? We find one answer in a poignant scene in Henri Christophe, when two nameless murderers are waiting to ambush and kill Dessalines. One of them expresses misgivings about taking a man’s life with such ease; the other one replies: “Ask the generals of the wars that are supposed to buy liberty and peace; ask them why they use ordinary people, workmen, niggers, and smiling boys with sonnets in their eyes dying like Greece on vulgar cannons; ask the man who hired us” (53–54). Already in the first play we see the critique of heroic leaders for whom the lives of ordinary people are expendable in the context of their own grandiose plans. That critique will come to full form and fruition in The Haitian Earth, but it is already there from the beginning, as an indictment of Dessalines and Christophe.

It is true, however, that Walcott allows Christophe to have his moment of grandiloquent glory before he meets his tragic fate in this first play. Dessalines receives a similar but briefer honor from one of his murderers, who laments as he is about to perform his deed: “I have no authority to cut the throat of light” (54)—a phrase that links Dessalines to the sun and may honor Aimé Césaire’s book Soleil cou-coupé, published precisely in 1948 (the phrase itself, “sun cut throat,” comes from Apollinaire’s poem “Zone”). Asked skeptically by his secretary Vastey if it was for racial hatred that they fought, Christophe replies:

Yes, fool; for that Haiti bled,
And spilled the valuable aristocratic blood
To build these citadels for this complexion
Signed by the sun.
Yes, for that we killed, because some were black,
And some were spat on.
For that I overturned the horn of plenty,
And harvest grey hairs and calumny;
It is I who, history, gave them this voice to shout anarchy


Against the King. I made this King they hate,  
Shaped out of slaves . . .  

(Walcott, *Haitian Trilogy*, 101)

Christophe appears here as one of those heroes who have “structured their own despair” indeed, as Walcott suggests in “What the Twilight Says.” He gives a tragic and violent shape to lives that, according to him, lacked any dignity, form, or purpose before. Christophe takes it upon himself (and this is both his greatness and his hubris) to rewrite the meaning of Haitian history, using the Haitian people themselves as his alphabet. When the king says “it is I who, history,” there is a clear conflation of Christophe and history—either the black king embodies the movement of history, or he addresses history directly in an apostrophe. Either way, he is linked to an impersonal stream of events that has achieved the liberation of Haitian masses just as it also has been relentless in their enslavement.

In this regard, it would not be out of place to emphasize here that Césaire’s portrayal of Christophe in his own 1963 tragedy, as we saw in chapter 3, corresponds quite neatly to Walcott’s. When confronted about his treatment of men by his wife, Césaire’s Christophe replies:

I ask too much of men? But not enough of black men, Madame . . . All men have the same rights? Agreed. But some men have more duties than others. Does anyone believe that all men, all I say, without privilege, without special exemption, have known capture, deportation, slavery, collective reduction to the level of animals, the monstrous insult, the total outrage that we have suffered, the all-denying spittle plastered on our bodies, spat into our faces. We alone, Madame, do you hear me, we blacks. (*Tragedy*, 41–42)

Like Walcott’s character, Césaire’s Christophe’s abuses are closely intertwined with his attempts to avenge the humiliations of black masses. His vision grants him his tragic nobility, even as his ambition poisons his actions almost beyond redemption.

Paul Breslin has highlighted how, in “What the Twilight Says,” Walcott engages in a wordplay that links C. L. R. James’s black Jacobins to his own black Jacobins (*What the Twilight*, 11), thus moving from James’s revolutionary fervor to the high literary style but fatal flaws and corruptibility of Walcott’s heroes. As Breslin indicates (Nobody’s Nation, 76), this gesture clearly marks the difference between James’s enthusiastic and Walcott’s much more skeptical perspectives on Caribbean emancipation movements—a skepticism,
it should be clear, about the way those movements may have betrayed their own ideals, not about the ideal of emancipation itself. However, as we will see in the next section and Breslin also highlights, both writers agree on the notion that “revenge has no place in politics” (James, Black Jacobins, 373). In that regard, Henri Christophe already points in the direction of Walcott’s later, more mature reflections.

In spite of pointing to Christophe’s tragic grandeur, Henri Christophe certainly does not shrink from highlighting the delusional dimension in the king’s dreams. However, as is clear from Walcott’s autobiographical assessment in “What the Twilight Says,” his younger self was precariously balanced between horror of Christophe’s cruelty and admiration for his daring, a daring that, as Christophe describes it in the passage quoted above, is not very dissimilar from the literary and artistic achievement to which the young Walcott aspired. One can appreciate how such a figure might appeal to the young poet who saw himself as engaged in a similar endeavor: giving shape and meaning (through poetry) to lives that he perceived as left behind by history. Christophe “gives voice” (his own) to the voiceless; he “made” his kingdom, “shaped” it out of the amorphous magma of slaves. Of course, etymologically the “poet” is the supreme “maker,” and Walcott has clearly expressed several times how his younger self felt compelled to give shape and voice to the chaos and poverty he perceived around him. And certainly, the elitism of that view of the poet or artist makes him a lofty, regal figure.

Although The Haitian Earth implies more a shift of emphasis than a full about-face with regards to Henri Christophe, it is certainly a significant one, and mediating them is Drums and Colors, organized around four important figures in the history of the Caribbean: Christopher Columbus, Walter Raleigh, Toussaint Louverture, and George William Gordon. Written as a pageant for the inauguration of the West Indian Federation in 1958, its performance included participation of actors from different islands, thus showing that “the many local governments and peoples of the Federation could work together” (King, Derek Walcott and West Indian, 21). Moreover, and appropriately for an Anglophone author with a protestant upbringing from a mostly Catholic island where most of the population speak French creole, Walcott’s presentation of Caribbean history included segments on Spanish and French imperialisms (Columbus and Haiti). Paula Burnett has pointed out that such a strategy shows how, although the play was written for a federation made up exclusively of former British colonies, Walcott “declined the narrow definition of the region and its history” (Derek Walcott, 224). I would add that it also points to an awareness of how, in spite of the differences between the diverse
empires that found their ways to the Caribbean, one may identify in all of
them recurrent patterns that place Europe/the West, narrowly conceived, at
the center of a global colonial hegemony that rapidly solidified after the “dis-
covery” of the Americas in 1492, and which Dussel has called the “myth of
modernity,” and Mignolo “the modern/colonial world system.”

In the Haitian segment of the long play, the emphasis on Louverture
marks a significant evolution from Walcott’s initial assessment of Carib-
bean heroics in his first play. As Walcott tries to articulate what intelligent
leadership (as opposed to chauvinistic heroism) might look like in a time
of crisis, Dessalines and Christophe recede to the background as brutal and
ambitious generals (Dessalines more so than Christophe, as usual). Toussaint
appears as the enlightened leader anguished by the violence he is forced to
exert, always unwilling to let the struggle for justice and freedom degenerate
into mere revenge. Moreover, the play tries to give more prominence to the
importance of common people in the development of Caribbean societies by
focusing on a lengthy, centuries-long panorama of historical events. It also
structures its plot within a carnival frame; that is, within the play, everyday
people in the context of a carnival celebration perform the historical epi-
sodes. The result is a highlighted role for the masses that is often erased by
an emphasis on heroic figures."

Several central scenes from the Haitian episode of *Drums and Colours*
were used again, with some rewriting, in *The Haitian Earth*. Not surpris-
ingly, paramount among those scenes are those in which Toussaint confronts
his generals, particularly Dessalines, expressing his loathing for unnecessary
violence. However, and tellingly, Walcott also moves from one play to the
other the scene in which Dessalines accuses Toussaint of hypocrisy (240; 365),
and also of being power thirsty (240; 389). The scene may represent Dessa-
lines’ duplicity in order to justify his own betrayal, but it may also represent
an instance in which Dessalines voices Walcott’s doubts about how different
Toussaint was from the other revolutionary heroes, if not in his intentions,
certainly in the violent results of many of his decisions.

As I pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, *The Haitian Earth*
opens with Dessalines, who eventually declares: “I am the beginning. And
I am the end. Haiti is me” (426). However, elsewhere in the play, Pompey,
a black peasant trying to convince his beloved Yette, a mulatto prostitute,
that they should leave the city and return to the countryside to work the
earth, says to her: “You and I, we is Haiti, Yette” (386). As Edward Baugh
has compellingly shown, the tragic events of the play take place between the
symbolic implications of those two phrases, one revealing the megalomania
of power, and the other one the promise of shared work and responsibility. Thus, the third play develops themes and possibilities that were only implicit in the ambivalent, skeptical view of heroic leaders that dominates the first two plays.

As indicated above, Walcott’s use of Dessalines’s perspective and ambition to trigger and frame the action of *The Haitian Earth*, compounded by his almost supernatural ubiquity throughout the plot, in which events move inexorably towards his ascension to the throne, transform the revolution into a veritable tragedy. We meet him at the beginning as a buccaneer, then he foretells his own future kingship, joins the rebellion of Boukman, and calmly walks through the plot with the confidence of a man whose destiny is certain. It is (although Walcott does not state this) as if the violent aftermath of the revolt had been written before the events even get in motion. Dessalines’s self-characterization as the beginning and the end, with religious echoes of Christ as the Alpha and Omega, dominates the play, which then becomes, in spite of its celebration of the efforts of common people like Pompey and Yette, one of Walcott’s most pessimistic assessments of Caribbean history. Similarly to the narrative of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, Dessalines is murdered, but what he “truly” is—what he represents in the play—resurrects almost immediately in Haiti’s long succession of tyrannical regimes.

In the play, Dessalines freely admits that he knows nothing about the art of war (a statement that does not do justice to the historical Dessalines) but he immediately clarifies, “I know plenty about the art of revenge” (350). When Toussaint Louverture comes to the forefront of the story, still the coachman of the slave-owning Breda family, he reluctantly finds his way to a plot already dominated, from the beginning, by Dessalines’s ambition.

Toussaint joins the revolution, but is horrified by its violence. His nephew, Moïse, later a general under his command replies: “They did us worse” (352). Toussaint insists: “We are supposed to be fighting a war. To kill a child, that’s a childish thing . . . The soil itself is bleeding . . . I don’t want revenge. There’s no strategy in revenge” (352). And while these warriors fight their battles, Pompey, the peasant, insistently ploughs the earth, telling Yette: “Somebody have to plant for people to eat. Not everybody can be a soldier. And they burning down this country” (356).

Later, in a scene transferred from *Drums and Colours*, Toussaint, already the leader of the Revolution, will state: “I hate excess” (364). It is Dessalines who, either projecting his own defects on Toussaint, or displaying keen insight, will exclaim: “Ho, ha! He kills ten thousand mulatto citizens and shrugs his shoulders and says he hates excess! I love this hypocrite!” (364). Until the
end of the play, Dessalines will insist that Toussaint’s political oscillations are a sign of hypocrisy: first he is aligned with the Spanish army against the French republic (and declares himself monarchic), then he switches back to France but expels the representatives of the French government in order to retain his control of the colony, and then he tries to reach a deal with Napoleon (who will take advantage of this in order to imprison him). Although the play remains sympathetic to Toussaint’s anguish and consistently marks the distance between his aspirations and Dessalines’s cynicism, Dessalines’s words destabilize attempts to simply idealize Toussaint’s historical role, particularly in a story dominated by the suffering of innocent civilians like Pompey. Although quite different from each other, both Toussaint and Dessalines come to embody historical processes that are indifferent to the fate of ordinary, specific individuals.

As we saw above, Berthony Dupont suggests Toussaint was not above hypocrisy at least in his attempt of blame Dessalines for the free people of color massacre (in the conflict with Rigaud) that he, Toussaint, had implicitly authorized. In *The Black Jacobins* C. L. R. James justifies Toussaint’s fluctuations by indicating that they were political maneuvers under which his actual convictions remained constant: liberty and equality for everyone in Saint Domingue. In James’s reading, even though Toussaint would not shy away from shifting alliances according to circumstances, his guiding principles, those of the French Revolution, did not falter. Walcott’s play points in a similar direction. When confronted by Leclerc, who has been sent by Napoleon with the mission of capturing Toussaint and reinstating slavery, Toussaint insists: “I have served France” (392). When Leclerc exclaims: “I am talking about civilization!” (394), Toussaint replies: “I am remembering civilization. All those glorious white marbles in your museums, all your Gothic arches, your embroidered books. What do they mean to a slave whose back is flayed so raw that, like a book, you can read the spine” (394). It is not that Toussaint does not believe in France’s “civilized” ideals; his argument, and the basis of his sarcastic parallel between a slave’s back and a book, is that France has betrayed, or never lived up to, those ideals. Confronted with France’s principles he clearly states: “I have always appreciated that. But those are ideals, as much as the Christian Church is an ideal. The empire wasn’t built on that, General” (394). Here Toussaint appears pretty much as C. L. R. James portrays him: committed to the ideals of the French Revolution, fighting to push them to their logical implications farther than the French would care to envision, much less admit, yet insisting on maintaining Haiti’s links to the nation that had given them faith in liberty, equality, and
fraternity. Unwilling (and, according to James, unable) to follow Toussaint’s lofty principles, Dessalines and Christophe betray him. Thus, Toussaint’s indecision, and his insistence on linking his claim for justice to the interests of those who would enslave him again, opens the door precisely to what he has been trying to avoid: brutal revenge and absolute despotism.\footnote{It is not without irony that Toussaint’s relative weakness, even if it is what James called “the failure of enlightenment, not of darkness” (Black Jacobins, 288) (as opposed to the insights of Dessalines, who “saw what was under his nose so well because he saw no further [ibid.]), ends up opening the way to such despotic violence. In both James’s and Walcott’s accounts, Toussaint’s attempts at fairness and evenhandedness do not go far enough, whereas Dessalines’s brutal excess and suspect essentialist rhetoric get the job of achieving independence done. After all, one should not forget that, in spite of Dessalines’ “brutality,” what the Haitian slaves were up against was the even more brutal, cynical force of France’s slave holding, colonial, racist empire. For it to be perfect, Dessalines’s energy would have had to include within its own momentum a sense of its legitimate limits, which it did not. But all of this, of course, implies that we agree with James’s view of Toussaint and Dessalines. Overall, Walcott seems to, but astutely and provocatively puts another, not wholly disposable possibility in Dessalines’s lips: that Toussaint might have also been ambitious and violent, albeit more politically shrewd and rhetorically cautious.\footnote{It is not totally surprising that Pompey refers to the former revolutionary heroes, now kings, as “you all,” just as before he had said “they” are burning down the country (356), without even making a distinction between the black leaders, the free people of color, and the French. From his own position, of course, he is right. From a bleak perspective that differs significantly from the optimistic thrust of many of his other works, Walcott offers through Pompey his critique of a Caribbean ethics/aesthetics of heroism that has pervaded many anticolonial and anti-imperialist works from the region. What that}}
rhetoric forgets, for Walcott, is central role of humble citizens in struggles for emancipation, and in the (re)construction of society after the violent phase of such struggles is over. The fact that the play ends with Christophe’s execution of Yette offers a bleak vision of the possibilities of breaking the cycle of violence, a vision that, unfortunately, is solidly grounded on Haitian history to this day.\textsuperscript{14}

Here it is important to highlight that, through the character of Yette, the important but often-neglected role of gender in the logic of coloniality comes to the foreground. In other words, in addition to the marginal position that she occupies because of her race and class, the fact that she is a woman adds still another dimension to her exploitation. Before joining Pompey, we meet her as a prostitute; as such, her body is a sexual commodity for both white men and free men of color. She is then raped by Dessalines, and her experience as a victim of that violent act is shared by countless female slaves and indigenous women throughout the Americas, for colonial domination has walked hand in hand with sexual domination since the conquest. Although Yette herself is a free woman of color, she is still a victim of the sexualization of racialized otherness in a colonial context in which sexuality becomes a vehicle for the exertion and display of violent domination; this is part of what María Lugones has called “the coloniality of gender.” As part of this perverse dynamic, we should notice that when Dessalines retains Yette with him and expels Pompey, the latter lingers outside of the palace, crying, which prompts Dessalines to question his manhood, and Yette to defend it (416). This “feminization” of male victims is part of the gendered racial logic of coloniality; it coexists with the hypersexualization of women of color, and both display the role of gender categories in the normalization of colonial relations. The paradoxical fact that the victimizer here is Dessalines highlights Aníbal Quijano’s point about the pervasiveness of the coloniality of power in postindependence societies.\textsuperscript{15}

Although Pompey, in his misery, does not greatly distinguish between French colonizers, Dessalines, and Christophe, he does make an exception for Toussaint. He states: “It had one talk then, I remember, under the old coachman, and that talk was not who was king but who would make each man a man, each man a king himself; but all that change” (431). Pompey’s words resonate with extraordinary acuity in the way they link, yet also differentiate, the ambitions of “the old coachman,” Toussaint and those of later leaders like Dessalines. Toussaint wants to make each man a man; Dessalines wants to be king. But Pompey inadvertently points to a possible key in Dessalines’s and Christophe’s behavior, at least as they are presented by Walcott
(and arguably, Césaire). Because if to be a man is to be one’s own king (“each man a king himself”), then perhaps when the trauma of a dehumanizing, brutal institution like slavery damages some men beyond repair, it is only by becoming kings, in spite of the violence that such a gesture may mean to other men, that those men can feel that they become men. To be a king here becomes a figure for possessing agency, dignity, freedom, respect from others: everything a slave lacks. It is a white mask in a white world in which a black man wants to be not a king but rather “a man among other men” (Fanon, Black Skin, 112). The importance of this connection between the illegitimate grab of absolute power on the part of men like Dessalines and the legitimate aspiration to full humanity on the part of every slave cannot be underestimated. One of the corrupting effects of the racial axis of the colonality of power, which makes a legitimate aspiration illegitimate, is to facilitate and embolden the substitution of an illegitimate goal (absolute power) for a legitimate one (full humanity and agency). Here, the Fanonian link leads us to another important dimension of Walcott’s Haitian plays: the racial politics they explore, which have been recurring preoccupations in Walcott’s oeuvre.

**Revenge or Nothing**

In his 1974 essay “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?,” Walcott famously declares: “We owe the past revenge or nothing, and revenge is uncreative” (Hamner, ed., Critical Perspectives, 57). That essay, along with the contemporaneous and equally well known “The Muse of History” (1974), presents some of Walcott’s most definitive positions on issues such as Caribbean identity in relation to its colonial past, the Caribbean artist’s connections to both Europe and Africa, and equally important, the Caribbean intellectual’s responsibility toward the injustices inflicted on the region by centuries of imperial domination. In some ways, those essays could be used as interpretive keys for Walcott’s Haitian plays, since those plays are concerned precisely with those questions of identity and justice, as they are emblematized by the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath. The phrase quoted above almost encapsulates Walcott’s answers to many of those questions, but his plays also demonstrate that no absolute answer can be easily reached that is not made unstable by the implications of the opposite answer.

Walcott’s essays were written during the height of “Black Power” cultural and literary movements in the Caribbean and the United States, and they reflect his mistrust, and sometimes open antagonism, to all forms of cultural
nationalism (understood by him as being too often not simply about pride in one’s culture or nationality, but rather as an ethnocentric, sometimes racist, unwillingness to be “tainted” by other cultures, with the implicit claim of the uncontaminated purity of one’s own identity). Thus, in “The Muse of History” he provocatively states:

That all blacks are beautiful is an enervating statement, that all blacks are brothers more a reprimand than a charter, that the people must have power almost their death wish, for the real power of this time is silent. Art cannot last long in this shale. It crumbles like those slogans, fragments and shards of a historical fault. Power now becomes increasingly divided and tribal when it is based on genetics. (*What the Twilight, 57*)

Although Walcott is responding to his immediate context, his mistrust of racial essentialism (or anything that might be construed as such) runs throughout his whole career, from well before the Black Nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Walcott has always regarded himself as a “mulatto of style,” as he defines himself in another essay, “What the Twilight Says” (*What the Twilight, 9*). “Style,” in that phrase, does not refer merely to aesthetic concerns and his views on writing, but to a whole cultural outlook. That outlook is often experienced as the precarious balance between conflicting commitments and loyalties, which leave the poet “divided to the vein . . . Between this Africa and the English tongue I love” (*Collected, 18*), as he expresses it in one of his best known poems, “A Far Cry From Africa.” And it is important to notice the ambiguity in the very choice of words in both the essay and the poem: “mulatto” and “vein” refer to biology, whereas “style” and “love,” refer to actions/approaches and emotions/affects. Although Walcott attributes no essentialist content to the mix of races in the Caribbean, he is certainly aware of the role that “biology” has played in the region’s historical relations, inasmuch as biology has been part of the ideological racist arsenal that Europe used to justify its imperial expansion. But precisely for that reason, he is suspicious of any attempts to challenge that colonial history that take as their point of departure a similar essentialism, even if now with its poles inverted.  

Walcott’s early response to the dangers and possible performative contradictions that may underlie racial politics can be clearly seen in *Henri Christophe*, where both Dessalines and Christophe justify their oppressive regimes by deploying racial essentialism and appealing to the quite justified resentment of the masses against colonial Europeans. However, already in that
first play Christophe confronts Dessalines by attacking precisely the latter’s misuse of race: “You kill offenders because of their complexion; / Where is the ultimate direction of this nation, / An abattoir of war?” (39). Dessalines remains unconvinced: he shows the marks that the whip has left on his body, claiming, “for every scar / Raw on my unforgiving stomach, I’ll murder children, / I’ll riot” (39). However, when Christophe turns despotic himself and is confronted by his white Archbishop Brelle, “Your smell of blood offends the nostrils of God” (91), Christophe readily responds by invoking racial categories as justification for his actions:

Perhaps the smell of sweat under my arms
Offend that God, too, quivering His white crooked nostrils.
Well, tell Him after death that it is honest
As the seven words of blood broken on His flesh; tell Him
The nigger smell, that even kings must wear,
Is bread and wine to life.
I am proud, I have worked and grown
this country to its stature . . .”

(Walcott, Haitian Trilogy, 91)

One should notice Christophe’s insistence on the material, even physiological, fact of his blackness. In doing so he invokes a whole array of racial categories that constellated Europe’s gradual domination of the globe (since the “discovery” of the Americas in 1492). Those categories were intimately linked with the development of what Walter Mignolo calls the “modern/colonial world,” in which Europe’s colonial domination is implicitly and explicitly justified as resulting from an inherent, essential superiority of Europeans to inhabitants of colonized territories. Thus, it makes perfect sense for Christophe to invoke those categories in his defense of his vision, but in Walcott’s play such racial rhetoric energizes rebellion at a high prize: it also keeps those who use it entrapped in Eurocentric models.

However, even that criticism—that a discourse of rebellion that relies on racial essentialism ends up replicating the abuses it is trying to undo—is only part of the problem that Walcott’s plays attempt to address. The question that these plays pose most insistently (and understandably leave unanswered) is to what degree these men actually believed their own essentialist rhetoric, and to what degree it was a ploy to justify their own personal ambition.

On the one hand, Walcott’s comments in “What the Twilight Says” would suggest the former: “Those first heroes of the Haitian revolution, to
me, their tragedy lay in their blackness” (*What the Twilight*, 12). In that interpretation, as I suggested at the end of the previous section, the megalomania of these heroes would be a twisted attempt to overcome the dehumanizing effect of centuries of slavery and abuse. These men attempt to become men—to regain their agency and dignity—by becoming kings, as Pompey’s words suggest at the end of *The Haitian Earth*. If the attempt is misguided to the point of transforming them into tyrants, then that much clearer is our insight into the almost insurmountable trauma they have to overcome.

In *Henri Christophe*, Dessalines presents his violence as “a necessary horror” (48). It is not surprising that in addition to Fanon’s observations on the black man’s need to wear a white mask when all he wants is to be acknowledged as human (to be “a man among other men” [*Black Skin*, 112]), the actions of the revolutionary heroes in Walcott’s plays also invoke the purging effects of violence that Fanon examines in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Violence is the abject reality of the slave, who suffers it every day of his/her life; it is also the means by which the slave can recover his/her freedom. Says Fanon: “At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (*The Wretched*, 94). However, it is equally true that “there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place” (39). The danger here, for Fanon, is not violence itself, but that the only option—or aspiration—for the colonized becomes simply to occupy the position of the colonizer. For that reason, the conclusion of *The Wretched of the Earth* is a plea to “find something different. We today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe, so long as we are not obsessed by the desire to catch up with Europe” (312); “Humanity is waiting for something other from us other than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature” (316). Arguably, both Dessalines and Christophe, as portrayed in Walcott’s plays, incarnate that “obscene caricature” that Fanon warns against, just as they also (and paradoxically) embody the “cleansing force” of a violent revolt—its “necessary horror.”

Walcott may implicitly acknowledge Fanon’s thoughts on violence’s cleansing potential when he calls the Haitian Revolution, for example, a “necessary upheaval” (*Haitian Trilogy*, vii–viii). But it is important to highlight that Walcott’s is a very different sensitivity, and that violence itself is more often than not a suspect force in his works, an approach that is frequently self-defeating even when it seems justified. As he states in a 1990 interview:

> If Black power oppresses the white victim, it is no different from a white power oppressing a Black victim. Now you can say that it is justified on the
basis of revenge and it is justified on the basis of history. But it is the very idea of history as revenge that does nothing for humanity. . . . But if, for instance, you consider Gandhi’s or even Martin Luther King’s idea of history as not containing revenge, then you have change. (Baer, Conversations, 166–67)

Walcott does not ignore that from certain perspectives revenge may seem justified by the historical oppression of one group over the other. From that perspective, “black violence” (say, Dessalines) exerted against a white victim (say, a former French slave holder) is not the same as its opposite, and to suggest so would bring one dangerously close to bad faith. Even if one grants that distinction, the question becomes, for Walcott, what is the end result that is been pursued through that violence—how to achieve what Walcott calls “change.” The uplifting of oppressed groups (as opposed to the satisfaction of individuals) is rarely served well by “revenge.” And here it is important to distinguish violence as such from revenge—even if violence may sometimes be regarded, in retrospect, as a “necessary horror,” it is not so if its motive is simply revenge. Even when violence seems justified, the ends can hardly justify the means if the means threaten to destroy the ends. For Walcott, violence rarely knows when to stop once its immediate objective has been reached, and it rarely chooses its objectives with precision. Both Dessalines and Christophe exert their violence not only against whites but also against other blacks, against their own people.

All of the concerns described above still assume a genuine concern for oppressed racialized groups, even when ethical dilemmas remain. But another possibility that Walcott’s plays insistently raise is that racial essentialism may be, at least in part, mere rhetoric in lips of these ambitious men, a way of rousing the masses to support their leaders’ self-aggrandizement. Already in Henri Christophe Dessalines is described as “vain,” more interested in power and its outer ornaments than in any political agenda (8). Christophe, who refuses any comparison to Dessalines (82), is also described as vain (59) and then as worse than Dessalines (92); in the last scene, while he waits for Pétion’s troops to raid his citadel, he has a “witch doctor” work on his sick legs, but soon enough dismisses him, commenting: “It is useless. Christ and Damballa, or any god” (97). Christophe does not believe in Africa or Europe; he only believes in his own ambition.

It is in The Haitian Earth that the fully disenchanted reading of these leaders’ motives comes to dominate. Therein lies the importance of Dessalines overpowering presence in this play. The full ambiguity of his motives is made clear from the beginning; when a young slave expresses surprise at seeing him alive, thinking he had been burned, Dessalines replies: “Black magic,
boy. Black magic. Keep walking. / What could be safer than this? Don’t worry. / Tonight you’ll be free. I’m walking to my throne” (307). Dessalines’s suggestion that he may have indeed been burned but has survived by “black magic” links him to the figure of Mackandal, the precursor of the revolution whose myth (which plays such an important role in Carpentier’s The Kingdom of this World) he thereby appropriates. In Mackandal’s legend, even though the maroon leader is captured and burnt by the French colonial authorities, his magical ability to transform himself into any animal saves him. But Mackandal, like Boukman after him, had genuine links to the beliefs and rituals of Haitian Vodou. Whether the historical Dessalines had such links or not is a question open to debate. Those links have been claimed for him and for Toussaint, whose adopted name, “L’ouverture” (“the opening”) could be associated to the lwa Legba, who opens the way in Vodou ceremonies. However, Toussaint is best known as a devout Catholic who persecuted Vodou practitioners, and it was Dessalines who carried out his orders. Moreover, in the play Dessalines uses the Eurocentric, disdainful term “black magic,” suggesting a distance from actual belief in those practices, and the possibility that he merely wants to impress his listener’s credulity. Is Dessalines genuinely promising freedom to the young slave, or is he enlisting him as an aid on his way to his throne? Both, perhaps? Does the difference even matter if, as a result of Dessalines’s ambition, the young slave conquers his own freedom too? This last possibility inevitably begs the question, is the young slave really free if once he obtains his freedom Dessalines becomes a despot on his throne?

Both Dessalines and Christophe appear in Walcott’s plays as ambitious figures who only believe in their own seizure of power, and who manipulate their people’s justified resentment in order to enlist aids to their egotistical plans. In this, they may emblematize other postcolonial leaders. However, it should be clear that, although Walcott is concerned about the way racist and essentialist rhetoric can be used to manipulate the masses, he is not any more sympathetic toward that rhetoric when it is genuinely embraced as a philosophy, even as a response to Western aggressions on the cultures of Africa and the African diaspora. I referred above to his ambivalent response to pressures on him during the height of the “Black Power” movements in the 1970s, and his unwillingness to renounce or denounce an European dimension of his cultural identity that, even if the result of colonial violence, he claims as legitimately his. In The Haitian Earth, Walcott’s dilemma as a man between two worlds is most powerfully incarnated by Anton, a young mulatto man
who is torn between his loyalty to the European and African sides of his identity. Anton complains:

Perhaps I’m very tired of Western culture
And its privilege of ideas, perhaps,
Except for art, I see the whole technological
Experience as failure, but true or not,
I have no wish to go back to the bush.
I think their African nostalgia is rubbish.

(Walcott, *Haitian Trilogy*, 306)

Anton is almost anachronistically talking about twentieth century issues that have always been of vital importance to Walcott. It is not at all evident that Haitians wanted to “go back to the bush” (*a racist* way of saying, “back to Africa”) during the revolution; they wanted emancipation, which, more often than not, Haiti’s black Jacobins understood in the terms made current and popular by the French Revolution. All the same, even if Anton’s words encapsulate some of Walcott’s concerns (or prejudices) about Black Nationalism, we should also notice his mistrust of Europe’s claim to greatness. Walcott’s position is not one of blind celebration of Eurocentric “civilization.” However, one cannot bypass the fact that the contrast is very unevenly represented in Anton’s words: the alternative to “Western culture” is “the bush,” rather than a different, even if conceived as less advanced in some respects, culture.

Anton, the character, is certainly not Walcott, but it would be naive not to recognize in his words a summary of Walcott’s preoccupations. Walcott’s language, if not his full-fledged position, is problematic indeed, and, fairly or not, he has been called to task for it. At the level of identity politics, his general point may not be difficult to accept, and it may not be particularly controversial today: the Caribbean and the Americas are not simply African, nor simply indigenous, nor simply European. They are heterogeneous, creolized, hypersyncretistic and chaotic (to use A. Benítez Rojo’s terminology) combinations of multiple cultural elements that also include Asia and the Pacific. But what Anton’s words lack (and some may lament Walcott’s essays do not highlight enough) is, first, a historically grounded awareness of the colonial context in which injured black pride attempts to find a voice, any voice, even as it may fall into dead-ends like essentialism; and second, enough emphasis on the racist ideological worldview that not only justifies the colonizer’s domination over the colonized but also allows even critics of colonial-
ism the easy identification of “civilization” with Europe, a view that relegates Africa—with its rich histories, cultures and civilizations—to “the bush.”

It is not surprising that Anton, whose voice follows Walcott’s so closely in this play, exempts art from his willing condemnation of Europe. Already in “The Muse of History” Walcott presented the great poets (and artists in general) of the Americas as the clairvoyant articulators of a new culture that is “Adamic,” new, original. Paradoxically, that Adamic gift comes to the New World artist from a willingness to imitate and incorporate (that is, embrace) all of his/her influences, whether African or European. The essay, nonetheless, is a polemic piece particularly stressing the need to accept the European side of that cultural legacy, written in a moment when its author felt that the injunction to create political, anti-colonial, Afrocentric art was too constraining for true artists. Not surprisingly, it is in this essay that we find Walcott’s defense of Wordsworth’s daffodils as windows to the life of the imagination. Walcott is not flippant in his defense of artistic autonomy, and his genuine anguish at his ambiguous position between European historical oppressors and the historical victims of imperial expansion clearly comes across in his essays, as it does in Anton’s words. What one might have expected from Walcott, in his essays at least, would be a more nuanced, more compassionate representation of why artists from populations that had been vilified for centuries might feel the imperative to reject the influence of those who had performed the vilification for centuries with impunity and even with a sense of condescension (the “white man’s burden”), even if that imperative is ultimately rejected as misguided or self-defeating. But those essays were written in the heat of then current debates, when Walcott himself felt under attack for the kind of poetry he wrote.

The Haitian plays are more explicit on the historical reasons that feed into Afrocentric sentiments, essentialist or not, justified or not. Anything Dessalines—and to a lesser degree, Christophe—might say is suspect, for as we have seen, it is in question to what degree they use such rhetoric to manipulate the population’s resentment. But Toussaint Louverture remains in Walcott’s plays a voice for reason, a man who is dragged to violence in spite of his best judgment and inclinations. In The Haitian Earth, just before he makes the heartbreaking decision (for him) of condemning his former master to death, Toussaint states:

Do not speak of God, Monsieur Calixte.
I cannot think of God. Where was God in those years
When we were shipped and forced to bear our excrement,
Calixte remains silent for an instant, and the stage directions indicate: “Calixte-Breda is also weeping. The love between them pours out its bewilderment” (367). In spite of a love for his former master that some critics might find implausible, Toussaint, the character, uses words that clearly show Walcott’s keen awareness of the arguments against white callousness (well justified by their “God”) that “Black Power” advocates could have used against Walcott’s own defense of Western culture. Referring to the “white man’s burden” of bringing “civilization” to the men he enslaves, Toussaint responds to Leclerc when he is taken prisoner: “I am remembering civilization. All those glorious white marbles in your museums, all your Gothic arches, your embroidered books. What do they mean to a slave whose back is flayed so raw that, like a book, you can read the spine?” (394). The powerful image that transforms the slave’s back in a book that allows us to read the real good that Europe did to its colonies during the period of slavery (and after) is another example of Walcott’s awareness of the kinds of well-justified historical examples an Afrocentric critic of the West could use (and against some of Walcott’s own occasionally over-dismissive criticisms of “Black Power” movements).

However, Walcott is careful to distinguish Toussaint from Dessalines and Christophe, and in spite of his historical role as liberator of the black slaves and the words that Walcott puts in his mouth, Toussaint in *The Haitian Earth* is closer in spirit to Anton than to Dessalines and Christophe. Both Toussaint and Anton are full of doubts and internal conflicts, both avoid gratuitous violence. However, all of this changes when both Anton and Toussaint are forced to take a position in spite of their doubts. At that point, Toussaint clearly chooses to join and lead “the wretched of the earth;” Anton does not. In that regard, they represent the possibilities and perils of Walcott’s own ambivalent position.

In *Drums and Colours*, which as I have indicated shares several scenes and characters with *The Haitian Earth* (Walcott calls his recycling of the material “a repetition in a slightly altered context” [vii]), the revolting slaves kill Anton before he makes up his mind about where his true loyalties belong. The play clearly highlights the links between Toussaint and Anton. When Anton describes the brutal punishment of slaves, he identifies himself in the following manner: “Because I am torn to pieces with them, I am myself a division. / By the fact that I am half African and half French, / I must become both
spectator and victim” (226–27). Shortly after he refers to Toussaint, who is still the coachman of his family, and states: “I have seen his black face tormented with division, / Between duty to his people and the love of our family. / How am I better than Toussaint, greater than his anguish?” (228). Anton’s words link him to Toussaint in that both of them are marked by internal “division” and anguish at the choices the events force them to make, which imply severing ties to what up to that point they have regarded as part of their heritage. Eventually Toussaint will lament, over Anton’s dead body, “This poor boy hated nothing, nothing” (235).

Like Anton in Drums and Colours, Walcott’s essays from the 1970s expressed not only indecision and anxiety (“division”) but also a steadfast openness to both cultures. In the darker but more realistic The Haitian Earth, Anton joins the forces of the mulatto Rigaud (fighting against Toussaint), warning his father “Do not trust a single black” (359). Anton’s decision to join the free people of color army against the slaves is significant precisely to the degree that his words on European and African culture—his indecision between their pull on him, his resistance to privilege an Africa to which he does not feel fully connected over a Europe of whose hypocrisy he is only too well aware—closely reflect Walcott’s positions in his essays from the seventies. However, in spite of its sympathy for Anton’s cultural dilemma, The Haitian Earth indicts Anton’s predictable rejection of a world he racistically describes as “the bush.” Is Walcott unsaying himself in the 1984 play then? Not precisely, but the later play considerably complicates Walcott’s earlier position by acknowledging that the conflict goes well beyond daffodils. What makes Anton’s arguments about having to choose between Europe and Africa self-defeating and self-complacent to the point of bad faith is that the problem is not simply about cultural identity but about ethics and justice.

At the level of identity, Anton’s anguish, so similar to Walcott’s in the sixties and seventies, could find resolution in the Adamic vision expounded in “The Muse of History.” Ultimately, there is no such thing as an original or isolated culture. All drink from the past and transform it creatively. Anton, like Walcott, does not (and indeed, should not) have to choose between Europe and Africa. Moreover, a defense of identity that relies on essentialism or ethnocentrism becomes divisive and even violent, thus replicating the very oppressive logic it is rebelling against. After all, even in the age of postmodern “multiculturalism” fixed views of identity have not lost their power to divide and justify violence and prejudice. If anything, there is more
atomization and attachment to essentialist ethnocentrism. Edouard Glissant refers to this when, in texts like Poétique de la relation, he contrasts the emphasis on a unique root as the basis of identity to a rhyzomatic identity that acknowledges its indebtedness to many sources. Glissant’s “poetics of relation” points precisely to that desirable balance between preservation and enjoyment of the unique, particular, individual forms that multiple elements take in specific cultures, and the need not to enclose oneself within the boundaries of that culture in fear of all change and development, for change through multiple contacts is the way all cultures develop.

It is certainly the case that identity still has considerable importance in debates about colonial and postcolonial justice, and that defenses of particularism play an important and necessary role. This becomes increasingly clear as marginal and subaltern populations around the globe attempt to resist the unequal domination exerted by metropolitan centers of globalized power (not coincidentally, the old centers of colonial power). From that perspective, attempts to vindicate other traditions, perspectives, customs and priorities are important gestures against the push of globalized capitalism to transform as many countries as possible into homogenized obedient consumers or cheap labor. These attempts are part of what Sousa Santos calls the need for an “ecology of knowledges” based on “epistemological justice” (Another Knowledge, xix–xx). That such efforts to privilege heterogeneity and otherness are important attempts at resistance is clearly shown by the violent backlash in Europe and the United States, for example in the anti-immigrant movements recourse to essentialist myths about the purity of European and Euro-American identities, whether focusing on the Christian roots of that identity, or on its modern secular developments. The racial component of that identity, its explicit or implicit whiteness, is fundamentally shared.

However, identity is only one set of problems. From the point of view of identity, Anton may feel closer to free people of color, blacks or whites; it does not really matter. But in a society in which whites are enslaving blacks, his choice to join the free people of color who have joined the whites in their attempt to repress the slaves’ struggle for emancipation is clearly the wrong ethical choice. In that regard, The Haitian Earth’s treatment of the character of Anton constitutes a significant evolution in Walcott’s emphasis (and the difference is mostly of emphasis, for it would not be accurate to state that Walcott was uninterested in ethical questions before that point). Identity questions, important as they are, are not the only or the ultimate concern in struggles for liberation—and the most genuine links of solidarity are often
articulated not around identities, but rather around shared visions of justice and inclusion. Thus, in *The Haitian Earth* Toussaint has little in common with Anton, whereas in *Drums and Colours*, with its stronger emphasis on Anton’s identity crisis rather than his ethical choices, the two of them share the same internal “division.” For the same reason—the primacy of ethics over identity—in both plays Toussaint has little in common (and here we must decide whether Walcott is being fair or not) with Dessalines.21

Evidently, transposing the conflict from identity questions to ethics and justice does not make it easier to find the right course of action. Certainly it cannot be argued that Dessalines and Christophe make the right ethical choices; at least, not entirely, in these plays. Toussaint comes closest in his careful attempt to measure the consequences of his actions. But as we have seen, Toussaint is as tormented about his ethical choices in the plays as Anton is about his identity. For the real question is: What is the right course of action? Furthermore, when does justice cross the line unto revenge, how can we tell them apart, and is the latter ever justified?

Naturally, Walcott cannot offer easy answers to such questions. The closest he comes to certainty is in his steady negative answer to the last question: revenge is uncreative, a dead-end that locks everyone, but particularly the original victims, in the past. The temptation is always there. It could be argued that in Walcott’s masterpiece, *Omeros* (1990), the redemption of the Fisherman Achille comes from his ability embrace his past without resentment, claiming his whole historical experience as legitimately his. Not surprisingly, the other character in that poem who comes to terms with the past through a similar act of acceptance is Plunkett, the descendant of the white colonizers. In Walcott’s Haitian plays, the most violent leaders, Dessalines and Christophe, who quite consciously practice a politics of vengefulness, enact the “wrong” choice. And it must be emphasized that their choice is not “wrong” from a position of abstract moralism, but rather from its concrete results: in their obsession with racial vindication (assuming it is a real motive and not a disguise for personal ambition), Dessalines and Christophe bring misery to themselves and their own people.

How, then, can we tell justice from revenge? It would be naive to expect a definite answer to such a question (and it is very much the question that the Haitian Revolution, in Walcott’s representation, poses to us), but *The Haitian Earth* points in two important directions to explore: one is a politics of inclusiveness in which subaltern subjects can find effective voices; the other is the mystery of forgiveness and reconciliation.
Pardon or Revenge

In “The Muse of History” Walcott states, “Who in the New World does not have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim? Who, in the depth of conscience, is not silently screaming for pardon or for revenge?” (What the Twilight, 39). The three Haitian plays offer powerful negative warnings, from the early ambiguous figure of Christophe in the first one to the full-fledged demonic dominance of Dessalines in the last one. In Drums and Colours, Toussaint (whose role is limited in the last two plays and does not appear in the first one) is adamant in his opposition to revenge: “Revenge is nothing. Peace, the restoration of the burnt estates, the ultimate rebuilding of those towns war has destroyed, peace is harder” (241). Toussaint names his alternatives to revenge “peace” and “restoration.” In his essay, Walcott refers to “pardon,” and although the differences between “pardon” and “restoration” have important consequences to which I will return below, it is clear that Walcott is pointing toward the problem posed by the possibility or impossibility of forgiveness (pardon). Forgiveness is one of the dominant (albeit sometimes implicit) themes in Walcott’s Haitian plays and in “The Muse of History,” as it is indeed throughout his whole oeuvre.

Even as he invokes forgiveness’s healing power, Walcott remains aware of the dangers of tossing that concept around too easily. In the last paragraph of “The Muse of History,” the writer states:

I accept this archipelago of the Americas. I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper “history,” for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates, and it is not mine to forgive, my memory cannot summon any filial love, since your features are anonymous and erased and I have no wish and no power to pardon. (What the Twilight, 64)

Forgiveness is indeed a slippery term, and its content can be trivialized and become complicit with the logic of violence it tries to overcome. Forgiveness is not supposed to “justify, explain and expiate,” and it stands in relation to “justifying” much as justice stands in relation to revenge. Once that important clarification is made, Walcott can write in the sentence that immediately follows (the last one in the essay), “But to you, inwardly forgiven grandfa-
thers, I, like the more honest of my race, give a strange thanks” (64). There is forgiveness, but almost as a surplus of love and willfulness that is not, cannot be, part of the same logic of violence that has dominated so much of Caribbean history. Paradoxically, forgiveness must be gratuitous to be effective, because the historical crimes committed have been too egregious, and the claim to justify or explain them, to offer expiation, would be too arrogant. The poet’s inward, not ostentatious forgiveness is neither a necessity nor a favor: it is a gift.

In that sense, Walcott’s conception of forgiveness resembles Jacques Derrida’s well known reflections on the topic, in which forgiveness is indeed true forgiveness only if attempts to forgive the unforgivable, if it does not become a comfortable part of a transaction that justifies and expiates:

If one is only prepared to forgive only what appears forgivable, what the church calls “venial sin,” then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear. If there is something to forgive, it would be what in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm. From which comes the aporia, which can be described in its dry and implacable formality, without mercy: forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. (On Cosmopolitanism, 32–33)

Derrida pushes his argument to suggest that true forgiveness cannot depend on the repentance or confession of the guilty party, if only because he who is forgiven at that moment is already a changed person, he who is forgiven is no longer the same as the one who committed the crime. Walcott’s words reflect Derrida’s in their radical call to face the unacceptable. In the George William Gordon section of Drums and Colours, Deacon Sale, while talking to the rebellious slave Aaron, makes the point clear while also highlighting Walcott’s view of the Haitian Revolution’s lesson to the Caribbean:

The man who whips you cuts his own flesh, Aaron. For you are a piece of that man. Do not hate him. Twenty years ago, in Haiti, the slaves turned on their masters and butchered them. When the great generals of the Haitian revolution came to power, their cause was corrupted by greed. Even that great general Toussaint caught the contagion of hate. But those that followed him, Dessalines, Christophe, from free slaves turned into insane emperors. Toussaint died in a cold tower in France, his dream ruined. Betrayed by his own generals, sold to his enemies. Do not hate, Aaron, however hard it seems.
Revenge is easier than love. That is why I tell you to pray continually, for God delivers us from evil and from hatred in the end. (255–56)

It would be inaccurate to suggest that Deacon Dale’s words encompass the totality of Walcott’s thoughts on Toussaint, Dessalines, and Christophe, for the rest of his works clearly attest to his awareness of the difficulty and often paradoxical nature of movements of historical emancipation. His preface to The Haitian Trilogy does call the revolution, in spite of its violence, a “necessary upheaval” (vii–viii). However, the Deacon’s ideas appear with enough frequency in Walcott’s poems and plays to suggest that they are indeed an essential trend in his thought, and an integral part of his partial discomfort with the Haitian Revolution’s legacy for the Caribbean archipelago. Like Derrida in his musings on forgiveness, Deacon Dale emphasizes the difficulty of love and the easiness of hatred. Even more: at least in some circumstances, hatred may feel more human or logical; love (which I am linking to forgiveness here) can only come from “praying,” as a gift from God, not a natural response. I am not interested here in the use of God in a traditional religious or Christian sense. I am trying to emphasize that love, in those conditions, like forgiveness for Derrida, can only come, if it comes at all, as a gift that achieves the impossible, following not the logic of historical causality of retribution but of gratuitous grace.

Both Derrida and Walcott are aware that such divine love, such pure forgiveness, exists as a horizon of possibilities that is never fully actualized. In the words that I quoted above, Toussaint opposes “revenge” with the need for “peace,” “restoration,” and “rebuilding” (Haitian Trilogy, 241). Toussaint’s goals are eminently worthy, but they are different from forgiveness as such, as understood by Derrida and Walcott. Within the unattainable (but always dimly posed) horizon of forgiving the unforgivable, Toussaint proposes more concrete goals toward which practical, specific steps can be taken. Derrida also acknowledges the need to combine the lofty vision of forgiveness with such more attainable goals. Toussaint’s objectives could fall within the realm of what Derrida calls conditional forgiveness.

Derrida’s distinction between “conditional” and “unconditional” forgiveness follows a logic similar to that of Emmanuel Levinas’s understanding of ethics. Unconditional forgiveness may be compared to Levinas’s ethical relation, which is the original source of subjectivity itself, but which only occurs in its purity in the face-to-face encounter between two subjects. For Levinas, once a third person whose rights must be considered appears, the imperative for justice is added to that original ethical intersubjective relation. Similarly,
Derrida’s understanding of forgiveness is altered when we need to consider the rights of third parties. In those circumstances “forgiveness” requires certain conditions, such as the “repentance and transformation of the sinner” (On Cosmopolitanism, 44). Derrida states:

In principle, therefore, always in order the follow the vein of the Abrahamic tradition, forgiveness must engage two singularities: the guilty (the “perpetrator” as they say in South Africa) and the victim. As soon as a third party intervenes, one can speak again of amnesty, reconciliation, reparation, etc., but certainly not of pure forgiveness in the strict sense. (42)

These two poles, the unconditional and the conditional, are absolutely heterogeneous, and must remain irreducible to one another. They are nonetheless indissociable . . . It is between these two poles, irreconcilable but indissociable that decisions and responsibilities are to be taken. (44–45)

It is not a coincidence that Derrida refers to South Africa, for the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation presided over by Desmond Tutu was part of the issues he was trying to address in his essay. Walcott’s Haitian plays also bring up questions related to conditional forgiveness, justice, truth and reconciliation, and they do so from the perspective of colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial experiences. For in a colony built upon the blood and suffering of thousands of slaves, wherein the metropolis was willing to fight to death in order to cling to its monstrous privileges, it may be difficult and perhaps hypocritical to ascertain how much violence was too much violence in the slaves’ struggle for liberation. However, from a “post”colonial perspective, a valid critique may be made of the violence that Haitian leaders used against their own people after independence, regardless of how necessary or not that violence might have been during the emancipation struggles. And then there is the “neo”colonial perspective, for the fact is that, regardless of how one addresses the previous two points, France did not willingly give up its most prosperous colony, and Dessalines’s and Christophe’s anxiety about a new invasion from France was certainly not unjustified. Moreover, when Boyer finally achieved France’s “recognition” of Haiti as a nation, it was at the price of an indemnity that contributed to cripple Haiti’s economy. If unconditional forgiveness can only happen in the ethical encounter between two subjects, then one could argue that history is nothing if not a perpetual overflow of “third persons” claiming for justice.
In Walcott’s plays, we may see a paradoxical glimpse of the possibility “unconditional” forgiveness in the relation between Toussaint and Calixte Breda. The intersubjective relation is suggested by the stage directions, which indicate: “The love between them pours out its bewilderment” (367). But Toussaint is not deaf to the claims of history’s “third persons,” in this case those at the very bottom of dispossession: the Haitian slaves. For them, justice is necessary—not revenge, as Toussaint insists. They also need truth, and ultimately, reconciliation. All of those elements are part of what Derrida calls “conditional forgiveness.” Skillfully, Walcott’s plays invoke the presence of unconditional forgiveness as a ghostly horizon whose utopian glow fills the wisest men in the revolution with unease at the inevitable compromises that the practicalities of reality entail. Only the conditional is ever satisfactorily attained, if at all. Yet, invoking that tenuous, disquieting pressure that the possibility of the unconditional (in Derrida’s sense of the word) exerts on the revolution’s most lucid actors is one of Walcott’s most enduring achievements in his Haitian plays.

Of course, the question that Walcott’s plays most insistently pose is whether even those conditional goals—“peace,” “restoration,” “rebuilding,” as Toussaint calls them—were achieved by Haiti’s former slaves. The immense achievements of emancipation from slavery and independence cannot be underestimated or diminished. But inasmuch as Haiti went from the ambition of two emperors to becoming what Robert Fatton calls a “predatory republic” that feeds upon its own citizens, it betrayed, for Walcott, many of its promises. This topic leads us to the second of the issues that I suggested above that Walcott presents as responses to an over-emphasis on identity politics. The first one was an inquiry into the possibilities of forgiveness. The second one is the need for a politics of inclusion, which paradoxically finds its fullest expression in the most pessimistic of the three plays, The Haitian Earth, through the figures of Pompey, the black peasant, and Yette, the mulatto prostitute; and particularly through Pompey’s understanding of his own situation.

Pompey is a slave at the beginning of the play; at the end he is a free man, but such freedom is merely formal, for Pompey, like thousands others, does not count as a subject. As we have seen, Yette is trapped in a triple knot of victimization—class, race and gender. She is poor and a prostitute; she is presented in the play as a mulatto woman, which in spite of the relative privilege it represents in her society makes her the target of race purists, whether black or white; and she is a woman. The brutal scene of her rape
by Dessalines highlights that gendered dimension of her colonial condition. I have already referred to Pompey’s indictment of Haitian rulers—“My life is one long night. My country and your kingdom, majesty. One long, long night. Is kings who do us that” (431); “When was I ever free? Under you all?” (432)—in which he does not even try to make a distinction between the black leaders, the free people of color, and the French. Earlier in the play he similarly states that “they” are burning down the country, without making distinctions (356). However, he keeps working the earth, because “somebody have to plant for people to eat” (356). As I stated earlier, it is hard to question Pompey’s assessment if one examines it from the perspective of the events he has experienced as an anonymous “everyman.”

Although the erotic coming together of Yette and Pompey might seem a facile emblem for racial unity in Haiti (and the Caribbean), the play ends in a note of tragic hope that is grounded in realism. While a better future is invoked by the shift of focus from military heroes to humble peasants, in fact Yette is dead and Pompey is at least temporarily defeated. He does not know it, but we as readers know that much of what is still to come to his country (at least for people like him, that is, the majority) is not much better than what came under Dessalines and Christophe. Decades of problems still lay ahead, ranging from endemic internal political corruption and constant external intervention to natural disasters like the 2010 earthquake, with the understanding that all of those spheres, and others like ecological depletion, are intimately linked. Even after “independence” and emancipation the Haitian masses have remained subordinated to economic interests and essentialist racial categories that remain firmly in an international colonial logic. Moreover, that logic and its implementation found welcoming agents in Haiti’s elite.

In his response to the colonial logic that governs Haiti’s history, Pompey praises Toussaint’s ideal (as portrayed by Walcott), that the important thing was “not who was king but who would make each man a man, each man a king himself” (431). As I noted above, those words make “being a king” a figure for human agency and freedom. When Pompey suggests that the ideal is not to become a king but to become a man, that in that sense each man is a king, he is talking about a politics of inclusion of others as subjects. Those others may be others in terms of class, of race, of gender, of religion, etc. However, such inclusion cannot be simply granted from above: in Walcott’s account, Dessalines will not allow that inclusion any more than Napoleon. It is the other agencies and voices that push their way to the stage, following diverse tactics or strategies, just like at the end of Drums and Colours the Car-
nival group in charge of representing historical events virtually takes over the play and transforms it into a carnival, as Edward Baugh aptly observes (“Of Men and Heroes,” 52).

Moreover, in the play Pompey tries to pose a politics of inclusion that does not define exclusion only in racial terms. This is interestingly revealed when Pompey explains the events of the French revolution that preceded the one in Haiti: “It was only poor people, it was slaves, and those who work and die as if they was white niggers under the sixteen kings of France” (431). By that point of the play, race and origin are not as important for Pompey as a subaltern position before the authorities. Evidently, race and origin are important inasmuch as the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being have inextricably linked them to a subaltern position, both before and after political independence. But Pompey has realized that black leaders can be as effective agents of (neo)colonial violence as white Europeans, and that gender, poverty, and any other category may be used as a tool to exclude certain people, and to justify violence against them. The point here is not to create a hierarchy of which form of exclusion is worse, but to remain vigilant of the manifold ways in which exclusion and oppression operate and justify themselves, with a view to persistently try to incorporate those marginalized subjects.

But how is that to be done? In The Haitian Earth, what is Pompey to do after he buries Yette? Would a struggle for inclusiveness justify violence? Would it require it? Would not an overcoming of the “coloniality of power” (and the ontological claims of the coloniality of being) imply the paradoxical need to include the voice of the former oppressor, the need for the reconciliation, and perhaps the mysterious workings of forgiveness? Walcott, by insistentely posing those questions, considerably deepens our appreciation of the implications of the Haitian Revolution for both Haitians and everyone from the Caribbean and the rest of the post/colonial world. As an event, it not only marked a Copernican turn in what was believed possible for colonized and enslaved peoples, and thus foreshadowed the great decolonizing struggles of the twentieth century, but also—and equally importantly, in its failures and successes—clearly pointed to many of the ethical and political questions that always lie at the heart of all movements of liberation.