

Haiti and its francophone culture

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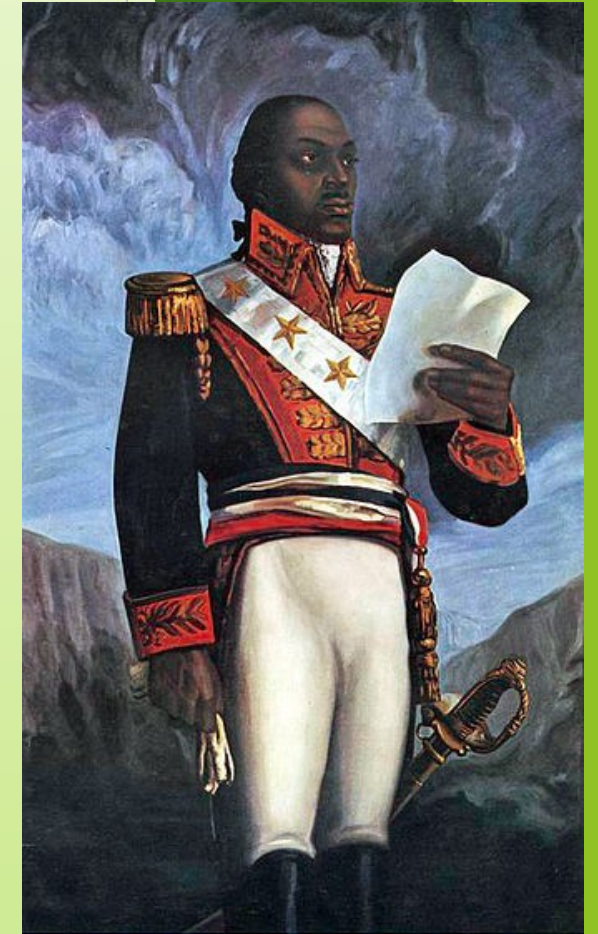
Haiti, officially the **Republic of Haiti**, is a country on the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean Sea. It occupies the western three-eighths of the island which it shares with the Dominican Republic. Haiti is 27,750 km², the third largest country in the Caribbean, and has an estimated population of 11.4 million, making it the most populous Caribbean country. The capital is Port-au-Prince.



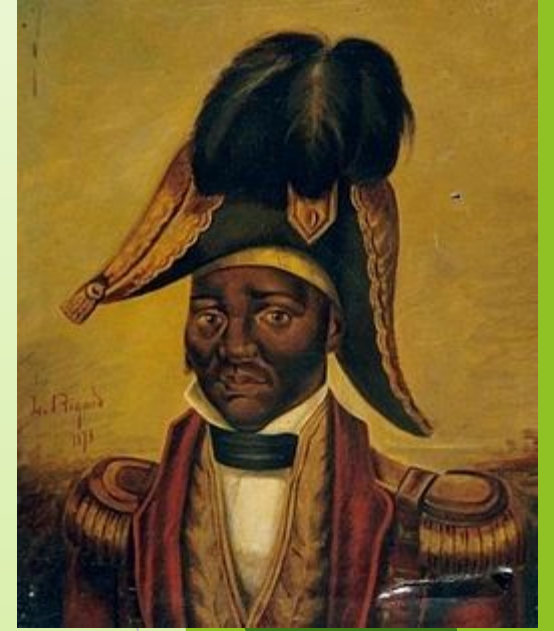
- 1492 **Christopher Columbus** landed on the island of Hispaniola inhabited by the **Taíno** and **Arawakan** people, who called their island *Ayiti*.
- The island was promptly claimed for the Spanish Crown, where it was named *La Isla Española*, later Latinized to *Hispaniola*.
- By the early 17th century, the French had built a settlement on the west of Hispaniola and called it Saint-Domingue with sugar and, later, coffee, indigo and cotton becoming important export crops
- By the end of the 18th century, the colony encompassed a third of the entire Atlantic slave trade.

1791 slaves staged a revolt which led to the Haitian Revolution André Rigaud forced the French to withdraw.

1802 Toussaint Louverture declared independence, Napoleon sent an invasion force to coerce the Haitians, imprisoned Toussaint in France, but Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Henri Christophe, and Alexandre Pétion forced French to retreat



- 1804 Dessalines declared the independence of Haiti and orchestrated a massacre of the remaining French population in Haiti, resulting in over 5,000 deaths purging the island of Europeans.
- 1804-1811 Empire
- After 1811 Republic with Alexandre Pétion



The independence that the formerly most prosperous and most profitable French colony gained at the cost of the bloody struggles of 1791-1804 created suitable conditions for the emergence of an institutional framework and the territorialization of literature. Along with the Anglophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone peripheries of the Americas, Haiti shares the advantage of the political independence gained during the first phase of decolonization in the late 18th and first third of the 19th century.

From the very first years on independence the Haitian state began creating its own institutions:

- 1811 the first printing press, where the *Gazette royale* was printed
- 1811 Opéra du Cap theatre;
- 1815 *Académie royale* was established
- 1816 the lycée (college) in Port-au-Prince
- 1860 Law Academy (École de droit)
- 1905 School of Applied Sciences (École des sciences appliquées)
- 1924 Central Agronomic School (École centrale d'agriculture)
- 1926 Medical and Pharmaceutical School (École de médecine et de pharmacie)

Historiographical works were being produced:

- *Histoires Caciques d'Haïti* (*Cacique Stories from Haiti*, 1837), in which **Émile Nau** bases the island's historical identity on the resistance of the Taíno chiefs
- **Thomas Madiou's** *Histoire d'Haïti* (*History of Haiti*, 1847)
- **Baubrun Ardouin's** *Études sur l'histoire d'Haïti* (*Studies on Haitian history*, 1865)

Territorialization and the appropriation of a Haitian view of history took place at roughly the same time as in Francophone Canada as well as in the emancipation movements of peripheral regions in Europe (for example in the Czech lands, Germany, Hungary, etc.).

The main difference lies in the issue of race and in the accompanying argument against scientific racism, for instance as put forth in Arthur de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (*The Inequality of Human Races*, 1855).

- The idea of biological and cultural white superiority was criticized by two Haitians in particular, **Pierre Faubert** in *Ogé ou le préjugé de couleur* (*Ogé or the Color Prejudice*, 1859)
- **Joseph-Anthénor Firmin** in *De l'égalité des races humaines. Anthropologie positive* (*On the Equality of Human Races. Positive Anthropology*, 1885).
- Both of these polemics were published in Paris. Haiti proudly presents itself as **the first free, unconquered black state in the world.**

The two centuries of Haitian history following independence were filled with traumatic events: economic blockades, government instability, dictatorships, uprisings, invasions, as well as occupations, the longest of which by the United States (1915-1934)

Waves of exiles and repeated natural disasters have contributed to the misery of the island.

In spite of this, Haitian society has created national heroes (Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines), political (Alexandre Pétion) and cultural elites (Jean Price-Mars, Jacques Stephen Alexis, Jacques Roumain) of international outreach, especially for the international **Négritude** movement

New institutions

- 1939 Bibliothèque Nationale
- 1941 Institut d'Ethnologie (1941)
- system of public, private and religious educational institutes
- 1960 Université d'État d'Haïti
- 1988 Université Caraïbe

- Historical circumstances have influenced the linguistic situation and the relationship between Creole, a language which is widespread and shared by all levels of society, and the French of the educated bourgeois elites, mostly mixed-raced
- cultural binarism: oral culture in Creole and written literature in French (written literature adopted oral genres such as the *cont* and *lodyans*)
- The question of language thus permeates the entire culture, including the preservation of oral genres, folk customs, along with religious ideas associated with animistic voodoo practices.
- While the cultural integration of the countryside into the urban environment was concomitant with urbanization, this is also the result of the search for identity and self of the elites, who have referenced their folk roots in literature and culture since the 19th century.
- Paradoxically, the penetration of Creole would intensify under François Duvalier's dictatorship (1957-1971), with the voluntary or forced emigration of Francophone mixed-race elites and professional professions accentuating the need for Creole.
- As a result, it received recognition as an official language in the post-Duvalier Constitution of 1987 alongside French. In the late 1970s, Creole was introduced into the school curriculum and programs, with the orthography also standardized independently of French spelling rules.

Gradually, written Creole as literature was also taking shape.

- poetry collection *Diacoute* (*Pouch*, 1953)
- tragedy *Antigòn* (1953) by Félix Morisseau-Leroy (Felix Morisseau-Lewa)
- Michel-Rolph Trouillot's historiographical essay on the Haitian slave revolt *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* (*A Short Talk on Haitian History*, 1977)
- novel *Dézafi* (*Throes of a Challenge*, 1975) by Frankétienne (Jean-Pierre Basilic Dantor Franck Étienne d'Argent), which also was translated into French under the title *Les Affres d'un défi* (1979)
- Haitian expatriates in Quebec continue to publish literature and cultural information on the bilingual Creole-French website Potomitan, which takes its name from the central supporting "post" of a voodoo shrine.
- <https://www.potomitan.info/>

Literary journals form an almost continuous series from the end of the 19th century to the present day.

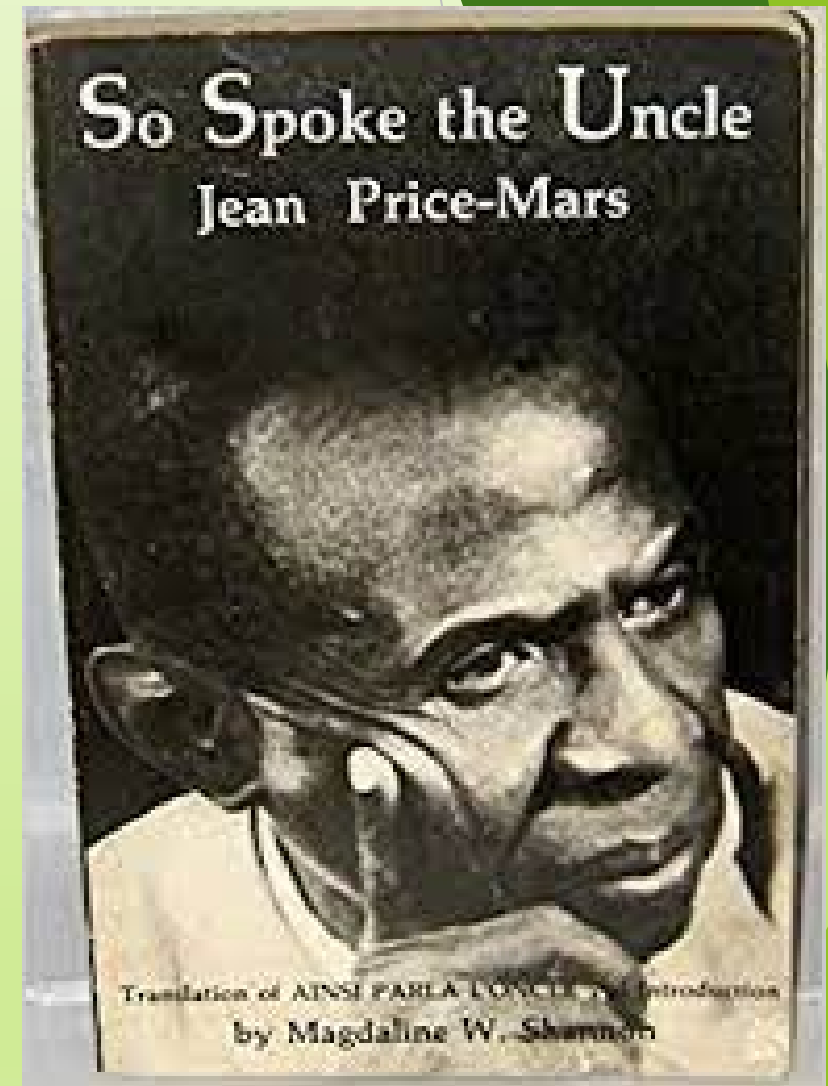
- *L'Abeille haïtienne* was established in 1817
- at the end of the century the Parnassian, decadent, and symbolist review *Jeune Haïti* (1895-1898)
- followed by *La Ronde* (1896-1901) and *La Nouvelle Ronde* (1925)
- modernist *La Revue indigène* (1927-1928) supported the nationalist program, followed by the radical and later more explicitly nationalist *Les Griots* (1938-1940) as part of the Noirism movement
- the avant-garde *La Ruche* (1945-1946) and later *Semences* (1961) published by the Haïti Littéraire movement would open up Haitian journals to an international readership
- *Petit Samedi* (1973-1992) and later *Chemins critiques* (1989-2004, 2017) would be active in Haiti during and after Duvalier's dictatorship
- while *Nouvelle optique* (1971-1973), *Collectif paroles* (1979-1987) and *Dérives* (1975-1987) became organs of Haitian exiles in Montreal.
- This overview is merely illustrative to clarify the link between literary currents and periodicals, even the titles of which suggest a gradual detachment from European movements and aesthetic values.

The shift in the network of relations and ties from Europe to America is also evident within the Haitian literary field

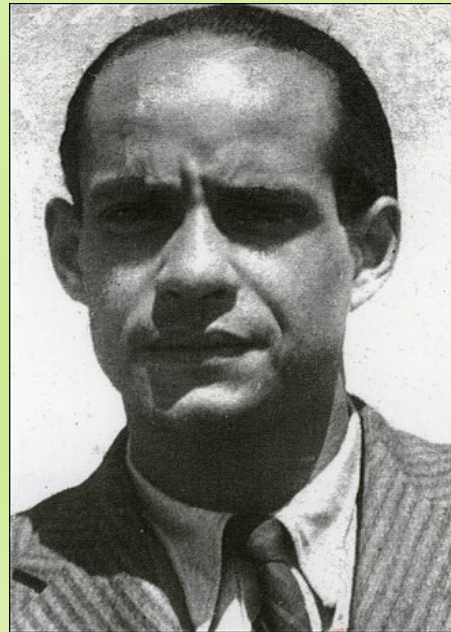
- the attraction of the Parisian center prevailed throughout the 19th and the first half of the 20th century: Haitian writers not only imitated French models, but some writers felt to be a part of French culture, for example Etzer Vilaire (1872-1951), who dreamed of “the entry of the Haitian elite into the literary history of France” (Laroche, 1981, 30).
- As late as the 1950s, we come across a diplomatic statement by Jean Price-Mars in which Haitian culture is assigned the role of torchbearer of French culture on the far periphery:

We are [...] on this side of the Atlantic the heirs of the traditions and civilization of a great country and a great nation which on the world scale represents one of the six or seven powers [...] not so much in territorial size and population, but in the glow of institutions, in the glory of ages of history, and in the sweep and influence of a culture of many centuries. We feel indebted to France [...] and to the world for the stewardship of this spiritual heritage. (Price-Mars, 1959: 102)

Three decades earlier, it was Jean Price-Mars's ethnological work *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (*So Spoke the Uncle*, 1928) that first marked a significant turning point in rethinking the relationship between center and periphery. Not only did this collection of “ethnographic essays” represent an essential impetus for the **Négritude** movement, but it also led, especially within Haitian culture, to a new perspective and appreciation of the Creole and African heritage, for example to the rehabilitation of voodoo and the associated religious ideas, customs and rituals, and to a turning of attention to the Haitian countryside.



Even before the emergence of the Négritude movement, Haitian poets and novelists had founded a review dedicated to Indigenism, *La Revue indigène* (1927-1928). The indigenists, including Carl Brouard (1902-1965), **Émile Roumer** (1903-1988), and **Jacques Roumain** (1901-1944), were not preoccupied with a backward-looking conception of folklore, but were set on integrating local themes into current global avant-garde movements. Jacques Roumain, a friend of the **Harlem Renaissance** exponents **Countee Cullen** and **Langston Hughes**, infused his free verse with jazzy rhythmicity. Roumain's novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944, *Masters of the Dew*, translated by Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook in 1971) combines rural themes and voodoo imagery with a realistic depiction of the Caribbean and Haitian countryside. The work represents a pillar of the modernist canon of Haitian literature as well as proof that the indigenists were at least by mid-20th century moving beyond the local towards the worldly.



It is not our intention, however, to discuss the history of Haitian literature, but simply to delineate here the decisive turning point of the 1930s and 1940s in the process of Haitian deperipheralization.

The Haitian initiatives occurred in parallel to the Négritude movement in Paris, but were independent of it.

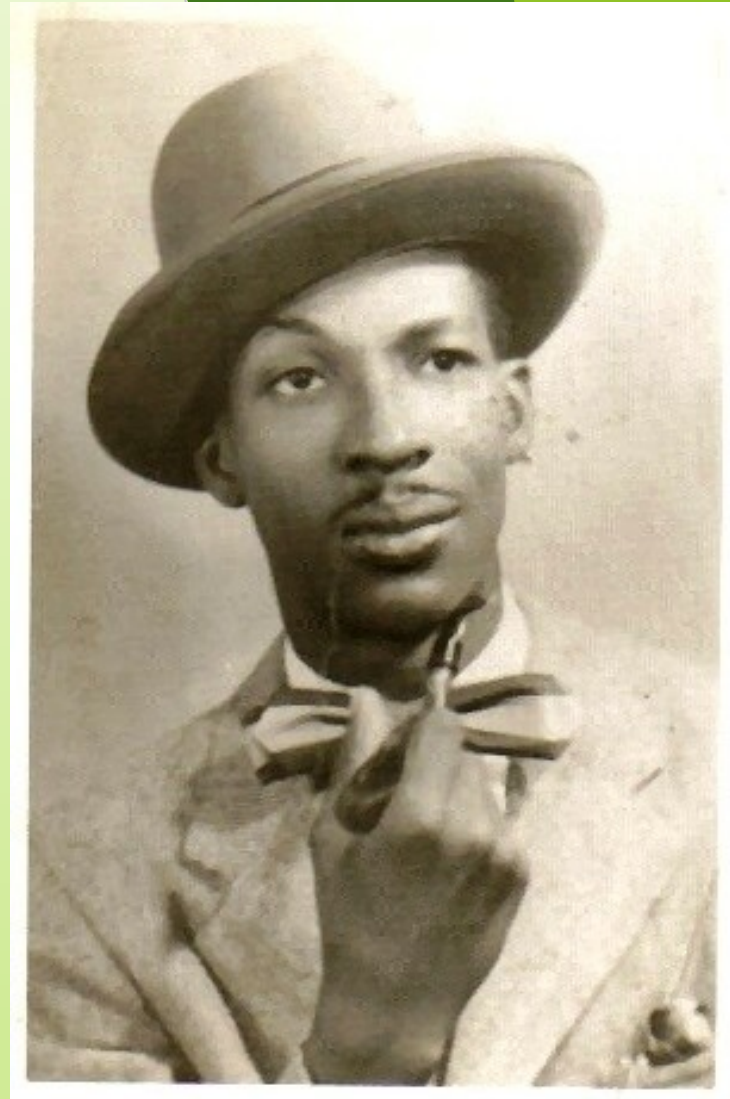
Haiti came to absorb both European and North American impulses:

Clément Magloire-Saint-Aude and **René Bélance** translated Breton's surrealism into a technique of the conceptualism of juxtaposed images, while the **Harlem Renaissance** inspired both the subject matter as well as the poetic technique of rhythmic free verse, as seen especially in the poetry of **Jacques Roumain**.

As early example of these tracks can be seen in Jacques Stephen Alexis's program of **Haitian Miraculous Realism** (réalisme merveilleux haïtien) presented in 1956 at the Sorbonne in **Paris as part of the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists**. The meetings were presided over by Jean Price-Mars. Alexis's lecture Du réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens (The Miraculous Realism of the Haitians) was organized by the Paris publishing house **Présence africaine**, after which the text was issued by the aforementioned publisher in a journal of the same name which is still in existence today. In the lecture, Alexis addresses a global black community with an aesthetic that transcends Négritude:

Everything shows that Haitians have adopted a distinctive approach to art, that there is at present a school of new realism created by Haitians, a school in a state of birth and gradual concretization, a school that we are beginning to call the school of Miraculous Realism, a contribution that we are presenting to the intellectuals of the fraternized black peoples and that, with the contribution of all, could hasten the establishment of this Haitian school on a clear foundation. (Alexis, 1956: 248)

See Real Maravilloso of the Cuban Alejo Carpentier as formulated in his novel *El Reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*, 1949). Translated into French in 1954, this text refers directly to Haiti.



Duvalier's dictatorship period

In Haiti, the group **Haiti littéraire** as well as **Groupe de Cinq** (Group of Five) — **Davertige** (Villard Denis, 1940-2004), **Anthony Phelps** (1928), **Serge Legagneur** (1937), **René Philoctète** (1932-1995) and **Roland Morisseau** (1933-1995) — mark another path towards autonomy. The movement publishes the magazine *Semence* (1961) and hosts the cultural program **Prisme** by Anthony Phelps on Radio Cacique. As Duvalier's dictatorship was emerging, Groupe de Cinq had to limit its involvement to the defense of independent culture, which became one of the areas of civil resistance for a long period of time.

The collective's activities are directed both towards the broader popularization as well as towards theoretical links to other avant-garde movements, particularly **Spiralism**, introduced in 1965 by **René Philoctète** and **Frankétienne** (Jean-Pierre Basilic Dantor Franck Étienne d'Argent, *1936). The spiral metaphor signifies an escape from (literally) dictatorial reality, an upward flight through black humor, formal anarchy and experimental disruption of traditional forms and represents an artistic reflection of existentialism and social instability under the despotic regime of **François Duvalier** (1957-1971), continuing with his son **Jean-Claude Duvalier** (1971-1986). This period also saw **massive emigration**, mainly of the elites in the first wave and later of the pauperized population. The Haitian diaspora around the world is currently **estimated at two million people**.

Haitien diapora in Quebec preserves its identity and distinctiveness

In Quebec, which in the 1960s was undergoing the final phase of Quebec's deperipheralization, a mutual exchange of ideas, debate and criticism was allowed. Thus the Haitian intellectual community within the Quebec cultural context was also able to maintain its identity, integrity and distinctiveness for at least the three decades of the 1960s-1990s. The historical serendipity of the Haitian exile, the deperipheralization of Quebec and the social emancipation of the crucial period of the Quiet Revolution should be emphasized in this context. An influx of French-speaking elites to "Frenchify" public administration and public institutions was essential during this phase, thus Haitian leaders were welcomed and were able to establish fruitful collaborations with Quebec elites on many levels (Kwaterko, 2011: 213-227).

Collaboration of Robert Berrouët-Oriol and Émile Ollivier with the review *Vice Versa* (1983-1996) directed by the Italo-Québécois Fulvio Caccia and Lamberto Tassinari. Robert Berrouët-Oriol's article *Effet d'exil* (Exile Effect), published in 1987 in *Vice Versa* (Berrouët-Oriol, 1987: 20-21), contributed polemically to the debate on the integration of migrant writers into the newly formed Quebec canon.

The Haitians themselves set up their own magazines (*Nouvelle Optique*, 1971-1973; *Dérives*, 1975-1987; *Ruptures*, 1992-1998) and publishing houses linked to cultural centers (Nouvelle Optique, CIDIHCA, Mémoires d'encrier)

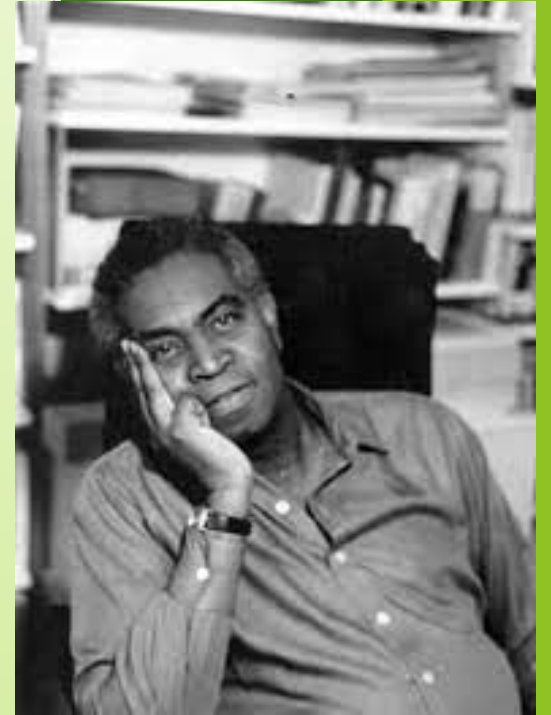
Strong foundations for this broader participation were prepared by the huge first wave of migrants — Émile Ollivier, Gérard Étienne, Antony Phelps, Max Dorsinville, Maximilien Laroche, Robert Berrouët-Oriol, Jean Jonassaint. This was then fully exploited by the second generation, represented for example by the award-winning novelist Dany Laferrière, now a member of the French Academy (although he considers himself an American author). A third generation born in Quebec the 1960s and 1970s includes Stanley Péan, Joël Des Rosiers, Marie-Célie Agnant, Henri Saint-Fleur, and Saint-John Kauss.



Starting from the dichotomy of Quebec's cultural and social tradition as inscribed in the opposition between the nomad-trapper (*coureur de bois*, "runner of the woods") and the settler, **Ollivier** inverts received values in favor of a new conception of nomadism. He argues for the transformations which would take place in a globalized human society:

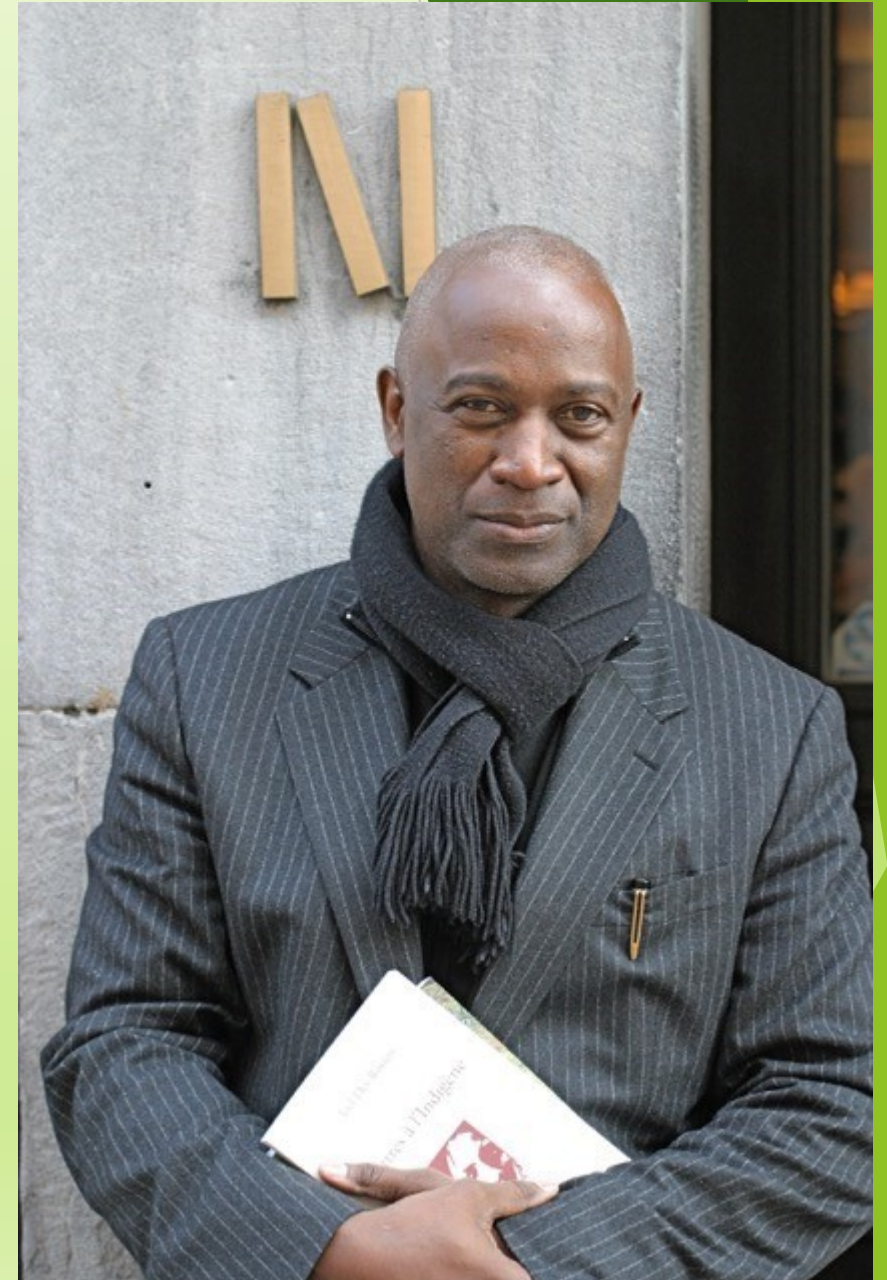
"The notions of exile and **unrootedness**, like homeland or state, are only meaningful for a settler society. It is only because settled societies have prevailed that laws and borders have been imposed on nomadic societies to confine them and prevent them from moving. It is only in this way that the concepts eventually acquired a historical justification that has no natural origin." (Ollivier, 2001: 32)

Unrootedness (*déracinement*) also implies the freedom and liberty of a new human destiny marked by "transnationalization": individual identities are not fixed, but are instead "mutable," individuals are "mutants" within a "fragmented society" in which it is necessary to learn to "live in free zones at the margins" (Ollivier, 2001: 37-39)



Joël Des Rosiers in *Théories caraïbes* (*Caribbean theories*, 1996) operates with the concept of a “postexile” human destiny manifested in the status and work of writers, i.e. it is precisely creation that makes it possible to fill the inner sense of emptiness by finding the Other. Further, Joël Des Rosiers definitively dismisses the concept of an essentialist identity as well as with the notion of national literature:

“Apparently, we have already reached the necessity to do away with the coincidence of language, culture and identity. For us, every language is an expression of foreignness; our rules of art seek to distance themselves from any rootedness. For us, **unrootedness** has a positive value; it brings modernity because it allows hybridization, diversity, openness to the Other within.” (Des Rosiers, 1996: 172)



A number of great authors such as **René Philoctète**, **Frankétienne**, and **Jean-Claude Fignolé** (1941-2017) remained in Haiti throughout, while others like René Belance, Raymond Chassagne (1924-2013) returned to the island before the fall of the dictatorship. Alongside these writers, another generation was entering the scene, including **Pierre Clitandre** (*1954), **Gary Victor** (*1958), **Louis-Philippe Dalembert** (1962), and **Emmelie Prophèt** (*1971). In addition to literature written in French, literature in Creole was also developing.

The **Rex Theatre**, the theatre hall of the **French Institute**, along with many small venues serve the development of theatre.

The **National Library** and the library of the French Institute are linked to a network of public libraries, notably the **FOKAL association** (Fondation Connaissance et Liberté / Fondasyon Konesans Ak Libète / Foundation for Knowledge and Liberty), founded in 1995

The library network of CLACs (Centers de lecture et d'animation / Centers for reading and animation)

Publishing houses

Éditions du Soleil and **Choucouné**, founded in 1970 by the poet Christophe Charles;

Deschamps, managed by Yanick Lahens in the 1990s;

Mémoire, eventually brought to Montreal by **Rodney Saint-Eloi Mémoire d'encrier**

Presses nationales d'Haïti founded in 2004 by Édouard Willems

Éditions de l'Université d'État d'Haïti, **Éditions de l'Université Caraïbe**, **Editha**, **Zemès**, and **Arytos**.