

Henry Christophe and Aimé Césaire

Doris Y. Kadish, University of Georgia
dkadish@uga.edu

Henry Christophe, a towering physical presence in his lifetime, retains an imposing presence in Caribbean history. He is also somewhat of an enigma who has been discursively constructed in widely variant ways. While some accounts depict a brutal despot besotted by the trappings of monarchy, others describe a humanitarian leader devoted to improving the lot of the downtrodden. Although both interpretations can be supported with evidence from his reign as king of Haiti, the more positive interpretation is especially compelling. The American-schooled black Prince Saunders, whom Clarkson dispatched in order to assist Christophe in instituting an educational system in Haiti, wrote upon his arrival in 1820, “The people of the South part of Haiti who had lived under the governments of Pétion and Boyer were at the least calculation twenty years behind the people of the Kingdom in their habits of industry and their improvements in the arts, sciences, and manners of civilised society.” (Cole 274-75) After Christophe’s death, Wilberforce wrote, “I cannot mention Haiti without interposing a word or two concerning this same *tyrant*, as now that he is fallen it seems to be the fashion to call Christophe. If he did deserve that name, it is then compatible with the warmest desire in a sovereign for the improvement and happiness of his people; and I must also add that all the authentic accounts I have ever heard of him have led me to believe that he was really a great man, with but few infirmities.” (Cole 275) All things considered, Christophe’s monarchy was more egalitarian and dedicated to the economic and educational betterment of the former slaves than Boyer’s republic. As David Nicholls observes, “In the kingdom, then, there was a considerable spirit of equality in spite of the elaborate façade of aristocratic hierarchy, while in the republic a careful reading of the constitution as well as an examination of the practice, would reveal that, despite talk about the sovereignty of the people, real power was in the hands of a small self-perpetuating elite.” (Nicholls 59)

In 1963, Aimé Césaire depicted Henry Christophe in the dramatic work entitled *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*. Did he view Christophe’s commitment to the black masses as entitling him to be considered a precursor of “negritude”? Among the numerous definitions of this complex term, Doris Garrison distinguishes between “Senghor’s apparently nostalgic, even mythological brand of Negritude and Césaire’s arguably more revolutionary emphasis on a revolt born of the memory of a shared history of oppression.”¹ (Garrison 74) Garrison’s emphasis on memory carries with it an implication of black agency. Negritude for Césaire is what blacks think, remember, and understand. It is not what they are, in some essentialist sense, by national origin or race. Nick Nesbitt’s provides an illumination definition of negritude that foregrounds the notion of black consciousness: “Negritude refers to a collective self-understanding of the African diaspora emerging from a common experience of subjugation and enslavement.” He goes on to point out that “both Césaire’s term and the subsequent cultural movement that took this name emphasized the possible negation of that subjugation through racial struggle and affirmation, of which the Haitian Revolution is emblematic.” (Nesbitt 21)

Christophe would seem to be a precursor of negritude in the Césairean sense of the term. But Césaire’s *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* is complex, and his treatment of Christophe in that work is ambiguous. If it is true that Césaire links Christophe’s reign to key components of

negritude, it is also true that he does so in a way that impels us to reflect upon the shifting meanings of racial identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is unquestionable that the experience of subjugation and enslavement, central to the concept of negritude, was the basis upon which Christophe, the ex-slave, strove to construct the identity of the Haitian people. As an illustration, one can look at the correspondance he exchanged with Thomas Clarkson from 1816 to 1820.² Having been rebuked by Grégoire, who was appalled by the North's rejection of the principles of republican government, the leader of the Haitian monarchy turned to England and Haiti's British abolitionist allies. (Sepinwall 183-84) Clarkson welcomed the opportunity to serve as friend, foreign policy advisor, and good-will amabassador to a nation that had realized his dream of emancipating blacks and proving their moral and intellectual equality with whites. Christophe's accomplishments—instituting a new code of law, breaking up large plantations, developing irrigation, disciplining the army, promoting education—impressed Clarkson and confirmed his deeply held beliefs in the perfectibility of free blacks. Indeed, in 1819, suffering from poor health, he expressed the desire to come to Haiti and spend the rest of his days there. (Griggs 181) The letters exchanged between the two men reveal a common aspiration to elevate the "nouveaux libres" through progressive social programs.

The letters between Christophe and Clarkson also indicate a substantial disconnect between the two men, however. Although Christophe is deeply appreciative of Clarkson's lifelong concern for blacks worldwide, real Haitians in the present moment are the king's chief concern. While Clarkson presses him to take action to prevent slaves from entering the Spanish part of the island of Hispaniola, Christophe makes it clear that not interfering in the affairs of their neighbors is a fundamental article of the Haitian constitution. In a letter dated November 18, 1816, Christophe emphasizes that the past enslavement and struggle for independence of his country alone is at the center of Haitian identity: "We have always believed . . . that we should enjoy quietly within our frontiers the liberty and peace which we have bought with our blood" (Griggs 98). Christophe also makes it clear that improving the lot of the Haitian people through public education, agricultural reforms, land distribution, and other social programs is his chief goal; in short, that he is more interested in the oppressed themselves than the cause of the oppressed. Regarding foreign relations, Christophe also actively constructs a Haitian identity that, while benefiting from Clarkson's interventions on his behalf, distinguishes itself as grounded in the experience of subjugation and enslavement. Whereas Clarkson repeatedly cautions him to act strategically with the French, even warning him that France will never acknowledge Haiti's independence without indemnities to the former colonists, Christophe refuses to quench the flames of hatred for his people's former oppressors: "we all abhor the French and their oppressive Government" (Griggs 100). That hatred is what separates the North and the South, he claims. How, he wonders, can Pétion welcome on Haitian soil French envoys whose ambition is to re-enslave the Haitian people? "After having tried to massacre our entire population and failed in the attempt, how could France convince anyone by a declaration that she would rule in Haiti as over a free people?" (Griggs 101).

Christophe's words here and in other texts conform then to a definition of negritude in which racial struggle and affirmation is front and center. Often referring to "the cause of the Africans and the Haitians, their descendants" (Griggs 128), Christophe locates the roots of Haiti's indentity in the Haitian Revolution and the ongoing battle to preserve the nation's independence. Shortly before his death, he authorized Clarkson to pursue informal talks with French officials regarding recognition of Haiti's independence. But he specified that he would not negotiate around indemnities or special trade privileges for France. Clarkson continuously pushed him on these

issues, reminding him that, if he refused to come to an agreement with France, Boyer would not fail to do so, which in fact he did in 1825. But Christophe remained firm in his rejection of the humiliating idea of former slaves compensating those who enslaved them. At the heart of Christophe's construction of Haitian identity was the love of independence and the horror of European tyranny³

Matters are far less clear-cut, however, when we look at the component of negritude referred to above as "collective self-understanding." Did Christophe believe that the black masses could be brought to an understanding of the past injustices and future goals of their race? In the monarch's correspondence with Clarkson and proclamations issued to the Haitian people, education is the cornerstone of such understanding. But it is not what we today would call an Afrocentric education, in which the descendants of slaves learn the historical importance of African and diasporic cultures. Instead, Christophe and his followers such as Pompée-Valentin de Vastey and Juste Chanlatte subscribed to the same notion of "regeneration" as did whites and non-whites from the South of Haiti at the time. Regeneration "entailed not only the immediate granting of citizenship to oppressed groups and thus their formal inclusion in the nation, but also special measures to change them." (Sepinwall 95) Christophe corresponded with Clarkson and sought out his aid in large part because of the Englishman's ability to provide the personnel for Christophe's large-scale project of educating the Haitian masses. This project did not achieve its intended purpose of forming an educated Haitian citizenry aware of its African origins and heroic battles for independence. The blacks who were educated by masters imported from Europe or the United States received the same instruction as white students learning from similar teachers elsewhere in the world. The nineteenth-century notion of regeneration also carried strong religious connotations. All those involved—abolitionists and emancipated Haitians—held that Christianity was the route to the civilization and improvement of blacks. Christophe, a devout Catholic, was no exception. A religious agenda was as essential for Christophe's black monarchy in the North as it was for the mixed-race republican regime in the South which followed the spiritual and political leadership of the abbé Grégoire.

It is around issues such as collective self-understanding and regeneration that Aimé Césaire's interpretation of Christophe differs the most from the construction of Haitian identity found in the nineteenth-century historical record. *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963)⁴ places at the center of the drama the conflict between Christophe and his people, between his vision of what they could become and their unwillingness or inability to comprehend that vision. Césaire's Christophe is hardly ever seen in connection with humanitarian internal affairs such as education. Instead, he is driven by the masculinist, military vision of building a Citadel as an expression of the people's self-realization. The first act depicts his entourage's lack of understanding of his mission. The second act shows his growing frustration, his inability to listen to the people, and the eventual recourse to violence. The third act portrays his dying days. It enacts an imagined passage from the fraught reality of Haiti to an idealized, originary home in Africa.⁵ Whereas Haiti represents the happy ending in white stories of abolitionism,⁶ for Césaire, writing in the early 1960s, it is a cautionary tale for African dictatorship. Christophe's ill conceived expectations exceeded the reality of the present condition of black people. The lonely, tragic, visionary figure that Césaire depicts is not the man who had such a close personal relationship with Clarkson that, upon the black king's death, Clarkson and his wife welcomed Mme Christophe and her two daughters into his home for a year. (Wilson 151-54). Instead, Césaire presents abolitionists as incapable of understanding the sense of rage that underlies Christophe's aspirations for black people.⁷

Wilberforce's warning to him—"You don't invent a tree, you plant it. You don't extract the fruit, you let it grow. A nation isn't a sudden creation, it's a slow ripening, year after year, ring after ring" (40); "On n'invente pas un arbre, on le plante! On ne lui extrait pas ses fruits, on le laisse porter. Une nation n'est pas une création, mais un mûrissement, une lenteur, année par année, anneau par anneau" (57)—provokes a passionate outburst that reveals the extent to which Césaire's Christophe views slavery as central to the identity of suffering Africans and their descendants:

If there's one thing that riles me as much as slaveholders' talk, it's to hear our philanthropists proclaim, with the best of intentions of course, that all men are men and that there are neither whites nor blacks. That's thinking in an armchair, not in the world . . . Does anyone believe that all men . . . have known capture, deportation, slavery⁸, collective reduction to the level of animals, the monstrous insult, the total outrage that we have suffered, the all-denying spittle plastered on our bodies, spat into our faces. We alone, Madame, do you hear me, we blacks. From the bottom of the pit we cry out, from the bottom of the pit we cry out for air, light, the sun. (41-42)

S'il y a une chose qui, autant que les propos des esclavagistes, m'irrite, c'est d'entendre nos philanthropes clamer, dans le meilleur eprit sans doute, que tous les hommes sont des hommes et qu'il n'y a ni Blancs ni Noirs. C'est penser à son aise, et hors du monde, Madame . . . A qui ferait-on croire que tous les hommes . . . ont connu la déportation, la traite, l'esclavage, le collectif ravalement à la bête, le total outrage, la vaste insulte, que tous, ils ont reçu, plaqué sur le corps, au visage, l'omni-niant crachat! Nous seuls, Madame, vous m'entendez, nous seuls, les nègres. Alors au fond de la fosse! C'est bien ainsi que je l'entends. Au plus bas de la fosse. C'est là que nous crions; de là que nous aspirons à l'air, à la lumière, au soleil. (59)

It is not only the hatred of slavery that separates Césaire's Christophe from the black monarch who corresponded with Clarkson. It is also the fact that nineteenth-century blacks such as Christophe did not express the affirmation of African identity that Césaire attributes to the Haitian king. The Englishman who tutored Christophe's son, William Wilson, observed that when the king was in contact with Europeans he enacted a regenerated self that, although not wholly authentic, was fundamental to the ideal Haitian that he strove to construct in his own person and, through him, for others: "One great end of his was the attainment of a high rank in the estimation of Europe—to raise himself in their idea from the petty chief of one part of a revolted colony (the colour of which had been long looked upon as degraded) to the place of the great ones of the earth—to exhibit himself as an exception, an anomaly to the body of his race—to redeem himself, if not his race, back to the mass of humanity." (Griggs 215-16)

One need only compare the historical figure of Mme Marie-Louise Christophe and the figure who appears in Césaire's play to realize how far apart the nineteenth-century notion of regeneration is from the twentieth-century concept of *negritude*. Mme Christophe and her daughters, Améthiste and Athénaire, lived with Thomas Clarkson and his family in England for several weeks.⁹ Commenting on the reluctance of Christophe's wife and daughters to appear in public, Clarkson comments: "If they themselves feel something of shyness respecting abolitionists, it arises from their fear of being confounded with Africans. I can pity their weakness. I have observed that very few persons can bear to be reminded of any circumstances in their history which

may be thought degrading. Even Lafayette appeared not quite well pleased with an allusion to the dungeons of Olmütz.” (Griggs 245) Although one may at first suspect that Clarkson is imposing his Eurocentric outlook here, letters from Christophe’s wife suggest that she and her daughters also valued the culture of Europe, where they chose to spend the rest of their lives. (Griggs 247) These women were probably more like Claire de Duras’s Ourika than like Césaire’s Mme Christophe, who near the end of the play speaks and sings in the creole language.

It is at the end of the play that Césaire gives the fullest expression to the twentieth-century notion of negritude, but in a way that is fraught with the ambivalence that he undoubtedly felt toward Christophe’s role in history. One character who reflects that ambivalence is Mme Christophe who, as noted above, speaks and sings in the language of slavery and the black people, creole. The following is one of two creole songs that she sings in Scene 7 of Act 3.

Moin malad m-chouche m-pa sa levé
 M-pral nan nô-é, mpa moun icit-ô
 Bondié rélé-m, m-pralé
 Moin malad, m-pral nan nô
 Bondié rélé-m, m-pralé (bis)
 M-pral nan nô-é, mpa moun icit-ô
 Bondié rélé-m, m-pralé (141)

The omission of creole songs from the English translation of the play significantly diminishes Mme Christophe’s agency as a Haitian woman as well as the African-centered nature that Césaire attributes to her character. As Nesbitt observes regarding the importance of the linguistic components of *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*, “the play itself is an attempt to concretize through language the African diasporic ethical community that Christophe himself failed to achieve.” (Nesbitt 143) Garrison observes that in Césaire’s play *Une tempête* (1969), Césaire “highlights the importance of subjectivity and language to any attempt at decolonization.” (Garrison 82)

Christophe himself most significantly reveals Césaire’s ambivalent view of negritude. Césaire’s goal in negritude of balancing the competing demand for self-awareness in the present with the preservation of African traditions from the past is not a goal that Christophe achieves. That is his tragedy. Throughout the play, in his hurried attempts to transform Haiti into a country that would meet European standards of education and culture, he turns his back on black identity and weakens its meaning. It is too late when, at the end of the play, he reclaims his African origins as a diasporic descendant, calling out “Africa, help me to go home, carry me like an aged child in your arms. Undress me and wash me. Strip me of all these garments, strip me as a man strips off dreams when the dawn comes.” (90). “Afrique! Aide-moi à rentrer, porte-moi comme un vieil enfant dans tes bras et puis tu me dévêtiras, me laveras. Défais-moi de tous ces vêtements, défais-m’en comme, l’aube venue, on se défait des rêves de la nuit.” (147) Increasingly, as the play draws to a close, he flees from civilization into nature, “immersing himself in the mythical realm of the Haitian Vodou gods.” (Nesbitt 137) Addressing himself to an African child rescued from slavery and made into a page at his court, Christophe pays a lyrical tribute to Africa (versified in the translation although not in the original):

Congo, I’ve often watched
 the impetuous hummingbird in the datura blossom

and wondered how so frail a body can hold
that hammering heart without bursting.
Africa, rouse my blood with your big horn
Make it open like a giant bird. (88)

Congo, l'impétueux colibri dans la tubulure du datura, je me suis toujours émerveillé qu'un corps si frêle puisse sans éclater supporter le pas de charge de ce coeur qui bat. Afrique de ta grande corne sonne mon sang! Et qu'il se déploie de toute l'envergure d'un vaste oiseau!

It seems doubtful that Césaire intended Christophe's return to Africa at the end of the play to be viewed as a positive expression of negritude. As critics have observed, in the 1960s, when the play was performed, black tyrants such as Guinea's Sékou Touré and Haiti's "Papa Doc" Duvalier had transformed negritude into debased forms used to support rather than combat the oppression of black people. (Nesbitt 137) Moreover African religious practices are enacted by Hugonin, the most debased of Christophe's courtisans. In the next to last scene of the play, he appears disguised as Baron-Samedi, the Haitian god of death, ludicrously attired and drunk.¹⁰ Similarly negative is Christophe's consecration of Vastey as black despite his mixed-race identity: "So, you are black! In the name of the cataclysm, in the name of my heart which with one gasp of disgust brings all of life back to me, I baptise you, I name you, I coronate you black"; "Donc, tu es nègre! Au nom du cataclysme, an nom de mon coeur qui me remonte la vie toute dans le hoquet du dégoût, je te baptise; te nomme; te sacre nègre." (146)¹¹ Such a racialized viewpoint, which is out of keeping with the outlook that Christophe is known to have expressed in his lifetime, seems to be less about the nineteenth-century king per se than about his twentieth-century descendants, notably Duvalier and his noxious "noiriste" policies.

On the other hand, *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* is not only a cautionary tale for newly independent African states. I would argue that Césaire also presents the black power that Christophe embodied in his lifetime and beyond in a positive light. It is noteworthy in this regard that at the end of the play the men who carry the king's dead body pay a simple tribute of him: "Got to admit he was a tall tree"; "Faut dire que c'était un grand arbre" (150).¹² This simple statement is consistent with the historical record: it is reported that field hands referred to him as "l'homme" ("the man") and would speak of the rebellion and his death as "le temps de notre malheur" ("the time of our sorrow"). (Cole 274-75) This statement also echoes the earlier phrase attributed to Wilberforce, "You don't invent a tree, you plant it." Placed in the mouth of the people, it suggests that a tree was planted that would one day bear authentic Afro-Caribbean fruit.

Christophe's burial also suggests a black empowerment and legacy of sorts. Nesbitt rightly observes that "Césaire refuses to close *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* with a gesture of transcendence that would bypass the antimonies of Caribbean existence." (Nesbitt 140) At the same time, however, he does choose an edifying burial that is in direct opposition to the ignominious abandon within the walls of the Citadel that was the fate of the deposed king.¹³ In the play, Vastey manages to have him buried erect and at the top of a mountain. His towering position in death thus mirrors his stature in life; and the location of his tomb repeats that of his celebrated Citadel, "a towering monument to negritude by the world's first black emperor." (Nesbitt 141) Although admittedly not transcendent, there is something noble about the final image of Christophe: the exalted mountain spot where he is buried; the Haitian soil in which his body is anchored; the erect stature which suggests that his spirit is reaching out in space and time to the future meaning of his

country. The play ends with the implication that his actions, although often cruel and misguided, will not be forgotten. The African page, Mme Christophe, Vastey, and the men who carry his body all mourn his passing. In the final words of the play, Vastey evokes the continuance of his vision:

O pollen-swarmed birds
fashion for him imperishable arms:
on azure field red phoenix crowned with gold. (95-96)

Oiseaux essaimeurs de pollens
dessinez-lui ses armes non périssables
d'azur au phénix de gueules couronné d'or. (153)

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¹ For definitions of negritude, see Garrison 84, note 2.

² See Earl Leslie Griggs and Clifford H. Prator, eds., *Henry Christophe & Thomas Clarkson: A Correspondence*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968).

³ For the significance of the notion of independence in Haiti in the first half of the nineteenth-century, see the forthcoming volume *Poetry of Haitian Independence*, eds. Doris Y. Kadish and Deborah Jenson. Trans. Norman R. Shapiro. New Haven: Yale UP.

⁴ I quote from both the French play, *La Tragédie Du Roi Christophe* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1963) and its English translation, *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

⁵ The meaning of the third act is seriously compromised in Manheim's translation, which omits significant portions of

the original text.

⁶ See, for example, Sophie Doin's novella *La Famille noire*, in *La Famille noire suivie de trois Nouvelles blanches et noires*, ed. Doris Y. Kadish (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002).

⁷ The rage against abolitionists is dramatically depicted by Daniel Maximin in *L'Isolé soleil* (Paris: Seuil, 1981); *Lone Sun* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989).

⁸ The original text designates both "la traite" (the slave trade) and "l'esclavage" (slavery). That Manheim translates both as "slavery" suggests a lack of awareness or sensitivity to the difference between them.

⁹ See Cole 275-78 and Gibson 151-54.

¹⁰ Joan Dayan reports that under Duvalier the Tonton Macoutes wore sunglasses and deliberately dressed like the Baron Samedi: "Vodoun, or the Voice of the Gods."

¹¹ This and other passages that are essential for the interpretation of race and ethnicity in the play are omitted from Manheim's translation.399

¹² Again, Manheim omits this key sentence. Vastey, the Queen, and the African page are the ones who describe Christophe's burial and address the issue of his legacy in the translation. What is lost is Césaire's acknowledgment of the endurance of that legacy among the people of Haiti.

¹³ For specifics concerning his death and burial, see Cole, 273, 277-78.