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Créolité and Culture:

Tracing the Haitian Roots of Global Identity

NAWA STER: „UR an international PhD student" (nr BPI/STE/ 2023/1/00001/U/00001)

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Professor Jacek J. Kolasiński

Department of Art + Art History at Florida International University
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5079-7762

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The main aim of *Créolité and Culture: Tracing the Haitian Roots of Global Identity* is to offer a unique and in-depth exploration of visual and material culture, along with contemporary art practices. This seminar is designed to benefit scholars, early career researchers, and students by expanding their understanding of theoretical frameworks like *Créolité* in cultural research. It also encourages participants to engage in interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary scientific endeavors. By combining both pedagogical and scientific approaches, the seminar equips attendees with practical and impactful tools for their research practices.

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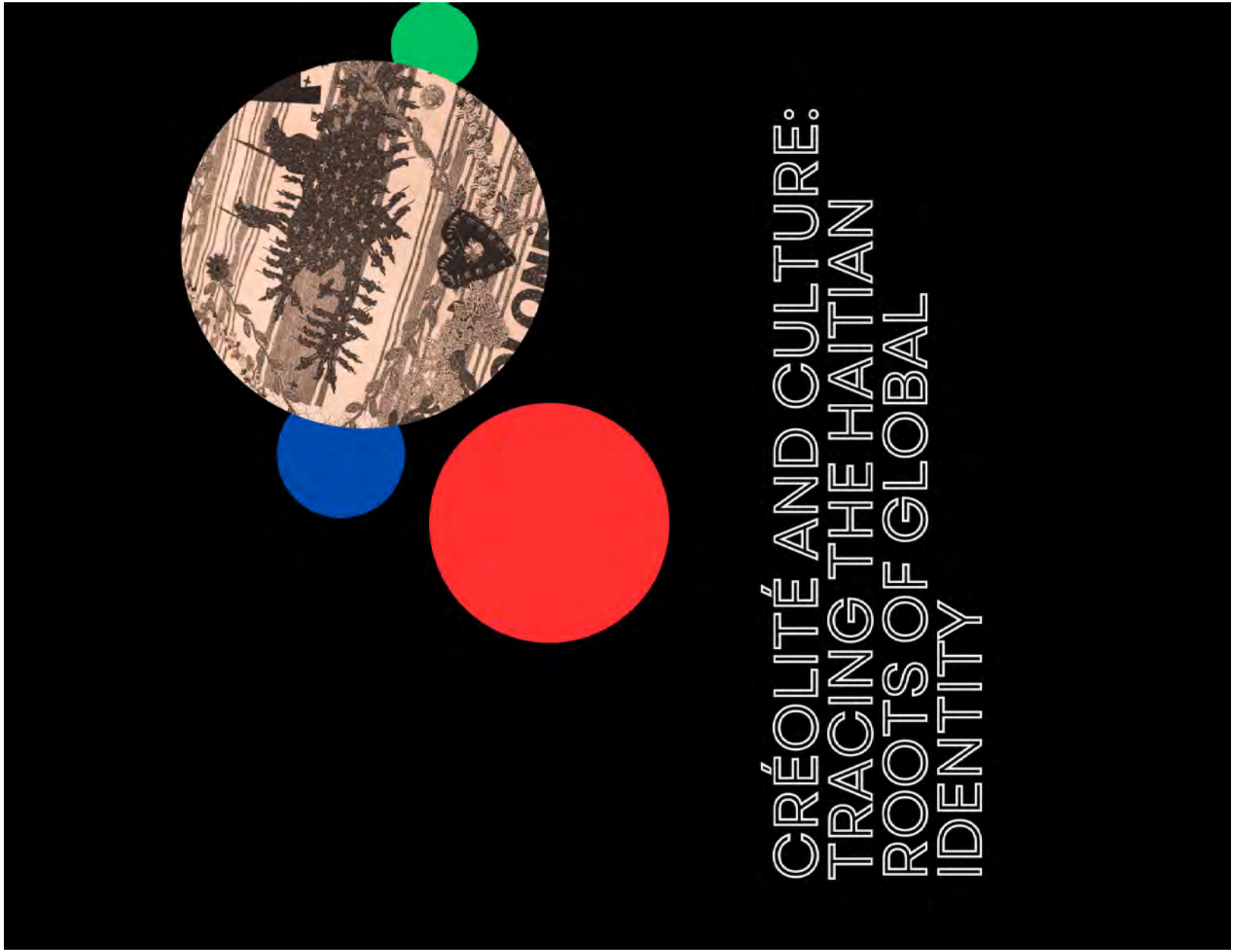
Prof. Jacek J. Kolasiński is the founding director of the Ratcliffe Art + Design Incubator and a professor in the Department of Art + Art History at Florida International University, where he served as the department chair for six years.

As an interdisciplinary artist, designer, and curator, Kolasiński is engaged in a very dynamic field of creative practice that undergoes constant and rapid change. An essential aspect of his research/creative activities involves his profound interest in engagement through human interaction and social discourse within the public and social realm. He is particularly drawn to the notion of convergence, often described as "spatial practice," which connects a variety of architectural and artistic engagements with the city, society and aesthetic practices at large. Through his creative work, Kolasiński has tested complex trans-disciplinary collaborative productions, multimedia installations, single and multiple channel video projections, 3D digital fabrications, as well as community-based and site-specific projects.

Kolasiński's artwork and curatorial projects have reached large international audiences through presentations and exhibitions in numerous venues, including the Teatro Colon, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Festival Internacional Cervantino, Guanajuato, Mexico; 61 Festival de Cannes – Short Film Corner; Cinema Politic, Barcelona, Spain; Digital Fringe, Melbourne, Australia; Art Academy of Latvia; Vilnius Academy of Arts; Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw; and Tianjin University, to name a few.

His ongoing Creole Archive Project explores transnational connections between Poland and the global South, and Haiti in particular. In 2020, he was awarded a Library Research Grant at the Getty Research Institute to explore the Association Connaissance de l'histoire de l'Afrique contemporaine (ACHC) collection.

He received his MFA from Florida International University in Miami, and his Ph.D. from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Poland. In 2018, Kolasiński was made an honorary member (Academia Artium Latviensis Socius Honoris Causa) of the Art Academy of Latvia.


CRÉOLITÉ AND CULTURE:
TRACING THE HAITIAN
ROOTS OF GLOBAL
IDENTITY

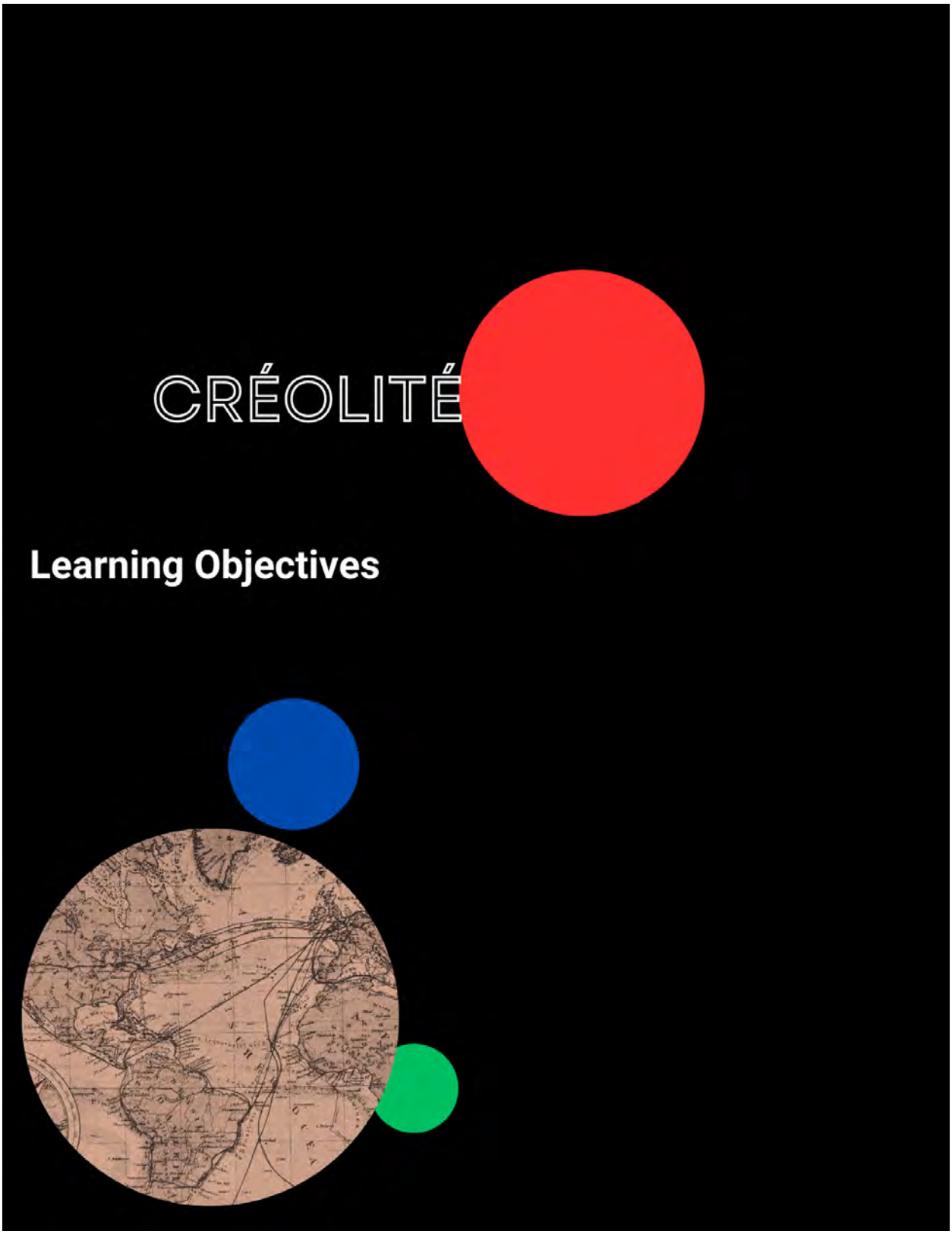
Welcome to ***Créolité and Culture: Tracing the Haitian Roots of Global Identity*.** This seminar brings together scholars, artists, and cultural thinkers to explore the profound role that Haitian culture has played in shaping broader global identity, grounded in the rich concept of *Créolité*. Originating in the Caribbean, *Créolité* represents the dynamic blend of African, European, and indigenous influences that have forged Haiti's unique cultural identity, offering a powerful lens through which to understand the complexities of cultural blending worldwide.

Throughout today's conversations, we will engage with diverse perspectives on how Haiti's history, art, and traditions reflect the essence of *Créolité*. Haitian-American artist Edouard Duval-Carrié will lead a discussion on Haiti's visual culture and its deep connections to the French Revolution, while Juanita Alcena will explore how Haitian fashion, particularly textiles like chambray and the tignon headwrap, became symbols of resistance and cultural pride. Filmmaker Dudley Alexis will delve into the rich culinary traditions of Haiti and the ways food preserves cultural identity within the Haitian diaspora.

Further conversations will take us into the spiritual realm, where Axelle Liautaud will explore the visual language of Vodou, highlighting the symbolism in *drapo (flags)* and *vévés* used in rituals. Nicolas André will guide us through the history of *Haitian Creole: kreyòl ayisyen*, emphasizing its role in cultural resistance, and Charlene Desir will close with an in-depth exploration of Vodou's role as a form of spiritual and cultural resilience during the Haitian Revolution.

These discussions underscore Haiti's crucial contribution to global cultural identity through *Créolité*, demonstrating the resilience, creativity, and adaptability of Haitian culture as it continues to resonate within and beyond the Caribbean.

BIO: Prof. Jacek J. Kolasiński is the founding director of the Ratcliffe Art + Design Incubator and a professor in the Department of Art + Art History at Florida International University, where he previously served as department chair. An interdisciplinary artist, designer, and curator, his work spans multimedia installations, 3D digital fabrications, and site-specific projects that engage with public spaces and social discourse. His creative practice explores the convergence of architecture, society, and aesthetic practices. Kolasiński's work has been exhibited internationally in venues such as Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires, Festival Internacional Cervantino in Mexico, and the 61st Festival de Cannes. His ongoing *Creole Archive Project* investigates the transnational connections between Poland and Haiti, and in 2020, he received a Library Research bwat from the Getty Research Institute. He holds an MFA from Florida International University and a Ph.D. from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Poland, and was named an honorary member of the Art Academy of Latvia in 2018.


CRÉOLITÉ
Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

1. Conversation: Haitian Visual Culture and Créolité
Learning Objectives:

- Understand the impact of the French Revolution on Haitian society and its influence on visual culture.
- Analyze the blending of African, European, and indigenous influences in Haitian art, particularly Vodou depictions.
- Explore the role of Haitian art in shaping and reflecting cultural identity, especially in Miami's Haitian diaspora.
- Examine how resilience and adaptability manifest in the evolution of Haitian culture and its global connections.

2. Conversation: Haitian Fashion and Créolité
Learning Objectives:

- Explore the cultural and historical significance of chambray fabric and the *tignon* head-wrap in Haitian ceremonial attire.
- Understand how textiles played a role in resistance among enslaved populations in Haiti.
- Analyze the adaptation of European fashion to the Caribbean climate and its reflection of Haitian resilience.
- Discuss the balance of Haitian heritage with global influences in contemporary Haitian fashion.

3. Conversation: Haitian Culinary Culture and the Diaspora
Learning Objectives:

- Understand the significance of Haitian cuisine in preserving cultural identity, particularly within the diaspora.
- Explore the role of traditional Haitian dishes like *Soup Joumou* in symbolizing freedom and resilience.
- Analyze how indigenous knowledge and communal practices like the *Lakou* system influence food and culture.
- Discuss the role of Haitian cuisine in maintaining cultural bonds within the diaspora.

4. Conversation: Vodou, Art, and Créolité
Learning Objectives:

- Analyze the artistic depictions of Vodou deities and their synthesis of African, Christian, and local influences.
- Explore how different mediums (such as calabash gourds and Vodou flags) reflect the blending of traditions in Haitian art.
- Understand the significance of *vévés* in Vodou rituals and their cultural symbolism.

- Discuss the role of historical events in shaping the evolution of Vodou visual culture.

5. Conversation: The Development of Haitian Creole Language
Learning Objectives:

- Understand the linguistic evolution of Haitian Creole and its blending of African, French, Spanish, and Taino influences.
- Analyze the role of Creole in Haitian cultural identity, resistance, and survival.
- Discuss the social and educational inequalities caused by the dominance of French in official contexts.
- Explore the significance of promoting Creole as an official language in the decolonization of Haitian society.

6. Conversation: Vodou and the Haitian Revolution
Learning Objectives:

- Explore the integration of African spiritual traditions with Native American and European beliefs in creating Vodou.
- Understand Vodou as a powerful form of resistance during the Haitian Revolution and beyond.
- Analyze the role of Maroons in blending indigenous knowledge with African spiritual practices for survival and resistance.
- Discuss the syncretism within Vodou and the symbolism of figures like *Èrzulie Dantò* in representing liberation and resistance.

Learning Outcomes

CRÉOLITÉ

Learning Outcomes

1. Conversation: Haitian Visual Culture and *Créolité*

- **Learning Outcomes:**
    1. Students will be able to describe how the French Revolution influenced Haitian visual culture.
    2. Students will analyze the fusion of African, European, and indigenous elements in Haitian art and Vodou practices.
    3. Students will evaluate the role of Haitian art in expressing identity and resistance, particularly within diaspora communities.
    4. Students will identify the ways in which Haitian culture has evolved and maintained global connections, particularly in Miami.

2. Conversation: Haitian Fashion and *Créolité*

- **Learning Outcomes:**
    1. Students will be able to explain the cultural significance of chambray fabric and the tignon headwrap in Haitian fashion.
    2. Students will analyze how enslaved populations used textiles as a form of resistance in Haiti.
    3. Students will compare and contrast European fashion adaptations to the Caribbean climate and their reflections in Haitian culture.
    4. Students will critique how Haitian designers balance their heritage with global fashion influences in their work.

3. Conversation: Haitian Culinary Culture and the Diaspora

- **Learning Outcomes:**
    1. Students will be able to identify the cultural importance of Haitian dishes like *Soup Joumou* and their role in symbolizing freedom.
    2. Students will analyze the communal aspect of food in Haitian culture, particularly within the *Lakou* system and Vodou traditions.
    3. Students will assess how Haitian cuisine has adapted within the diaspora while preserving its cultural roots.
    4. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the use of food as a tool for maintaining cultural identity in the Haitian diaspora.

4. Conversation: Vodou, Art, and *Créolité*

- **Learning Outcomes:**
    1. Students will be able to interpret artistic depictions of Vodou deities and their representation of Haitian cultural synthesis.
    2. Students will analyze the significance of *vévés* and Vodou flags in Haitian visual and ritual practices.
    3. Students will evaluate the use of diverse artistic mediums in Haitian Vodou culture and their cultural symbolism.
    4. Students will connect historical events to the evolution of Vodou visual culture and its representation in Haitian art.

5. Conversation: The Development of Haitian Creole

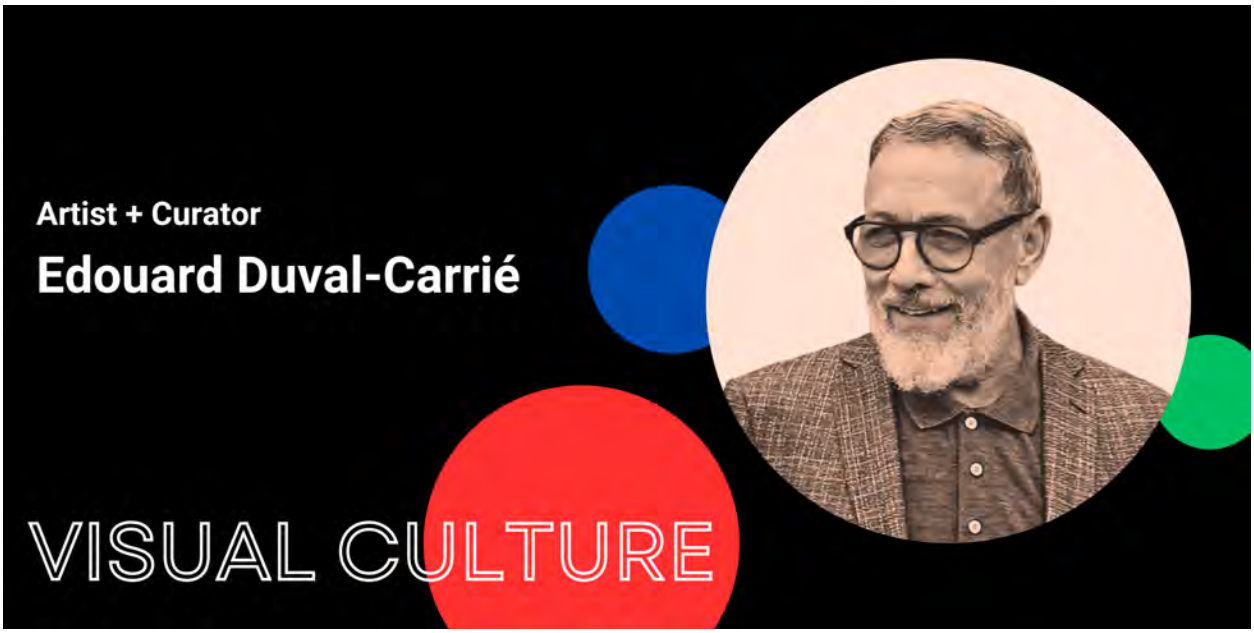
- **Learning Outcomes:**
    1. Students will explain the linguistic evolution of Haitian Creole and how it blends African, French, Spanish, and Taino influences.
    2. Students will analyze the role of Creole in shaping Haitian identity, culture, and resistance to oppression.
    3. Students will critique the social and educational inequalities associated with the dominance of French in Haiti.
    4. Students will assess the importance of promoting Creole as an official language in decolonizing and valuing Haitian cultural heritage.

6. Conversation: Vodou and the Haitian Revolution

- **Learning Outcomes:**
    1. Students will be able to describe the creation of Vodou as a blend of African spiritual traditions, Native American beliefs, and European Christianity.
    2. Students will analyze the role of Vodou as a form of resistance during the Haitian Revolution and in subsequent Haitian history.
    3. Students will evaluate the contributions of Maroons in blending indigenous and African practices to resist colonization.
    4. Students will interpret the syncretism within Vodou, including the symbolism of revolutionary figures like *Èrzulie Dantò* as icons of liberation.

7. In-class Conversation: Applying *Créolité* to Cultural Landscapes

- **Learning Outcomes:**
    1. Students will apply the framework of *Créolité* to analyze their own cultural landscape.
    2. Students will discern potential cultural patterns in their heritage that echo the analysis process used to study the Caribbean and Haitian experiences.
    3. Students will engage in reflective discussions to compare their cultural landscapes with the concepts of cultural resilience, syncretism, and identity explored in Haitian culture.



BIO: Edouard Duval-Carrié was born in Port-au-Prince. His family emigrated to Puerto Rico while he was a child during the François Duvalier regime. Duval-Carrié studied at the Université de Montréal and McGill University in Canada before graduating with a Bachelor of Arts from Loyola College, Montréal in 1978. He later attended the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, France, from 1988 to 1989. He resided in France for many years and currently lives in Miami, Florida. ``I didn't want to go back to Haiti because of the political turmoil there. I have two kids,`` he explains. Instead he resides among Miami's substantial Haitian immigrant population and maintains cultural ties to his homeland. His works have been exhibited in Europe and the Americas.

(By: Lesley A. Wolff[1])

[1] http://duval-carrie.com

Synopsis: In this engaging conversation, Haitian-American artist Edouard Duval-Carrié and Prof. Jacek J. Kolasiński explore the rich visual culture of Haiti, particularly through the lens of *Créolité.* They discuss the profound impact of the French Revolution on Haitian society, the complex blend of African, European, and indigenous influences that shaped Haitian Vodou and visual traditions, and the evolution of Haitian identity through art. Duval-Carrié highlights the resilience and adaptability of Haitian culture, noting its continuous evolution and global connections, particularly in Miami, where he continues to create and influence the next generation of Haitian-American artists. The discussion underscores Haiti's significant role in the New World's cultural and social experiments, cementing its place as the birthplace of *Créolité.*

JJK: Today, I will be speaking with Edouard Duval-Carrié, a Haitian-American artist and curator, about the visual culture of *Créolité.*

EDC:
Before I dive into the theme of visual culture, I want to focus on Haitian Creole. I'm not a linguist, so I'm just sharing what I've heard and tried to understand. Whatever it is, it's very particular and specific—not just to the island but to the Caribbean as a whole. It's been very active since the "discovery", since the colonial impact. And it's literally a port language when you speak of the island. Interestingly, the Creole spoken in Haiti is very similar to the one in Martinique and Guadeloupe, and even to the one in the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Saint-Denis. It's really strange because I can understand people from those places.

JJK: So when you break it down, there's a root in the French language, but there's also a significant influence from West African linguistic structures, as well as from Spanish, Portuguese, and maybe even Arabic, because of the Syrians who arrived later on.

JJK: Well, a lot of the slaves were Muslims. Someone prominent in our history, Mackandal[2], was a Muslim. And then there was Bookman, called that because he could read books.

JJK: The Man of the Book.

EDC: Yes, the Man of the Book.

JJK: Who might have been carried a Quran?
EDC: Yes, probably.

JJK: But when you break it down, you have an amalgamation of multiple cultures that eventually simmered into the creation of something new and unique, born out of conflict and the clash of different elements. And there's also the indigenous community of people...

EDC: Which was already there, informing them about what they were eating and other things. The Haitian Revolution was mostly about food. The Europeans were freaking out, very worried that their source of food wasn't arriving in time. They ate wheat, used the sugar, but it

[2] François Mackandal (c. 1730–c. 1758) was a Haitian Maroon leader in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, now Haiti. He is often identified as a Haitian vodou priest, or houngan.

was transformed in Europe into things palatable to them. The slaves, on the other hand, ate whatever they could find and produce locally. But the hysteria caused by the French Revolution at home, and the theories transmitted to the islands, especially in Haiti, made the slaves anxious. And all along, they were wondering if they would have enough to eat. They heard their masters talk, but it didn't concern them directly. Once they realized that, they went full tilt towards revolution.

JJK: So, going back to the visual world, the Haitian visual world is so rich. We can start with Taino[3] influences and look at the entire work in a visual scope, connected to the Voodoo culture and religious practices. And then there's the French influence for over a hundred years...

EDC: 300 years.

JJK: So, 300 years of French influence, bringing in French styles and aesthetic ideas. And all of that collides to create something new What are Vévés[4]?. Maybe let's start with the idea that Rigaud describes in his book: *Ve-Ve Diagrammes Rituels du Voudou*[5]. Can you explain?

EDC: *Vévé* is a particular experience translated into visual form. The slaves weren't allowed to fully practice their religion, so the production of sacred objects was forbidden. On the plantations, they were reduced to using very ephemeral materials for their religious activities. The *Vévés* were symbols representing the deities, and there were many because, in Haiti's case, people came from all over West Africa. We could say that the entire Atlantic coast of Africa was represented in Haiti. The French never really had what they called at the time a "counter." A counter was when a colonial power would establish a supply point where locals would provide slaves. In this process, the political powers within Africa were very much to blame as well, selling and providing Europeans with slaves. There were always little wars between kingdoms and even between villages, between the interior and the coast. So this whole procedure of providing slaves ensured that in a place like Haiti, the French were very eager to have slaves because they started their industrial revolution long before the British. Unfortunately, the engine for that was slavery—it was the African slave. And they literally consumed the enslaved population; they were considered a commodity. They would buy them, and the slaves had an expected lifespan of no more than four years. Can you imagine? Slavery in Haiti was pretty harsh.

JJK: So the idea of people being kidnapped on the coast of Africa, packed into slave ships...

EDC: As ballast.

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[3] *The Taíno*, the Caribbean's largest indigenous group, numbered up to two million during the late 15th-century Spanish conquest.

[4] *Vévé* - is a sacred symbol in Haitian Vodou, representing the various lwa (spirits) worshipped in the religion.

[5] Rigaud, Milo's *Vè-vè: Diagrammes Rituels du Voudou* is considered the most comprehensive work on sacred Vodou geometry, detailing the intricate symbols (*vèvè*) used in rituals to invoke spirits.

JJK: As human cargo. And they were insured by the companies handling the whole economic procedure, so if somebody died, they would receive compensation. It was essentially livestock for them. But the point now is that someone could be on a boat next to someone from a completely different cultural group. Maybe they didn't even speak the same language.

EDC: Same language.

JJK: They came from different religious practices. When people were brought to the Americas, there was often a perfunctory act of baptizing them, and then they were thrown into the hell of the plantations.

EDC: They had to quickly learn how to communicate with their superiors and masters. This wasn't just limited to the slaves. Sometimes Haitians refuse to listen to me because they don't believe the story. The people who were brought over, and planted there, weren't learned Parisians showing up on the coast of Haiti. They were mostly from the provinces and barely spoke French, as the 17th-century phenomenon of rallying around the French language in France hadn't yet reached them. They spoke a kind of Creole, and this is what the slaves learned.

JJK: So, going back to the societal structure—according to the *Code Noir*[6], society was divided into *grands blancs, petits blancs* (the working-class), and *gens de couleur (*people of color), who could be either *gens de couleur libres* (free) or enslaved.

EDC: Yes, they were enslaved.

JJK: The *grand blancs* were often aristocrats, possibly from Paris or elsewhere, but they rarely spent much time in the colonies. They had people managing the plantations for them.

EDC: Exactly. The *petit blancs* did that.

JJK: So now, with the enslaved people brought to Haiti, you have a representation of many cultures, including people from the Congo who might have already been Christian, since Christianity was adopted in the late 15th century in the Congo . They had their own visual language—a language of visual representation. Then there were people who practiced a range of indigenous religions.

EDC: Animistic, yes.

JJK: Animistic, right. And, as you mentioned, there might have been some influence from Islam. On the other side, you had the indigenous population of the Caribbean Islands, who had their own language.

EDC: Yes, they had their own language and were the providers of intelligence about the land. But in the case of Haiti, the indigenous people were massacred because the Spaniards found a bit of gold. Columbus noted in his annals that there was some gold there. The Spanish

[6] *The Code Noir* (Black Code' was a decree issued by King Louis XIV of France in 1685, outlining the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire. It governed the practice of slavery in French colonies until 1789, the year the French Revolution began.

population managed to move to Mexico after the collapse of the Aztec Empire, leaving the island nearly empty except for a few native Tainos. The Spaniards had brought livestock—cows, pigs, chickens—that were left behind when they went to invade Mexico in search of gold. For the next 50 or 60 years, the island was largely abandoned, with only poachers occasionally coming by to take what was left.

The island then served as a stop for the transatlantic trade, supplying water, food, and so forth. The ones who settled there were mainly of French extract. The Treaty of Ryswick[7] came into play when one of the Spanish infantas married the king of France, and they divided the island. But they did it in a way that caused issues because of the island's water flow and geomorphology. Most of the water flowed into what is now the Dominican Republic, creating a problem that will become more crucial as water scarcity intensifies.

France wasn't really considered a maritime power like Spain or England. They did try with Canada and the fur trade, but they were mainly interested in trade, not in sending people to populate the colonies. Compared to the number of enslaved people, the French presence on the island was minimal. The landowners were absent.

JJK: In your work you often reference Fr. Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish Dominican friar whose writings recorded the accounts from the colonies to the Spanish court, discussing the abuse and massacre of indigenous people.

EDC: They were not only massacred, but many also committed mass suicides. These people were in a state of development where they lived relatively easily, with abundant resources like water and fish. But then the Europeans arrived, and all they saw was gold. The gold in Haiti was not very pure, so extracting it was laborious. They relied on the local population, and between Columbus's first and third voyages, the population dwindled to almost nothing.

JJK: He realized the indigenous population was decimated and became one of the architects of the idea to bring Africans to the Caribbean .

EDC: He didn't explicitly want that but suggested bringing people from similar latitudes. The closest were from Africa.

JJK: His writings show that he became highly critical of the transatlantic slave trade after witnessing its horrific effects. Africans were brought to the Caribbean from a multitude of nations, transported on large ships, and treated as mere cargo. If they fell ill, the traders would dispose of them by throwing them into the ocean.

But let’s focus on how the enslaved population developed its own culture of resistance, which is where the language of *Créolité* becomes particularly significant. They had to conceal their practices, ideas, and communication systems, creating a form of opacity. This hidden knowledge, often learned from the local population, became crucial during

[7] In the Treaty of Ryswick of 1697, Spain formally recognized French control over Tortuga Island and the western third of Hispaniola.

the early days of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). The Maroon[8] communities used this knowledge to fight against the planters. Th Vodou practitioners develop an intricate graphic language of the vévés

EDC: Speaking of *vévé*, these are sacred and secret symbols made from ephemeral materials like ground corn or ashes. They could be easily erased if someone was caught, as practicing such rituals could lead to severe punishment under the Black Code of France.

JJK: Yes, the Code Noir prescribed an array of the corporal punishments such as whippings, branding with a fleur-de-lis, and cutting off ears…

EDC: Yes, for any transgressions. Practicing these rituals was a clandestine activity. It's important to remember that many different tribes came to Haiti, bringing their beliefs. They didn't have physical baggage, but they brought memories and adapted to the new land, creating unique cultural reactions. In Haiti, people from the entire West Coast of Africa, from Mauritania to Angola, were brought in. Meanwhile, Spain, England, Holland, and Portugal had their own West African networks.

The French turned slavery into a machine to supply Europe with sugar, which was then a drug. Europe, which was used to honey as a sweetener, became addicted to sugar—a total addiction that persists worldwide today.

JJK: At one point, sugar was so expensive it was almost seen as medicine. It created massive fortunes for the French aristocracy, which were pumped into the French system from Saint-Domingue.

EDC: Yes, like Versailles. Louis XIV built Versailles with the riches brought by sugar.

JJK: The various people from the West Coast of Africa brought their visual traditions, which then collided with the iconography of Christianity. Eventually, elements like masonry were incorporated into the symbolism.

EDC: Yes, at the same time.

JJK: How did these symbols create their own aesthetics? If you see a *vévé*, you understand it because they are very specific. There are lines, intertwined, encapsulating vodou theology.

EDC: Yes, it's the visual counterpart of the theology. Sacred diagrams exist in every culture, but in Haiti, it's peculiar because it incorporates so many different styles. In Cuba, for example, they have *Palo Monte*[9], derived from maybe one or two African traditions. Meanwhile, in Haiti, there are gods *(lwa[10])* so peculiar that people can't even figure out what they are.

JJK: So, I think we should maybe talk specifically about one deity in the Haitian Vodou pantheon. There are different

[8] *Maroons* are descendants of Africans in the Americas and Indian Ocean islands who escaped slavery.

[9] *Palo*, also known as *Las Reglas de Congo*, is an African diasporic religion that originated in Cuba in the late 19th or early 20th century.

[10] *Lwa*, also known as *loa*, are spirits in the African diasporic religion of Haitian Vodou.

houses of *lwa* and a good example to discuss might be Ogoun, right?

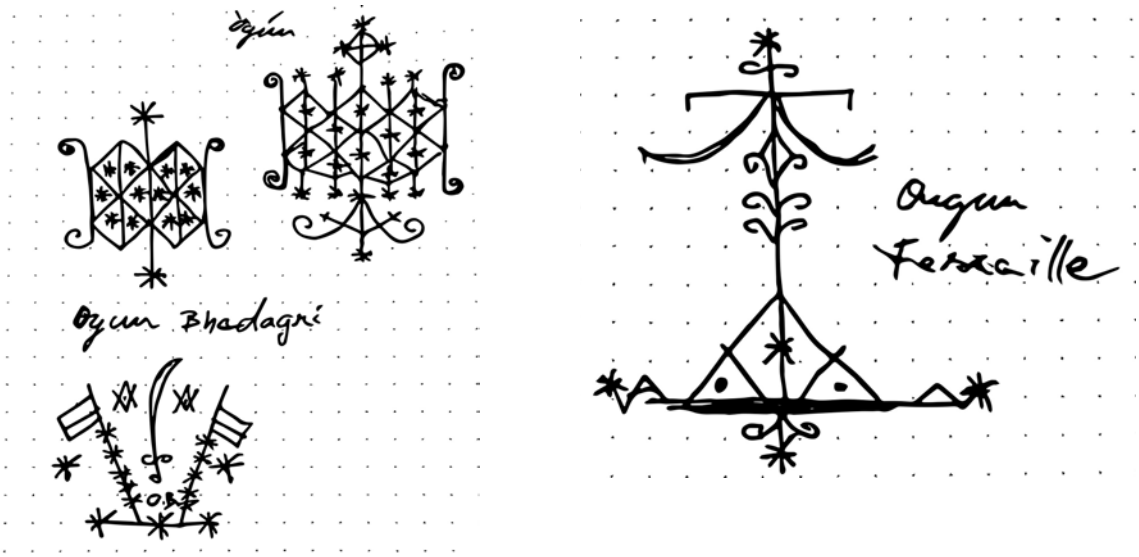


Figure 1. Sketches (2018) by Jacek J. Kolasinski of the Haitian Vodou *vévé* of Ogoun.

EDC: Ogoun is considered the god *(lwa),* or more accurately, the mystery—because that's what they're called, mysteries—of aggression and war. But more than that, he instills courage in people. In Haiti, his main attribute is that if you're sick, you call upon him to gather all your strength to fight the illness. That's why he's called the warrior—he fights sickness. There are two major groups of *lwa.*

JJK: The Petro and the Rada?

EDC: Yes, the *Petro* and the *Rada*. Ogoun's spirit primarily comes from the Congo region, where the tribes were often at war, building kingdoms, and constantly fighting. When he shows up in Haiti, he becomes a very important deity, as you can see, and for obvious reasons.

EDC: Exactly. The sword was the key attribute that identified him as Ogoun. He was quickly adopted by people that might not have known about him before.

They found ways to present him that would not be obvious or palatable to the European planters. For example, there's the phenomenon of syncretism, where images of Catholic saints were given the attributes of *Vodou lwa*. The chromolithographs of the time depicted saints, and Ogoun, whose attributes include metal, was associated with Saint-Jacques-le-Majeur, or Santiago de Matamoros, a figure shown riding a horse with a sword in hand. This image equated with the warrior spirit.

JJK: The equestrian rider slaying his enemy, in this case, a Moor, ties into the tradition of Ogoun.

The planters had no idea what was really happening—they thought the slaves were simply devoted to this particular saint.

In Haiti, the symbols of Ogoun, like his sword, became interwoven with these syncretic images. All of these elements were mixing in a very small place, considering the size of Haiti.

JJK: You mentioned earlier about the two houses of *lwa* Rada and Petro. Some of the *lwa* are of African origin, while others emerged from the colonial experience of the Caribbean.

EDC: Right.

JJK: The Caribbean *lwa* are definitely a synthesis of the cultural clash, born out of the experience of people being kidnapped, forcibly Christianized, surviving under the horrific conditions of enslavement and plantation labor. They developed a spiritual system as a form of resilience, a way to stay afloat.

EDC: Exactly, to survive. You also have to remember that the transatlantic slave trade moved progressively down the coast of West Africa. By the time they reached the Congo and Angola, the political systems were less organized compared to places like the Benin Basin.

JJK: In Africa, you had a variety of political systems ranging from highly complex kingdoms with developed iconography of symbols and images to people with more animistic approaches to life. All of that collided and was juxtaposed with the iconography of Catholic saints, initially through paintings and later through printed images. These visual elements were distributed by the French colonial institutions of the island.

Over 300 years the Europeans brought their visual culture to the island, embedding a strong force of representation. So, what role did the images brought over to Saint-Domingue by the French play in shaping the contemporary visual language of Haitian culture?

EDC: It's fascinating—a kind of acculturation that I only fully realized when I went to France. I couldn't believe how French I was. Despite speaking a colonial Caribbean-style French, I understood everything around me, and they understood me perfectly. It made me realize what 300 years of acculturation can do.
You have to remember that the colony was flush with money, though, of course, not for the slaves. All the trappings of wealth existed in Haiti. The plantations were wealthy, and these people had châteaux in France, but they also built imposing estates in Haiti. Cap-François, now Cap-Haïtien, was one of the most important cities of its time, where concepts of banking and paper money were being established. The amount of money circulating led to piracy on the high seas, and eventually, gold and silver were forbidden from being transported.

JJK: Transported, yes. At some point, it could have been easy to do that.

EDC: And they did. But we're talking about the wealth of the urban society of Saint-Domingue.
JJK: Yes, in urban centers like Cap-François and Jacmel, you'd see theater productions that had premiered in Paris being brought to the colonies soon after, as part of the entertainment. This wealth

brought a flood of cultural ideas into the colonial system.

Figure 2. Vodou mural depicting Ogoun (St. Jacques Majeur), Little Haiti, Miami, Florida (2016). Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

EDC: Everyone wanted to have their own cultural products. The island had a rich fauna and flora, and Haiti's precious woods were used to produce furniture, some of which influenced American designs. Haitian craftsmen even helped build the White House and villas in New Orleans. The island wasn't what it is today—it was a very different society.

At the same time that France was experiencing its golden cultural age, the

colony was also flourishing. Sugar was crucial to the French, and the terminology used in sugar production even influenced art, like the term “glassage” (glazing), which parallels how paint was applied.

JJK: After the Haitian Revolution, *Henri Christophe* created the Kingdom of Haiti[11]. He built the phenomenal palace of *Sans-Souci* and the largest fortress in the Caribbean, the *Citadelle Laferrière*. He also established the first art school in his palace, bringing in a British court painter, 1816, to paint his royal portrait. The French visual culture echoed throughout Christophe’s court, from coronation ceremonies to the heraldic system he developed. You were involved in the creation of a book about this, correct?

EDC: Yes, the book is a fascinating story, and it shows how all of this history is inextricably linked on such a small island. Even if you’re not a scholar, you learn about these things—they’re ingrained in the culture. For example, today in Haiti, there’s a particular style of painting that directly descends from that first art school in the 1800s. It’s called *Cap-Haïtien style*, and it’s clear that those who practice it are not untutored “primitives,” as they were once called, but rather skilled artists with a rich tradition.

There's a need to reframe the terms used in Haiti, as it’s a unique mélange that has given rise to a truly Creole culture, encompassing not just the legacy of the French but also the Anglophile tendencies of *Henri Christophe*, who was likely born in Jamaica before being transferred to Haiti. Despite these influences, the French culture remained dominant, especially in the area of Cap-Haïtien, where the local economy still relies on products like orange peels used exclusively for making Cointreau liqueur.

JJK: In some of your work shown at the last *Dokumenta in Kassel*, Germany, you explore this synthesis. You depict the leaders of the Haitian Revolution and the new nation, all dressed in Napoleonic-style uniforms, emulating the political power of the metropole.

EDC: Absolutely. This body of work I’ve created, and continue to create, is particularly relevant now as I'm invited to South Africa—the latest Black republic in the world, while Haiti was the first. They're very curious about how we visualized our nationhood. Even though Haitian practices remain deeply connected to African traditions, the appearance of power—through clothing and other symbols—has been shaped by the former colonial masters. This may seem superficial, but in Haiti, this is what power looks like. We've had kings, presidents, and emperors.

JJK: That process isn’t unique to Haiti. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Visigoth kings minted coins that looked just like Roman ones. Similarly, the coins from the reign of Henri Christophe resemble Napoleonic coins.

[11] The Kingdom of Haiti (1811–1820) in the northwest of Hispaniola.

Figure 3. Photo (2017) by Jacek J. Kolasinski in Little Haiti, Miami, Florida, depicting a mural of Henri Christophe, King of Haiti, inspired by Richard Evans' royal portrait (1816).

Figure 4. Photo (2017) by Jacek J. Kolasinski in Little Haiti, Miami, Florida, depicting a mural of the Citadelle Laferrière, painted by Serge Toussaint.

EDC: Exactly.

JJK: The symbols of power, like the “main de justice” (hand of justice), are carried over and adapted.

EDC: The Haitian Revolution is fundamentally a product of the French Revolution. Conceptually, everything was adopted, including the bonnet Phrygian[12]. But in Haiti, no one actually wears it. If they wear a hat, it’s likely a straw hat, not a bonnet Phrygian.

JJK: It does appear in the Haitian coat of arms, at the top of the palm tree.

EDC: Yes, the palm tree is a symbol of Haiti. The *bonnet* itself is not as significant, but the concept it represents is.

JJK: We started our conversation with the idea of Haitian Creole as a language. There's this bifurcation in Haitian society: French was used as the political language for proclamations by presidents, kings, and emperors, while the language of the people was Creole.

[12] *Red Phrygian*, or 'liberty' caps, symbolized freedom in European and colonial cultures, notably during the American and French Revolutions.

Creole was an amalgamation of all the cultural elements we've been discussing.

EDC: Absolutely. Politics and culture in Haiti are deeply influenced by our history. I've highlighted these historical details to explain the complexity of the concept of *Créolité*. It touches on language, religion, social and economic stratification, and more.

Now we can talk about *Créolité* and its visual counterpart, which is even more complex. The majority class in Haiti, former slaves, continued to use elements brought from Africa and adapted them to a new environment. Haitian Vodou, for instance, is unique—there's nothing quite like it in Africa. Some practices, like zombification, are specific to Haiti. The origins of this practice can be traced back to a group of priests from the island of *Calabar*, near *Lagos*. These priests were known for administering a poison as punishment for severe crimes. They were eventually sold to the French, who brought them to Haiti, unaware of who they had brought. This sect continued their practices in Haiti, where zombification became a phenomenon.

JJK: They adapted these practices to the local environment, using the available flora and fauna.

EDC: Exactly. They were savvy enough to understand and adapt to their new surroundings.

JJK: We're looking at layers upon layers of cultural amalgamations that eventually form a new, cohesive representation—a visual culture unique to Haiti.

EDC: And it's still evolving. Some people think Haiti exists in a bubble, isolated from the world, but that's not entirely true.

JJK: You're right. Anyone who visits Haiti and walks through Port-au-Prince will see the *tap-tap* trucks, festooned with images that connect to global icons, from football heroes to Hollywood stars. This vernacular art form reflects Haiti's global connections and ongoing evolution.

EDC: And it's relatively new. Yes, there was an art school in *Cap-Haïtien* during the reign of King Henri, and later, the government promoted some art through monuments and sculptures. But the real spark came in 1944 when an open space for artists was created in Port-au-Prince. This led to the labeling of "Haitian art," which caught the world's attention. Before that, there was no such thing as the paintings on the *tap-tap* trucks you mentioned.

JJK: And the beautiful metalwork from repurposed steel drums also became iconic.

EDC: That's right. But this genre was started by one person and has since become a tradition, although it's not very old.

Figure 5. *Tap-taps* from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

JJK: You recently organized an exhibition in Port-au-Prince that traveled to a museum in Miami. It showcased how Haitian artists use whatever materials are at their disposal, from discarded tires to fabric scraps, transforming them into powerful narratives.

EDC: Yes, but does it truly have a Haitian identity? That's something I wrestle with. These works have aesthetic concepts behind them, but each artist is doing something unique, especially when you look at the first generation of artists. Haiti is a stratified society, with a large, active majority class creating a visual language for themselves and the world. They're expressing their identity in a very modern, recent political context that's not entirely European but distinctly American—in the sense of the Americas.

JJK: They're Creole.

EDC: Exactly. Since the United States claimed the name "American," we've had to find a new term. But really, Creole is a product of the New World.

JJK: It's a New World language of expression. An art historian once called you the "Caribbean Baroque artist," and anyone who visits your studio can see the multiple influences in your work, from Cap-Haïtien to Versailles to Africa. You've spoken about your first trip to Africa and how it shaped your visual language, especially when confronting the space that many consider the mythical origin, the "Guinea of Versailles."

EDC: Yes, going to Africa is a powerful experience because it's where we come from. My first trip was to Benin, where the

Fon people originated. They were among the first Africans coveted by the French and brought to Saint-Domingue. In Benin, I felt a deep connection—the intonations, the way people spoke, it all reminded me of Port-au-Prince. But when I turned to listen, I realized they were speaking Fon or another local language.

JJK: How did the people there respond to your visual language?

EDC: They absorbed it immediately. They found it novel and interesting, yet familiar. So much so that they felt their temple murals were obsolete and asked me to repaint the entire temple. I was shocked that they would erase hundreds of years of visual history, but I organized a team of artists, and we each took on a part of the project.

JJK: On the other hand, when you were brought to France by the French Minister of Culture for a project on their colonial past, your work was received with a similar sense of familiarity. The French could discern and understand it through their own lens.

EDC: Yes, but the French have erased much of their history. Today, they're scrambling to fill in the gaps. Most French students still confuse Haiti with Tahiti. They have a very vague understanding of what Haiti represents. Yet, our literary production in French is the most prolific today.

JJK: Think about how everyone reads Édouard Glissant's books without realizing he's from Martinique. The global impact of what was created on this small Caribbean island is significant.

EDC: Exactly, and it's a fascinating place. The French may not have forgiven us for defeating them, but they're starting to realize they created their own little monster. Now they're trying to fill in the gaps, but it's not easy. They thought they could claim jazz and the jazz generation from the United States, but that's not theirs to claim.

JJK: The last thing I want to touch on is your time in the U.S. You've been here for a long time, creating work in a place that's geographically and culturally close to the Caribbean—Florida. How has Miami influenced your visual language?

EDC: Miami is a unique place. People think of it as the South with its history of plantations and slavery, but I see it as an interaction point. We're not south of the U.S.; we're north of the Caribbean. That's more accurate for this city.

JJK: Similar communities existed here, like the Maroons in Haiti. There were also sea Maroons in Florida, and under Spanish rule, Black soldiers served in the Spanish Empire. When Florida was transferred to Britain, they were moved to Cuba. There are many parallels, but...

EDC: But we're in 2024 now, and the story is different. Miami is the U.S. gateway to the Caribbean and South America. News from Haiti or Cuba resonates deeply here. Just the other day, my Cuban friends were ecstatic about the possibility of Venezuela being liberated. It's a city that feels the pulse of the region.

JJK: I often jokingly call you the "Pope of Haitian art in Miami," but in many ways, you are a visual conduit for young Haitian-Americans, helping them connect

to their culture. You're one of the most prolific storytellers of Haiti's visual history in the American continent.

EDC: That's part of the broader story of the New World. It's important that Haiti takes its rightful place in this narrative. Haiti is the expression of a New World, with all its complexities. It's a social and human experiment that's unique and particular. We are truly the beginnings of *Créolité.*

JJK: Édouard, thank you so much for the conversation. We'll talk again soon.

BIO: Juanita Alcena holds a Bachelor's degree from Hunter College and an MFA from Paris American Academy. She has been an entrepreneur running her own fashion line in Miami since 1988 (Alcena Design Studio, Inc.). She has taught as an adjunct throughout her career as she finds teaching to be extremely rewarding. She has taught at Miami Dade, The Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale (for over a decade), and American Intercontinental University in Florida where she also served as Department Chair for three years. She has taught a broad range of courses in garment design and construction, sewing and patternmaking. She spoke with us about innovative ways to teach mathematics in her introductory courses. She also has taken the initiative to create noncredit experience for her students to expand their knowledge into specialty areas such as swimwear and children's clothing.

Synopsis: In this conversation, Prof. Jacek J. Kolasinski and Prof. Juanita Alcena explore the rich intersection of Haitian culture and fashion, focusing on the influence of Créolité on textiles and clothing. They discuss the significance of chambray[13] fabric in Haitian ceremonial attire and the *tignon* headwrap's evolution from a symbol of oppression to one of resistance and fashion. Juanita shares her experiences balancing Haitian heritage with global influences in her fashion designs and highlights how textiles played a role in resistance among enslaved populations. The conversation also touches on the adaptation of European fashion to the Caribbean climate, showcasing the cultural resilience that shapes Haitian visual culture.

JJK: Today, our guest is Juanita Alcena, a professor of fashion and design at FIT in New York. We'll be discussing the intersection of *Créolité* with fashion, fabrics, fiber production, and the visual culture of clothing. Juanita, one thing that's been getting a lot of attention in the media is the Haitian team's attire for the Olympics, designed by Stella Jean. This is a quintessential example of Haitian visual culture, incorporating elements like Philippe Dodard's paintings. But let's start with the fabrics.

JA:. One of the most important aspects of Haitian fashion is the integration of Haitian art into garments, specifically the fabric. A popular fabric used for this is called chambray, which is 100% cotton. There are two types: a lighter blue and a darker blue, and sometimes even white cotton fabric, which is also used for painting. Haitian art is very popular, and you can see artists everywhere in Haiti. In terms of clothing, they do a lot of design work directly on the fabric, creating what's called *karabela*[14].

Karabela is made from chambray fabric, and in Stella Jean's designs for the Olympics, you can see this artwork integrated into the fabric. It's a very popular style. I'm proud to say that Haiti was ranked third in the Olympic fashion ratings, with Cambodia first and an African country second.

JJK: That's fascinating. You mentioned *karabela*—where does this fabric come from? Was it introduced by the French to Saint-Domingue?

JA: Yes, the fabric, chambray, originated in a town called Chambray in France. It's similar to denim but much lighter since it's 100% cotton. It's still used widely in Haiti and has become a significant part of our culture. The *karabela* style is essentially the design made from this chambray fabric. Nowadays, if you look on TikTok or social media, you'll see that Chambray is still very much a part of ceremonial attire, like weddings, where it's often required.

[13] *Chambray* is a lightweight cotton fabric with dyed warp and white filling yarn, traditionally light blue, resembling denim but lighter.

[14] A *karabela* is the traditional dress of Haitian women, made of blue cotton or linen with red lace, reflecting the colors of the Haitian flag.

JJK: You bring up an important point—Haitian culture is rich with rituals, dancing, and festive ceremonies, from carnival to Vodou ceremonies. Given Haiti's diverse population, from the indigenous Taino to enslaved Africans and other groups, what other fabrics besides chambray are significant in Haitian textile culture?

Figure 6. Images from Stella Jean reveal Haitian Olympic uniforms for Paris 2024, featuring artwork by Philippe Dodard. The uniforms include a vibrant skirt for women and pants for men (Stella Jean via AP).

JA: Chambray is by far the most significant fabric. Other fabrics don't hold the same cultural value; they're just regular materials. Chambray stands out because it's associated with ceremonial events. For instance, people often wear chambray for weddings, anniversaries, and even retirement parties. The fabric itself is a piece of art, especially when it's painted, like the skirts designed by Stella Jean featuring Philippe Dodard's patterns.

JJK: Fashion and clothing have also been tools of resistance against colonization. I'm reminded of the *tignon*[15]—the headwrap worn by Creole women as depicted in Agostino Brunias' paintings. The *tignon* started as a legal requirement but evolved into a symbol of

[15] A *tignon* (or *tiyon*) is a headwrap mandated by the 1786 *tignon laws* under Governor Esteban Rodriguez Miró, enforcing restrictive dress codes for *gens de couleur* women in colonial society.

resistance. Can you talk about its evolution?

JA: Initially, the *tignon* was a law that forced Creole women to cover their hair. It was meant to make them less attractive, so they wouldn't lure the attention of white men. However, it eventually became a fashion statement, especially when white women started wearing it. The *tignon* was adorned with jewels and other embellishments, transforming it into a sophisticated accessory.

JJK: The *tignon* law was pushed by white colonist women who felt threatened by the beauty of mixed-race Creole women. It's fascinating how something meant to diminish beauty became a powerful fashion statement. This is a great example of how the local culture of the Caribbean adapted and transformed French fashion influences.

JA: Absolutely. Haitian culture has always been about resilience and adaptation. Despite Western influences, we've maintained our cultural identity, especially in rituals and ceremonies. Even as we modernize, elements like the *karabela* and *tignon* remain deeply rooted in our culture.

JJK: You were born in Haiti but studied fashion in Paris. How did you navigate the cultural differences in fashion between Haiti and France?

JA: I've always stayed true to my roots. My personal style has remained consistent, whether I'm in Paris, New York, or Miami. As a designer, I can create for any culture, but my personal aesthetic is always influenced by my Haitian heritage. In fashion school in France, I learned many techniques, but I always incorporated elements of African and Creole culture into my designs.

JJK: Major fashion houses often struggle with cultural appropriation. How did you address this issue in your work?

JA: It's interesting you bring that up. When I studied textile design in Paris in the early 1980s, I created a project based entirely on African textiles. At the time, African textiles weren't popular, and my professor didn't understand my design. It was my only C grade ever, but now African textiles are at the forefront of the fashion world. I've always combined my cultural heritage with what I learned in the Western world.

JJK: What do you think was the contribution of the indigenous Taino population to the visual culture of Haiti?

JA: To understand the roots of fashion and textile, we have to go back to ancient civilizations like Egypt, where the first weavings were done by hand. The Taino, like many indigenous cultures, had their own techniques and patterns that contributed to the broader textile traditions. Everything in fashion history, from textiles to clothing design, traces back to these ancient practices.
JJK: Speaking of ancient practices, Haiti's history as Saint-Domingue involved a brutal plantation system. How did the enslaved population manage their clothing? Were they responsible for making their own clothes.

JA: Yes, everything was handmade. Many enslaved Africans brought skills in tailoring, sewing, and craftsmanship. In Haiti, even today, tailors and seamstresses are highly respected. Back

then, the enslaved population often made their own clothes, as well as clothing for the plantation owners.

JJK: There was a stark contrast between the lives of those in the plantations and the urban elite. The urban population had access to the latest Parisian fashions, while those on the plantations had to make do with what they could create.

JA: That's true. The urban elite had the resources to follow Parisian trends, while the enslaved population often had to be resourceful. But even within these constraints, they developed a rich visual culture, including the use of textiles for communication and resistance.

JJK: It's fascinating how these communities used textiles and clothing as a means of communication, especially among the maroon communities and those resisting oppression.

JA: Yes, the use of textiles and the development of Creole as a language were both forms of resistance. The enslaved population created ways to communicate and organize that were hidden from their oppressors.

JJK: It's incredible how diverse communities from different African ethnic groups, speaking different languages, came together to create a common Creole language and culture. This language became the dominant form of communication, even as French remained the language of political power.

JA: Exactly. In Haiti, the majority of people speak Creole, but French was always the language of the elite and the government. It wasn't until later that Creole gained recognition as a legitimate language.

Figure 7. Agostino Brunias (Rome, c. 1730-1796), *Free Women of Dominica with Child*. Property from the Private Collection of William S. Reese.

JJK: Fashion has always been influenced by climate. During the Haitian Revolution, European soldiers were often ill-prepared for the Caribbean climate, wearing wool uniforms that were completely unsuitable.

JA: Yes, it must have been unbearable for them. In contrast, the local population was used to the heat and adapted their clothing accordingly, using materials like cotton, which is breathable and suitable for the climate.

JJK: There's evidence that even the soldiers adapted by replacing their heavy uniforms with lighter, locally sourced materials, like straw hats instead of wool shakos.

JA: Exactly. The use of local materials like straw for hats was a practical adaptation to the climate, allowing for better airflow and comfort.

BIO: Dudley Alexis is a Haitian-born independent filmmaker, visual artist, cultural anthropologist, and historian. He immigrated to the United States as a teenager, where his journey into the arts began in Miami through his studies in fine art. Alexis has a remarkable ability to gain the trust of those whose stories are often overlooked, uncovering deep and poignant narratives filled with tragedy, resilience, and triumph. His first full-length documentary, *Liberty in a Soup* (2016), explores the historical significance of Haiti's national dish, Soup Joumou, as a symbol of the country's independence and its status as the first Black republic in the Western Hemisphere. Beyond filmmaking, Alexis has exhibited fine art, including his work in the prestigious 2019 Art Basel event during Miami Art Week. His multidisciplinary approach and relentless curiosity allow him to shine light on marginalized voices, making him a true contemporary Renaissance Man dedicated to promoting societal awareness and change through his art.

Synopsis: Prof. Jacek J. Kolasiński and Dudley Alexis discuss the concept of *Créolité* through Haitian culinary culture and the experiences of the Haitian diaspora in Miami. Dudley, a filmmaker and artist, reflects on how Haitian cuisine has evolved in the diaspora while maintaining deep connections to its roots. They explore the significance of dishes like *Soup Joumou*, a symbol of Haitian freedom, and the communal aspect of food in Haitian culture, especially within the *Lakou* system and *Vodou* practices. The conversation highlights the resilience of the Haitian people, their use of indigenous knowledge for resistance, and the enduring role of food in preserving cultural identity and community bonds. The discussion concludes with plans to continue exploring these themes over a shared meal at a local Haitian restaurant.

JJK Today, we're speaking with DA Alexis, a filmmaker and artist based in South Florida, originally from Haiti. Our discussion today will focus on the concept of *Créolité* as seen through the lens of culinary culture. One of DA's significant achievements is his role in advocating for *Soup Joumou* to be recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage treasure[16]. We'll dive into that later, but first, let's talk about your journey. You were born in Haiti and later moved to Miami. You mentioned the experience of growing up in a diasporic society—being away from home, yet feeling close to it. What does that mean for you?

DA: It's exactly that—being away from home but still feeling close. Growing up in Miami, I noticed how the Haitian diaspora here has formed its own unique culture. It's distinctly Haitian, but there are aspects specific to the diaspora. Especially among the youth—whether born here or in Haiti—they've created a culture that's unique in how they engage with Haitian culture and their experiences of Haiti.

JJK: That's a crucial point. *Créolité* is essentially the negotiation and creation of new cultural expressions, identities, and ways of life, often under difficult circumstances. The Haitian diaspora in Miami is another chapter in this ongoing story, where the culture adapts to new, sometimes brutal, conditions to create a sustainable space that people can call home—a safe haven.

[16] https://www.npr.org/2021/12/18/1065477169/haitian-soup-joumou-awarded-protected-cultural-heritage-status-by-unesco

Figure 8. Dudley Alexis, *Liberty in a Soup* (2015).

DA: Exactly. When you move to a new place, some things are no longer available, and you have to redefine them in your new environment. Early Haitian immigrants faced discrimination and stigma here. They also had to navigate life in a country with a history of racism, particularly against Black people. Growing up between Haiti and Miami, I've seen how these experiences shape the diaspora's culture. You can see it in the food, the way people talk, the music they prefer—some artists are more popular in Haiti, while others are bigger in Miami. Interestingly, there are also more evangelical Haitians in the diaspora than in Haiti itself.

JJK: That's fascinating.

DA: All of those aspects blend together to create a new culture.

JJK: Let's hold that thought for a moment because I spoke with someone about the evangelical community of Vodou practitioners, which I found very interesting, but let's pause on that and go back to history. The *Bois Caïman*[17] ceremony in the late 1700s was a pivotal event that led to the first wave of Haitian immigrants to America, initially to Cuba and then to places like New Orleans. From the 1790s through the Haitian Revolution, which culminated in the creation of the Free Republic of Haiti in 1804, people from various economic backgrounds fled to America.

At one point, there were so many people from Saint-Domingue in Philadelphia that

[17] On August 14, 1791, at the start of the uprising that ignited the Haitian Revolution, a group of insurgents held a Vodou ceremony in the Bois Caïman forest.

the second newspaper printed there was in French. Wealthy planters escaped the flames of the Revolution to places like Cuba and eventually New Orleans, where the influence on music, cuisine, and culture was profound. Congo Square in New Orleans is a good example, and when you look at the city, there are striking similarities to the architecture of Cap-Français (now Cap-Haïtien) in Haiti.

DA: Yes, exactly. The first wave of French people fleeing the Haitian Revolution ended up in Louisiana, and their migration brought with them a stigma toward Haiti and the Revolution. The French who escaped often described the horror of the violence against enslaved people, but they conveniently overlooked the violence they themselves inflicted. Their stories spread fear of another revolution among plantation owners in America, and this fear was reflected in the newspapers of the time.

JJK: And that fear also created a whole wave of propaganda. The first accounts of the Bois Caïman ceremony were written in Philadelphia by someone who wasn't even there—only interviewing those who had been arrested or claimed to be witnesses. This legend was built up to demonize what happened, and as you pointed out, this kind of pejorative media coverage began with the very first uprisings of enslaved people against their captors.

DA: Exactly. This wave of fear spread with the French who fled, not just to Louisiana but throughout the Caribbean, Trinidad, and Brazil. They brought with them misconceptions about Haitians that persist to this day, rooted in how the former colonizers described the Revolution. Almost all the accounts came from French people who escaped. As a result, Haiti became increasingly isolated, with trade embargoes and blockades that further cut it off from the rest of the world.

JJK: But before we dive deeper into that...

DA: Yes, let's talk about the blockades and embargoes that followed.

JJK: ... let's think about something else because before all those punitive measures were enacted, I think it's important to recognize that Haiti served as a catalyst for liberation movements across the hemisphere. Simon Bolivar, for example, received not only military support but also moral backing from Haiti, which helped him and other revolutionaries in their struggles to free their nations from colonial rule. Haiti was pushing for other centers of dissent to flourish in the region, right?

DA: Absolutely, and that fear that the colonizers had eventually materialized. You mentioned Simon Bolivar, and it reminds me of how Haiti, despite helping him secure independence, was later isolated by many of those it supported, including Bolivar himself. After his revolution, even he cut off ties with Haiti. This isolation, marked by trade embargoes and cultural cutoffs, made Haiti one of the most unique cultures in the Caribbean.

In the Caribbean, I often say Jamaica is one of the most influential due to its music and cultural exports. But in terms of uniqueness, Haiti stands alone because of how isolated it was from

everyone else. There are aspects of Haitian culture, like the *Lakou*[18] system and the central role of Vodou, that are deeply rooted in African traditions but also mixed with French influences.

JJK: Maybe we should simplify this for our readers by defining what *Lakou* is.

DA: Yes, that's important.

JJK: And we should also outline the various cultural influences that shaped Haiti. First, you have the West Africans who were brought over as enslaved labor.

DA: Right. Then there were the local indigenous Tainos, who were there before the Spanish arrived. The African influence mixed with the Taino culture, and let's not forget the Dutch, English, and of course, the French, who had a 300-year presence on the island. All these influences blended to create a unique culture that you can see in everything from food to music.

JJK: And you mentioned cassava bread as an example of Taino influence, which is still prevalent today. Could you explain what cassava is?

DA: *Cassava* is a tuber that's very easy to grow and requires minimal resources. It's a hardy crop that thrives in arid conditions and doesn't need much fertilizer. It's rich in carbohydrates, making it an excellent substitute for rice or potatoes. Cassava is an ancient, pre-Columbian food that's found throughout the Caribbean, including Haiti. Another example is squash, which originated in the Andes and became a symbol of freedom in Haiti. The preparation of squash in Haiti reflects a blend of African, French, Spanish, and Taino influences.

Another key example is the Creole pig, introduced by the Spanish, which became integral to Haitian cuisine. You see it in dishes like griot and a dish we call ragu in Haiti—though it's not the same ragu you might be familiar with. This ragu is made with pig feet or the fatty part of the pig's skin, cooked with tomatoes in a Creole sauce. The Creole sauce itself is a mix of influences, with roots in Taino, Spanish, and French culinary traditions.

JJK: And let's not forget the African influence, particularly with rice dishes like *diri djon djon* and the use of seeds that enslaved people brought with them, hidden in their hair as a way to preserve a piece of their homeland. This is how they managed to adapt and survive in the harsh conditions of the plantation system, where they were often responsible for growing their own food to stay alive since it wasn't provided by their captors.

DA: Exactly. The African influence, particularly in religion and cultural practices, played a significant role in blending with other traditions. The pig, for example, became central not just in Vodou rituals but in the broader Haitian culture. It symbolized resilience and was crucial in the struggle for freedom, as seen in the Bois Caïman ceremony,

[18] A *lakou* is a Haitian communal space with family homes around a central yard, serving cultural, social, and spiritual functions.

where the sacrifice of a pig was a pivotal moment in the fight against enslavement.

JJK: ... another aspect of the pig is its role in the economic structure. And I know you're working on a documentary where the pig is essentially equivalent to a savings account, right?

DA: Yes, exactly. After the Haitian Revolution, one of the significant developments was the creation of the Lakou system. This system allowed formerly enslaved people to redistribute land among themselves, including the generals and others who fought in the revolution. The Lakou system provided a way for the newly freed people to escape state control and achieve true independence. At the center of this system was the Creole pig, which became the economic engine driving the Lakou.

The Lakou can be described as a kind of compound where a group of families lives together, sharing access to land for growing food and sustaining themselves. This system relied heavily on subsistence farming, not just to feed the families but also to sell produce when they needed cash. The pig was central to this economy, much like how pigs in traditional African societies played a similar role. The Lakou made it difficult for any government to fully control the people, as the system provided a level of independence that is still challenging for authorities to undermine today.

JJK: In his book, Jean Casimir spends a lot of time discussing how the Bossale and Lakou systems resisted the colonial rule imposed by the French. These systems were transplanted from African society as a way to resist the dominant structures that governed every aspect of the lives of those who were brutally kidnapped and transported to the Americas.

DA: Exactly. The Lakou represented that resistance, and it still does today. No matter how many invasions, dictatorships, or attempts to control Haiti, the Lakou system has made it difficult for any entity to fully control the island. The independence it grants to individuals makes it hard to tax them, sell their land, or impose external control. The Lakou and the land it represents are central to how Haitians govern themselves.

JJK: Another important aspect I want to bring up is the knowledge of indigenous herbalism and plants. This knowledge became a crucial tool in the struggle for independence. Maroon communities deeply understood the local flora, using it to poison water sources, sicken horses and cows, and generally disrupt the ruling class of the island at that time.

DA: Absolutely. The Haitian Revolution and the various rebellions relied heavily on the knowledge of the land. The Maroon societies, often a mix of Tainos and escaped enslaved people, combined their knowledge to create poisons, understand the land, and make it as productive as possible. Figures like Mackandal, who used poison as a form of resistance, are emblematic of this strategy.

During the Haitian Revolution, French soldiers were constantly falling ill and dying. In Haiti, the belief is that Vodou

priests were poisoning the rivers, food, and environment. European scholars often attribute these deaths to yellow fever, but it's curious how the fever seemed to only affect the French soldiers while leaving others unscathed. This discrepancy highlights how herbal knowledge and environmental understanding were weaponized during the revolution. Many Haitians see this as part of their revolutionary history, while European scholars often dismiss it as yellow fever.

JJK: That's a fascinating point. My research focuses on the 5,000 Polish soldiers sent to Haiti, with around 4,000 estimated to have died there, either in battle or from illness. These soldiers, from a cold climate in Central Europe, were suddenly thrust into the tropical heat, wearing wool uniforms, with no understanding of the local flora and fauna. They had no idea what was safe to eat or drink, putting them at a significant disadvantage. The Haitian culture had developed many tools to resist oppression, making survival for these foreign soldiers incredibly difficult.

DA: Absolutely. The environment was treacherous for the French soldiers. Haitians knew how to exploit their weaknesses, particularly by contaminating water sources. Another often overlooked aspect of the Haitian Revolution is that more than half of the people on the island at the time were not Haitian-born—they were enslaved people who had been recently captured. Many of these were not just ordinary individuals; they were soldiers, experienced fighters who had been captured in battles and brought to the Americas.

JJK: So these were people who came with a lifetime of experience from their previous lives, suddenly reduced to beasts of burden.

DA: Exactly. Many of them were true warriors, familiar with combat. They weren't willing to make the same mistakes twice. They knew how to fight, and they brought that knowledge with them. It's important to remember that they were not just passive victims; they were active agents in their own resistance.

JJK: It's interesting you mention that because in the accounts of Polish soldiers in Haiti, they're often accused by the French of never breaking formation, even in the dense, tropical terrain where European-style warfare was almost useless.

DA: Yeah

JJK: They would march in a very European style, but here you are in the middle of thick tropical vegetation where that style of warfare has no application.

DA: Exactly.

JJK: You're in a situation where guerrilla tactics, what we might call guerrilla warfare today, were being used from every direction. And when you connect this to the local food culture and knowledge of botany, it becomes clear that a sophisticated form of biological warfare was being waged against these troops. They didn't understand the

geography, where the rivers came from, what water was safe to drink, what food was safe to eat—everything suddenly became treacherous.

DA: Yes, exactly.

JJK: On top of that, they had to deal with a brutal climate, the rainy season, and an environment that was completely foreign to them. It was a situation where everything seemed hostile.

DA: Everything was used against them, and none of it was familiar. But speaking of food, let's talk about the soup, for example. There are certain details I learned after finishing the documentary that I wish I could have included.

JJK: We should definitely tell our readers and listeners about your documentary on *Soup Joumou*. Let's discuss what Soup Joumou is and how it represents Créolité in the form of food. It embodies the cultural struggle, with each group contributing elements from their own ethnic and cultural experiences to create something new.

DA: Absolutely. Well, to start simply...

JJK: What is Soup Joumou?

DA: Let me describe it as simply as possible. Soup Joumou is based on a type of squash known as joumou, which is common in Haiti. The soup is savory and filled with various root vegetables, pasta, carrots, and cabbage. The base of the soup is, of course, the joumou squash, but each family adds their own twist. Everyone will tell you that their mother's Soup Joumou is the best.

JJK: And there's meat in it, right?

DA: Yes, you add the meat of your choice—some people use turkey, others beef or pork.

JJK: I've never tasted Soup Joumou with turkey, but I've heard...

DA: Another interesting thing is that smoked turkey, which is often used in the diaspora, has become a popular addition. What makes Soup Joumou unique is that wherever you are, you adapt the recipe based on what's available, but the squash is always the base.

JJK: What about the spices? I imagine some people add hot peppers?

DA: Of course! Scotch bonnet peppers are a must. The soup is savory and spicy, with a touch of sweetness from the squash. Personally, I judge Soup Joumou by how well that sweetness comes through because too much spice can overpower it.

JJK: Can you talk about the significance of the soup? Why is it so important that everyone in Haiti eats it on January 1st?

DA: The soup has become a powerful symbol of freedom for Haitians. After the Revolution, on January 1st—our first

Independence Day—it was decreed that everyone should make and eat Soup Joumou. This was significant because, during colonial times, the soup was forbidden to be consumed by Black people on the island. It was reserved for the Grand Blanc, the Petite Blanc, and a few free people of color. For the enslaved, it was a way of dehumanizing them. So, when we gained our freedom, making and eating the soup became a symbol of our liberation.

JJK: So the enslaved population had no access to this soup, which was a culinary delicacy for the white and free elite, but not for them.

DA: Exactly. It was another method to keep them "in their place." And it wasn't just the soup that was forbidden—there were also colors they couldn't wear, jewelry they couldn't adorn themselves with, and women had to cover their hair. All of these rules were meant to dehumanize and control.

JJK: Yesterday, I spoke with Juanita Alcena, a Professor of Fashion in New York, who talked about the practice of hair covering, which originated in Louisiana but spread throughout the Caribbean. Paintings by Brunias depict Creole women following these strict codes of behavior, regulated from clothing to jewelry and even whether or not they could wear shoes.

DA: Yes

JJK: But back to Soup Joumou—during the colonial period, it was likely cooked by enslaved people working as domestic servants, many of whom brought their culinary traditions from Africa. They prepared it but couldn't eat it themselves.

DA: Exactly. They were the ones cooking it, but they couldn't partake in it. They couldn't be on the same level as their masters, and eating the soup would have signified that. So, while they were the ones making the food, they were barred from sharing in it.

JJK: In documentaries about culinary traditions within African diasporic communities in the Americas, you see incredible resilience. People had to figure out how to sustain themselves with very little time for elaborate meals—just eating fast to stay alive.

DA: Exactly. That was the reality in Haiti too. The harsh labor, lack of food, and the need to survive meant that the average lifespan of an enslaved person was only five to seven years. Everything was calculated—even in a sort of cruel "spreadsheet" manner—because they were given scraps to eat, had little access to cultivated land, and worked 12-hour days. Their diet had to be carb-heavy just to keep them going, especially under those brutal conditions.

JJK: In the scorching Caribbean sun, chopping sugarcane, with its incredibly sharp leaves, could easily lead to cuts and infections.

DA: I've been in a sugarcane plantation. When you walk through, you don't realize how many small cuts you've gotten until

you start sweating. Your whole body starts itching as the sweat hits those cuts. Imagine doing that for 12 hours a day, constantly getting infections, and all the while, someone with a whip is making sure you keep working.

JJK: To alleviate the suffering, people who understood plants would use whatever they could to help you recover enough to face another day of torment.

DA: Exactly. That's why understanding food and diet is so important. With the Columbian Exchange, foods were traded between Africa and the Americas. A great example is gumbo. In Haiti, the Creole word for okra is "gumbo," which comes directly from Africa. There's even a saying in Haiti, "One finger doesn't eat gumbo," meaning it's so slippery you can't pick it up with just one finger.

That's how food from Africa mixed with indigenous cuisine and eventually made its way to places like Louisiana after the Haitian Revolution. Today, gumbo is seen as a classic Louisiana dish, but its roots trace back to Haiti and beyond. This is a pure example of Creole culture—food that traveled to the Americas and became something new. That's what the term "Creole" really means: something born outside the metropole or colonial center.

JJK: Some scholars trace the term to Portuguese and Spanish origins, where it referred to a person of different heritage born in the Americas, regardless of race or gender.

DA: Yes. If you were from Africa and born here, you were Criollo. If you were from the Iberian Peninsula and born in the Americas, you were also Criollo. But over time, the term evolved and took on different meanings.

JJK: Exactly. The term is always associated with the Americas, whether in the Caribbean, Latin America, or Louisiana.

DA: Yes, and even more broadly across the Americas, including the United States, where many aspects of culture reflect the same concept of Créolité.

JJK: Exactly.

DA: What's interesting about Creole cultures is how they were born in the Americas, each unique in its own way, yet all interconnected.

JJK: That brings me to something else, DA—something we haven't touched on yet: sugar, right?

DA: Yes.

JJK: Saint-Domingue wouldn't have existed without Europe's addiction to sugar, which filled the coffers of the French landowners. But how does sugar fit into Haitian or Creole cuisine?

DA: That's an interesting point. Our cuisine is predominantly savory, with very little emphasis on sweetness. However,

it's worth noting that French pastry as we know it reached its peak when sugar became cheap due to slavery. In Cuba, the influence of French pastry is quite evident, and you can trace how it spread from Haiti to the rest of the Caribbean after the Revolution.

JJK: Do you remember Alejo Carpentier's book, ***The Kingdom of This World***.?

DA: Yes, yes.

JJK: There's a character, Ti Noel, who goes with the plantation owner to Cuba and eventually returns to Haiti. When you think about Cuban *pastelitos de guayaba*, which are soaked in sugar syrup—so sweet and sticky—it really ties into what you're saying.

DA: Exactly. The development of European cuisine in the post-Columbus era—Swiss chocolate, Italian espresso, French pastry—was fueled by ingredients like sugar and coffee that were linked to slavery. People often overlook that connection.

JJK: Like Irish and Polish potatoes, which didn't exist in Europe before Columbus.

DA: Right. Many don't realize that the foundation of these culinary traditions is rooted in slavery. I've been working on an essay about this, inspired by an exhibition called *The Age of Elegance.* It focused on the American South before the Civil War, where they were trying to replicate European aristocracy on plantations. It's interesting how they glorified this lifestyle while ignoring the exploitation happening in the background.

JJK: It's similar to European serfdom, where peasants couldn't leave or marry without the lord's permission.

DA: Exactly. The plantation system is a harsher extension of that feudal model.

JJK: And the Haitian Revolution was a revolutionary idea in itself—challenging the European concept of landownership, where those who worked the land actually owned it. It's still difficult for many Europeans to grasp that concept today.

You brought up the concept of Lakou, which is a communal system where people are united for a common economic purpose, right?

DA: Yeah.

JJK: And it's not just about the economics, but it plays an incredibly important role within that system. We started this conversation talking about what it means to be part of the diaspora—what it means to be a Haitian living outside the island. Haitian cuisine has changed here in the diaspora. When you go to the local grocery stores, you'll find items labeled as Haitian food, but they're produced in other places in Latin America, like products from Madame Gougousse.

DA: Right.

JJK: I'm thinking about *pikliz*, the typical Haitian salad made of cabbage and spices, but it's produced somewhere in Latin America. So, how is Haitian cuisine surviving in this diasporic situation? Or is it evolving into something new?

DA: I'd say it has evolved into something new. My relationship with it is complicated. Sometimes, it feels extremely authentic here, but at the same time, I feel like something is missing—a small aspect of the food is different. But that's normal when people move to a new place. They cook with what's available to them. I wouldn't say, "Oh, this isn't authentic," because they're in a new land with different resources. I can't complain about how close it gets to the original. In Haiti, they make it with what's available there. In Miami, they make it with what's available here.

JJK: What's your favorite dish from this incredibly sophisticated Haitian cuisine? What would you want to talk about?

DA: Well, the soup is my favorite dish, but it's not the only one I love. Of course, I also like...

JJK: Is it Creole, *Lambi*? I mean, there's just so much.

DA: There's so much. You have rice dishes like *Diri Djon Djon*—no one can touch that. And then...

JJK: Oh, the rice with mushrooms?

DA: Yes, with mushrooms. It's really unique. I also love a really good Creole sauce, made with real tomatoes, not tomato paste. You can make it with anything. Another dish I love is called *Pwasòn Gwo Sèl*—I'm not sure how to say it in English.

JJK: I'm not sure either. Can you describe it?

DA: It's a fish, usually red snapper, cooked with a bit of spice and savory lime juice.

JJK: So, where's the best place to eat that, besides your mom's house?

DA: I always tell people, when you go to a Haitian restaurant, each one excels at something different. One place might have the best *griot*, another the best *plantains*, and another great rice. One place I frequent is Alberte because they offer a variety of dishes, including some I miss. But I feel like Haitian restaurants in Miami mostly serve Sunday dinners, if you know what I mean. They focus on the special meals you'd get on a good Sunday.

JJK: Cooking is serious business for Haitians, isn't it?

DA: It is. It really is.

JJK: You don't take it lightly. I have a bit of a competition with my father-in-law over who makes better Pikliz. Mine is spicier, and we let my better half and her sister be the judges. Whenever they say

mine is good, my father-in-law sends me a jar with a note that says, "Try this, it's sweet." And by "sweet," he means it's so packed with scotch bonnet peppers that it could practically peel the paint off a car chassis! But it's all about the connection to food and the communal experience, right?

DA: Exactly. Food becomes really important in that sense. When you visit a Lakou, you'll often find that none of the houses have their own kitchen. Instead, there's a big communal cooking area outside. When the food is ready, everyone gathers around. It's really something to see.

The communal aspect of food is so important. Cooking it well is essential, and it's not until you grow up that you realize just how vital and unique this aspect of food is.

JJK: As we wrap up, I want to touch on something we didn't have time to fully explore—the idea of community in the *Lakou*, which extends beyond the living. It includes the spirits of the Lwas. There are religious feasts where people eat together after the ceremonies, and that spiritual aspect of food is important. It's not just about nourishing the body; it's also about taking care of the spirits who protect your community.

DA: True, true. In almost every culture, food serves as a meeting place. In Vodou, for instance, after an animal sacrifice, people often wonder what happens to the animal. Well, they cook it, and everyone sits down to enjoy the meal. It makes you ask, "Is the animal sacrifice a spiritual practice or a culinary one?" The two blend together, and it raises the question: "Is cooking itself a spiritual practice?" Food is so deeply integrated into the culture. Every Sunday, after church, there's that big meal—the *Makawoni au Graten*[19], the rice and beans, the lettuce, the tomato. That's the Sunday meal, and you see it in every Haitian restaurant in Miami, even though in Haiti, during the week, you'd get something simpler like *bouillon* or *vite* (root vegetables). But Sunday is special; that's when you get *Diri Djon Djon*[20] or *Diri Kole*[21], with fried chicken, *griot*[22], or turkey.

JJK: And Lambi?

DA: Yes, Lambi, or whatever the dish of the week is. Sunday mornings start with church, and by the time you're eating that meal, you start to wonder, "Is food a spiritual practice or a culinary one?" It's similar in Vodou—after the ritual, everyone gathers to eat. This also happens after major spiritual events like church services or funerals. There's something deeply African about it—this idea of gathering your extended family, sharing a meal, discussing the day. Especially in Vodou and *Lakou*, this communal meal is why Vodou in Haiti has

[19] Haitian Macaroni and Cheese

[20] Haitian Mushroom Rice

[21] Haitian Creole term that translates to "sticky rice" or "clumped rice"

[22] Griot is a traditional Haitian dish made from marinated, fried pork.

always been politically feared. It brings people together to discuss what's happening to them, strengthening the community.

JJK: This reminds me of the 1915 American occupation when the USS Washington arrived in the Bay of Port-au-Prince. The Marines targeted Vodou temples because they were centers of resistance, political power, and sources of spiritual strength for the people. All the Creole uprisings were centered around the spiritual powers of *Houngans* and *Manbos* who blessed the fighters.

DA: That's still true today. Gonaïves, where Vodou is most prevalent, is considered politically crucial in Haiti. There's a saying that if Gonaives rises up, the whole country does. Every major uprising in the last hundred years can be traced back to Gonaives—even the fall of *Duvalier*. Vodou is still a tool Haitians use to fight oppression because it brings people together in a powerful way.

JJK: Well, Dudley, let's wrap up here. But next time, we're not meeting over Zoom —we're meeting in a restaurant to try some of the delicious dishes you've been describing.

DA: Absolutely. Let's have our next conversation at Alberte.

BIO: Axelle Liautaud is a Haitian art historian, curator, and designer who has played a key role in promoting Haitian art for over 30 years. She has curated several notable exhibitions, including *The Sacred Art of Vodou* (1995), which traveled to major U.S. museums such as The Field Museum in Chicago and the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., as well as *Allegories of Haitian Art* (2006) at Miami's Bass Museum, which featured the collection of filmmaker Jonathan Demme. Liautaud has been a member of Le Centre d'Art's Board of Directors since 1997, and after the devastating 2010 earthquake, she became Acting President. In this role, she led the rescue and preservation of thousands of artworks and important cultural archives, working in collaboration with the Smithsonian Haiti Cultural Recovery Project. Under her leadership, Le Centre d'Art continued to thrive, with Liautaud organizing the Piasa Art Auction in Paris in 2017 and curating the Jasmin Joseph exhibition, which opened in Port-au-Prince in 2016 and later toured France. She stepped down from her position at Le Centre d'Art in 2021, leaving behind a legacy of dedication to the preservation and promotion of Haitian art and culture.

Synopsis: The conversation between Prof. Jacek J. Kolasinski and Axelle Liautaud delves into the concept of *Créolité* and its role in shaping a unique visual language in Haitian culture. They discuss the artistic depictions of Vodou deities by André Pierre, highlighting how these images synthesize African, Christian, and local influences. The discussion covers various mediums, including calabash gourds *(kwi)* used for paintings, and explores the use of *vévés*—symbolic ground drawings integral to Vodou rituals. They also examine the evolution of Vodou flags *(drapo),* noting the impact of historical events and cultural interactions. The conversation illustrates how the blending of diverse traditions has led to a rich cultural tapestry, evident in everything from language and religious practices to art and architecture, embodying the resilience and creativity of the Haitian people.

Figure 9. *Èrzulie Dantò*, Vodou mural, Miami (Little Haiti). Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski (2016).

JJK: Today, we're speaking with Axelle Liautaud, who is an artist, curator, designer, and art dealer. I want to focus on how the concept of *Créolité* connects to the multiplicity of influences that create a visual language.

We could discuss some pieces in your collection. I am thinking about the beautiful works by André Pierre, particularly those depicting Vodou *lwa* deities. These pieces already introduce a complex visual language that brings together many traditions. Let's start by discussing one of these pieces from your collection. What is it painted on?

Figure 10. " André Pierre, *Agassou,* c. 1950s, from the collection of Axelle Liautaud. Photo courtesy of Axelle Liautaud.

AL: It's painted on what we call a *kwi*[23] in Haiti, which is a *calabash*, a large gourd from a tree. The size and shape can vary depending on the tree, with some being smaller and rounder. This is actually the same tree used for the *asón*[24] in Vodou ceremonies, which are the larger, round ones. The oval-shaped ones, like the one we're discussing, are commonly used throughout Haiti as plates for serving and eating food. These trees are widespread, though I'm unsure if they are native to the Americas or exist in other parts of the world as well. If they existed during the time of the Taínos, I imagine they would have used them similarly.

[23] *Kwi*- kwi calabash bowl

[24] *Ason* - an ason rattle used in the Vodou ceremonies

JJK: So, people use them as containers or bowls..

AL: Yes, containers, any cooked food can certainly be served in them. You could use it as a plate. If you're eating alone, you can put your food in one of these *kwis* and eat directly from it. Afterward, you wash it and store it. It's essentially a natural wood container you find in nature. You just cut the fruit, remove the seeds, let it dry, and clean up the inside a bit, and then it's ready to use.

JJK: Sure. But for now, let's focus on what we see on the *kwi*. Let's start with a basic visual description. There's a figure wearing a uniform, and it looks like they might have a sword or some kind of weapon.

AL: Agassou is a spirit that's not widely known or frequently worshipped. It's a less popular deity. I believe it originates from an African legend involving a panther, or maybe it's a leopard. It's a fierce spirit. What I find fascinating about André Pierre's depiction of the *lwas* is the detail in their clothing. Each spirit has distinct attire and attributes. This particular spirit has a sword, indicating that it embodies power and, possibly, violence. For instance, Agassou wears a sash with tassels, showing the richness of the clothing. There are intricate details like embroidery, hats, and specific attire. Take Damballa, for example. He's represented like Saint Patrick, who is depicted as a bishop in Catholic imagery. So, Damballa is shown wearing a bishop's hat, slightly pointed at the top, to align with that representation.

JJK: Damballa's hat inspired by St. Patrick's *infula* (a bishop's *miter*).

AL: The clothing has importance, it's not random. Here is the edited text for clarity, grammar, and flow:

JJK: I was thinking about *A Passion for Haitian Art: The Albrecht and Heller Collections* exhibition at the Tampa Art Museum, where they recently displayed several pieces by André Pierre. Let's talk about Baron Samedi. This piece is particularly interesting because, as you described earlier, it features a *lwa* (deity) dressed in what looks like a military uniform. What makes this piece stand out is the beautiful vévé painted inside the space of the gourd *(kwi),* to the right of the *lwa*. Could you tell us a bit more about how *vévés* are constructed and what they represent? The *vévé* for *Baron Samedi* that we see here includes a cross at the top and an intricate design that resembles...

AL: A tombstone?

JJK: Yes, a tombstone.

Figure 11. André Pierre (Haitian, 1914-2005), *Baron Samedi*, c. 1950s. Oil painting on calabash gourd. Collection of Kay and Roderick. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

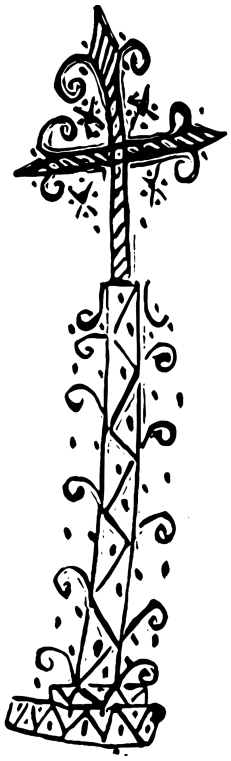


Figure 12. André Pierre (Haitian, 1914-2005), *Baron Samedi - Vévé*, c. 1950s. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

AL: Exactly. The cross at the top is what you typically see in cemeteries in Haiti. And like many other elements, there is as much ornamentation as possible. That's why you see all the crisscross patterns and detailed designs on objects used in these contexts. In Haiti, tombs are often quite elaborate, sometimes even larger than the houses they stand in front of, reflecting the deep significance of death and the relationship with the invisible world and ancestors. Vodou, at its core, connects the living with the ancestors.

JJK: Another piece we can see at the Tampa Art Museum depicts *Simbi* on an ochre red background. It features a intricate *vévé* on the right-hand side that looks like a cross, and there's another symbol to his right. He appears to be pointing at a book.

AL: Yes, that's interesting. In that image, Simbi, known as the magician and guardian of knowledge, is pointing to a book, which signifies his role as a keeper of wisdom.

JJK: He's pointing to a specific text in the book, though it's hard to discern what it is because the image is too small.

AL: It's difficult to know exactly, but Simbi is associated with freshwater—springs

and rivers, primarily. He's also connected to brackish water, which has some salt but not a lot. Simbi is not just a water spirit; he's also involved in gathering specific medicinal plants and those used in magical potions. Moreover, he is the *lwa* of divination, representing ancient knowledge that continues to be relevant in Vodou practices today.

Figure 13. André Pierre (Haitian, 1914-2005), *Ogoun*, c. 1950s. Oil painting on calabash gourd. Collection of Kay and Roderick. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 14. André Pierre (Haitian, 1914-2005), *Simbi*, c. 1950s. Oil painting on calabash gourd. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

JJK: Moving further, I have another image I'd like to discuss. This one depicts *Ogoun*. In Pierre's representation, *Ogoun* is dressed in a uniform reminiscent of the Napoleonic style, which was prevalent in Saint-Domingue and later in Haiti. He holds a red cloth in his right hand and is adorned with a large dagger.

AL: Yes.

JJK: To Ogoun's right, there is a beautiful *vévé* depicting a constellation of stars.

AL: That's *Ogoun Batagry.* Exactly. So, the interesting thing about what you just described is that Ogoun is the lwa of war. This explains why his costume resembles

those used in the Independence War on both sides, as sometimes even Haitian generals wore similar outfits. The fact that he has a sword is significant as well. In Africa, Ogoun is more recognized as the god or spirit of metal and metal tools. But in Haiti, he is more specifically seen as a warrior spirit.

JJK: And often, I think in iconographic language—and I think I spoke with Edward about this at some point—Ogoun is represented as Saint Jacques. Saint Jacques the Great—

AL: St. Jacques Majeur

JJK: Yes, Saint Jacques. And in Miami, we find many murals that depict Ogoun as Saint Jacques or Santiago Matamoros for Spanish speakers.

AL: Yes.

JJK: *Saint Jacques de Majeur* in a French context, I think. What's interesting about Pierre's work is that every *lwa*, every male *lwa*, is dressed in a military uniform. Even Damballa is portrayed, as you mentioned, but he wears a bishop's *miter.*
AL: It might have some elements of the church because these are the images that were shown to African people when they were baptized or introduced to Christianity. Since they didn't fully understand what they were being shown, they picked details that reminded them of a *lwa.* In this case, it relates to Saint Patrick stepping on a snake.

JJK: And the image here does the same.

AL: That's how freely these symbols are appropriated. I think this aspect of Haitian culture is very interesting—people don't hold back when it comes to using what is around them, maybe because they came with nothing. That's one way of looking at it. When you arrive somewhere with absolutely nothing, you have to borrow and take from your surroundings. Most of these *lwas* came into existence around the time of the uprisings or perhaps earlier, like *Gran Bwa*, which is believed to have been inherited from the Taínos. That makes sense because it's associated with the spirit of medicinal plants. The others, however, are recreations of something that existed in Africa, adapted to a new environment, with new meanings and functions. The reason why many of them are depicted in military outfits is that they were instrumental during the uprisings and the Independence War.

These *lwas* became very important at that time because if you're fighting an army equipped with guns, gunpowder, cannons, and all kinds of sophisticated weapons, and you only have sticks, stones, and a few weapons you've managed to seize, it's crucial to believe that you have an army of spirits on your side to help in the fight. This belief also extended to possessing magical powers, like the idea of having a *wanga*[25], a protection that makes you invincible, so bullets cannot pierce your skin. Some of these powers might have been real because people initiated in Vodou, or *kanzo*[26], could walk on...

[25] *wanga* - charm or spell

[26] the initiation ceremony within the Vodou tradition

JJK: You brought up something very interesting: the idea of how *vévés* were constructed. I think you alluded to the influence of Taíno drawings that existed before people from Africa arrived in America and then Haiti.

AL: Well, that's somewhat obscure. It's hard to pinpoint exactly where *vévés* come from. One thing I know is that *Gran Bwa*[27] is said to be the one spirit that came from the Taínos, which makes sense. When the Africans arrived, they didn't know the local medicinal plants. If there's a spirit that helps in gathering medicinal plants, it must be based on knowledge passed down by the Taínos. That makes perfect sense.

As for the drawings themselves, I've searched for the origins of *vévés*. Interestingly, while similar drawings exist in Cuba and Brazil, there's not much evidence of comparable ground drawings in Africa that I'm aware of. Maybe I'm just not informed, but if anyone knows more, I'd be delighted to learn.

In the New World, I've read some theories that seemed very far-fetched and complex. The closest connection I've found is with the Taínos, who mostly lived on the shores of Haiti. They didn't live in the mountains until they began fleeing the Spanish. They were primarily fishermen and foragers, living along the coastline. It's said they would draw things in the sand before going fishing. That's the closest link I've found. Perhaps more extensive research is needed, but this isn't my main area of focus. I look for information here and there, but it's not something I do every day.

JJK: Could you describe for our readers and listeners how a *vévé* is drawn, who draws it, and where it is done? When you enter a sacred space, a Vodou temple, there is a central space, right? It is called- *poto mitan*[28]. It serves as a kind of axis mundi, connecting the ground with the spiritual world.

AL: Exactly, yes, absolutely.

JJK: And around the *poto mitan*, *vévé* symbols are drawn using a white starchy material, often cornmeal, right?

AL: They can use various materials: cornmeal, pulverized chalk, flour, charcoal, or bricks mashed into powder for the red color. But most commonly, it's white flour, powdered chalk, or cornmeal. Those were traditionally the most common. I'm not sure how things are evolving now. I recently saw someone filming *vévé* drawing using all kinds of colors. But traditionally, it was mostly white or yellow from the cornmeal and white flour. These are used in temples, but also if a ceremony is held outside. Knowing how to draw a *vévé* is a skill.

JJK: When you look at Milo Rigaud's book, he explains that every line in a *vévé* has theological significance.
AL: Yes, absolutely. That's right.

JJK: A single line squiggled to the right or left could represent the sun or the moon, opening up different spiritual portals. And

[27] *Iwa* closely associated with trees, plants, and herbs

[28] means "post in the middle." It refers to the central pillar around which most of Vodou ceremonies takes place.

then you have symbols like swords and flags.

AL: Exactly.

JJK: So, when you talk about *Ogou Feray*, you'll find a lot of military symbols associated with him.

AL: Absolutely.

JJK: And when you talk about *Èrzulie*, there are hearts and other symbols. There might be ships, boats, and so on.

AL: Yes, absolutely. What's interesting is that, because it's an oral tradition, it's not fixed or set in stone. You can draw it in different ways. It needs to resemble what it represents, but it's not an exact science. It just has to be recognizable. That knowledge isn't shared with just anyone, but those who have it can use it privately, like performing a ceremony alone under a tree. It's not always in a communal setting, like in a temple.

JJK: This brings me to another point about ceremonial space, often decorated with beautiful *drapo*[29]—Vodou flags. In 2022, there was a stunning display of Myrlande Constant's flags at the Venice Biennale. For many, it was their first exposure to such art, as these flags have entered the global art narrative through major events like the Venice Biennale. Let's discuss the *drapo* in Vodou, which, like the *vévés* on temple grounds, represent the same deities but through vibrant, festive fabrics.

AL: I've seen all kinds of flags, even before Myrlande's work, as I started buying and reselling them about 50 years ago when they began entering spaces where they could be purchased. Initially, they were available only in certain Vodou temples in Port-au-Prince. *Clotaire Bazile* was one of the pioneers. Later, you could find flags and bottles at the museum in Port-au-Prince. Besides the museum and the iron market, I was among the first to sell them. So, I've witnessed their transformation over the years.

[29] *drapo Vodou:* Haitian Vodou flags

Figure 15. Myrlande Constant, *Guede (Baron)*, 2020. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 16. Myrlande Constant, *Haiti, 1986: "Rasanbleman soupe tout eskòt yo"* (2019). Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

JJK: I remember you showing me some older flags, ones that didn't use sequins but were made with lead beads or other materials that are no longer common.

AL: Yes, some of the oldest flags I've seen had buttons or pieces of shell. One interesting discovery was pointed out by Susan Tselos , a scholar from California. She explained that some of the sequins had tiny dents and were made from lead. Artisans would take a sheet of lead, roll it tightly, hammer it flat, and cut it into thin slices, piercing the center. Lead (Pb), being soft, would solidify under pressure, creating a durable decoration.

JJK: It solidifies.

AL: Yes, exactly. These were the materials used in some of the very old flags. When resources were scarce, artists focused on colors and designs, sometimes creating strikingly powerful pieces. The temple flags often had a more intense quality, with fewer details but strong symbols. Over time, they evolved with more colors and detailed images, resembling paintings. Initially, sequins were used with beads on top. Then, during the embargo, when sequins became scarce, artists adapted by using beads, which became available from closing wedding gown factories. They even dyed white sequins to get the colors they needed, resulting in older flags with

pale hues due to the use of cheap dyes. This adaptation led to combining beads with sequins or using beads alone, sometimes resembling Russian icons or...

JJK: The Byzantine tradition? Yeah.

AL: Exactly.

JJK: I want to mention the beautiful piece by Yves Telemak, a representation of *Èrzulie* Freda, which some might associate with the Virgin Mary, while others see her as *Èrzulie Freda* adorned with hearts and swords piercing her heart. The piece also includes ritualistic objects like a cap and a gourd placed before her. It combines various elements, including *vévés* and text identifying her as *Èrzulie Freda*. This motif is popular on flags, alongside *Èrzulie Dantò*, which is connected to the Byzantine iconography brought to Haiti by Polish soldiers. Let's talk more about these symbols that appear on the flags.

Figure 17. Yves Telemak (Haitian, b. 1955), *Èrzulie Freda*, 2009. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

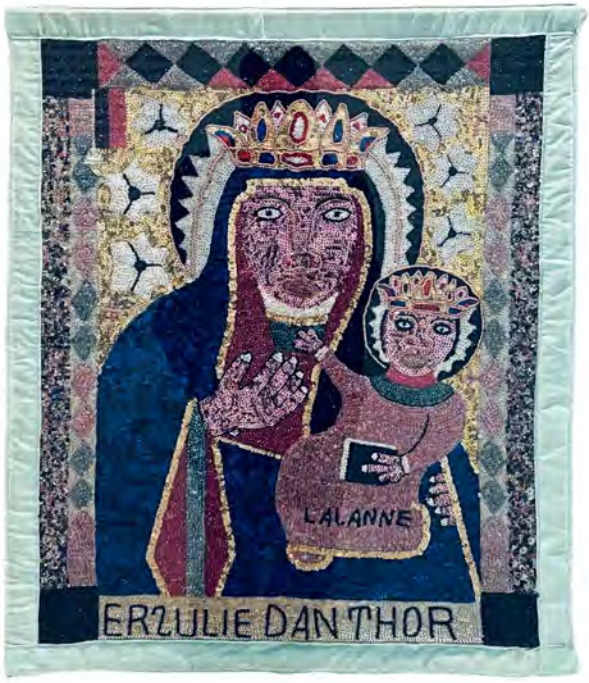


Figure 18. Eveland LaLanne (Haitian, 1939-2003), *Èrzulie Danthor*, c. 1980s. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

AL: Yes, chromolithographs were images the Catholic Church used to promote their saints.

JJK Distributing images of saints, yes. It was a form of advertising at the time.

AL: Exactly. When enslaved people were baptized, they would see these images.

Although the images weren't fully comprehensible to them, certain elements caught their attention—like images of two women. One was black, often depicted with a child, while the other was adorned with jewelry, beads, and hearts. They associated the first with motherhood. Many say *Èrzulie Dantò* represents Mother Africa or Mother Haiti, depending on who you ask. The other, dressed in jewelry, symbolized carnal love or passion, which is why they were identified with *Èrzulie Freda* and *Èrzulie Dantò*. What's also interesting is that, when the flags began being made for sale, artists started incorporating chromolithographs with beads and sequins, creating new forms of iconography.

JJK: Often, these chromolithographs are attached to divination bottles, covered with a transparent plastic sheet.

AL: Yes, that's right. This trend began around the same time that flags started gaining popularity—probably in the 1970s.

JJK: Myrlande Constant's work presented at the Venice Biennale goes beyond the traditional flat forms. These are monumental, almost like paintings, encompassing entire theological narratives of Vodou, depicting deities and heavenly feasts.

AL: Yes, absolutely. Myrlande's approach is different. She's a true painter who uses beads as her medium. When I started buying flags, the artists creating them weren't necessarily drawing them. They would commission drawings from others and then do the beadwork themselves. Even Myrlande, when working on flags, collaborates with large groups because it's very labor-intensive.

In the early days, when I began buying and selling these flags in the mid-seventies and eighties, you'd often find wax on them from candles, as people worked by candlelight, especially in temples where electricity was scarce.

JJK: This image of artisans working by candlelight reminds me of medieval craft traditions, like *Bayeux Tapestry*, where groups of women would create vestments for priests and bishops. They worked in low light, similar to these flag makers, translating divine messages into textiles.

Figure 19. Myrlande Constant, *Haiti, 1986: "Rasanbleman soupe tout eskòt yo"*, 2019 (Detail). Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

AL: Yes, absolutely. And the influence of military banners from the time of the Haitian Revolution and earlier, during Saint-Domingue, also played a role. Haitian troops carried banners while fighting for American independence and in other military engagements, using them to identify their units.

JJK: And there's also a connection with *Masonic* vestments. Masonry and Vodou have always been intertwined.

AL: Yes, and it's interesting to note that the way people dress for ceremonies and the attire of the *lwas* (spirits) often reflect these influences. When someone is possessed by a *lwa* during a ceremony, they're dressed in a way that makes the spirit recognizable to others. The intricate and rich clothing, even for people with limited means, signifies the importance of these ceremonies. The best-dressed people I've seen in Haiti are at weddings and Vodou ceremonies. They use their finest clothes because these events are of the utmost importance to them. This, too, is a form of artistic expression.

JJK: Another important aspect of the ceremony is that the flags are sometimes worn on the body, right?

AL: They dance with them.

JJK: They dance with them?

AL: Yes, typically, temples are dedicated to two main spirits, sometimes more. During the ceremony, there comes a moment when they bring out the flags and dance with them. When you're at a ceremony—there's something magical about the candlelight, even in a home setting. The flags seem to come to life when surrounded by candles. It's a different effect compared to spotlights or electric lights. I remember seeing these dances in temples that had maybe just one light bulb, with the rest of the space illuminated by candlelight. It was absolutely magical.

JJK: The light shimmering from the sequins creates a mesmerizing effect.

AL: Exactly.

JJK: It's fascinating to see how the flags are incorporated into the choreography of the space. When you mentioned people dressing in their best attire, it makes sense—they are entering a spiritual union with the deity, almost like a wedding.

AL: Exactly, it's a very important moment for them.

JJK: Speaking of art, I was thinking about a particular piece that you're very familiar with. It's in the collection I've mentioned a few times today. It's a painting of *La Sirene* from the 1990s, by Frantz Zéphirin.

AL: Oh, yes, I know the one. I actually owned that piece at one point. It hung in my house before I sold it to a friend. Zéphirin had a show at the Gallery Monnin, and I had known his work before and since. He is an extraordinary painter, and that particular show was exceptional. He exhibited alongside Pascale Monnin, and they were working side-by-side at times. This created a competitive atmosphere where each tried to outdo the other. That's why I purchased that painting. I believe it's one of the most extraordinary pieces Zéphirin has done. I recently revisited it and noticed new details. The painting mainly features one central figure, unlike his other works, which often depict many people. This central figure is beautifully and skillfully painted.

JJK: And there are other characters woven into the waves, on the right and left.

AL: Yes, exactly.

JJK: And on the top and bottom, there are characters with heads of lions and zebras, and you can see sharks as well.

AL: Every inch of that painting is filled with details.

JJK: The central figure of *La Sirene* is depicted in a vibrant orange dress, wearing a crown that resembles the Habsburg crown. Her body is covered with symbols that look like magical eyes, with little fringes hanging down.

AL: Yes, and she's holding a gold scepter.

JJK: A gold scepter, and in the other hand, she holds a fan.

Figure 20. Frantz Zéphirin (Haitian, born 1968), *La Sirene*, c. 1990s. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

AL: Exactly, which is one of the attributes commonly associated with mermaids in Haitian art, along with mirrors and trumpets.

JJK: And she wears stunning jewelry, with a necklace or part of the collar of her dress, and a long braid hanging down.

AL: It's truly a gorgeous painting. I remember it very well.

JJK: So, we've moved from discussing ritual spaces, *poto mitan*, and the connection in the temple with vévés drawn on the floor and flags in motion during rituals, to the static space of paintings created by artists for different purposes.

AL: Yes, but Frantz Zéphirin is like a Rigaud.

JJK: So these aren't just about the aesthetics?

AL: They are decorative, but his work is deeply informed by his knowledge of Vodou. It's important to note that these images are not created randomly; they're very much inspired by religious knowledge.

JJK: It reminds me of Byzantine icons, often painted by monks. In that tradition, creating icons was like writing a book—it was about conveying theological knowledge, understood fully only by those within the religious order. Similarly, in Vodou, the oungan is like a priest.

AL: Yes.

JJK: For those unfamiliar with the term, an *oungan* is a priest in a Vodou tradition. So, there's a sacred knowledge tied to Zéphirin's creations, much like in Byzantine traditions.

AL: Absolutely. A lot of this knowledge is transmitted through images, even though Vodou is primarily an oral tradition. Temples have books where the priests record prayers, draw *vévés*, and write down rituals. These books are often beautifully decorated with whatever materials are available—colored pencils, markers, or even just ballpoint pens. The intricate and beautiful designs are a form of written transmission. But most of it is still oral and visual, using images to convey the religion's essence and knowledge. People who create these paintings usually know what they're talking about and strive to accurately represent their subject matter.

JJK: For those who spend time learning and understanding Haitian traditions, it's possible to grasp the language and symbolism. Milo Rigaud's book, for example, is an excellent resource for understanding *vévés*. It's almost like learning an alphabet to interpret the visual and symbolic language in Vodou.

AL: Absolutely. Rigaud dedicated his life to studying these symbols, and his book is fantastic. Vodou tradition speaks of 21 nations, meaning there were roughly 21 African nations that came to Haiti, which illustrates the complexity of the culture. People often think of Africa as a monolithic entity, but it's incredibly diverse. Each of these 21 groups brought something unique.

JJK: From languages to visual culture to culinary traditions…

AL: Exactly.

JJK: People came to Saint-Domingue with diverse cultural backgrounds, including animistic traditions, complex court structures like those in Congo, and Christian influences from the Kingdom of Kongo, which adopted Christianity in the 15th century.

AL: Yes, absolutely.

JJK: Others brought knowledge of Islam and the Quran. These people, divided by language, history, and different worldviews, were forced together in Saint-Domingue.

AL: Yes, sometimes even at war with each other.

JJK: Exactly. There had to be a way to create something cohesive from this complex mix. Language was one way this happened, possibly starting on the boats. In the 16th to 19th centuries, even the French didn't speak a uniform language—there were regional dialects like Occitan.

AL: Yes, I've seen this. Regional languages were still in use when I was studying in France.

JJK: Right, and this lack of uniformity carried over to Saint-Domingue, where people from different regions had to find ways to communicate, especially on the ships.

AL: They needed to understand commands to survive the journey, leading to the creation of a common language. Many Creole terms are actually marine terms, showing the language's origins on the boats.

JJK: During the horrific journey from Africa, enslaved people were crammed together, often not speaking the same language, and they had to find ways to communicate and comfort each other.

AL: Yes, and *Creole* contains a lot of French vocabulary, although its structure is different. It's an African-based language with influences from various sources.

JJK: Exactly, it's a simplified form of communication that evolved into a complex language, rich in imagery and politeness. Over time, it became a vital part of creating a new society, with its own language, culture, and rituals.

AL: Yes, even under harsh conditions, people cultivated their own food, developed cuisine, and built a society with rich traditions. They created something new out of necessity and creativity.

JJK: After Haiti became a republic, there was a new sense of inspiration. Henri Christophe's court, for example, was influenced by English painting styles. Creole culture synthesized European traditions with local elements.

AL: Creole culture is inherently creative, blending different influences into something unique. It's a testament to resilience and innovation, building something extraordinary from limited resources.

JJK: This synthesis is evident in architecture, like the gingerbread houses in Port-au-Prince, which combine Victorian elements with adaptations for the tropical climate.

AL: Absolutely. The Haitian architectural style is brilliant, incorporating both functionality and aesthetic excellence.

JJK: This ability to blend and innovate is also seen in Haitian symbols, like the coat of arms from Henri Christophe's kingdom, which merged tropical imagery with European heraldry.

AL: It's all about creativity—taking existing elements and transforming them into something entirely new and uniquely Haitian.

JJK: This conversation will be valuable for students in Poland, helping them understand the rich, complex culture of Haiti, including the influence of the Polish soldiers who defected during the Haitian Revolution.

AL: Yes, the idea of making everyone equal by using the term *"Noir"* in the Haitian Constitution was a brilliant way to address race. It made everyone the same, regardless of color or social class.

BIO: Nicolas André, is the Haitian Creole Program Coordinator, Haitian Creole & French Teaching Professor, and Haitian Studies Certificate Director at Florida International University (FIU), where he has taught since 2010. With a BA from the State University of Haiti and an MA from Indiana University, he has also taught Haitian Creole at Indiana University and served as a research assistant there. Previously, André led research on Haitian Creole at the State Secretariat of Literacy and contributed to the creation of bilingual dictionaries. He co-created the Haitian Creole course on Duolingo and has published widely on Creole linguistics and Haitian culture, including his French novel *Qui trop embrase mal éteint* (2011). A founding member of the Haitian Creole Academy, André is also a certified language tester for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and an active member of several professional associations.

Synopsis: This conversation between Prof. Jacek J. Kolasinski and Prof. Nicolas André explores the development and significance of Haitian Creole, a language that emerged in the late 17th century among enslaved Africans in Haiti. Haitian Creole evolved as a means of communication among people from diverse linguistic backgrounds, blending elements of African languages, particularly Fon, with French, Spanish, and indigenous Taino influences. The discussion highlights the language's role in Haitian identity, cultural resistance, and survival. Despite Creole's widespread use, French long dominated official and educational contexts, contributing to social and educational inequalities. Efforts to promote Creole, including its recognition as an official language and its use in education and public life, are seen as vital steps toward decolonizing Haitian society and valuing its unique cultural heritage.

JJK: We'll explore what Haitian Creole truly is by speaking with Professor Nicolas André about his ongoing projects and his work at the university centered around this language. Nicolas, where does the story of Haitian Creole begin? How should we start this conversation?

NA: Let's start by defining what Haitian Creole is.
Haitian Creole is one of many Creole languages, which can vary greatly. Some are based on French, others on English, Dutch, or Spanish. Haitian Creole, as its name suggests, is the Creole spoken in Haiti. This language emerged in the late 17th century, primarily among enslaved people from West and Central Africa who were brought to the Americas. It developed through interactions with other language groups, including Spanish, French, and English speakers. The enslaved people blended elements from their native languages with the languages of their oppressors to create a new, unified means of communication.

JJK: Let's pause on that because you've highlighted something significant. We're talking about various linguistic groups forcibly brought from Africa to the Caribbean. Potentially hundreds, if not thousands, of languages were represented among these people. They were thrown into what can be described as apocalyptic-scale labor camps, with no common language. How did they come to terms with one another and develop a system for exchanging ideas? The plantation owners and managers spoke French, or at least a version of French, right?

NA: Right, exactly. It's fascinating because languages are complex, but it's important to remember that languages are created by people, not the other way around. In the case of Haiti, which was known as Saint Domingue during the colonial period, most enslaved people came from regions in West Africa, speaking languages like *Fon, Gbe*, and *Igbo*. These languages significantly influenced the development of Haitian Creole. Linguists have identified specific structural elements of Haitian Creole that mirror those in Fon. For example, the placement of the definite article after the noun, which is unlike English but similar to Fon.

JJK: Nicolas, the Fon language is something I'm not very familiar with, but I know it has a rich vocabulary, especially regarding assemblage or putting things together. Suzanne Blier mentions this in her essay on the *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* [30], discussing how rituals and objects are assembled. This focus on assembly could metaphorically describe Creole as a language of compilation, bringing together different linguistic and cultural elements. I wonder, though, within the Fon-speaking community, were there various dialects? Was there a standardized form of Fon that everyone could understand, or were communication barriers prevalent even among Fon speakers?

NA: That's a great question. Communication wasn't always straightforward. Historically, plantation owners intentionally separated people from the same ethnic groups to prevent them from communicating easily. This tactic was part of a divide-and-conquer strategy. However, enslaved people demonstrated incredible resilience and adaptability. They created a common code or language that allowed them to communicate, even if they came from different linguistic backgrounds. This development of a new language was a form of resistance and survival.

JJK: This idea of linguistic adaptation reminds me of Jean Casimir's insights in his book *The Haitians*. He describes early Haitian society as having two parallel worlds: the urban centers with mixed-race populations and French *colonial elites*, and the rural *Bossales*[31] communities, continually replenished with newly arrived enslaved people. These rural communities had to forge their own ways to survive and resist, and language was a key tool. In urban centers, there was greater access to French culture and language, while rural areas developed distinct linguistic practices. The differences between city and countryside must have been pronounced.

NA: Absolutely. Despite these challenges, Haitian Creole emerged as a language that could be understood across the country, even though regional variations exist. People took what they knew from their native languages and blended it with elements from French and other languages they encountered. Before the French colonized the west side of the island, which the Taino originally called Haiti, meaning "land of mountains," there were already diverse cultures and languages. The French and Spanish eventually divided the island, leading to the formation of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The Spanish influence is still evident, especially in the place names and certain words we use in Haitian Creole today.

JJK: You've touched on something crucial. The island, once known as Santo Domingo, had indigenous populations speaking various languages before the arrival of Europeans. The Taino and Arawak peoples had their communication systems, and their influence is still

[30] Cosentino, Donald. *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. Los Angeles, Calif: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995. Print.

[31] Wild, untamed, raw; born in Africa and recently enslaved in a colony" refers to a Black African-born person newly enslaved in a French (or other European) colony, particularly Haiti, as opposed to someone born into slavery in the colony.

present. How many Taino words have made their way into Haitian Creole? When *Maroon* communities—runaway slaves—formed, they likely merged Taino languages with African languages, incorporating some French elements. These communities probably created unique communication systems, blending indigenous and African influences.

NA: Yes, there are Taino influences in Haitian Creole. We still use many Taino-derived words, particularly in place names. Words like Ayiti[32],*Gonaibo*[33]*, and Jatibonico*[34] come directly from Taino. Jean-Louis Lehre Jolibois and Jeannot Hilaire's research documents many Taino words that have become part of Creole. The Maroons, known for their resistance, played a significant role in preserving these indigenous elements. There was a Taino leader, or cacique, named Henry who initiated early resistance efforts, and this laid the groundwork for what we now know as the Haitian Revolution.

JJK: Early European settlements, like those on Tortuga, involved a mix of languages—French, Spanish, and the unique vernacular of buccaneers[35]. This linguistic melting pot must have significantly influenced the development of Haitian Creole.

NA: Yes, indeed. The Caribbean was a site of intense competition among European powers, with the French, Spanish, and even pirates like the buccaneers vying for control. These interactions further shaped the linguistic landscape. The Treaty of Ryswick in 1697 officially divided the island, with the French taking the western part, which they named Saint Domingue. These colonial encounters laid the groundwork for the linguistic diversity that contributed to the formation of Haitian Creole.

JJK: When the French implemented the *Code Noir* in the late 1600s, it established legal frameworks that regulated life on the island, including social hierarchies. French became the language of administration and legal affairs. However, what was considered French at that time might differ from the standardized French we recognize today.

NA: Correct. French, which evolved from Latin, has undergone significant changes over centuries. Old French had similarities with other Romance languages, like Spanish and Italian. Just as Haitian Creole evolved from a mixture of African languages, French, and indigenous influences, languages like French also evolved from various linguistic and cultural influences. After Haiti's independence in 1804, French remained the official language for administration, education, and legal matters. Creole, though widely spoken, was only recognized as a national language in the early 20th century and became an official language in 1987.

JJK: For a long time, Haitian leaders addressed their population in French, even though the vast majority spoke

[32] Haiti

[33] Gonaïves

[34] Artibonite or Latibonit

[35] 17th-century freebooters who preyed on Spanish ships and settlements in the West Indies.

Creole. This situation is reminiscent of medieval Europe, where Latin was the language of governance, understood by only a select few.

NA: Exactly. This language barrier has long contributed to educational inequality in Haiti. Many children struggled in school because French was the medium of instruction, even though they spoke Creole at home. This disconnect led to high dropout rates and illiteracy. Despite Creole being officially recognized, French remained dominant in education and governance. Scholars like Michel DeGraff have worked tirelessly to promote Creole and integrate it into education and other formal contexts.

JJK: There's a famous story about *Edmond Laforest* [36]drowning himself with two volumes of Larousse dictionaries, symbolizing the pressure of French linguistic standards in Haiti. When did Haitian literature begin to emerge in Creole rather than French?

NA: There were early attempts to write in Creole. In the 18th century, a French plantation owner named *Duvivier de la Mahautière* wrote "*Lisette quitté la plaine"* in Creole using French orthography. Many literary works, including the famous poem *"Choucoune"* by Oswald Durand, were written this way. In the late 1970s, the Haitian government introduced a standardized Creole orthography, marking a shift towards recognizing Creole as a legitimate language. However, Creole was still seen as inferior to French, reflecting colonial attitudes that persisted long after independence.

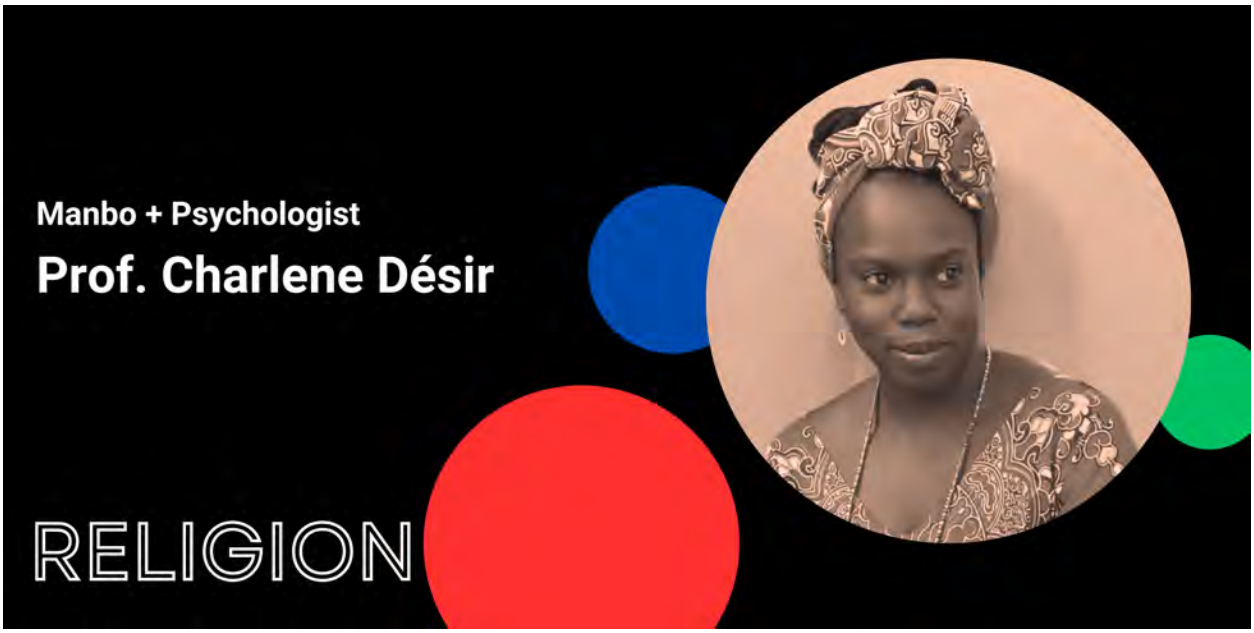
JJK: Decolonizing the Haitian mindset, where French is seen as the language of power and civilization, has been a significant challenge. French had been associated with the colonial power that dominated Haiti for centuries, and the elite were educated in France. Even Toussaint Louverture's children were educated in France and were brought back by Napoleon's forces to restore French control over the colony.

NA: That's right. The association of French with power and prestige was deeply ingrained. Speaking French was a status symbol, seen as essential for advancing socially and economically. Even today, many Haitians believe that learning French is the key to a better life, which perpetuates a linguistic hierarchy.

JJK: It's encouraging to see Creole gaining recognition, especially within the Haitian diaspora. In Miami, for example, you hear announcements at the airport in English, Spanish, and Creole, and ballots are available in Creole, not French. This reflects the growing acknowledgment of Creole's importance.

NA: Yes, it's a positive development.

[36] Edmond Laforest was an accomplished and influential writer, critic, and editor for *La Patrie* and *Haïti littéraire et scientifique.*



BIO: Dr. Charlene Désir is a professor at Nova Southeastern University's Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. She received her doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Dr. Désir's academic interest is in the social, psychological, and spiritual adjustment of immigrants, specifically psycho-social trauma, and how psychosocial issues affect social, cognitive, identity, and spiritual development. Dr. Désir has presented various papers on the topic of immigrants and their adjustment to the US. She has also published on the topic of immigrant identity, spirituality, and becoming a reflective researcher. Dr. Désir founded the Empowerment Network (TEN), Global, a non-profit that supports the personal, spiritual, and academic development of women and students in Haiti and the US. She is a member of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. and the vice president of Kosanba, an academic association on the study of PanAfrican Religions. She was the 2012 president of the Haitian Studies Association and a gubernatorial appointee to the Children's Services Council in Broward County, FL. Dr. Désir has worked as a school psychologist, K-12 school counselor, school administrator, academic advisor, and professor.

Synopsis: In this interview, Dr. Charlene Désir explores the rich and complex religious history of Vodou, particularly within the context of the Haitian Revolution. She discusses the integration of diverse African spiritual traditions that enslaved people brought with them from different regions, blending them with Native American beliefs and European Christianity to create a new religious and cultural system. The conversation touches on the role of Maroons, who escaped plantations and learned local survival tactics from indigenous communities, using their knowledge in the fight for freedom. Dr. Désir emphasizes how Vodou, more than just a religion, became a powerful form of resistance against colonization and oppression, surviving centuries of external attempts to suppress it. The discussion also covers syncretism within Vodou, where Catholic saints, African deities, and revolutionary figures like *Èrzulie Dantò* symbolize the enduring spirit of liberation.

JJK: Today, we're focusing on *Créolité*, specifically in the context of religion. We have Dr. Charlene Desir with us, a professor at Nova Southeastern University, who is also a *Manbo* in the Vodou religion. Welcome, Charlene.

CD: Thank you.

JJK: Let's start by discussing the religious landscape of the Caribbean, particularly Saint-Domingue, before Haiti became a free country. After the revolution and liberation, what was the religious situation like? You had a mass of people kidnapped from Africa and transported against their will to the Caribbean, where they were forcefully Christianized. However, they weren't given deep religious education, except maybe for those who came from regions like Congo, which had earlier exposure to Christianity. What was the situation in terms of religion before and after the revolution?

CD: Yes, that's a great place to start. I recently returned from Benin, where I saw deep connections between Benin, Nigeria, and Ghana, part of what was once called Dahomey. Many Africans who were kidnapped and brought to Haiti came from this region. They arrived with a variety of religious ideologies, some rooted in traditional African spirituality. In Allada, for example, where Toussaint Louverture was born, he was of royal lineage. That speaks to the fact that these Africans came with diverse social positions—some were craftsmen, farmers, warriors, and even royalty. There were larger tribes in Africa that were also vying for power and territory. Some became involved in aspects of the slave trade, not unlike others who were trading for weapons or goods. So, the people brought to Saint-Domingue came with strong, diverse backgrounds, and their religion was a key part of that.

JJK: That's fascinating and complex. You reminded me of Zora Neale Hurston's[37] account of *Cudjoe Lewis*[38], one of the last survivors of the transatlantic slave trade. He described being captured by the Dahomey warrior women, who terrorized villages by carrying the decapitated heads of their enemies. This highlights the brutal dynamics between different African groups before the Europeans exploited these divisions. It was essentially a divide-and-conquer strategy used to sustain the transatlantic slave trade, right?

Figure 21. *Dahomey Amazons* from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

CD: Yes, and it was incredibly complex. The people in Africa didn't fully grasp what was waiting on the other side of the Atlantic. Even *Toussaint Louverture*[39], when he arrived in Hispaniola, ended up in slavery despite being from royalty. In his case, he became a house slave, which positioned him differently within the system, but it didn't negate the overall brutal experience.

What's interesting is the idea of the "21 nations," which refers to the many different regions in Africa from which

[37] https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zora-Neale-Hurston

[38] Hurston, Zora Neale. *Barracoon : The Story of the Last "Black Cargo."* Ed. by Deborah G. Plant. First Amistad paperback edition. New York, NY: Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2019. Print.

[39] François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture (1743-1803) , also known as Toussaint L'Ouverture or Toussaint Bréda, was a key leader of the Haitian Revolution.

Figure 22. *St. Patrick*, chromolithography from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

these kidnapped individuals came. Some were Muslim, some followed forms of African-based Christianity, and most practiced indigenous African religions. In Vodou, you see these different traditions coming together. The enslaved Africans I visited the slave dungeons in Ghana as part of my trip, and it was striking to hear our guide say that the first slave ships went to Hispaniola. He also emphasized how many didn't survive the journey, as the conditions on the slave ships were horrendous.

JJK: Right, the conditions were appalling. When you look at the diagrams of how people were packed into these ships, it's easy to make the unfortunate comparison to sardines in a can. It's horrifying. People became sick during the voyage, and companies insuring the ships still compensated the slavers if someone was thrown overboard.

CD: Yes, and the majority of the kidnapped Africans came with their own deep-rooted ways of understanding the world. They practiced Vodou, Ife, and other Pan-African traditions. These traditions were polytheistic and rich with deities, spirits, and ancestors, which played vital roles in understanding and interacting with the natural and spiritual world.

JJK: So, there was a strong belief in a creator god, but also in various spirits or deities who acted as intermediaries between the divine and the human world.

CD: Yes, that's right. The *lwas* are the ones who actively participate in the lives of the people. The ancestors and the brought these beliefs and blended them with what they encountered in the Americas, including Christianity. Even before slavery began in what we now call the United States, this process was happening in the Caribbean.
Would you say that ancestor veneration also played a key role in this worldview?

CD: Absolutely. In most Pan-African traditions, there is belief in one creator, but ancestors are also seen as divine entities that can interact with and influence the living. The *lwas* or *orishas*—the spirits or deities—represent different aspects of the natural world, such as the elements. The practice of Vodou is very much about understanding how to work with and integrate nature, and how to seek guidance from the spirits and ancestors.
The Atlantic Ocean itself became a cemetery for those who didn't *survive* the Middle Passage. The belief is that the water spirits, like *Agwé*[40] and *La Sirène*, carried the spirits of those who died to rest beneath the ocean. Water, therefore, became a sacred element in Vodou, and rituals connected to water and ocean spirits have profound meaning.

JJK: That's powerful—the idea of the ocean as both a cemetery and a conduit for spiritual energy. In Haitian Vodou, it seems that there's this concept of a distant, uninterested creator god, but the *lwas* act as intermediaries, managing the daily affairs of humans. The connection to ancestors also seems to be deeply tied to this practice, correct?
spirits take on this divine role. When Africans were thrown into the ocean, the water became a sacred space. Spirits like

[40] one of the *lwas* from the Rada nation, is the great admiral and spirit personifying the sea in Haitian Vodou.

Agwé, who is connected to the sea, and *La Sirène*, the mermaid spirit, were venerated for their role in this cosmic process. The water spirits helped guide and care for those souls lost during the passage.

During my time in Benin, I noticed that some spirits and practices had very precise counterparts in Vodou. For example, *Damballa* and other *Rada* spirits came directly from Africa. These spirits are tied to specific elements, like the snake being linked to *Damballa* and knowledge.

JJK *Rada* spirits originate from Africa, while other spirits, like those connected to the Middle Passage, emerged from the colonial experience, correct?

CD: Yes, exactly. Spirits like the *Ogoun*, the warriors, had to adapt to the experiences of slavery and colonialism. They evolved because they had to accompany people through the trauma of the Middle Passage and the fight for survival in a new world. The idea in Vodou is that nothing is ever subtracted; instead, we add. We don't lose the old, but we integrate new experiences. It's a system of continuous growth.

The Catholic Church supported the slave trade, and enslaved Africans were forced into Christianity. However, there were two Bibles—the European Bible, and the Bible for the enslaved Africans. The latter was used to justify their enslavement, twisting religion into a tool for control. But the Africans brought their spirits with them, and they merged their practices with Catholicism. When I visited Benin recently, I learned about the 400 different temples there, each dedicated to specific deities, much like the various *lwas* in Vodou.

JJK: So, it's very site-specific—different regions have different deities or spirits they focus on?

CD: Yes, but when the Africans arrived in Haiti, they didn't have the luxury of those regional distinctions. In Africa, you might have a temple specifically for *Damballa* or another spirit, but in Haiti, all these traditions had to come together. The enslaved people were forced to create a unified spiritual system that incorporated all their deities, regardless of their specific tribal or regional origins. It was a process of synthesis, where everyone had to embody and embrace all the spirits, not just those of their own ancestors or regions.

JJK: It sounds like this blending of traditions was necessary for survival in the new world. Everyone had to share and integrate these beliefs to make sense of their reality.

CD: Exactly. It was a survival strategy, both spiritual and cultural. When they arrived in the Americas, they needed to find common ground to survive the trauma of slavery. So, instead of each person worshiping their own specific deity, they shared their knowledge and created a collective system of belief that became Vodou. This was part of how they maintained their identity and resisted the oppression they faced daily.

JJK: Negotiating a common pantheon of deities for people from such diverse regions of Africa—vast areas with different languages, traditions, and cultures—must have been challenging. Suddenly, these people were thrust into

the plantation system, where the average life expectancy was often just five to six years. They had to learn a new language, which was often an interpretation of the overseers' language and the orders being “barked” at them. Christianity was imposed, but it seems it was primarily understood by those working as domestics, who participated in Catholic rituals or followed their owners to church. However, on plantations, there was little real instruction in Christianity. Slave owners were afraid of giving them too much knowledge—especially the Jesuits, who had a more liberal ideology and were eventually kicked out of the colonies for fear they might stir up resistance.

CD: Yes, exactly. Catholicism became a tool of justification, a way to claim that they were "saving" these people from a so-called barbaric life of worshipping deities. The Bible was often used to justify the idea that these Africans could be enslaved. It was all part of a narrative that made slavery seem righteous or necessary.

JJK: Right, they painted the enslaved as "crude and violent" people who needed redemption through "civilization"—a justification for the brutal handling of the enslaved.

CD: Absolutely. They leaned on stories like the *"Curse of Ham"* to argue that these Africans were destined for servitude. But at its core, this was all about profit. They needed a system to justify enslaving these diverse groups—people from various religious systems and cultures. Once they survived the brutal Middle Passage, a new system had to be created. The Europeans enslaved people and gave them this Catholic framework, pretending it was all for their salvation. But really, it was about keeping them productive.

At the same time, many enslaved people were highly educated in their own traditions. Some had a deeper knowledge base than many realize, and they began to make sense of their new environment. The Dahomey identity, for instance, wasn't confined to Benin—it included parts of modern-day Togo, Nigeria, and Ghana. These people had to create a new language and culture, which evolved into Haitian Creole, a fusion of all the languages they spoke. They also had to acknowledge the Native American presence. The word *"*Ayiti*"* itself comes from the Arawak-Taino language, meaning "land of high mountains." They had to create not just a religion, but an epistemology—a way of being and understanding the world. That’s how Vodou emerged, as both a religion and a philosophical system.

Vodou became a way to synthesize all these identities—combining indigenous Taino beliefs, European Catholicism, and the African Pan-African spiritual systems. They created a new worldview that could accommodate the different realities they faced, merging them into a coherent religious and cultural system. In a more just world, we might call Vodou a Pan-African American religion.They didn’t just adapt; they redefined their existence. They brought in Native American elements, African traditions, and Catholic ideas, creating a complex system of communication and belief that helped them survive and resist.

JJK: That makes me think of the visual culture of Vodou. There’s a lot of syncretism in the representation of the *lwas*—the deities of Vodou. For

example, in Puerto Rico, there's a tradition where Saint Barbara, a Catholic saint, was depicted on artillery canons. Enslaved Africans would hear the explosion of the guns, which resembled the thunderclap associated with *Chango*, the African deity of thunder and lightning. Over time, Saint Barbara became associated with *Chango*, allowing enslaved people to honor Chango under the guise of celebrating a Catholic feast. The Spaniards even prayed to Saint Barbara to protect their homes from lightning bolts, which tied into the symbolism of Chango. This kind of syncretism was found all over the Caribbean and the Americas, with many saints, like Saint Jacques, taking on layers of African meaning.

CD: Yes, and it was dangerous. Practicing your own beliefs, worshipping deities like Ogoun, could get you killed. You had to attend church services, and in doing so, many enslaved Africans would think, "How do I make this fit my understanding of the world?" They never believed they were slaves. They saw themselves as spiritual beings in bondage, not as slaves.

Take Saint Patrick, for instance. In Haitian Vodou, Saint Patrick is associated with *Damballa*, the serpent god and highest form of knowledge. In the Irish tradition, Saint Patrick is known for driving the snakes out of Ireland, and the snake is sacred to *Damballa*. So it made sense for Haitians to associate Saint Patrick with *Damballa*.
There's also the Polish Black Madonna, which shares a fascinating connection with Vodou.

JJK: Stay with Saint Patrick for a moment. So in the legend, Saint Patrick drives the snakes out of Ireland, and that imagery became associated with *Damballa* in Vodou, who is often represented by a snake. That transposition seems to fit naturally.

CD: Yes, and it shows how the enslaved Africans were not ignorant—they adapted these symbols with deep understanding. Saint Patrick was himself enslaved in Ireland. His story, like those of many Vodou deities, is one of suffering and redemption. These associations weren't arbitrary. They were principles of how to exist in this new world.

Haiti was the first place where Africans arrived in large numbers through the transatlantic slave trade. Despite the horrors of slavery, the Vodou system remained largely intact. It has survived through generations and continues to thrive, even with all the criticisms that may come. It was passed down from the beginning and still exists in Haiti today.

Figure 23. *St. Patrick* (Detail), chromolithography from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

JJK: You also mentioned the Black Virgin of Czestochowa and *Èrzulie Dantò*, a topic I've been researching. The journey of this Byzantine icon across continents is incredible, especially how it became pivotal in the formation of national identity in Poland, acquiring scars during an attack by heretics in the 1430s. Eventually, the icon finds its way to Haiti with Polish legionaries sent by Napoleon. Hundreds of them opposed their role in suppressing the Haitian revolutionaries, seeing a contradiction between fighting for their own country's independence and being used as instruments of colonialism. Many of these soldiers defected and, in their final moments, called upon a Black woman with scarification on her face—the Virgin Mary—to intercede for them. The Haitians saw this image as embodying *Èrzulie Dantò*, a deity associated with the fight for liberation.

CD: Yes, the Creolization process wasn't just limited to African and indigenous influences—it included Europeans as well. The Polish, in particular, became part of the Haitian story. After 300 years of enslavement, there was still a strong consciousness of liberation in Haiti. Even though their bodies were enslaved, the people knew their spirits were free. Children were born into this consciousness of freedom, believing that they would be liberated because they had deities that lived forever.

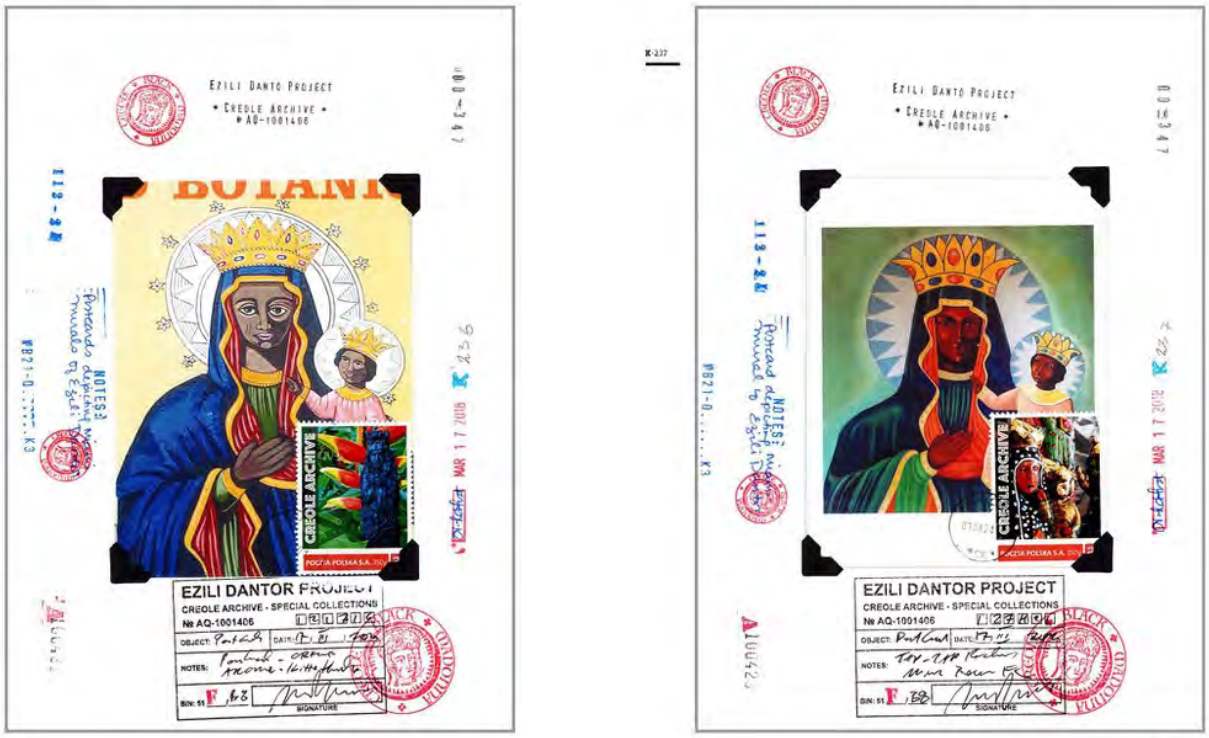


Figure 24. *Èrzulie Dantò* (Miami murals) from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

The story of the Polish soldiers is complex. They saw Black women warriors like the *Agojie* from Dahomey, who fought fiercely. Dessalines' mother, who raised him, was one of these warriors. In seeing these powerful Black women, the Polish soldiers saw divine figures, which led them to lay down their arms. They recognized the divinity in these women, and as a result, Dessalines declared them Black—though not based on pigmentation, but on a shared consciousness.

JJK: Yes, Article 14 of the Haitian Constitution of 1805 states that every citizen would be referred to as "Noir," not based on skin color, but as a unifying identity of the Haitian people. It emphasized a shared consciousness of resistance and liberation.

CD: Exactly. It was a powerful statement. To be Black in this context was to embrace the consciousness of liberation and solidarity. Even today, in Fond-des-Blancs, where many Polish descendants live, you can see traces of that ancestry —dark-skinned people with blonde hair or light eyes. Haiti broke the colonial ideology that race is tied solely to pigmentation. It showed that race, as a social construct, can be transcended.

JJK: Let's go back to *Èrzulie.* Who is *Èrzulie,* specifically *Èrzulie Dantò*, in the Vodou Pantheon?

CD: It's funny because, before I started studying Vodou and going through initiation, people would often say, "You're an *Èrzulie Dantò*," and I didn't fully understand what they meant at first. *Èrzulie Dantò* is like Isis—she's a fierce

mother figure. She's considered the first mother, the woman the creator imagined would give birth to all the children of the earth. In the Vodou Pantheon, *Èrzulie Dantò* is the sacred, fierce mother who defends her children by any means necessary. She accepts and loves all her children, no matter their form or manifestation on earth, and she's a warrior, too.

She's part of the warrior tradition in West Africa, especially among the Amazonian women warriors. I saw these representations in Benin, where many women had facial scarifications as a sign of initiation and commitment, just like the *Agojie* warrior women.

JJK: The Polish Black Madonna painting that came to Haiti has two scarification lines on her face. The scars were inflicted when followers of Jan Hus damaged the painting in the 1430s. It was later repaired, but in African culture, scarification has a different meaning. When you were in Benin, you probably saw many examples of this on women's faces.

CD: Yes, I saw many women with scars on their faces. These markings often signify higher levels of initiation or commitment, especially among warriors like the *Agojie*. There's a myth in Haitian Vodou that suggests *Èrzulie Dantò* was scarred during a fight with *Èrzulie Freda*, but I never believed that. I think it's more in line with what you're saying—these scars are symbols of strength, not conflict.

JJK: There's another mythology about *Èrzulie Dantò* that portrays her as a revolutionary figure. Some practitioners believe that her tongue was cut off because she knew military secrets the French didn't want revealed, or maybe she was tortured. That's why, when she "mounts" someone during a ritual, they don't speak clearly. Is that part of her mythology?

CD: Yes, that's one version. Remember, *lwas* are energies, and they manifest in different ways depending on the region or Vodou house. In some depictions, *Èrzulie Dantò* is shown embracing and nurturing children, but other stories emphasize her as a fierce warrior. Her energy is seen as cosmic, and for some, she represents a real historical figure who manifested in different ways across generations. The way she's portrayed depends on whether the person's family lineage has been initiated into these traditions.

JJK: You've mentioned Freda a few times. She belongs to a different house of Vodou deities, right?

CD: Yes, *Èrzulie Freda* is part of the *Rada* spirits. She represents a different form of femininity—she's seen as younger, more seductive, and embodying romantic love. *Freda* is often associated with abundance, flirtation, and allure. Some mythologies describe her as the child of rape, born from the union of an African woman and a French colonial. These stories can vary by region, but *Freda* symbolizes a different stage of womanhood compared to *Dantò,* who represents the fierce, protective mother.

JJK: So the *Èrzulie* figures represent different stages of womanhood—youth, motherhood, and perhaps even older age. But Vodou doesn't have a formal theological structure, right? The narratives and practices vary by region and house.

CD: Exactly. Vodou is decentralized—there's no dogmatic council to write down or standardize the practices. It's very regional and adaptive, with different interpretations of the same spirits depending on local customs and practices. For example, while Freda is seductive, *Dantò* is protective, and other spirits represent different energies.

JJK: You mentioned earlier that seduction was also a tool used in warfare. There was a woman, a spy for Toussaint Louverture, who seduced French officers to gather intelligence on troop movements. And then you have women fighting alongside men in battle, as well as those caring for the wounded. They represented every role in society at war.

CD: Absolutely. In that time, warfare included all kinds of strategies, including seduction. In Vodou, different spirits represented the energies needed in battle, just like a mascot or guardian spirit today. Sometimes you needed *Freda*, other times *Dantò*, or *Zakass* or Ogoun. These energies were called upon in times of need.

JJK: Earlier, you mentioned that before imagery like postcards or paintings, people represented deities through *vévés*—sacred symbols drawn in the temple. Can you explain what *vévés* are and how they function in Vodou ceremonies?

CD: *Vévés* are cosmic symbols representing the energy of the spirits. It's a sacred form of geometry. Drawing a *vévés* requires discipline because it acts as a portal, a way to call down the spirit to the earthly realm. These energies don't have race or gender—they are pure forces of the universe. The *vévés* captures that energy and allows practitioners to engage with the spiritual realm. Before the images we have now, *vévés* were the main representations of the spirits.

JJK: The *vévés* remind me of the Byzantine tradition of icons. Icons are seen as windows or portals to the divine, much like how you describe the *vévés* as conduits for connecting to the *lwas.* Without drawing a *vévés*, the spirit can't be summoned.

CD: Yes, particularly in high ceremonies, *vévés* are essential to opening that portal. The process varies depending on whether someone is initiated, but in religious services, the vévés serves as the key to invoking the spirit.

JJK: Do you see any connection between *vévés* and Taino traditions?

CD: Yes, but it depends on the region in Haiti. For instance, in *Lakou de Real* in northern Haiti, they don't use any Catholic images. Their tradition is a blend of Native American and African practices. For example, Manbo Ingrid, who is from that area and now lives in South Florida, incorporates Native American, Taino, and Arawak imagery on her face as part of her practice. In their rituals, they use a ceremonial mound as the *poto mitan* (the central pole in Vodou temples), and they don't integrate any Christian ideology. I saw similar things in the north of Haiti, where people were archiving Taino rocks used in ceremonies.

So, when we talk about Vodou, it's similar to Christianity in that there are different denominations or expressions. Even in traditional Vodou, figures like Anacaona,

the legendary maroon leader, are considered *lwas* (spirits). We have cosmic energies like the *lwas,* but we also elevate real historical figures into the pantheon of Vodou spirits. In *Lakou de Real*, they actively integrate the Taino and Arawak traditions alongside African practices.

JJK: It's fascinating how these Taino influences, like the imagery and rock carvings, blend with African traditions. It reminds me of certain Polish Catholic practices that people might not realize stem from pre-Christian traditions. For example, the *Feast of St. John* is celebrated in Catholicism but goes back to pre-Christian solstice rituals. This blending of traditions seems to be quite universal.

Another question I had relates to the Masonic symbols we see in Haiti. When you look at Masonic processions in the north, especially in *Ocap*[41], they wear regalia that are a blend of Catholic, Masonic, and African elements. It's a striking visual language.

CD: Yes, that's something I learned in Benin—the philosophy of adding, not subtracting. My father and godbrother are Haitian Masons, and last year I was initiated as an Eastern Star, the female branch of Freemasonry. After that, my father shared a lot about the Masonic rituals and how they merge with Vodou. In Haiti, many Masons are also Ogoun (spirits of warriors) or other *lwas*. They celebrate Saint Jacques, a Catholic figure who is also considered an aspect of Ogoun, on June 24th. My own initiation into the Vodou priesthood involved both Masonic and Vodou rituals.

What's interesting is that Haitian Masonry, while originating in Europe, has evolved to blend African-American Christian spiritual ideologies and Catholicism with Vodou. Many Haitian Masons I know are also Guinee Vodou priests. I've even attended ceremonies that begin with Masonic rituals and transition into Vodou ones. The deeper you go into the Masonic rituals, the more you see the overlap with Vodou.

JJK: That's fascinating. In Haiti, many people identify as Catholic but are also Vodouists, which seems contradictory from a European perspective. In the Creole world, though, belief systems overlap and coexist.

CD: Exactly. It's about adding, not subtracting. Enslaved people were forced to adopt Catholic or Christian norms because they were seen as "less than" without them. But they needed a way to feel whole, and that wholeness came from their Pan-African spiritual systems. Over time, Vodou evolved alongside Catholicism, and for a long time, there was no conflict between believing in the *lwas* and practicing Catholicism.

Over the years, stricter divisions emerged, but in many Pan-African traditions, especially among Protestants, there's still an understanding of the overlap. The first African-American evangelists who came to Haiti were pro-Black and embraced Vodou. It wasn't until the 1980s, when fundamentalist Christianity gained a foothold, that Vodou began to be demonized as "evil" or "black magic." Before that, the two existed together without much conflict.

[41] Ocap is a colloquial term for Cap-Haïtien, a significant city in northern Haiti.

JJK: That's an interesting shift. Many evangelical Haitians today follow strict doctrines, yet many still practice Vodou, which evangelical leaders often condemn as possession by the devil. This contradiction seems particularly evident in discussions about *the Bois Caïman ceremony*, which some describe as a "pact with evil."

CD: Yes, there's a lot of misunderstanding around *Bois Caïman*. Two years ago, despite the political unrest, I felt compelled to visit *Bois Caïman*. The town was desolate but welcoming. We showed up unannounced, and the Vodou priest there performed a two-day ceremony for us.

The ceremony took place in a cave, where Maroons hid during the revolution. The Arawak and Taino taught them survival techniques, how to use the land, and resist the colonial powers. *Cécile Fatiman*[42] was mounted during the ceremony, and the spirit of *Ogoun* was also present. This is a deeply sacred space, and we don't broadcast it because it's central to rebuilding identity and resisting colonial narratives. It's about understanding that we are sacred and connected to the land. Colonizers who didn't want to share power painted Vodou as evil to justify their control over resources and people.

JJK: The *Bois Caïman* ceremony took place on August 22nd, a Catholic feast day for the Virgin Mary. Enslaved people would gather at the marketplace on that day to trade food and provisions. It's believed that on this day, they evoked *Èrzulie Dantò,* who is symbolized in Haitian art by the Black Virgin of Czestochowa. You've already mentioned *Cecile Fatima,* and then there's *Bookman*, whose name may indicate a connection to Islam or the Quran, which he is said to have carried.

On that day, the participants made a secret oath to continue fighting until they expelled the last slave owner from the island. They sacrificed a *black Creole pig* to seal the covenant, and this is recognized as the beginning of the Haitian Revolution. The struggle lasted until 1804. The first written account of Bois Caïman was by a plantation owner who fled to Philadelphia. He never witnessed the ceremony himself but gathered information from participants. His account, however, is far from accurate.

[42] Cécile Fatiman (1771–1883) was a prominent figure in the Haitian Revolution who participated in the Bois Caïman ceremony in 1791, which sparked the slave uprising.

Figure 25. *Bois Caïman Ceremony* (1791) on Haitian Postal Stamp (1968) from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

CD: Yes, there's a lot of mythology around *Bois Caïman*. There's a place called La Coupe that has the real documentation of what was said, the ceremonies, the songs. But again, who gets to tell the story? Why would those who own the true records share them publicly? It's bizarre when people claim *Bois Caïman* was about "conjuring Satan." What were they supposed to do? Continue in slavery? This was a 12-year fight, and it didn't happen overnight. It wasn't about "magic"; it was about people who knew the land, who knew how to use the elements to their advantage.

These were well-trained warriors with a conviction for liberation. They used their knowledge of the universe, the land, and their cosmology to fight back. This revolution was in the making for 300 years, not something that happened spontaneously.

JJK: You mentioned Maroons in our conversation. Maroons were people who escaped from plantations and often connected with indigenous communities. Through this connection, they learned about local botany and customs. If you think about the Haitian Revolution as a form of guerrilla warfare or even biological warfare, it was highly sophisticated. European troops, accustomed to conventional warfare, came in large numbers, but they were unfamiliar with the harsh tropical terrain and the long rainy season.

Enslaved people, using knowledge from the Maroons, knew how to poison water sources and animals, and how to use herbs for warfare. In one of my conversations with Dudley Alexis, we discussed how food was weaponized. People weren't simply dying of natural causes—food and water were being poisoned intentionally. They used every tool at their disposal to win the war. The

motto of the revolution was "liberté ou la mort"—liberty or death.

CD: Absolutely. They knew the land intimately. One of my mentors, Bayyinah Bello, speaks about the role of elder women. These women were often overlooked, but they knew the secrets of the caves and how to navigate from the north to the south of Haiti. Children were used as scouts, and they played a crucial role in the fight.

So, while the Europeans had guns and conventional warfare tactics, the Haitians had their knowledge of the land and the ability to mobilize everyone—children, elders, free people of color, and even biracial individuals—all came together for the revolution. It was one of the rare times in Haitian history when everyone united. Another time this unity happened was during the US invasion from 1915 to 1934. It was the only time the entire Haitian Parliament agreed on something: they refused to let the US take their funds. The US took the reserves anyway, but it was a moment of solidarity. The revolution was influenced by forces from both the Americas and France, and afterward, the challenge became: how do we govern ourselves?

JJK: I'm glad you brought up the 1915 invasion. The *Cacos*[43] uprisings were a significant part of that period. The US invasion targeted Vodou temples as centers of resistance. There are many paintings that depict US Marines systematically raiding and burning religious objects from Vodou temples. The US saw Vodou as a powerful, unspoken source of resistance, and there was fear that the revolution in Haiti could spread to other parts of the world, especially to American slave owners.

The portrayal of Dessalines in the US after Haitian independence was that of a violent figure, a warning to American slave owners that the Haitian Revolution might inspire similar uprisings. This fear, combined with American evangelical efforts, led to a distorted view of Vodou as something satanic. It was a deliberate attempt to demonize the revolution and the religion tied to it.

CD: Exactly, and Haiti did help spread independence movements across South America. Countries like Venezuela have monuments commemorating Haiti's role in their struggles for freedom.

In the United States, before school integration, African Americans were taught about Haiti's influence. There are towns in the US named Haiti. *Frederick Douglass*, the first US ambassador to Haiti, spoke eloquently about the country's revolutionary influence. But after integration, this history was no longer emphasized. Haiti disrupted one of the most lucrative financial systems—slavery—and faced decades of embargoes as punishment. There were at least two or three additional embargoes beyond the initial 50-year one.

Even now, Haiti has natural resources that haven't been fully exploited, much like in many African countries. But the resistance we see in Haiti, both historically and today, is rooted in an

[43] *Cacos* were Haitian rebels who resisted U.S. occupation (1915–1934). In 1920, U.S. Marines crushed a *Cacos* uprising of northern peasants fighting forced labor and land expropriation, resulting in over 2,000 Haitian and about 100 U.S. and gendarme deaths.

African and Pan-African ideology. Vodou itself is a form of resistance—a resistance to colonization, to oppression, and to the barbaric ideologies that still exist.

JJK: Thank you so much for your time. I feel like we could talk for another three hours—there's so much more to explore. We'll have to sit down again and dive deeper into these topics, especially the connection between Vodou and Masonry. But for now, I'll stop the recording.

Assignment Description:

Exploring Cultural Artifacts through *Créolité*

In this assignment, students will select a cultural artifact from their own heritage and analyze it using the framework of *Créolité*, which explores the blending of diverse cultural influences. While *Créolité* is often applied to Caribbean contexts, this project will focus on the complex history of Central and Eastern Europe, with an emphasis on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the 123 years of partition, the interwar period, and the contemporary transnational position within the European Union.

The artifact can come from any aspect of art, literature, language, music, spirituality, or other forms of cultural expression. Students will explore how this artifact reflects the convergence of diverse geographies and genealogies that shaped the region's history and identity. By examining these cultural objects, students will investigate how historical events and cross-cultural interactions influenced the evolution of their heritage, revealing patterns of cultural resilience, hybridity, and identity formation across generations. This analysis will help students connect their personal heritage to broader socio-political transformations in Central and Eastern European contexts.

Given that Central and Eastern European societies have been shaped by diverse sociopolitical and cultural forces, it is pertinent to explore the following questions:

1. **Early Christianization of Central and Eastern Europe:** How did the process of Christianization serve as a cultural negotiation, incorporating pre-Christian

customs into the new Catholic rituals and lifestyle, thereby creating a unique spiritual ecosystem?

2. **Sarmatism as an Ethno-Cultural Ideology:** In the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, Sarmatism developed as a distinctive blend of Oriental, Western, and native traditions. What were its defining characteristics, and how did it influence the region's cultural identity?

3. **Evolution of Culinary Traditions:** How did the introduction of American products in the 16th and 17th centuries, such as potatoes, tomatoes, and corn, transform the culinary practices in Central and Eastern Europe?

4. **Jewish Diaspora in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth:** What factors contributed to the establishment of a vibrant and unique Jewish culture in the region, and how did it become a defining element of the Commonwealth's social fabric?

5. **Catholic-Byzantine Synergy:** After the Union of Brest-Litovsk (1595–1596), how did the Greek-Catholic Rite foster a blend of Catholic and Byzantine religious and iconographic practices?

6. **Development of Galician Culture:** What cultural and historical factors shaped the distinct identity of Galicia in the southeastern territories of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth?

Figure 1. Sketches (2018) by Jacek J. Kolasinski of the Haitian Vodou *vévé* of Ogoun.

Figure 2. Vodou mural depicting Ogoun (St. Jacques Majeur), Little Haiti, Miami, Florida (2016). Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 3. Photo (2017) by Jacek J. Kolasinski in Little Haiti, Miami, Florida, depicting a mural of Henri Christophe, King of Haiti, inspired by Richard Evans' royal portrait (1816).

Figure 4. Photo (2017) by Jacek J. Kolasinski in Little Haiti, Miami, Florida, depicting a mural of the Citadelle Laferrière, painted by Serge Toussaint.

Figure 5. *Tap-taps* from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

Figure 6. Images from Stella Jean reveal Haitian Olympic uniforms for Paris 2024, featuring artwork by Philippe Dodard. The uniforms include a vibrant skirt for women and pants for men (Stella Jean via AP).

Figure 7. Agostino Brunias (Rome, c. 1730-1796), *Free Women of Dominica with Child*. Property from the Private Collection of William S. Reese.

Figure 8. Dudley Alexis, *Liberty in a Soup* (2015).

Figure 9. *Èrzulie Dantò*, Vodou mural, Miami (Little Haiti). Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski (2016).
Figure 10. "Agassou" by André Pierre from the collection of Axelle Liautaud. Photo courtesy of Axelle Liautaud.

Figure 11. André Pierre (Haitian, 1914-2005), *Baron Samedi*, c. 1950s. Oil painting on calabash gourd. Collection of Kay and Roderick. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 12. André Pierre (Haitian, 1914-2005), *Baron Samedi - Vévé*, c. 1950s. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 13. André Pierre (Haitian, 1914-2005), *Ogoun*, c. 1950s. Oil painting on calabash gourd. Collection of Kay and Roderick. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 14. André Pierre (Haitian, 1914-2005), *Simbi*, c. 1950s. Oil painting on calabash gourd. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 15. Myrlande Constant, *Guede (Baron)*, 2020. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 16. Myrlande Constant, *Haiti, 1986: "Rasanbleman soupe tout eskòt yo"* (2019). Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 17. Yves Telemak (Haitian, b. 1955), *Èrzulie Freda*, 2009. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 18. Eveland LaLanne (Haitian, 1939-2003), *Èrzulie Danthor*, c. 1980s. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 19. Myrlande Constant, *Haiti, 1986: "Rasanbleman soupe tout eskòt yo"*, 2019 (Detail). Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 20. Frantz Zéphirin (Haitian, born 1968), *La Sirene*, c. 1990s. Photo by Jacek J. Kolasinski.

Figure 21. *Dahomey Amazons* from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

Figure 22. *St. Patrick*, chromolithography from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

Figure 23. *St. Patrick* (Detail), chromolithography from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

Figure 24. *Èrzulie Dantò* (Miami murals) from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

Figure 25. *Bois Caïman Ceremony* (1791) on Haitian Postal Stamp (1968) from Jacek J. Kolasinski's Creole Archive Project (2017).

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Workshop and Archive Creation

This workshop is part of a five-day PhD seminar titled **"Créolité and Culture: Tracing the Haitian Roots of Global Identity."** The seminar will culminate in the creation of a seminar archive that reflects the complex blending of cultural influences within Central and Eastern Europe.

Days 1-3: Seminar Focus
The first three days will introduce participants to the concept of *Créolité*, starting with its origins in the Caribbean and its application to global cultural identities. Through discussions with scholars, artists, and cultural thinkers, participants will explore the profound role Haitian culture has played in shaping broader global identities.

Key conversations include:

- **Haitian Visual Culture:** Haitian-American artist Edouard Duval-Carrié will discuss Haiti's visual culture and its connections to the French Revolution.
- **Fashion as Resistance:** Juanita Alcena will explore how Haitian fashion, particularly textiles like chambray and the *tignon head-wrap*, became symbols of cultural pride and resistance.
- **Culinary Traditions:** Filmmaker Dudley Alexis will delve into Haiti's rich culinary heritage and its role in preserving cultural identity within the diaspora.
- **Spiritual Symbolism:** Axelle Liautaud will highlight the visual language of Vodou, focusing on *drapo* (flags) and *vévés* used in rituals.
- **Haitian Creole:** Nicolas André will discuss the history of Haitian Creole (*kreyòl ayisyen*) and its role in cultural resistance.

- **Vodou's Resilience:** Charlene Desir will provide an in-depth exploration of Vodou's role as a form of spiritual and cultural resilience during the Haitian Revolution.

Days 4-5: Workshop and Archive Creation
Building on these discussions, the workshop will invite participants to explore their own cultural heritage through archival art-making practices. Participants will select, research, and creatively display a personal or cultural artifact, using the framework of *Créolité* to understand the blending of diverse influences in Central and Eastern Europe.

Workshop Structure:

- **Day 4:** Introduction to archives as both repositories of history and creative mediums. Participants present their chosen artifacts, research their backgrounds, and start photo documentation.

- **Day 5:** Development of artifact typologies, narrative creation, and curatorial processes for designing comprehensive displays. Group discussions will allow for the introduction of participant-proposed topics, enhancing the seminar archive.

Suggested Themes:

- Christianization and cultural negotiation
- Sarmatism and cultural identity
- Evolution of culinary traditions
- The Jewish diaspora and regional culture
- Catholic-Byzantine synergy
- Formation of Galician culture

Outcomes:
By the end of the seminar, participants will have developed skills in archival practices, curation, and creative expression. The resulting seminar archive will encapsulate their cultural heritage and the historical transformations of Central and Eastern Europe, showcasing how archives can serve as dynamic, creative platforms for cultural storytelling and analysis

Suggested Seminar Readings:

These readings are valuable additions to the seminar. Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* delves into the Haitian Revolution through a literary lens, while *Creolizing Europe - Legacies and Transformations* by Encarnacion Gutierrez Rodriguez and Shirley Anne Tate broadens the dialogue on Créolité and its impact on contemporary European identities. Together, these works provide profound insights into the themes of cultural hybridity and resistance that are integral to this seminar.

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- Encarnacion Gutierrez Rodriguez, Shirley Anne Tate, *Creolizing Europe - Legacies and Transformations*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2015.