Kant and Trouillot on the Unthinkability of the Haitian Revolution

By

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Abstract: The article begins with an analysis of Kant’s essay What is Enlightenment? as a paradigm of the European Enlightenment to argue that such paradigm was European male-centered and presupposed freedom from forced labor. It then shows that such paradigm asserted European humanity in contradistinction to slaves as non-humans. Also, using Michel Rolph-Trouillot’s critique of the European Enlightenment’s paradigm, it shows that Michel Rolph-Trouillot’s account of the unthinkability of the Haitian revolution is the logical implication of the European-male centered paradigm of the Enlightenment. It then contends with Michel Rolph-Trouillot’s view of the unthinkability of the Haitian revolution among the slaves and its leaders. The last section argues that instead of Michel Rolph-Trouillot’s account of the unthinkability of the Haitian revolution, Voodoo Cosmology provided the religious unity, language, achievement of common destiny as an axiom of state formation and the conviction of universal humanity that made the Haitian revolution a successful critique and expansion of the European Enlightenment’s ideals. Furthermore, the rise of Voodoo Cosmology is consistent with Buck-Morss’s observation that reconciling tribal differences and the intersection of Voodoo practices and marronage were important accomplishments of the slaves of St-Domingue. The essay concludes that these achievements made the Haitian revolution a coherent and systematic event from the perspective of the revolutionaries and its leaders.

The Haitian Revolution and the Boundaries of European Enlightenment

In academic circles, the Haitian revolution is usually considered the proper topic of History under the aegis of a constellation of events that occurred during a specific time period and place. History thus seems to be the suitable discipline to account for the unfolding of such events and their inherent relationship. Then if History is indeed the academic discipline for the study of the Haitian revolution, what is the worth of a
philosophical rendition of these events? What can a philosophical interpretation hope to contribute to the historical interpretations of the Haitian revolution?

The incentive for a philosophical engagement with the Haitian revolution lies in two central aspects. First, it explores the contribution of the Haitian revolution to understand the issues of self-determination and self-image of the African Diaspora. Put differently, the philosophical relevance of the Haitian revolution is that it situates the ideals of the European Enlightenment in the context of the African Diaspora. The questions that haunted the Enlightenment such as: What is man? What is truth? What are the ideal social and political institutions for self-realization and the pursuit of happiness? became pertinent to the African Diaspora via the occurrence of the Haitian revolution. It provided the platform for the African Diaspora to grapple with questions about agency and black identity, especially in shifting individual perception and collective consciousness from slaves communities to Black people, which was a non-existent category prior to the Haitian revolution. The Haitian revolution provided the foundation of Blackness, Black power, and Black cultural experience in the African Diaspora. Also, the essay aims at shedding light on the Enlightenment’s position toward slavery in showing Kant’s exclusion of non-Europeans from his discourse and postulation of the Enlightenment’s ideals. Kant’s view of the African, which is an expression of the larger Enlightenment’s intelligentsia, suggests an indirect justification for the Atlantic Slave Trade and the systematic dehumanization of Africans. The role of Rolph-Trouillot’s critique of the European Enlightenment in the essay is meant to reinforce the exclusion of non-Europeans and to show the Enlightenment’s perspective upon the Haitian revolution. However, I depart from Rolph-Trouillot’s account of the unthinkableability of the Haitian
revolution among its leaders because it undermines the agency of both, the slaves and their leaders in undertaking the revolution.

The European Enlightenment relied on scientific discoveries and the shift from a religious paradigm to the ascendancy of reason to grapple with these questions. However, as Rolph-Trouillot observes the superseding paradigm of the European Enlightenment is not all-inclusive and universal as it hoped to be. For the thinkers of the Enlightenment, the paradigm of humanity is twofold; it is constituted on the premise of European citizenship and masculinity and presupposes freedom from forced labor. Accordingly, women and all other non-Europeans, specifically slaves communities are excluded from the Enlightenment’s paradigm of humanity.

The Haitian revolution is the set of events which compelled European Enlightenment thinkers to reassess the privileged assignment of humanity to European males. Thus the logical extension of the Haitian revolution is that it gave rise to an aesthetic and ethical project for the African Diaspora. In other words: What kind of sociopolitical institutions are most sensitive to the identity of the African Diaspora? And what is the suitable physical presentation to distinguish the African Diaspora from the European aesthetic ethos? A philosophical approach is concerned with the Haitian revolution as a defining process for both the European Enlightenment and the African Diaspora. In order to conclude that the Haitian revolution was the harbinger of the African Diaspora Enlightenment, I am going to analyze the role of shared religious experience, language, the achievement of common destiny as an axiom of state formation, and the conviction of universal humanity despite the exclusion of people of African descent from the paradigm of Western humanity. Before providing my arguments, I outline Kant’s account of the
European Enlightenment and Rolph-Trouillot’s view of the Enlightenment and his account of the Haitian revolution as unthinkable. I use Kant’s account of the Enlightenment and Rolph-Trouillot’s view to elaborate the premise of my argument that the Haitian revolution was thinkable as a systematic and coherent event within the parameter of Voodoo cosmology, which provided the religion, language, achievement of common destiny and conviction of universal humanity among the slaves of St-Domingue.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it is necessary to provide a working definition of the European Enlightenment. I believe that Kant’s account in the essay What is Enlightenment? (Was ist Aufklärung?) is a suitable model because Kant elaborates judiciously the basis and limits of the European Enlightenment while asserting indirectly the end of medieval tyranny on European cultural, social, and political practices. I hope to build upon and critique Kant’s account in order to argue that the Haitian revolution made the ideals of the European Enlightenment available to the African Diaspora.

Kant opens up the essay with the following definition: “Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another.”¹ Observe that in this definition Kant proceeds judiciously to define tutelage and understanding. The fact that Kant defines tutelage and understanding which he imposes upon the category man, while the latter is undefined suggests that he is working with the prevailing account of man during his time. It is thus reasonable to infer that by man Kant intends European and male. The ideal subject of the Enlightenment is a

European male fit to overcome self-incurred tutelage and employ his rational faculties. There is further evidence for Kant’s preference for European males, as ideal subjects for the Enlightenment, in his *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764).

In this work, Kant asserts emphatically that women are merely beautiful and not constituted to think. For Kant, thinking is a sublime activity which is suitable only for men. Kant provides his view of the intellectual faculty of women in the following:

> Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it destroy the merits that are proper to her sex, and because of their rarity they can make of her an object of cold admiration; but at the same time they will weaken the charms with which she excercises her great power over the other sex. A woman who has a head full of Greek, like Mme Dacier, or carries on fundamental controversies about mechanics, like the Marquise de Chatelet, might as well even have a beard; for perhaps that would express the mien of profundity for which she strives.\(^2\)

Essentially, rational investigations by women are a travesty and a violation of their natural constitution. Hence, Kant’s attribution of the duty to overcome self-tutelage to man can be taken literally. In the same essay, Kant says of Black people that:

> In the land of the black, what better can one expect than what is found prevailing, namely the feminine sex in the deepest slavery. A despairing man is always a strict master over anyone weaker, just as with that man is always a tyrant in the kitchen who outside his own house hardly dares to look anyone in the face. \(^3\)

Black people seem to be immersed in the beautiful characteristics that Kant ascribes to women. However, from Kant’s perspective, Black people are in a worse predicament than women because they are naturally inclined to slavery. Black people are not fit to think rationally and they are slaves by constitution. Kant’s remarks indirectly reinforce and justify the Atlantic Slave Trade on the lack of rational faculties in Black people. Also

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\(^3\) *Ibid.*, p. 113
Kant’s assertion establishes a hierarchy with European men at the apex and Black people at the bottom. So, to return to Kant’s definition of the Enlightenment, Kant intends man exclusively of both women and all non-Europeans specifically Black people.

Kant proceeds to elaborate the lynchpin of the Enlightenment. He declares that: “For this enlightenment, however, nothing is required but freedom, and indeed the most harmless among all the things to which this term can properly be applied. It is the freedom to make public use of one’s reason at every point.”4 It is noteworthy that Enlightenment—as the overcoming of tutelage—requires rational freedom. The fact that Kant only posits rational freedom suggests that he takes the physical freedom of his audience as a given. Accordingly, Kant’s discourse about the Enlightenment is not intended for slaves communities. Moreover, it imposes a symmetrical relationship between rational freedom and European men. Rational freedom, for Kant, is the exclusive privilege of European males.

Kant is emphatic upon the Enlightenment’s requirement to ‘use one’s understanding without the direction from another’. A legitimate question then is: who is this other? As Kant’s essay unfolds it becomes obvious that he has in mind monarchy, organized religion and the monarchy’s use of organized religion to justify their rule over the peoples of Europe. In Kant’s words:

I have placed the main point of Enlightenment—the escape of men from their self-incurred tutelage—chiefly in matters of religion because our rulers have no interest in playing the guardian with respect to the arts and sciences and also because religious immaturity is not only the most harmful but also the most degrading of all. But the manner of thinking of the head of a state who favors religious Enlightenment goes farther, and sees that there is no danger to his sovereignty in allowing his subjects to make public use of their reason and to publish their thoughts on better formulation of his legislation and even their open-minded criticisms of the laws already made.5

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5 *Ibid.*, p. 89
For Kant, only enlightened monarchies can be part of the Enlightenment. Such monarchies make their policies and the ground of their authority transparent to their subjects and refrain from interfering with the progress and methodology of the arts and sciences. For Kant, religion can’t remain within the purview of the Enlightenment unless it is inner religion—the opposite of organized religion—which allows religious adherents the use of their faculties in matters of religious faith. Hence, Kant’s discourse about the Enlightenment aims at securing the rational, aesthetic, religious and scientific autonomy of European males.

Under the light of Kant’s account, Trouillot’s castigation of the Enlightenment philosophers is in order because it brings its inherent biases to the fore. Trouillot summarizes his contention with the European Enlightenment in the following passage:

> The West was created somewhere at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the midst of a global wave of material and symbolic transformations. What we call the Renaissance, much more an invention in its own right than a rebirth, ushered in a number of philosophical questions to which politicians, theologians, artists, and soldiers provided both concrete and abstract answers. What is beauty? What is Order? What is the State? But also above all: What is Man? Philosophers who discussed that last issue could not escape the fact that colonization was going on as they spoke…Indeed, the slave trade increased in the years 1789-1791 while French politicians and philosophers were debating more vehemently than ever on the rights of humanity.⁶

Indeed, Trouillot’s observation is insightful because it exposes the boundaries of the European Enlightenment. The projects that Trouillot posits at the core of the Enlightenment map out a new regime of truths and the infrastructure of European socio-political organizations. It is noteworthy that the inquiry about beauty aims at elaborating the ethos of self-image for European men. While order and state are geared toward the organization of socio-political institutions to reinforce their dominance.

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Also, Trouillot’s criticism draws out another dimension of the Enlightenment that is often overlooked. The Enlightenment is usually interpreted as a rupture with medieval religious tutelage and the fulfillment of the Copernican revolution. As it is called in French, l’ Âge des lumières (the age of lights) was supposed to end the darkness that hinders Europe’s self-determination. By relying on scientific standard, the aim was to situate European man at the center of the cosmos. However, under the light of Trouillot’s criticism it becomes apparent that the proponents of the Enlightenment defined European humanity in contradistinction to the inhumanity of slaves in the European colonies. Essentially, part of the answer to the Enlightenment’s question what is European man depends on the implicit assertion of the inhumanity of slaves and their inability to self-determine.

From the perspective of the European Enlightenment, the boundaries of humanity are circumscribed by Whiteness, masculinity, and freedom from forced labor. It is important to ponder the implication of this paradigm because it is pertinent to Trouillot’s claim that the Haitian revolution was unthinkable within the conceptual apparatus of the European Enlightenment. Trouillot proceeds on the premise of the exclusion of slaves from the purview of the European humanity to argue that the Haitian revolution could not have been conceived by Europeans. In Trouillot’s words:

To sum up in spite of the philosophical debates, in spite of the rise of abolitionism, the Haitian revolution was unthinkable in the West not only because it challenged slavery and racism but because of the way it did so… The Haitian revolution was the ultimate test to the universalist pretensions of both the French and the American revolutions. And they both failed. In 1791, there is no public debate on the record, in France, in England, or in the United States on the right of black slaves to achieve self-determination, and the right to do so by way of armed resistance.7

7 Ibid., p. 40-1
The logical structure of Trouillot’s argument is conditional. Trouillot posits the major premise as: for the Enlightenment, only rational entities can carry out strategic revolutions. The minor premise is that since Europeans are rational entities, and they can carry out strategic revolutions. On the other hand, since slaves are non-rational entities, therefore they are not expected to carry out strategic revolutions. Trouillot’s thesis is thus epistemological and based on the inherent logical structure of the European Enlightenment. Viewed from the conceptual frame of the European intelligentsia and the prevailing beliefs of the Enlightenment, the Haitian revolution was indeed unthinkable because non-humans are unfit for strategic rebellion. The unthinkable of the Haitian revolution is consistent with the logical frame of the Enlightenment. To return to Kant, if only European males are able to overcome self-incurred tutelage and deploy rational freedom, then slaves—as non-humans—cannot carry out sophisticated revolts because they are not endowed with rational freedom. Another viable conclusion of Trouillot’s account of the unthinkable of the Haitian revolution is that the success of the Haitian revolution depended primarily upon its position vis-à-vis the Enlightenment conceptual purview. A logical implication of Trouillot’s position is that the Haitian revolution was successful because it took place within the blind spot of the Enlightenment conceptual apparatus. In excluding the slaves of St-Domingue from the category of humanity and rational entities, the Enlightenment conceptual practices could not conceive the rise of a planned revolution from their midst. However, Trouillot’s thesis also suggests that if the Enlightenment acknowledged the slaves of the European colonies as fully human and rational, then the Haitian revolution could have been anticipated and therefore suppressed from its inception in 1791.
Moreover, Trouillot’s discussion of the process of erasure and attempt to render the Haitian revolution banal is a further implication of the racist perspective that people of African descent as non-humans are unfit for any strategic revolutionary undertaking. “When the news of the massive uprising of August 1791 first hit France, the most common reaction among interested parties was disbelief…Others, including colored plantation owners then in France and most of the left wing of the French assembly, just could not reconcile their perception of blacks with the idea of a large-scale rebellion.”

The news of the Haitian revolution baffled French citizens and the rest of Europe because it articulates a contradiction; it was a paradox because it defies the prevailing belief of the Enlightenment that freedom from forced labor is a unique aspect of European whiteness.

Trouillot’s account of the academic erasure of the Haitian revolution is still relevant. For example, contemporary scholars such as Glièch holds that the powerful plantation owners started the revolution. “En 1789, ce ne furent pas les esclaves, mais les colons notables qui prirent l’ initiative de revolutionner Saint-Domingue.”

[In 1789, it was not the slaves but the powerful plantation owners who took the initiative to revolutionize St-Domingue.] These scholars fail to appreciate that the unfolding of the revolution from 1791-1804 was concurrent with the elaboration of a new world-order. Such world-order was unprecedented because it combined the concepts of blackness and freedom for the first time.

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8 Ibid., p. 42
However, Trouillot’s insightful depiction of the unthinkable of the Haitian revolution is plagued by an impediment. It consists in the fact that for Trouillot, the Haitian revolution is equally unthinkable from the perspective of the slaves of St-Domingue and the leaders of the revolution as well. Trouillot asserts emphatically that:

Not only was the Revolution unthinkable and, therefore, unannounced in the West, it was also—to a large extent—unspoken among the slaves themselves. By this I mean that the revolution was not preceded or even accompanied by an explicit intellectual discourse. One reason is that most slaves were illiterate and the printed word was not a realistic means of propaganda in the context of a slave colony. But another reason is that the claims of the revolution were indeed too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds. Victorious practice could assert them only after the fact. In that sense, the revolution was indeed at the limits of the thinkable, even in Saint-Domingue, even among the slaves, even among its own leaders…Toussaint himself may have not believed in the possibility of independence whereas, for all practical purposes, he was ruling Saint-Domingue as if it were independent.10

If Trouillot is correct, then it leaves us bereft of any rendition of how the Haitian revolution—as a process—took place from the perspective of the revolutionaries and its leaders. For the Haitian revolution to be equally unthinkable among the slaves and its leaders, it would have to come to be ex nihilo—out of nothing. And by extension the slaves and leaders underwent the revolution without any planning and active consciousness of the revolutionary process. Such view is clearly untenable because it robs the slaves and their leaders of revolutionary agency. Moreover, Trouillot favors intellectual discourse, as the ideal medium for revolutionary organization. His assumption is that given that slaves were illiterate, they could not have planned a strategic revolt. Thus Trouillot succumbs to the limitations of the Western Enlightenment practices that he is critiquing in thinking that the Haitian revolution could have been thinkable by the slaves and leaders unless they could read the printed word.

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The Haitian Revolution as the outcome of Voodoo Cosmology

Hitherto, using Kant’s essay *What is Enlightenment?* I provided a paradigm of the European Enlightenment to show that it was a European-male centered paradigm. Secondly, I showed that such paradigm defined European humanity in contradistinction to slaves as non-humans. Also, I argued that Trouillot’s account of the unthinkability of the Haitian revolution is the logical implication of the paradigm of humanity inherent to the Enlightenment while I disagree with his view of the unthinkability of the Haitian revolution among the slaves and its leaders. My goal in this section is to argue that Voodoo cosmology provided the religious unity, language, the achievement of common destiny as an axiom of state formation, and the conviction of universal humanity that made the Haitian revolution successful. And that these achievements made the Haitian revolution a coherent event from the perspective of the revolutionaries and its leaders.

Voodoo cosmology stands for a non-spiritual account of Voodoo which fleshes out its sociopolitical prowess. It is a secular rendition of the religious rituals and the sociopolitical attitudes of the adherents. It emerged out of the experience of displacement during the Atlantic Slave Trade and the concomitant attempt of the slaves of St-Domingue to reinvent their initial sociopolitical and religious context. It is a sociopolitical reading of Voodoo and sets out to approach it from the totality within which it is practiced while prioritizing the perspective of its adherents, as both believers and social agents. Voodoo cosmology differs from Voudoun as a religion in its emphasis upon the attempt to overcome social dissonance among alienated slaves of St-Domingue which preceded Voodoo as an elaborated system of colonial religious practices. As the African precursor of Voodoo, Voudoun consists of various religious practices across
African tribes. Unlike Voodoo, it is immune of syncretism with Christianity and the attempt of slaves to reconcile their religious differences.

To begin, it is necessary to trace the emergence of Voodoo in the New World. As a close examination of this provenance reveals, Voodoo cosmology derives from the slaves’ celebration rituals for their ancestors; it is the spontaneous configuration of the practitioners’ collective attempt to grant meaning to their subjective experience in the New World. Voudoun was a collective creation, it did not exact the abandonment of one tribal deity in favor of another. On the contrary, it seemed rather to delight in as generous an inclusion as possible.\footnote{Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (McPherson & Company, 1953), p. 59} In the tribal context of some slaves, it was a privileged ritual to feed the departed ancestors and to summon their guidance. Le culte des ancêtres est le point de rencontre privilégié entre le social et le sacré, entre le séculier et le religieux.\footnote{Lilas Desquiron, *Racines du Vodou*. (Port-au-Prince: Éditions Henri Deschamps, 1990), p. 76} [The cult of the ancestors is the privileged meeting point between the social and the sacred, between the secular and the religious.] The systematic dismantling of families by slavery affected the rituals that used to be so central to slaves’ preexisting religious identities. And yet, deprived of the guidance of the religious initiates, the slaves had to rely on religious and social memory to reproduce the rituals without the input of the elders and spiritual leaders. In this effort, celebration rituals for ancestors made a natural starting point. Accordingly, the attempts of slaves from different tribes to summon and celebrate their ancestors constitute the first form of syncretism that Voodoo underwent. Each society maintained its own ancestral traditions, and through interactions with one another they modified their beliefs and practices to meet their new situation.\footnote{Mozella Mitchell, *Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), p. 65}
On the other hand, Voodoo encapsulates the failure to reproduce the private ancestral ritual of their homeland. Voodoo is a substitute for the ancestral rituals which occurred in the private and intimate context of the African family. The dismantling of the family infrastructure by slavery made the emergence of Voodoo rituals necessary as a public and collective alternative to restore the family structure. The public rituals of the hounfor are, in a sense, an extension of the principles which govern a family, where the co-operative participation of all the members—including the children—is necessary for survival.\(^{14}\) This dimension of Voodoo suggests collective nostalgia, the yearning to regain the original African way of life. Thus Voodoo cosmology is the synthesis of these various aspects of the slave experience in the New World in a public and collective setting.

For the slaves, Voodoo provided a language and medium to determine their social and religious assimilation in the New World. In doing so, it depended on the collective memory of slaves, their shared ability to preserve and perpetuate African-based religious traditions. It was the focus for the development of political consciousness so far as it allowed the slaves to be aware that their values were different from those of the whites and also as far as it allowed them to express their negritude.\(^{15}\) Of course, these traditions were not necessarily common. The disruption of the slave trade often placed, side by side, slaves from different regions, tribes, languages, and beliefs. Accordingly, to simply transplant African practices were impossible. Voodoo cosmology embodies essentially the religious negotiation of various tribal communities in establishing common ancestral basis to define their religious and social identity in the New World. The slaves retained elements of the culture which they had known in Africa, and in particular the Voodoo


\(^{15}\) Michel S. Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (St Martin’s Press, 1989), p. 70
religion, which was widely practiced in the plantations. It was an amalgam of the various religious beliefs and practices of West Africa, which even incorporated certain Christian symbols.16 Herein lies the collective nature of Voodoo: a system of neo-African religious practices and deities. The traditional religions of Africa could hardly be perpetuated in toto in the New World because of the vast ecological differences between the continents.17 And yet, despite the challenges of geographical and tribal differences, the displaced slaves in the Catholic regime managed to invent the suitable rituals to preserve their African-based cosmology. Neo-African cults, found in countries which are predominantly Catholic, have incorporated a considerable body of African traditions in their beliefs and rituals.18

Thus, the elaboration of Voodoo cosmology is the by-product of a collective process to derive a common ethos and social compass. In this way it reflects what Desquiron’s description of Voodoo as a “dual syncretism”: “Le Vodou haïtien est le produit d’un double syncrétisme: le premier s’est accompli entre les différentes cultures africaines; le deuxième a eu lieu entre ces différentes cultures africaines et la culture occidentale.”19

[Haitian Voodoo is the product of a dual syncretism: the first happened among the different African cultures; the second happened between these different African cultures and Western culture.] Indeed, Voodoo unfolded simultaneously as the slaves established both the appropriate rituals and a socio-ethical map to orient themselves in a foreign environment under the harshness of slavery.

16 David Nicholls, From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour, and, National Independence in Haiti (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 23
17 Michel S. Laguerre, Voodoo and Politics in Haiti (St Martin’s Press, 1989), p. 23
In this deeply alienating context, religion certainly provided an institution through which the African past of the slaves was perpetuated and also an instrument of solidarity and communication during the colonial period.\textsuperscript{20} Finding common identity and social destiny was inherent to the practice of Voodoo during slavery. Of course, as previously noted, the negotiation of rituals among slaves from different tribes brought with it considerable changes. Over and above these were the legal and religious restraints of \textit{Le Code Noir} – a series of restrictions on the practice of any religion other than Roman Catholicism in the French colonies. Indeed, when considered in this context, the necessarily secretive dimension of Voodoo becomes clear. The elaboration of Voodoo as an African-based cosmology in the New World thus displays slaves’ ability to overcome the barriers of tribal difference as well as their resistance to this colonial mandate.

So, as a process, the elaboration of Voodoo cosmology is characterized by collective negotiation of different tribal rituals in secret practices, which mapped out the creed of the new spirituality of the slaves. Thus, Voodoo has to be characterized as a generic term, covering these various Creolised cults.\textsuperscript{21} It is unsurprising then that, Voodoo cosmology unfolds at the intersection of different rituals and deities which it simultaneously transcended and preserved. One of the sociopolitical implications of the process of overcoming tribal differences and formulating a common identity is that it compels the individual subjectivity of the practitioners to embrace the ‘we’, as the marker of the collective, instead of the ‘I’ as the classic marker of Western subjectivity. Embracing the ‘we’ as the marker of an African-based subjectivity was the logical implication of syncretism and collective process that yielded Voodoo cosmology.

\textsuperscript{20} David Nicholls, \textit{From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour, and, National Independence in Haiti} (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 31

\textsuperscript{21} Michel S. Laguerre, \textit{Voodoo and Politics in Haiti} (St Martin’s Press, 1989), p. 38
The rise of Voodoo cosmology thus represents the successful attempt of isolated slaves’ communities to reinvent the social and religious context of their original social and religious context. Voodoo was perhaps one of the most cohesive forces among the slaves and one which the whites tried to suppress.\textsuperscript{22} Voodoo cosmology is born out of the need for an existential praxis for self-orientation in the foreignness of the New World by overcoming tribal differences and assimilating the norms of the New World as well as the thoroughly social nature of the Voodoo cosmology that ultimately emerged. Le vodou est créateur. D’une multitude d’hommes venus de toutes parts, d’ethnies bien différentes, voici que cette religion est en train d’en faire une société cohérente…il transmet une institution qui conditionne l’efficacité de l’action à venir en vue d’une libération collective.\textsuperscript{23} [Voodoo is creative. From a large number of men who came from all parts, and different ethnicities, this religion is creating a coherent society…It is the vehicle of an institution which conditions the effectiveness of the future act which leads to collective freedom.] Such collective negotiation defines the political and social potential of Voodoo from its inception in the New World.

It is precisely in virtue of this social and collective nature that Voodoo would come to stand at the center of the colonial revolution that established Haiti as the first independent Black nation. Indeed, the birth of Haiti and Haitian citizenship depended on several key factors rooted in the elaboration of Voodoo cosmology. First, on the most general level taking part in the activities of a cult or sect provides emotional support for members who

\textsuperscript{22} Thomas Ott, \textit{The Haitian Revolution}, (Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1973), p. 15

\textsuperscript{23} Guérin Montilus, \textit{Haïti: un cas témoin de la vivacité des religions africaines en Amérique et pourquoi} In \textit{Vodun} (Présence Africaine, 1993) p. 181
are forced to live in a world that they often perceive as hostile thereby allowing for the possibility of collective action.24

Second, as discussed, Voodoo provided disparate slaves with a sense of common sociopolitical destiny and confidence in their African-based national identity despite the legal and religious restrictions of *Le Code Noir*, and slavery’s eroding impact on individual subjectivity. Building socially coherent communities follow the same process which established Voodoo cosmology. The initial manifestations of social cohesion that results from Voodoo cosmology are the formation of maroon communities. After all, the task of reconciliation among the slaves shipped to St-Domingue, hardly an issue of redistributing wealth, concerned building fraternal alliances of trust among former enemies of war and among persons massed together in labor gangs who had no common background and little understanding of each other, indeed they may not have known of each other’s cultural existence before the crossing.25

Beginning in 1791 the Haitian revolution stands as the culmination of marronage, secret organizations, and frequent insurrections until the final war of 1804 led by Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Marronage is central to understand the slaves’ attempt to become free. It is the moment when the maroon, a runaway slave, seeks freedom in the mountains. The Maroon-Vodou collaboration was pivotal at the outbreak of the Haitian revolution, and Vodou became ‘the symbol of Haitian autonomy and nationalism as the only black republic in the Americas’ in 1803. Boukman Dutty, a founder of the revolution, was a Maroon leader and Vodou priest, or papaloï, with an imposing physical stature. He was

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also known as Zamba.26 Viewed from the perspective of the slave, the intersection of Maroon-Voodoo suggests that the landscape of St-Domingue gradually lost its hostile and foreign aura.

The occurrence of marronage articulates the shift of consciousness that occurred as the slaves started to perceive the mountains as places where freedom dwells. It indicates the slaves’ gradual appropriation of St-Domingue as their homeland. Starting to view the mountains as free places within the colonial environment is the outcome of secrecy, voodoo cosmology, and the elaboration of a common language which articulates collective consciousness among the slaves. The slaves must have been able to communicate the hiding places in the mountains to one another. And in order to do so there must have been a shared language as the medium of communication. This is important because such common language is another indication of the slaves’ transcendence of their tribal differences and their unity around an African-based semiotics; a system of words and signs as a shared medium of communication.

Like every language, the rise of Haitian Creole presupposes a system of signifiers and signified which articulate the sophisticated grasp of both the physical and social environments by its speakers. The rise of Haitian Creole and its role as one of the specifics of the Haitian revolution is the solid proof that the revolutionaries and leaders’ possessed a systematic map of the revolutionary process. Trouillot failed to appreciate the inherent systematic and sophisticated dimensions of Haitian Creole. And that the rise of Haitian Creole shows that it was the medium through which the revolution was thinkable among the revolutionaries and their leaders.

26 Ibid., p. 63
The coalescence of these various social and religious media in the slaves’ communities is embodied in the figure of Boukmann. Even though the particulars surrounding the planning of the slave rebellion are obscure, but Boukmann’s role was certainly important. A huge, muscular man and a fugitive slave from Jamaica, Boukmann was a Voodoo priest who despised whites. He used the deep roots of Voodoo among the slaves as a communications system to organize rebellion. Boukmann is probably the most interesting figure in the Haitian revolution because his contribution synthesizes religion, organization, and collective trust in the process to end slavery. Boukmann was able to act as the coordinator of the Haitian revolution upon the constellation of the religious and social factors.

Such medium of communication must have been Haitian Creole, which is one of the specifics of the Haitian revolution. The rise of Haitian Creole as a medium of communication shows the slaves’ transcendence of the inherent dissonance of slavery and the establishment of a shared medium of communication. Given that the hiding places were kept secret, the slaves must have learned to trust each other. Trust and secrecy are expressions of social cohesion among the slaves. They demonstrate the recognition of common social interests which must be kept from the masters’ awareness. The frequent revolts and burning of plantations were linked to marronage because upon achieving confidence in the mountains as places of freedom, the next logical step was to attempt to expand these places in the rest of the colony; to make St-Domingue uniformly free. So the slaves’ proclivity to expand freedom through marronage and their perception of the mountains as free places were intrinsic incentives of the frequent revolts and the Haitian revolution.

Of course, little is known about the slaves’ discussions and exchanges while hiding in the mountains, (emphasis is usually upon the final meeting which occurred around the Voodoo ceremony in Bois-Caiman). Such lack of literature may be the reason that Trouillot believes that the Haitian revolution was unthinkable even among the slaves and its leaders. However, what we do know suggests that the maroon communities were the predecessors of slave-based societies in the Caribbean. Maronnage provided the ideal theater of freedom, community, and social exchange among the slaves of St-Domingue prior to the rise of Haiti as a free nation. In learning to assume specific social roles in the maroon community, the slaves develop social agency.

Accordingly, the maroon transcends her slave consciousness as she learns to see herself as an organizer with specific roles in the maroon community. Social agency is an inherent dimension of citizenship because it maps out the role that each ought to assume in order for the proper functioning of the sociopolitical institutions. Thus, an independent Haiti was already potentially present in the maroon communities of St-Domingue and the revolutionary process is best understood as the confirmation and realization of this nascent independent consciousness.

Thus the fact that a voodoo ceremony was the prelude of the ultimate battle is consistent with both the rise of Voodoo cosmology—as the sociopolitical substance of Voodoo and the maroons as the first free communities of St-Domingue. The ceremony celebrated the religious and sociopolitical confidence that maroons communities achieved and the conviction that their freedom ought to permeate every aspect of the land. It is on such premise that the tripartite move from slaves, to maroon and Haitian citizen occur. The pioneering role of the Haitian revolution is viewed by Nesbitt as a radical Enlightenment.
For Nesbitt, the rise of the Haitian state “announced that freedom can exist only when we create a global society whose structures and laws allow for the full and unimpeded development of our possibilities as living individuals. This pronouncement was shocking and inadmissible in a system of global colonialism grounded and dependent on the enslavement of a portion of the human population.” 28 As a radical Enlightenment, the occurrence of the Haitian revolution was both a major critique of the European Enlightenment and the completion of its ideals. It exposed the inherent contradiction in positing freedom for humanity while excluding non-Europeans. Also, in granting freedom to the slaves of St-Domingue, it fulfills the promise of the Enlightenment that all human beings ought to be free from religious tutelage and forced labor.

In concluding, the Haitian revolution was the prelude of the African Diaspora Enlightenment because it avails the slaves the consciousness of being of African descent and free at the same time, an idea that was anathema to the purview of Eurocentric ideals. It granted the slaves the occasion to overcome both physical and rational self-tutelage in consistency with Kant’s requirement above. The tyranny of the monarchy and organized religion that Kant repudiates are the equivalent of the colonialist regime and the justification of slavery by the edicts of Le Code noir in the French colonies. Through the occurrence of the Haitian revolution, people of African descent became the center of their sociopolitical context much like DaVinci’s famous renaissance drawing of the Vitruvian Man depicts the European man at the center of the cosmos through the accomplishment of the Haitian revolution.

Furthermore, the occurrence of the Haitian revolution undertakes a paradoxical shift of the Enlightenment. It displaces its conceptual purview in showing that reason, the central lynchpin of the Enlightenment, exists in slaves communities. It allows the slaves to secure the recognition of the West, as both humans and *res cogitans*—entities that are fit to reason and manifest sociopolitical agency. This recognition is articulated in the emergence of St-Domingue as the Republic of Haiti, the first black nation. Thus the news of the Haitian revolution was subversive among other slaves’ communities because it triggered the consciousness of the possibility of being of African descent and free, which is synthesized in blackness, black power, black cultural expressions.