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From *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti*

**Michel-Rolph Trouillot**

*Introduced and translated from Haitian Creole by Mariana Past and Benjamin Hebblethwaite*

*Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti*, or *Controversial Issues in Haitian History* (1977) was the first book published by Michel-Rolph Trouillot. He wrote it soon after emigrating to the United States from Haiti to escape the Duvalier dictatorship. This narrative historical account of the Haitian Revolution, from 1791 to 1803, has received little attention because it was composed in Creole, was not circulated widely, has been out of print for decades, and has never been translated. But Trouillot’s book, henceforth *Ti difé boulé*, is important because it shows how Haiti’s Revolution holds the clues to interpreting and critiquing the country’s more recent history. Instead of following the epic tradition glorifying revolutionary heroes, Trouillot delivers an iconoclastic critique of the European-inspired traditions of governance displayed by the rebel generals—Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Henri Christophe, and Alexandre Pétion—while re-examining the fundamental but underappreciated contributions of the Haitian slave masses in the revolution.

In a well-documented yet accessible manner, drawing from Haiti’s popular storytelling tradition, proverbs, expressions, and songs, *Ti difé boulé* explores the rivalries, murders, and gamesmanship that mark the formation of the Haitian state and traces their harmful effect upon the evolution of the state in independent Haiti. Each chapter opens with lines of verse that draw the reader into the analysis by creating the sense of an informal oral performance. In this way *Ti difé boulé* calls readers to engage with Haiti’s problems through an inalienable Haitian frame of reference, asserting the pivotal role of the Haitian people and the Creole language in the continuing struggle for liberation. As Laurent Dubois observes in a recent *Transition* article about Trouillot (issue 109), woven into *Ti difé boulé* are the “central themes that would guide and shape Trouillot’s work over the coming decades: respect for multiple historical perspectives, the centrality of the Caribbean peasantry in the region’s past, present, and future, the power of silence, and the power of breaking silence.” As part of a broader movement to write in Creole, including novelist Frankétienne’s famous 1975 novel *Dézafi* (an excerpt of which is included in this volume), it was, Dubois writes, an attempt to “bridge the gap between the French language historiography
Kòd Noua pou maré ti kochon

li vann viann...
...ak tout épis ladann!

Gin youn paket atik nan Kòd Noua-a ki té la pou konsévé fos ponyèt ésklav yo, pou société-a té ka kontinié minmman parèyman. Loui 14 mandé pou yo pa koupé manb ésklav yo san rézon, pou yo pa krazé ponyèt yo, pou mèt yo ba yo manjé, bouè, dòmi (atik 22 rivé atik 27). Li mandé pou ésklav yo souflé lédimanch, pou mèt-ésklav yo pa séparé ti bébé ak manman (atik 6-7-12).

written by Haitian intellectuals and the historical knowledge propagated” in other contexts, through “song, ceremony, objects, story-telling, painting, and debates in households like those he had listened to growing up.” In a nation where the majority language is still marginalized in the context of the state and education, *Ti difé boulé* stands tall among the first generation of books that initiated the process of expanding the Haitian Creole corpus of scholarly publications. The following selections are taken from our forthcoming original English translation of this work.

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These two selections from Chapter 2 explore the history of the Code Noir and how it operated on slave society. This chapter outlines the hierarchies of power within the former French colony of Saint Domingue, wherein the Black Code consistently and predictably favored white plantation owners over the slaves. In straightforward terms Trouillot conveys his Marxist analysis of the contradictions in the colonial system—which foreshadows the predatory role of the Haitian state in society, following the revolution.

**A Black Code/Cord to Tie Up the Little Pig**

He sells meat...
...with all the spices within!

The Black Code contains a ton of articles that are meant to conserve the energy expended by the slaves, so that the society would be able to keep functioning in exactly the same way. Louis XIV mandated that they not dismember slaves without reason, that they not crush their arms, that masters give them food, drink, and rest (articles 22 through 27). He ordered that slaves rest on Sundays, and that masters not separate babies from mothers (articles 6-7-12).

In truth, the Black Code declared that slaves be given food, but at the same time it clamped down on them. A slave didn’t have any rights. They considered him like any other kind of property, like a horse, a dog, or a chair, a table. The Black Code said it like this: **a slave is a piece of furniture**! The slaves were not allowed to buy or sell anything (article 18). They weren’t allowed to approach the State for anyone, even if the others had abused them (article 31). They didn’t have the right to carry either weapons or “big sticks” (article 15). If they raised a hand to the master of the house, to the woman of the house, or to the children of the housemaster, the housemaster had the right to kill them (article 33).
Kidonk mézanmi, nou jouinn 2 travay Kòd Noua-a tap fè nan Sindoming:

1) konsèvé fòs ponyèt klas anba-a
2) anpéché klas anba-a souké kò-l.


dappiyanp sou bonanj

Mouin pa konn si nou konprann. Atik sila-a, zôt té fè li éspré pou bay tout ésklav yo maladi jé pété pandan 33 jénérasion. Savé k-ap étidè sa k-andédan tèt mounn ki fè yo pa bourik, fè nou konnin sè laparoli ki ridé youn nonm ak oun fam pliziè réfléchi! Sè paròl tout vouazinay ki ridé vouaziní réfléchi. Mín pou vouazin palè, fò yo rankontré, fò yo réyini. Fèmín réyinion sè fémin laparòl. Fèmín laparòl sè fémin réfléksion. Fémin réfléksion sè fémin libèté...


Lè nou konnin jan yo té séparé afrikín yo nan Sindoming, nou ouè pi byin ki jan Kòd Noua-a tap chèché marè ésklav yo. Lè Kòd Noua-a déklaré li vépa ésklav réyini, minm si sè pou fète mariaj, sè kòm si li té pran nanm pép la, li mété-l nan youn ja, l-antéré-l anba tè.
So, my friends, we find two functions that the Black Code had in Saint-Domingue:

1) preserve the energy of the lower class
2) keep the lower class from becoming agitated.

But that wasn’t enough for some. Because, in order to take up arms, to strike the master and his wife, the warped idea had to occur in your head, and there had to be something behind it. Also, the Black Code arranged itself in such a way as to prevent the idea of revolution from entering the head of the slave. Article 16 bluntly “outlaws the assembly of slaves from different properties, whether by day or by night, whether for weddings or for other reasons, whether it’s in the house of a white person, or elsewhere. As for meetings on the highway, or in the backwoods, that is not possible.” The article required the beating of slaves who didn’t obey the law, and if they began again... they should be killed. Article 17 reinforced this law: if the masters gave the slaves any room to organize meetings, the masters had to pay the consequences.

Attacks on common sense

I don’t know if you understand. This article, those who wrote it intentionally wanted to blind the slaves for thirty-three generations. Scholars who study what’s in the mind that makes one not a fool, have made it known that communicative interaction helps a man or a woman think! It’s the words of the neighborhood that help neighbors reflect. But for neighbors to converse, they have to meet one another, they have to come together. To shut down meetings is to shut down speech. To shut down speech is to shut down thought. To shut down thought is to shut off liberty...

The Black Code attacked the common sense of the powerless people of Haití. For us to fully understand this type of attack, we must understand how the colonists split up the slaves in Saint-Domingue. The colonists intentionally never put slaves who came from the same tribe in Africa together. Thus the slaves who were in one house didn’t serve the same lwa, or vodou spirits, or speak the same language. The colonists did that so they would force their own ideas and their own language into the heads of the African slaves of Saint-Domingue. But the slaves showed off to the masters. They took the colonists’ language and they wound it up in a bunch of African languages and they established Creole. They took the religion of the colonists, they wrapped it in their own religion and they produced Vodou... That’s what made a lot of scoundrels not want to see either Creole or Vodou.

Be advised, I’m not taking a stand for either Creole or for Vodou. No language is better than any other one. Native criminals are ready to tell people bad lies in good Creole. No religion is better than another. Some people also use Vodou to disrespect the Haitian people.
Laparoli sé younn nan doua tout nonm ak tout fanm fêt avè-l. Sé doua pou di: <Bonjou kòmè>, pou kòmè di: <Kouman nou yè>. Sé doua pou réponn ak lajoua: « Pa pi mal non, makòmè, min si nou mét ansanm lajounin démin va pi bèl ».

... ...

kasé kòd

Mézanmi, M-pa konn si n-ouè sa, min laloua pa sinp jan yo vlé fè n-kouè-a. Laloua sé youn zam nan min klas opouvoua yo pou kinbé sosiété-a ting fas. É zam sila-a frape pliziè koté, pliziè manniè. Nan Sindoming, Kòd Noua-a té la:

1) pou ridé réprodui fós kouray ésklav yo
2) pou anpéché ésklav yo jouinn okazion révolté
3) pou anpéché ésklav yo réfléchi sou sitiyasion yo
But like it or not, Creole and Vodou are the first two battles that workers had on Haitian soil under the foreign colonists. But, let’s return to the Black Code…

When you understand how they separated the Africans in Saint-Domingue, we see better how the Black Code sought to tie up the slaves. When the Black Code declared that it denied slaves the right to assemble, even for the celebration of marriage, it’s as though it stole the soul of the people, it put it in a jug, and then buried it underground.

Speech is one of the rights that every man and woman is born with. It’s one’s right to say: “Good morning, dear sister,” for a woman to say: “How are you.” It’s a right to respond joyfully, “Not bad, dear sister, but if we get together during the day, tomorrow will be more beautiful.”

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Breaking the Code/Cord

My friends, I don’t know if you see this, but the law isn’t as simple as they want us to think it is. The law is a weapon in the hands of the classes in power, so they can clasp the society tightly. And this weapon strikes on many sides, in many ways. In Saint-Domingue, the Black Code was there:
4) pou fé ésklav yo vi-n dosil
5) pou kasé féy kouvri éksplouatasion ak krim kolon yo
6) pou anpéché lôt klas (ak lôt katégori) pran pozision pou ésklav yo
7) pou anpéché nèg lib kolé tèt ak blan kont boujoua fransé yo.

Mézanmi, min nannan Kòd Noua-a. Késion pou nou ta mandé koulie-a sè èské yo té obéyi la loua sa-a? E késion sa-a trinnin youn lòt: sa k-fè yo suiv youn régléman, sa k-fè yo pa okipé youn lòt?


Lè sa-a, prériè jès klas éksplouatè sè fé kalè klas anba-a. Tout mounn konnin sè Ti Piè suivi la loua, Ti Piè pral nan prizon. Sa sè youn. Min yo pa touti mété tout youn klas nan prizon. Kidonk, si atout sa, klas anba-a kontiniè voyé piè, klas anlè-a gin 2 bagay li kapab fé:

1) Li ka ralé kòd la pi séré pou bay klas anba-a youn ti chans rêsipirè, jan sa fèt o Chili pa égzanp.


Nou vlé konn konman sa rivé? Nou vlé m-di nou, mézanmi ki kalité siklon Azèl ki té pasé sou Sindoming? Inbin, chita, koutè... Lamési, ban-m ti tak té koton ankò. Paròl sa-a mandé réfléchi...
1) to help reproduce the output of the slaves
2) to hinder the slaves from finding opportunities to revolt
3) to keep slaves from thinking about their situation
4) to make slaves be more submissive
5) to cover up the exploitation and the crimes of the colonists
6) to keep other classes (and other categories) from taking the side of the slaves
7) to keep the free blacks from uniting with whites against the French bourgeois.

My friends, these are the inner workings of the Black Code. The question we should ask now is whether they obeyed that law? And that question begs another: What made them follow one rule, and what made them disregard another?

You already know the law is a code/cord that the upper class (or classes) put in place to tie up the lower classes. But we also know that the more Lamèsi’s bean pot heats up, the more smoke rises. In the same way, the more inherent contradictions in the society are advancing down the road of struggle, the more the lower classes begin to ignore the law.

At that moment, the first move of the exploitative class was to have the lower class beaten. Everyone knows that if Ti Piè doesn’t follow the law, he goes to jail. That’s one thing. But they can’t put an entire class in prison. Thus, even if in spite of that, the lower class continues to revolt, the upper class has two things it can do:

1) It can tighten the cord even more in order to deprive the lower class of a chance to breathe, like they did in Chile for example
2) It can lengthen the cord to deceive the lower class, to make the lower class think it has the right to go where it wants to. But it’s not true, the cord is never untied, it’s merely lengthened, like they do in New York for example.

In Saint-Domingue, from 1700 to 1791, the upper classes (the powerful colonists) tried to play with the cord like a little child who gets tangled with a kite in a whirlwind. They let it go, they pulled it, they pouted. Nothing worked. They pulled harder on the cord. They came up with articles that were still stricter than the Black Code. But, the contradictions were still simmering, and a class they are exploiting, is not just any kite! It’s a kite with razor blades on its tail! In 1791, what happened? The kite broke the cord.

Do you want to know how that happened? Do you want me to tell you, my friend, what kind of hurricane Hazel came through Saint-Domingue? Well, sit, listen... Lamèsi, give me another drop of té koton, cotton tea. These words require refreshment...
Kouzin sé pa sa ou té di-m

ay
lavi gin lè l-gin mistè
souvan m-bliyé nou tout sé frè


Dégizman fanmi-an pat égzisté nan sosiété Sindoming la sèlman. Nou jouinn li nan idéyoloji ni aristokrat, ni boujoua an Éròp yo. Nou jouinn li an
In this excerpt from Chapter 7—the conclusion to Ti difé boulé, and by far the longest chapter—forms part of a scathing critique of Toussaint Louverture’s political vision. Trouillot exposes how the concept of “family,” which is common within all societies with African origins, is manipulated by Louverture as a form of control. He is generally obsessed with advancing his own political objectives, and the Haitian people begin to suspect that he is no longer trustworthy. Trouillot explores many of the problems with Louverture’s leadership, from his refusal to redistribute land to the ex-slaves, and his insistence that they work the land against their will (to produce commercial crops instead of subsistence crops), to his execution of his nephew Moïse, whose populist left-leaning political vision threatened Louverture.

Cousin, That’s Not What You Told Me

Oh my
Life appears to have mysteries
I often forget that we are all family

The first disguise that Louverture’s ideology puts on to mask contradictions is that of “family.” Louverture’s ideology claims: instead of society being a bundle of classes, it is a single FAMILY. When Toussaint saw the workers refused to work on plantations, he told them, “As much as we had to sacrifice for our former masters, we should give that same effort to society, to contribute to the enormous family we’re in.” On whatever plantation, wherever little people were slaving away for big shots, the ideology gave them the disguise of “family” (Constitution of 1801, Article 15). Each plantation is a family, and “each worker of the soil, each laborer is a member in that family” (Article 16).

The family disguise didn’t only exist in Saint-Domingue’s society. We find it in both aristocratic and bourgeois ideologies in Europe. We find it in France before, during, and after the Revolution of 1789. Even in Saint-Domingue, as in all African countries or countries that have African descendants, the disguise of the family takes hold more effectively, because it dovetails with the special role that families and neighborhoods play in those societies. In the same way, Louverture’s ideology takes full advantage of that disguise. Every problem in society, every contradiction between classes or categories of classes, appears disguised as problems “in the family” that can be resolved “in the family.” I wouldn’t be surprised if Toussaint himself got trapped in that disguise. Gilles Bréda (Moïse Louverture) and Charles Bélair were passed off as his “little nephews.” (That didn’t keep him from shooting Moïse, and it didn’t keep
Frans, anvan, pandan, apré Révolision 1789 la. Min nan Sindoming, tankou nan tout pèyi Lafrik osnon pèyi ki gin désandan afrikin, dégizman lafanmi-an pran pi byin, pasé li fè jouinti ak rôl espésial fanmi ak vouazinaj joué nan sosiété sila yo. Ositou, Idéyoloji Louvèti-a dòmi nètalkolé sou dégizman sila-a. Tout problèm nan sostié-t, tout kontradiksion pami klas osnon katégori klas yo, parèt maské kòm problèm « an fanmi » ki ka rézoud « an fanmi ». Mouin pa ta sézi si Tousin k-Tousin té pran nan dégizman sila-a. Jil Bréda (Moyiz Louvèti) ak Chal Bélè té pasé pou « ti névé-l ». (Sa pa anpéché l-té fizié Moyiz, sa pa anpéché Désali-n pran Bélè an trêt, min parol <névé> sa-a té ridé ranjé dégizman an rédchêch). Sé sou minm roulib sa-a toujou, Louvèti té joué rédchêch pou fôsé nièss li, youn fi Chansi, (youn fanm nouè) marié ak Kolonèl Véné (youn milat) pou montré kouman nouè ak milat sé minm kôt fanmi-an. Sé sou minm roulib sa-a Désali-n pral chêchê marié prôp pitit pa-l, Sélimèn, ak youn milat (Pétion). Kôm ti fi-a pat vlé, Désali-n fè arété minnaj mamzél la, youn sètin kolonèl Chansi, youn nèg rouj nan minm fanmi Chansi sa-a, prôp névé Tousin Louvèti... Kôm ki diré, gin dé lè Listoua komik ak dlo nan jèl. Prôp fanmi Tousin Louvèti té pral nan méra idéyoloji lafanmi sila-a.

Min, kité névé, pran tonton...
Dessalines from calling Bélair a traitor, but the word “nephew” definitely helped keep the disguise in place. It was under that same pretext that Louverture played hardball to force his niece, a girl named Chansi (a black girl), to marry Colonel Véné (a mulatto) to show that blacks and mulattos are an undivided family. It’s under that same pretext that Dessalines will try to make his own daughter, Celimène, marry a mulatto (Pétion). Since the daughter didn’t want to, Dessalines had her boyfriend arrested, a certain colonel Chansi, a red-skinned man from that same Chansi family, Toussaint Louverture’s own nephew... That’s to say, apparently a comic and tragic History. Toussaint Louverture’s own family would get caught in the trap of that “family” ideology.

But let’s leave the nephew, and take up the uncle. The family ideology is a disguise that is extremely useful to classes or groups in power, it’s a disguise that can fit any kind of situation. It’s a disguise that allows anyone to be stuffed in the same sack, depending upon the political situation. The “family” can include all of humanity, for example: the giant family of “man” the religions love to mention, as if all people are brothers and sisters. The family can include everyone with the same ancestors: the “indigenous families of Saint-Domingue.” The family can include everyone of the same color: “the big black family.” The family can include everyone from the same

Pou Tousin Louvèti liminn, dégizman lafanmi an té kouvri ninpòt ki group: tanto nouvo-lib yo, tanto ansyin-lib yo, tanto tout mét-bitision. Min, nan kondision politik épézial Sindoming lan, poutèt dominans pròp katégori pa-l la tap chèché tabli nan sosité-a, an 1798-1801, pou Tousin Louvèti, fanmi an sé té tout <mounn>, tout <dividi> ki té pilè té Sindoming é ki té dakò ak prinsip libètè jénéral la.

department: “Brothers of the South;” everyone from the countryside: “Brothers of the backcountry.” In the history of Haiti as a country, the family ideology primarily serves to maintain color prejudice. Likewise, economic and political supporting joints are welded together, and property owners and big mulatto businessmen consider themselves like one big family that can do anything they want on Haitian soil. In the same way, the “noiriste” opportunists (especially middle-class blacks and black property owners) say: no, we are also in the family. We have more rights than mulattos because the Haitian family is a family of black people, so if we abuse the people, it’s like a big brother beating up a little one!

For Toussaint Louverture himself, the “family” disguise covered any kind of group: sometimes the ex-slaves, sometimes the mulattos, sometimes the masters. But in the particular political circumstances of Saint-Domingue, given the dominance that his own group was trying to establish in society, in 1798-1801, for Toussaint Louverture, the family was every “person,” every “individual” who set foot on Saint-Domingue and agreed with the principle of “general liberty.”

Everyone, whatever his or her social class, was in the family so Toussaint could perform his second stunt: that of being the father.●