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The Poetics of Second Liberation: Revisiting Aimé Césaire's *King Christophe*

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Abstract

This article examines Césaire's *The Tragedy of King Christophe* as a fundamental text for understanding the complexities of decolonization in postcolonial contexts. The essay rereads the play, focusing on the concepts of 'bad decolonization', 'good decolonization', and the necessity for a 'second liberation' – a form of decolonization that transcends mere emancipation from physical subjugation. It analyses Césaire's dramatization of Haiti's revolutionary period to illuminate how his portrayal of decolonization not only prefigures but also advocates for the second liberation. Through a critical engagement with the works of Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, the essay argues that effective decolonization within the postcolony must inherently culminate in self-awareness, the eradication of colonial vestiges, and the cultivation of a new consciousness that inspires what Mbembe (2021, 3) refers to as the "will to community" to describe a shared commitment to reconceptualizing community beyond the colonial legacies of separation, hierarchy, and exclusion.

Keywords: Haiti; decolonization; postcolony; historical drama; revolution

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If the work of Black artists, as Césaire asserted in his 1959 Rome address, is to hasten decolonization and prepare for good decolonization (cited in Hawkins 1986, 146), how can we read *The Tragedy of King Christophe* (1963, 2015) to interrogate the constitutive elements of bad decolonization and to account for the absence of good decolonization? How can we engage Césaire's assumptions about decolonization to not only discern whether the questions underpinning the play continue to merit responses within the configuration we have come to designate as the present reality we inhabit, but also suggest a critical approach to the play that envisions the pursuit of 'second liberation' – decolonization beyond physical bondage – as good decolonization?

This article reads the play beyond the simple indexing of instances of good or bad decolonization to flesh out the complexity of decolonization in the aftermath of a revolution. For Haiti, decolonization was a revolutionary process that involved a fierce, almost instinctual rejection of all forms of subjugation, especially those enforced under the pretext of race. It was a fight by the Haitians to reclaim all aspects of their existence, ranging from their immediate environment to the broader horizons and greater depths of their lives. The question that lingers and guides my inquiry is why decolonization in Haiti failed to dismantle systems, establishments, and notions that upheld domination, signalling a simple shift of power from the master to the enslaved person. I seek to suggest, through Fanon and Mbembe, that decolonization in Haiti, as depicted in the play, should be grasped as a multifaceted process involving (1) 'first liberation' (liberation from physical bondage), and (2) 'self-abolition' (rejection and eradication of the servile part of oneself). In this case, decolonization manifests not as an event but as a process whose philosophical meanings lie in what Mbembe (2021, 3) characterizes as "an active will to community". In other words, decolonization is not simply a historical incident or political process, but a philosophical act rooted in a collective desire or "active will" toward establishing a shared community. The "will to community", or the drive to establish a collective identity and solidarity, is, according to Mbembe, a manifestation of the will to life. In other words, it is an expression of a desire to thrive, prosper, and assert one's existence. The ultimate aim of this drive is to achieve self-determination and create a meaningful legacy or heritage.

Aimé Césaire emerged as a prominent francophone Black writer and postcolonial thinker in the decades following World War II (Arnold 1990, xi). Born in Martinique in 1913, Césaire is celebrated as a poet, playwright, and politician, and as a pioneering figure of the Négritude movement – an ideological and literary initiative that sought to reclaim and valorize African identity and heritage. Césaire's works interrogate the enduring legacies of colonialism. His seminal poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1956), denounces colonial exploitation while invoking a resurgence of Black identity and cultural revival. Césaire's dramatic oeuvre includes four major plays: *Et les chiens se taisaient* (1958) (And the Dogs Were Silent), *La Tragedie du Roi Christophe* (1963) (The Tragedy of King Christophe), *Une saison au Congo* (1966) (A Season in the Congo), and *Une tempête* (1969) (A Tempest). Spivak, in her introduction to the English translation of *Une saison au Congo*, suggests that these works can be viewed as variations on a central theme, remarking that "the poet has created the same play in four incarnations" (Spivak 2010, x). *The Tragedy of King Christophe* explores the tumultuous history of independent Haiti, focusing on the period beginning in 1806, when Henri Christophe rises to power, through his self-proclamation as king, the subsequent civil war, and the eventual partition of the country, culminating in his suicide in 1820. The play scrutinizes the aftermath of Haiti's liberation from slavery, and particularly Christophe's transformation from a liberator to a tyrant as

he attempts to unify, protect, and ennoble his formerly enslaved subjects. This effort is epitomized by his coercive campaign to build the Citadel Laferrière, the largest fortress in the Western Hemisphere, atop a mountain. Act I of the play documents Christophe's flawed attempt to bestow immediate dignity upon his people by establishing a monarchy, which ultimately proves untenable. Act II explores his relentless, yet increasingly despotic, efforts to drive productivity under severe constraints, leading to escalating cruelty, desperation, and paranoia. Act III portrays the final phase of Christophe's reign, ending in his tragic suicide amidst a popular uprising.

The question of good and bad decolonization manifests itself right at the beginning of the play, when the audience is immediately confronted with the visceral contention between Christophe and Pétion for the control of the future of Haiti. The assassination of Toussaint's successor, Dessalines, initiates Christophe and Pétion's battle for leadership. The Senate offers Christophe the presidency after stripping it of most of its powers and bestowing them on itself. However, Christophe perceives a presidency devoid of inherent authority as analogous to a corporeally eviscerated figure, rendered ineffective and bereft of vigour (Césaire 2015,10). He sees the presidency as an office without its operational potency, akin to a body hollowed out or a lifeless shell, symbolizing the futility of such a position. While the mulatto-dominated Senate, under the leadership of Pétion, claims to have established a presidency that will never devolve into despotism, Christophe is convinced that the Senate, in its machinations, harbours a racial prejudice against him because of his Black identity, thereby encapsulating the conflict within the paradigm of bioracism. Although the historical distinctions between the mulatto and Black populations of Haiti do bear relevance in this context, Césaire's play seeks to transcend the binary racial tension within Haitian governance. Instead, it channels these complexities, through the lens of Christophe's character, to prompt a more overarching question: What is Haiti's greatest need? Christophe asserts: "The greatest need of this country, of this people who must be protected, must be corrected, must be educated, is…" (Césaire 2015, 11–12). His thoughts, however, are interrupted by Pétion's interjection: "Liberty" (Césaire 2015,12). For Pétion, liberty revolves around the absence of tyranny. This reasoning aligns with what this article considers as 'first liberation', which refers to the emancipation of enslaved people from physical bondage. For Christophe, while liberty is essential, "easy liberty" must never be desired (Césaire 2015,12). The notion of easy liberty is particularly salient in Haiti, a land of "transplants" (Glissant 1989,18), where people who have been transplanted from their homes must learn to transcend their existing limitations. Christophe believes Haiti should advocate for aspirations beyond mere liberty. This early divergence of views on visions for the future of Haiti delineates the space of contestation between Pétion's and Christophe's visions of Haiti and, by extension, their ideas of decolonization.

If good decolonization is a complete break from the structures of colonization, then bad decolonization implies a situation where, even after gaining political independence from colonial powers, a country continues to be economically, socially, or culturally dominated or influenced by these powers or continues to mimic their structures and systems (Hawkins 1986, 145). This situation may result in continued exploitation, inequality, and lack of true sovereignty. Césaire's dramatic works were particularly concerned about similar situations where newly independent countries merely replaced foreign oppressors with local ones without meaningful changes to the oppressive systems and structures of the colonial era (Césaire 1985, 1990, 2010; Conteh-Morgan 1994). Mbembe (2021, 126) characterizes this situation as the "logic of repetition" to describe the tendency for postcolonial societies to

continue operating under systems, ideologies, or structures like those of the colonial era. Bad decolonization is, then, a process that fails to bring about meaningful liberation, defined as autonomy and self-determination for previously colonized peoples. The moniker 'bad decolonization' finds its meaning in the play due to Christophe's mangling of 'self-abolition' as a constitutive process of decolonization in a post-emancipated society. While Césaire draws our attention to the limitations of Haiti's initial emancipation – that liberation from physical bondage and the breaking of the 'double' consciousness is insufficient to secure full recognition and establish an egalitarian society – he devotes most scenes to the failure of the 'second abolition', which is a more complex stage. Whereas the 'first abolition' signifies an immediate negation, an outright rejection of the colonizer's identity and objectification, the second abolition goes further. This stage involves not merely the abolition of the 'Other' – the enslaver's oppressive presence and influence – but also a self-abolition, which constitutes purging oneself of any traces of the enslaved identity and overcoming the psychological wounds left by the dehumanizing experience of slavery.

Critics diverge in their interpretations of Christophe's reign, with some viewing it as a tragic failure and others as a noble yet flawed endeavour to affirm Haitian identity. Nesbitt (1997–1998, 139) argues that the play uses the figure of Christophe as a means to explore the delicate balance between achieving autonomy and re-enslaving the people in the name of freedom. While Nesbitt sees Christophe's failure to lift his country of ex-slaves into a state of autonomy as a critique of authoritarian leadership and the challenges inherent in nation-building, Christophe (1978, 31) (not to be confused with King Christophe) wonders whether the socioeconomic conditions of early 19th-century Haiti necessitated King Christophe's authoritarianism. Notwithstanding Haiti's leadership needs in the early 1800s, Christophe notes that King Christophe's vision for Haiti was flawed by his misunderstanding of the pace at which societal and historical change can occur. King Christophe's impatience and desire for rapid transformation overlooked the need for a gradual process of development that could accommodate the deeply ingrained traumas and complexities of post-slavery Haitian society.

Although Christophe's reign is portrayed as tragic in many studies (e.g., Cohen 1973; Irele 1968; Kaisary and Past 2020), Figueroa (2009, 1007) sees it as a noble endeavour to affirm the particular identity of Haitians in the face of the universalist ideals that had often been used to justify colonial domination. For Figueroa, King Christophe's failure lies in his attempt to vindicate and glorify the Black population through the mimicry of European courtly splendour and titles. While he intended to assert the dignity and nobility of Haitians in the face of colonial degradation, this approach failed to resonate with the lived realities and aspirations of the Haitian people, further deepening the chasm between the king and those he ruled.

Literary scholars such as Mawuena Logan and Shane Graham highlight Césaire's nuanced portrayal of King Christophe, emphasizing his complex character and the broader themes of decolonization and identity. Logan (2016, 100) reads Césaire's play as an attempt to move beyond the caricatured portrayals of Christophe found in racist and colonialist literature, aiming instead to present a nuanced, humanized portrait of a leader striving to uplift his people from the legacy of slavery. Here, King Christophe functions as a paradigm for reflecting on broader issues of decolonization, nation-building, identity, and the challenges postcolonial states face in navigating the legacies of colonialism and slavery. Graham (2019) posits that Césaire structured the play to depict the challenges King Christophe faced in forging a collective identity rooted in the past and capable of adapting to the future.

Although Césaire presents Christophe as a figure who embodies the ideals of Négritude, his rule is characterized by a tension between his desire to build a nation that honours its African roots and the heritage of its people, and his increasingly despotic measures, which alienate him from the very people he seeks to uplift. Graham suggests that Césaire is critically aware of the paradox of memorialization – the process by which the attempt to fix the memory of the past in physical monuments (like the citadel) can lead to a form of forgetting or ossification, where the dynamic, lived experiences of the past become static and inert. This 'musealization' of history threatens to disconnect the present from the vibrant, living traditions of resistance and survival that characterized the Haitian Revolution (Graham 2019, 467). Although these scholars embrace divergent readings of the play, they portray Césaire's project as one of decolonization and locate the idea of decolonization within the logic of what this essay characterizes as the 'first liberation', referring to emancipation from physical oppression. This essay goes beyond this depiction of decolonization to show how Césaire outlines Christophe's challenge as the failure to mobilize the means for attaining the second liberation.

Becoming Haiti/Undoing Haiti

Within the narrative of the Black diaspora, Haiti holds a critical position as the first place where the contemporary concept of decolonization was actualized. Haiti not only carries the title of 'Africa's eldest daughter', due to its predominantly African-descended population, but has also earned the title of "eldest daughter of decolonization" (Mbembe 2021, 49). However, Haiti's emancipation was flawed and incomplete (Christophe 1978; Tolliver 2022). For instance, the play unfolds with the power struggle between Christophe and Pétion for dominion over Haiti. The Black citizenry perceives Christophe as the only credible harbinger of freedom due to his adamant refusal to collude with the French. Conversely, they condemn Pétion for his pursuit of power, which he seeks via an alliance with the French in exchange for reparations. The question posed by the Black citizens is one of profound irony: why should they, the formerly enslaved, be obligated to pay reparations? As the Second Citizen satirically asserts: "A Black man [Pétion] offers to pay reparations to those who Blacks so rashly deprived of the privilege of owning Blacks" (Césaire 2015, 14). These discussions among the citizens foreground one of the play's central problematics – what kind of Haiti the formerly enslaved should aspire to create – and tease out the limitations of the first liberation.

Since neither the Toussaint-led initial liberation of enslaved people nor Dessalines' empire automatically led to *a state of mastery* or self-awareness, the liberated slaves failed to establish complete autonomy. Without achieving an internal transformation (self-ownership), the act of emancipation, which was primarily a negation (a rejection of the enslaving 'Other'), resulted in the reduplication of old oppressive structures and dynamics, as embodied in Dessalines' despotic rule and Christophe's tyrannical rule. In both regimes, new forms of servitude emerged, manifesting as internalized oppression – activities of the 'Other' being exercised on and against Haitian people, thus symbolizing the survival of internal servitude despite the abolition of physical slavery. In other words, the enslaved people, though physically freed, continued to perceive themselves through the lens of the former master, resulting in a perpetuation of the master-slave dynamic internally. This dynamic reflects the deep-seated psychological effects of slavery and colonialism and highlights the inherent complexities in the Haitian decolonization process, which extends beyond physical emancipation to involve intense psychological transformations.

Despite achieving political independence

and liberation, the 'spirit of the plantation' haunts Haiti. Since the plantation system was predicated on suppressing the enslaved individuals' subjectivity, reducing them to mere objects in service to their masters, its lingering effects, which include deeply ingrained power structures, social hierarchies, internalized oppression, and the residual psychological damage caused by centuries of dehumanization and exploitation, continue to shape Haiti's history. Césaire's works show how the formerly enslaved people strive to achieve autonomy – becoming fully self-defined individuals free from the internalized notions of inferiority and objectification – and how this process is laden with complexities beyond overthrowing the enslavers.

The events in *The Tragedy of King Christophe* begin after the assassination of Dessalines, who was ambushed and killed in Pont-Rouge, near Port-au-Prince, while he was on his way to deal with a rebellion in the south of the country. The play begins with a power play epitomized by a cockfight, an allegory that reflects and foreshadows the central problematic of the play. The cockfight, a familiar spectacle in Caribbean culture, becomes a metaphorical battleground on which power, dominance, and liberation are played out, mirroring the dialectic of master and slave.[1] The cockerels, trained to fight to the death, serve as proxies for their masters, the human characters of the drama. The power dynamics of the cockfight reflect the power dynamics between the characters, particularly Christophe and his rivals for power, embodying their struggle for control and dominance in the new Haitian state. However, in a profound deviation from Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Césaire emphasizes the destructive consequences of this struggle for dominance through the symbol of the cockfight. The cocks' fight to the death results in the mutual destruction of both parties instead of leading to a resolution and a synthesis. The fight foreshadows the tragic outcome of Christophe's reign.

Becoming King Christophe I

Césaire's depiction of the fractious power dynamics in Haiti amid the aftermath of the civil war is portrayed through the abortive attempt at the reunification of Haiti spearheaded by Christophe. Upon witnessing the physical and societal devastation of his nation, Christophe halts his onslaught against Pétion, espousing the prospect of a truce and potential reunification. However, we observe a discourse laden with derogatory disdain within Pétion's camp, dismissively questioning Christophe's suitability to rule Haiti.

> PÉTION: Indeed, Christophe proposes the reunification of the island. It goes without saying that it would be under his authority, his royal munificence deigning, no doubt, to distribute among you and me some paltry rewards, the stipends of low-level sinecures. In short, we would

[1] The master-slave dialectic unfolds as a fight to the death for recognition and freedom, where one party, the master, seeks to assert dominance over the other, the slave, who, in turn, seeks recognition as an equal being. This struggle involves a process of mutual recognition, with each party affirming their self-consciousness through the other. This dialectic is mirrored in the cockfight at the beginning of the play.

become the subjects of His Most Christophean Majesty!
A REPRESENTATIVE: That's outrageous!
A REPRESENTATIVE: No deals with that tyrant!
A REPRESENTATIVE: That puffed-up pasha!
A REPRESENTATIVE: Better Louis XVIII than Christophe!
A REPRESENTATIVE: May Heaven take vengeance upon him! (Césaire 2015, 30).

Confronted by this stark display of division, Christophe's anguish echoes the narrative of African colonization, wherein intra-population discord is cast as a central element in Africa's disempowerment. In Christophe's speech, 'dust' symbolizes disintegration and devastation, while stone symbolizes 'creation'. Thus, his determination crystallizes in the resolve that "the human material needs recasting" (Césaire 2015, 31), a sentiment that grows into the driving impetus that defines the rest of the play. Césaire's theatrical endeavour in the play can be expansively construed through this idea of recasting humanity, posited as the essential component of 'true decolonization'. Christophe wanted to execute a vision of a new trajectory for Haitian history by reshaping Black existence. He grappled with the daunting enormity of the task of recasting humanity. Césaire depicts him as a leader ensnared in the labyrinth of unknowing, unable to devise a concrete strategy for his project of recasting humanity. He asks, "But how? I don't know. We'll do what we can in our nook of the world. In our little workshop! The smallest country in the universe is immense if the hand is broad and the will does not falter. Forward Much!" (Césaire 2015, 31). Christophe's goal is to *find* a people and build a civilization. For him, the questions of how to recast humanity and what Haiti needs are intertwined, reflecting his vision for Haiti's second liberation. If the first liberation was solely focused on the emancipation of slaves from physical bondage, the second liberation marks a "transition from damaged consciousness to autonomous consciousness," inaugurating a process that requires slaves to "expose themselves and abolish the being-outside-of-self that is precisely their double" (Mbembe 2021, 50) in the Hegelian sense.[2]

In his decolonization theory, Frantz Fanon articulates a distinct framework that incorporates both *hermeneutics* and *pedagogy* grounded upon a political discourse concerning property and ownership (Mbembe 2021, 53). The battleground of proprietorship is primarily rooted in the idea of self-ownership. These conflicts symbolize endeavours to regain, reclaim, and, if required, forcefully retrieve what is intrinsically ours and rightfully belongs to us. If slavery, as Christophe laments (Césaire 2015, 37), dispossessed Blacks in Haiti, then "to own oneself is nothing other than a step toward the creation of new forms of life that could genuinely be characterized as fully human" (Mbembe 2021, 53). Mbembe's reading of Frantz Fanon shows us that for Fanon, existence was synonymous with creation, with the act of producing something, especially time. The primal historical Event is time itself, which serves as the bedrock for all subjectivity, or, in other words, as the foundation for all self-awareness and self-recognition.

In Haiti, being, or existence, was not simply located within the dimension of time but was actively formed through it, by it, and, to some extent, because of it. This interpretation

[2] Hegelian philosophy of the master-slave dialectic presents this externally imposed identity as the 'double'. According to Hegel, the dynamics of recognition between the master and the slave led to a struggle that forces the slave into a dual consciousness – a consciousness that sees itself not only through its own eyes but also through the objectifying gaze of the master. This dual consciousness signifies a profound self-alienation, a 'double' existence where the slave's self-perception is heavily influenced by the master's degrading perspective.

suggests that time is not merely a passive backdrop against which Haitian life unfolds, but an active agent in shaping existence and consciousness. Césaire, like Fanon, saw time not only as a stage where history and existence play out, but also as an intrinsic part of being, shaping our consciousness and subjectivity. For instance, long after Christophe instituted his *creation* to usher Black people into history, his critics remarked that his initiatives would fail because they transgressed time, meaning that they were outside the European progression of history. His friend, Wilberforce, counselled him in a letter that "one does not invent a tree, one plants it! One does not extract its fruits but allows it to bear them. A nation is not a creation, but rather a gradual ripening, year by year, ring by ring. Sow the seeds of civilization. We must give time due time" (Césaire 2015, 36). Wilberforce's reasoning – notwithstanding his good intentions given his prominent role in the abolition movements – is laden with European thought, which saw natives as people "located outside of time" and considered that "Europe had the monopoly of that essential human quality we call the disposition toward the future and the capacity for futurity" (Mbembe 2021, 53). Wilberforce sees time as a gift of civilization that Christophe, in his uninitiated form, should learn to wield. However, he fails to see that Christophe is trying to create something new to proclaim the existence of his people, aiming to establish their place in history.

Christophe is obsessed with founding a people and a country. He consequently orchestrates the establishment of a kingdom in the North as an act of refusal to accept the continued servitude of Black people, which turns into an act of Black people projecting their identity. Finally, he morphs into what Mbembe calls "an act of refoundation, a sign, and Event" calculated to inaugurate a future. Christophe sees this future as a moment of "self-creation" and "invention" (Mbembe 2021, 44). Césaire depicts him as a master craftsman, moulding a malleable Haiti into the desired shape. In outlining his vision, Christophe extols the virtues of redemption, rebirth, and regeneration, with his linguistic choices reflecting his aspiration for construction, establishment, unity, and transformation (Césaire 2015, 22). His solemn pledge to the Haitian populace embodies his unwavering commitment to their well-being, encapsulated in his vow:

> I will never permit on any pretext whatsoever the return of slavery or any measure contrary to the freedom and full exercise of civil and political rights by the people of Haiti, and I will govern with only one end in view: the interests, happiness, and glory of the Haitian family of which I am the head (Césaire 2015, 23).

In this solemn pledge, the Haitian monarch firmly asserts his commitment to ensuring the freedom and preservation of the rights of the Haitian people. This declaration reflects his resolve to prevent the return of any form of enslavement or any action that could infringe upon the civil and political liberties of his people. The reference to "any pretext whatsoever" implies Christophe's staunch resistance to any subtle, covert, or manipulative mechanisms that could reintroduce oppressive systems or practices. He articulates his sole governing principle as being the pursuit of the Haitian people's interests, happiness, and glory and envisions himself not just as a ruler but as the head of an extended Haitian family, thus evoking a sense of unity, shared destiny, and collective welfare. This familial metaphor underscores Christophe's personal and emotional investment in his people and political responsibilities. He aims to elevate Haiti, restore its dignity and prosperity, and instil a sense of pride and accomplishment among its people. Christophe's speeches epitomize Fanon's idea of decolonization as "a struggle to

own oneself" and become one's "own foundation" (Mbembe 2021, 55) while forging a distinctive, autonomous path forward.

Christophe believes that a monarchy is what Haiti needs. Consequently, he lets his secretary, Vastey, persuade the people of the need for a monarchy. Vastey frames the need for a monarchy in terms of upholding Black dignity. He suggests to the citizenry that the restoration of the Black man's dignity and the assurance of his position within the sphere of humanity can only be achieved through establishing a kingdom, signified by a crown. In his words:

> The whole world is watching us, citizens and its multitudes think that black men lack dignity. A king, a court, a kingdom – that, if we want respect, is what we must show them. A leader at the head of our nation! A crown on that leader's head. That, believe me, would calm those heads in which windy ideas could, at any moment, unleash a storm on our own heads right here!" (Césaire 2015, 15).

If Christophe's plan was to forge a path for Haiti that does not maintain servitude beyond the first liberation or breed "new forms of servitude", it remains to be seen whether a monarchy was best suited to deliver this promise. Although Christophe's monarchy is a historical event, Césaire deploys it not only to underscore the challenges of nation-building in Haiti but also to use Haiti's history as a backdrop and crucial resource for his exploration and critique of the decolonization process and the emergence of new African nations (Cohen 1973). Christophe's form of state and his relationship to it eventually determined the tenor of his decolonization. While it is not clear at this stage of the play whether Vastey's reasoning concerning the monarchy as amplifying Black people's dignity will hold, especially if we consider that the recognition he talks about depends on the 'Other' – an act that depicts the institution of the monarchy as an initiative aligned more with the first liberation, which merely sought to break free from physical bondage, than with the second liberation (self-abolition), which leads to 'self-ownership' – Christophe embarked on a long process of searching for a 'creation' that will inaugurate the Black people's journey to *disalienation*: "a precondition for the creation of a new species of men and of new forms of life, that is, forms of life that could genuinely be characterized as fully human" (Mbembe 2021, 55). Disalienation points to a process of reclaiming selfhood and agency that had been suppressed and lost under the oppressive system of slavery. Thus, to be fully human was to be restored to freedom, autonomy, and self-determination. For Vastey, slavery had engineered, among Haitians, a gap between image and essence (Mbembe 2021, 55), which the establishment of the monarchy seeks to close. However, for Christophe, this gap between image and essence called for radical decolonization beyond the institution of a form of government. To restore the self to image necessitated a new strategy that would not only achieve this feat but also inaugurate something new that would ultimately locate Haitians in *time* and *history.* In other words, the future of Haitians was at stake in this form of decolonization.

What form of *creation* will then lead Haitians down the road of good decolonization? Christophe's engineer, Martial Besse, suggests an invention befitting "patrimony". This idea pleases Christophe, who imagines a citadel (Césaire 2015, 40), which aligns with his desire to create a legacy that embodies his vision of a self-sufficient, prosperous, and independent Black nation. More importantly, the magnitude and complexity of constructing the citadel on a steep slope underscores Christophe's need for a creation that goes beyond making minor progress to inaugurating

his people as artisans who, to use Mbembe's parlance, while moulding minds, substances, and shapes, does not need to replicate pre-existing templates. The citadel appears to be a seemingly impossible project that the people must make possible to affirm their collective consciousness and transcend their biological limits, as Christophe pronounces: "Against fate, against history, against nature!" (Césaire 2015, 40). Christophe understands that as slaves, Haitians had been trapped in a situation without opportunities for self-ownership, and confined to a limited range of actions. They could only produce activities as immediate extensions of their body and to the benefit of their masters. How, then, can such people transcend their limitations in the present moment and engage in expansive and ultimately universal actions and interactions characteristic of humans?

Christophe saw labouring on the citadel as a framework for bringing to fruition a new Haiti, or what Mbembe describes as:

> A new species of men, endowed with a new essence. Men who are no longer limited or predetermined by their appearance, and whose essence coincides with their image. Their image is no longer something separate from whom they truly are. Nor is it, as in the colonial dispensation, something that does not belong to them. There is no longer a gap between this image and the recognition of oneself as one's own property. Only such "men" can create new forms of life, free from the shocking realization that the image through which they have emerged into visibility is not their essence (Mbembe 2021, 54).

The image above is that of a new 'man' who is no longer limited. These individuals no longer bear the burden of their existence being circumscribed or predestined by their skin. This depiction departs drastically from the colonial circumstances where their image was alienated from them. Christophe also saw the citadel as a symbol of liberty and nation-building, becoming Haiti: "Built by the whole people, men and women, children and elders, built for the whole people!" (Césaire 2015, 40). It was to serve as a fortress, a massive breastplate of stone. Impregnable, thus signalling a new, secure Haiti. Ultimately, the citadel was to stand as a monument that cancels the slave ship to mark a new social order in Haiti. However, Christophe miscalculated in believing that a well-built and completed *creation* alone would foster self-consciousness among the people. He failed to grasp how the idea of labour was the crucial factor that could guide emancipated slaves toward self-awareness.

Self-Abolition as Good Decolonization: Labour and Haiti's Second Liberation

Césaire imbued 'labour' with the capacity to create, redeem, and destroy. In the master-slave dialectic, redemptive labour is a fundamental mechanism through which the enslaved forms self-consciousness. The enslaved, through labour, achieves a consciousness of self that the master, dependent on the slave's labour but not involved in it, does not attain. The labour of the enslaved becomes an embodiment of their own subjectivity, a manifestation of their inner world in the external one. In other words, the transformation of the natural world through labour is a reflection and assertion of the self-consciousness of the slave. This Hegelian dialectic offers a compelling paradigm through which we can read Christophe's mobilization of Haitians for the construction of the citadel. Christophe issues a royal decree pronouncing that "liberty cannot exist without labour" (Césaire 2015, 40). The decree suggests that work is not merely an act of survival or subservience but a crucial means through which Haitians can achieve self-realization

and liberation. In other words, through labour, Haitians will acquire a greater self-consciousness, demonstrating labour's dynamic, transformative potential.[3] However, this dialectic uncovers a complex layer of power dynamics in Christophe's Haiti. In his attempt to secure Haiti's self-autonomy, Christophe inadvertently imposes a forced labour regime on his subjects. His good intentions and determination to achieve progress at all costs paradoxically constitute him as a master, with the Haitian labourers as his slaves. Instead of being a liberating process leading to self-consciousness, labour functions as a tool of oppression. For instance, First Lady and Second Lady question Vastey as to whether "the path of liberty and the path of slavery would be one and the same" (Césaire 2015, 46). Vastey's inadequate response is that Christophe is working hard to ensure that "never again, anywhere in the world, shall there be a young Black person ashamed of the color of her skin, who finds her color an obstacle to realizing the wishes of her heart" (Césaire 2015, 60). Christophe is oblivious to the people's suffering under his strict labour regime. He admonishes the Council of State for their efforts to intercede for the tired and broken citizenry, in need of a much-deserved break from building the citadel. He asks, "What was this country before the coming of King Christophe?" (Césaire 2015, 60) and asserts that the country was "shit" (Césaire 2015, 61). His derogatory language implies that Haitians lack the willpower to develop the country and, as such, must be compelled to work.

The irony lies in the fact that Christophe, in his role as the 'master' of the Haitian household, fails to recognize the humanistic value of the labour of his subjects. In his single-minded pursuit of the citadel as a manifestation of Haiti's second liberation, he unwittingly recreates the oppressive dynamics he sought to overcome, thereby underlining the tragedy of his reign. Redemptive labour would have fostered a greater self-consciousness and unity among the workers, giving rise to a collective identity defined not by their former enslavers but by their own collective efforts. Toiling and transforming the landscape to construct the citadel would, in essence, have shaped the workers' identity and collective consciousness. Only in this framing can we construe the peasant's labour as a transformative and emancipatory act.

Bad Decolonization

If we construe bad decolonization as an act of creating a new Haiti based on the existing plantation structure, then Christophe's tragic flaw lay in the assumption that he could enact Haiti's second liberation without fundamentally dismantling the deep-rooted structures of colonization. His first error was perhaps to misconstrue Haiti's greatest need

[3] Alexander Kojeve's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures of the Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1980) explains how Hegel's master-slave dialectic emphasizes the transformative power of labour and its role in the metamorphosis of the slave's consciousness. The fundamental premise in this dynamic is that the master compels the slave to work, which consequently leads to the slave's domination over nature. Originally, the slave succumbed to the master's power because he was himself subjugated to nature, influenced by his instincts for self-preservation. However, through labour, the slave transcends this inherent bondage to nature and his instinctual self, thereby achieving a form of self-liberation. Work becomes the medium of emancipation, breaking the shackles that bind him to his own nature and, by extension, liberating him from the control of the master. His transformation of the natural world via labour allows the slave to construct a new reality – a technologically altered world wherein he exercises authority. The authority that the slave gains through work is distinct from the immediate authority the master initially possessed. The slave, through the process of labouring, transcends both the physical environment and his own innate limitations. He transcends the master, who remains bound to the unaltered, given world. In this view, the master's power, rooted in the slave's fear of death, is essentially a catalyst for historical progression. However, it is the slave's labour, transforming the world and himself within it, that actualizes and refines this progression.

as the desire for recognition from the French. Vastey, Christophe's secretary, lays down the case for a monarchy as a state that Napoleon will recognize, thereby uplifting Black people's dignity. For instance, the creation of a court for a Black kingdom using European signifiers illuminates the convoluted complexities of such a project. The entire ceremonial rehearsal is predicated on the fabrication of a corporeal comportment that would be identifiable within the context of a European court. The Master of Ceremony pronounces: "To walk well, you must hold yourselves straight without stiffness, direct your legs in a line, never move to the left or the right of your axis, make your body participate imperceptibly in the collective motion" (Césaire 2015, 21). This ceremony, possessing a carnivalesque aura, functions as an exercise in the fabrication of bodies, underscoring the intricate mechanisms of subject formation, whether unintentional or premeditated, embedded in Christophe's initiatives. Rather than solely elevating Africans as per Christophe's imagination, the ceremony reveals how these Black individuals are constructed as subjects under a Black King. The revelation raises the question: Is this the type of future Christophe envisions for Haiti? Even when Christophe uses naming, which Tolliver (2022, 484) refers to as 'griffes', meaning both 'claws' and 'signatures', as a sacralizing gesture to bind people and land to his power structure, aiming to create a bulwark against the flow of European-dominated capitalism, his reliance on racial categories and the establishment of an aristocracy based on these divisive identities undermines the goal of creating a unified and decolonized nation.

The framing of Black people through the lens of European symbols and rituals is both a powerful and a troubling aspect of Christophe's vision, which Césaire unpacks in the play, revealing the tensions within postcolonial identity formation. Christophe becomes frustrated that Blacks cannot recreate the European court, thus gaining the much-desired recognition of the French. His court was an act of overreaching himself. Terry Eagleton, writing in the context of Macbeth, counsels that "when a man overreaches himself, he brings others and himself to nothing, to the condition of inert objects or corpses" (Eagleton 1970, 7). Christophe's life is wedded to the lives of his fellow Haitians, and as such, any act that does not alter their lot in life is an act of self-destruction. By becoming King, Christophe projects himself beyond his community but unfortunately fails to re-articulate the terms that define this community. He plunges into a state of delirium as he attempts to set up a new community, which fails because it keeps the plantation structure intact.

Metellus, the loyal servant-turned-rebel, offers an invaluable critique of Christophe's rule and the pitfalls of 'bad decolonization'. Césaire deploys this character to represent the oppressed Haitian populace, which experiences a perverse form of emancipation under Christophe's rule, where the chains of slavery have merely been supplanted by the tyranny of one of their own. Césaire crafts Metellus as a character that embodies the tribulations of the Haitian people, having endured the horrors of slavery and the arduous struggle for freedom. Metellus' first-hand experiences and the vivid descriptions of his trials lend a palpable sense of authenticity to his critique. He harks back to the era of their shared struggle with Toussaint, painting it as a period when their bloodshed had meaning, symbolizing their collective drive for a common body politic. His metaphor of "glorious, raucous blood" and the "bitter cassava" used to dress their wounds vividly encapsulates the spirit of their struggle, highlighting both its harshness and its noble purpose (Césaire 2015, 26). However, Metellus' disappointment and disillusionment surface when he contemplates the fruits of their struggle: the redeemed land they had envisioned as a sanctuary for all Blacks has turned into a "battlefield", symbolizing the "double tyranny" of Christophe and Pétion (Césaire 2015, 26).

The theft of Hope, once the beacon guiding their fight, is perhaps the most profound of his grievances. Metellus humanizes Hope, describing her as a fearless madwoman who called to their timid blood, spurring them away from complacency and towards their freedom. Nevertheless, this Hope, like the promised land, has been desecrated. Metellus accuses Christophe and Pétion of debasing their motherland, reducing it to "a trivial, contemptible puppet" in the eyes of the world (Césaire 2015, 26). Herein lies Metellus' rebellion, an incisive indictment of Christophe's (and Pétion's) rule, symbolizing the collective dissent of the oppressed Haitian populace. His rebellion thus serves as an emblem of the deep-seated discontent within the populace, highlighting the pitfalls of Christophe's rule and the unfulfilled promise of a truly emancipated Haiti.

Metellus' execution highlights the inherent paradox within postcolonial Haitian society. Despite Haiti's proclaimed freedom from colonial chains, Christophe's rule, ironically, mirrors the authoritarian tendencies of the French slave masters, suppressing dissent and stifling the voice of the oppressed. In this light, Metellus' death signifies the quelling of a voice that dared to critique and resist the regime's deviation from the emancipatory ideals of the revolution. Metellus' demise is not simply a personal tragedy but rather a broader allegory of the failed promises of the Haitian revolution and the perilous path that postcolonial Haiti had taken under Christophe's rule.

Towards a True Decolonization

Césaire's question at the beginning of the play was: What is Haiti's greatest need? Christophe's attempt at answering this question failed, as his 'creations' ultimately brought agony and suffering to his subjects, prompting them to rebel against his rule. This chain of events culminates in his tragic suicide. We suggest that Haiti's greatest need is intricately tied to the aspirations and dreams of the Haitian peasantry. The peasants perceive the emergence of new landowners as a blatant violation of their freedom, a contradiction to the spirit of post-emancipated Haiti.

> SECOND PEASANT: When we beat the whites back into the sea, that was to have this land for ourselves, not to toil on the land of others, even if they are black, but to have it for ourselves (Césaire 2015, 45).

The Peasant speaks of the initial purpose of their revolution – to expel their white oppressors and reclaim the land for themselves. Theirs was a struggle against physical bondage and economic subjugation, symbolized by the ownership of land, the most fundamental resource for survival and prosperity. The peasant's lament points out a tragic irony of their post-revolutionary reality: they are still labouring on land owned by others, even if those owners are now their fellow Black countrymen. This fact indicates the continuation of their economic subjugation and challenges the idea that they have genuinely achieved freedom. Despite the change in the colour of their masters, their condition remains fundamentally the same. They are still landless labourers, a reality that starkly contradicts the promises of the revolution. This critique underscores the necessity for a genuine decolonization process that dismantles the colonial era's economic structures and ensures an equitable distribution of land and resources among the people. The peasant's lament also critiques Christophe's failure to dismantle plantation land policies and distribute land to peasants. Instead, Christophe substituted the exploitation of Black people by French slave masters with the exploitation of Black people by a new class of Black landowners.

Given the brutality of Christophe's rule, some peasants debate whether a republic could be better than a kingdom. Unfortunately, they frame their concern within the rubrics of the

first liberation – escaping physical violence. Oppression impedes them from conceiving of life beyond the first liberation in terms of self-awareness or self-abolition. First Peasant's response captures what I believe is Césaire's response to the question: What is Haiti's greatest need?

> What I love is the earth (land).
>
> I believe in the earth that I work with my own arms,
>
> but the fat King won't put it in our arms to keep (Césaire 2015, 68).

The First Peasant's statement reveals a deep-seated yearning among the peasants for land ownership – a tangible symbol of freedom and self-determination. It points to an unconscious understanding that the form of the state – whether a republic or a kingdom – is not as crucial as the economic structures that govern their lives. The peasant's declaration of love for the land underlines their intimate relationship with it, viewing the land as a living entity they engage with through labour. This love represents the idea of self-ownership, self-awareness, and self-abolition, wherein the peasants see themselves as autonomous beings capable of defining their destinies through their engagement with the land. The king's refusal to distribute land, symbolized as the "fat King" withholding the earth from their grasp, reflects the ongoing exploitation and the lack of genuine emancipation. In this light, Césaire seems to argue that Haiti's greatest need is not simply a specific form of governance but also a substantial transformation in its socioeconomic structures. This transformation would involve transitioning from a society marked by economic exploitation and class disparity towards a more equitable society where the fruits of labour and land are accessible to all, leading to a truly liberated and self-aware citizenry.

Conclusion

Christophe's failure cannot be attributed solely to his character or leadership style; he was shaped by the early 19th-century political and socioeconomic conditions that relegated Black people to slavery. Critics of the play frequently criticize Christophe's pursuit of a Eurocentric style of monarchy without addressing the difficulties of developing a new system of governance under the constant threat of France re-establishing slavery in Haiti. Even Pétion's policies are scarcely better and hardly advance the formerly enslaved towards self-liberation and consciousness. Instead, they pose a risk of plunging Haiti into the belly of the French empire. Christophe's citadel and palace were meant to show that Black people could liberate themselves from physical bondage and move towards self-determination. However, his critical errors were his preservation of the plantation economy as a means of attaining self-determination and his failure to create a governance system that could address the complexities of a capitalist system built on exploiting Black people. Capitalism, reliant on slave labour, struggled to conceive of a system based on redemptive labour.

Through redemptive labour, Mbembe's assertion that the philosophical meaning of decolonization as an event lies in an active "will to community" becomes intelligible. He notes, "This will to community is another name for what could be called the will to life. Its goal was to realize a shared project: to stand up on one's own and to create heritage" (Mbembe 2021, 3). King Christophe can be construed as embodying this will to community and will to life in his efforts to build an independent and proud nation following the liberation of Haiti. Césaire's goal in this play and in his subsequent plays – *A Season in the Congo and A Tempest* – was to inspire the newly independent countries in Africa and the African diaspora to grasp the complexity and contradictions of the decolonization process. He cautioned that brutal and oppressive methods, as seen in *The*

Tragedy of King Christophe, suggest that the will to community, pursued without regard for individual rights and freedoms, can lead to new forms of tyranny and oppression. Just as leaving the plantation's economic structure intact derailed Haiti's journey towards attaining the second and true liberation, the newly independent countries will also fumble and fall. The plantation's economic structure determines what one does (i.e., one's role in the economy) and who one becomes (i.e., social identity) within the postcolony. The structure of this system inherently shapes the individual and collective consciousness, thus influencing the modes of interaction, the range of potential relationships, and the overall societal dynamics. Therefore, only a complete overhaul of this structure can pave the way for decolonization as self-awareness.

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