

People Without Shoes: Jacques Roumain, Langston Hughes and their Transnational *Ti Nèg* Aesthetic

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In 1931, the Harlem Renaissance thinker, writer, and activist Langston Hughes travelled to Haiti via Cuba with a young African-American art student named Zell Ingram. During their three-month stay, they developed an acute insight into the lives of the Haitian people and the cultural, political, and economic turmoil wrought by a fifteen-year imperialist occupation by the United States—an occupation which would last at least another three years, but whose effects would continue to be felt long beyond. Their perceptions of Haiti were thus mediated through a subaltern lens. Haiti's radical revolutionary history, inscribed in the built landscape and the subaltern experience, captivated Hughes's imagination. As Russell White notes, Citadelle Laferrière, the mountaintop fortress built to protect the sovereign nation from foreign invasion on the outskirts of Cap-Haïtien between 1805 and 1820, left one of the most lasting impressions on Hughes (2011: 109). However, it was the spectral voices of the numerous and nameless that laboured to construct the colossal edifice, rather than the heroic legacy of the self-appointed 'King' Henry Christophe, who commissioned its construction, that informed his radical creative energies and aesthetic sensibilities. The children's book that he co-wrote with the African American writer Arna Bontemps in 1932 shortly after his return from Haiti, *Popo and Fifina*, became a vital outlet for the rehabilitation of these spectral voices. The narrative recounts the trials and tribulations of two Haitian peasant-children, Popo and Fifina—a brother and sister who, together with their parents, are compelled to relocate from the countryside to Cap-Haïtien so that their father can find work. After several weeks spent revelling in childhood pursuits, Popo is apprenticed to his uncle as a carpenter, and his elderly mentor 'Old man Durand' recounts the affecting story of the Haitian peasants who were separated from their families for over a decade and forced to work under brutally oppressive labour conditions to complete the construction of the Citadel (Bontemps & Hughes, 1993: 77-78). Rich with pathos, Old man Durand's story forces Popo, and indeed the reader, to confront the occluded narratives of the poor men and women that lurk beneath the mythical history of Christophe and his grand military fortress. In this way, Hughes reaches back into the revolutionary past through the rich ancestral memories of

what Haiti scholar Elizabeth McAlister refers to as the ‘*ti nèg*’, or small man, in Haitian culture (McAlister, 2002: 15).¹

Hughes’s short stay in Haiti thus gave rise to a peculiar interest in the customs, history, and resilient revolutionary spirit of the Haitian peasantry, particularly the agrarian poor whom Hughes would affectionately allude to in a succession of writings as the ‘people without shoes’ (2015: 48; 1931: 12). This was an interest that he shared with the Haitian writer and politician, Jacques Roumain, whom Hughes paid a short honorary visit toward the end of his sojourn in Haiti. Though keen to avoid members of the imperious, light-skinned Haitian elite, who paraded their class status in material displays of wealth (harnessing commodities that were often unattainable to the peasant classes such as coats and shoes), Hughes was eager to make the acquaintance of Roumain, with whom he shared a great affinity as an artist and as an intellectual. Indeed, while Roumain had been born into a wealthy Haitian family, receiving all the privileges of an elite European education, his political and artistic aspirations were deeply intertwined with the symbolic values of the Haitian *ti nèg*. His commitment to the cause of subaltern resistance in Haiti (and indeed elsewhere in the Black Atlantic) manifested itself in his writing and his activism. In 1934, he founded the Haitian Communist Party, and was forced into exile for nearly a decade for his seditious activities. During this time, he sought to affirm his interest in Haitian peasant culture by pursuing studies in ethnography at Columbia University. These experiences would compound his aesthetic and political commitment to rehabilitating the often occluded voices of the Haitian poor, their ancestral roots, and their revolutionary reaches.

¹ This is a Kreyòl variation on the French phrase ‘*petit nègre*’ (small Negro/Black). However, in Haitian culture, the term ‘*nèg*’ does not carry the same pejorative racialised baggage as the term ‘Negro’, owing to the fact that the 1805 constitution drawn up by Jean-Jacques Dessalines classified all Haitian citizens as ‘*nègres*’. Article 14 declared that ‘Because all distinctions of color among children of the same family must necessarily stop, Haitians will henceforth only be known generically as Blacks’ (Dubois and Garrigus, 2006: 193). The symbolic resonance of this term has therefore been radically inverted and re-appropriated to reinforce the rhetorical foundations of a sovereign nation. In this sense, ‘*ti nèg*’ would be more appropriately translated as ‘small man’, the subaltern Haitian figure that is viewed in rhetorical contradistinction to the Haitian ‘*gwo nèg*’, or ‘big man’. Jana Evans Braziel talks extensively about the cult of ‘big-man-ism’ in Haiti in her introduction to *Artists, Performers, and Black Masculinity in the Haitian Diaspora*, where she notes that ‘Haiti’s revolutionary history has been citizenized by *gwo nègs*, or “big men,” whose individual lives, heroic (or dastardly) feats, and triumphant (sometimes notorious) deaths are fragile ruins and shard-like makings of legend, or infamy: François Mackandal, Boukman Dutty, Toussaint Louverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, Henry Christophe, Alexandre Pétion, and later the infamous Faustin Soulouque, self-proclaimed Emperor Faustin I, are all included among Haiti’s *gwo nègs*’ (Braziel, 2008:1). This phrase is also deployed in John Houston Craige’s *Black Bagdad* to elucidate intra-national power play between social groups. When the gendarme Darmond addresses a group of rioters in Léogane, he exhorts ‘*Qui moon gros negre icit!*’; as Craige delineates, ‘What he meant was, “Who is the big negro here? *Gros negre* [...] means big negro. Everywhere in the Island it is the creole term for “big boss”’ (1933: 160-161).

Ultimately, both Hughes and Roumain found in the history and culture of the Haitian *ti nèg* an archetypal model for art and scholarship. Their encounter in Port-au-Prince prior to Hughes's departure in 1931 would form the basis of a lifetime friendship articulated through correspondence and collaboration and solidified in the mutual expression of a Haitian peasant aesthetic. In 1943, after his return from exile, and under the administration of the new Haitian president Élie Lescot, Roumain established the *Bureau d'ethnologie* and proceeded to write one of his most influential novels, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* [*Masters of the Dew*]. The novel charts the story of a Haitian peasant community located in the vicinity of Croix-des-Bouquets in the fictional village of Fonds Rouge which has been blighted by drought and ancestral feuds. The novel's protagonist, Manuel Jean-Joseph, who left the village as a young adult to become a *viejo* in Cuba,² returns after fifteen years with a plan to irrigate the land and unite the community. The novel explores the almost symbiotic relationship between the Haitian peasantry and the land that they till, and the 'hidden transcripts' of power anchored in the ancestral memory of rural landowning communities (Scott, 1990: 138-139). In this way, it represents one of the best examples of Roumain's *ti nèg* aesthetic. Although Roumain died shortly after its completion, Hughes would endeavour to preserve its legacy by co-translating the novel with Mercer Cook several years later. In so doing, Hughes extended the ethics of collectivism, class power, and community pride embedded at the heart of the novel to new audiences in the English-speaking world.

This article seeks to interrogate the shared radical vision of Langston Hughes and Jacques Roumain, their fascination with Haitian folk culture, and their emergent *ti nèg* aesthetic. Like McAlister, I use this *Kreyòl* phrase to elucidate 'how the "small man" positions himself in the political patronage system that anthropology calls "big man-ism"' while also rooting it firmly within the lexicon of the Haitian peasantry (2002: 15-16). In this way, I seek to demonstrate how alternative revolutionary narratives formulated from below became symbolically associated with the collective cultural practices of Haitian peasant communities (including, but not limited to, music, labour, language, and worship). The motif of the *ti nèg* is used, in this respect, to shed

² The term 'viejo' is Spanish for 'old man', but, in this context, describes a sugarcane labourer who worked in the Hispanophone Caribbean in the interwar period. As Valerie Kaussen notes, 'the *viejo* character' is used in Roumain's novel to emphasise the 'dialectical relationship between the Caribbean's industrialized spaces and the denuded landscapes of rural Haiti; the *viejo*'s movement traces the pathways of capital that link together these two spaces and that determine their relative development' (2008: 112). The use of Spanish lexicon is therefore important

light on the complex dynamics of power that frame the revolutionary narrative in Haiti, which has been shaped by a long history of class and racial discord that began with the rupture between formerly enslaved and propertied free-coloured rebels at the inception of the Haitian revolutionary saga. Indeed, although Haiti's revolutionary history is often viewed through the lens of iconic *gwo nègs* (or big men), such as Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henry Christophe (Brazier, 2008: 1), such icons ultimately encrypt wider currents of popular resistance that lay at the foundation of a collective, grass-roots struggle (Fick, 1990: 228). This struggle was manifested on the battlefield in a series of militant revolutionary encounters, but it also became inscribed into Haitian identity; it was part of the fabric of enslaved life in colonial Saint-Domingue, and would remain a hallmark of life for the agrarian poor under the administration of successive sovereign rulers in post-independence Haiti. In the wake of emancipation in 1794, and under the jurisdiction of rebel-leader Toussaint Louverture, former slaves were conscripted to continue labouring on the plantations of their former masters (Fick, 1990: 168). The revolutionary iconicity of the *ti nèg* in this sense encapsulates the transgenerational class struggle of the Haitian peasantry against the economic and political establishment. By probing the conceptualisation of the *ti nèg* in the work of Hughes and Roumain, focusing predominantly on Hughes's translation of Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, this article endeavours to show how interwar Haiti sparked the genesis of a Black peasant aesthetic that had significant cultural and political ramifications for Black artists across the transnational Americas. While, in this sense, it extends on the important work of Haiti scholars such as J. Michael Dash, Colin Dayan, and Celia Britton, who illustrate the internationalist Marxist undercurrents in the work of intellectuals such as Roumain and Hughes—in addition to the influence of broader Black cultural movements such as *indigénisme* and the Harlem Renaissance, it also seeks to go further in anchoring this aesthetic resolutely within traditions of Haitian peasant resistance and their repeated, transgenerational articulations in the Afro-Creole imaginary.

in demonstrating the wider globalised nexus of industrial imperialism and, by extension, the need to develop transnational community-led solutions to combating its spread.

As Black Atlantic scholar Paul Gilroy suggests, while black identity is often viewed through the prism of ‘roots and rootedness’, approaching questions of identity ‘via the homonym *routes* [my emphasis]’ might provide a better analytical frame of reference for thinking about diasporic communities shaped by a ‘process of movement and mediation’ (1993: 19). The symbolic figure of the *ti nèg* reinforces Haiti’s multiple routes of resistance, serving to emphasise the cultural cleavages effected by issues of race and class that ultimately led to the evolution of a bitterly divided society whose divisions are still acutely felt. The concept of routes, which, in its plural formulation, points to multiple alternative narrative pathways, also forces a reconsideration of Haiti’s revolutionary narrative, so often told in linear terms and centred around a singular historical moment. Conceptualising the routes of ‘Haitian’ identity, and the identity of the *ti nèg* in particular, helps to expand the parameters of the revolutionary debate, and highlights the divergent ways in which revolutionary acts have been and continue to be articulated. The conventional Haitian revolutionary timeline of 1791 to 1804, for example, compresses a long and complex history of resistance that predates the slave insurrections that spread across the Northern provinces of colonial Saint-Domingue in 1791, and extends through to the present. The Haitian Revolution did not occur, after all, in an ideological vacuum, but was shaped by historic injustices against an enslaved and free-coloured populace. Likewise, the spirit of protest and cultural resilience that has prevailed among poor labouring communities in independent Haiti is a legacy of the historic struggle against the exploitation and violence that undergirded the colonial project. This spirit of protest was manifested in the Caco rebellion against the United States marine occupation during the interwar period and in the rise of the popular Lavalas movement of the 1990s that has seen Jean-Bertrand Aristide canonised as the perennially persecuted leader of a grass-roots struggle against the political establishment.³

With the *ti nèg* at its symbolic centre, the history of the Haitian Revolution is thus better understood in circular, *routed* terms rather than linear, rooted terms: as a process with a continuous, repeating energy upheld by the peasant labouring community. It is impossible to conceive of the rebel plot of the maroon Makandal, for example, who was executed in 1758 (several decades before the outbreak of the first large-scale slave insurrections) for disseminating

³ The Cacos were a group of rural rebels that were galvanized during the occupation by the ex-army officer Charlemagne Péralte. As Dubois notes, ‘as the U.S. occupation became more firmly entrenched, the tradition of the Cacos—rebels in the countryside rising up against the central government in Port-au-Prince—became adapted, quite smoothly, into guerilla resistance against the American forces’ (2012: 225).

poisons in an attempt to contaminate colonial waterworks, as extraneous to Haiti's revolutionary genesis. After all, 'his memory', as Fick notes, 'was sufficient to nourish the long and bitter struggle that would one day lead to [...] emancipation' (1990: 63). It is also unthinkable to separate the coups that unseated Dessalines, Christophe, and a succession of Haitian rulers up until the violent protest that culminated in the assassination of Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam in 1915, precipitating the subsequent United States marine invasion and occupation, from the revolutionary events that preceded them. In present-day Haiti, the spirit of popular resistance among peasant labouring communities is sustained in the frequent protests held on the streets of urban suburbs such as Cité Soleil, Bel Air, and Carrefour, still devastated from the effects of the 2010 earthquake and the subsequent cholera epidemic introduced by United Nations peacekeeping forces. Amidst continuing allegations of corruption and incompetence that surround Haiti's *gwo nègs*, the attorney Mario Joseph has become the figurehead for a popular resistance movement against 'U.N. impunity', seeking legal justice for the victims of cholera and their devastated families (Cholera Accountability). The *ti nèg* has thus been vital to Haiti's historic revolutionary saga, and expanded the routes that lead toward continuing revolutionary possibility in the nation. The revolutionary primacy of the *ti nèg* is symbolised by the figure of '*le marron inconnu*', the bronze statue of an unknown maroon which stands outside the former location of Haiti's national palace, destroyed in the earthquake of 2010 and finally razed in 2012. This statue invariably embodies the 'national conviction' in the revolutionary primacy of the *ti nèg* (Joseph, 2013: 59). Moreover, the survival of this anonymous figure over the infrastructure of the national palace—a grand temple built to house Haiti's *gwo nègs*—is a symbolic testament the *ti nèg*'s revolutionary resilience in cultural memory.

The routes of revolution have also been inscribed in cultural memory via the enduring practices of a rebellious peasant counterculture that strives to preserve inherited ancestral customs while adapting to safeguard itself from persistent assaults by ruling elites. This counterculture represents a way of life which has often been at variance with the ideals of the political establishment (both in colonial Saint-Domingue and independent Haiti). As such, it has often had to navigate marginal expressive spaces, harnessing what Gilroy terms the 'lower frequencies' of power, operating outside of conventional publics in order to survive and reproduce itself for future generations (1993: 37). In Roumain's *Master's of the Dew*, the peasant community of Fonds Rouge conceal their collective revolutionary endeavours from the prying

eyes of the mercenary rural police chief Hilarion Hilaire, the novel's principal *gwo nèg*, whose sole mission is to terrorise the villagers and appropriate their land, by mediating such 'lower frequencies'. Peasant countercultures in rural Haiti, like in other parts of the Americas, reflect the diasporic and creolistic crossings of Black Atlantic cultures. As a syncretic religion that fuses tenets of West and Central African belief systems with the Christian liturgy and pantheon of saints, Vodou remains perhaps the most prominent example of Haiti's rebellious counterculture (Dayan, 1995: 245). However, the broader *ti nèg* counterculture that Hughes and Roumain sought to define is informed by diasporic cultures of performance, community-formation and agrarian labour. Countercultural resistance is articulated in the novel in a variety of ways; through adherence to the Vodou *lwas*, through acts of communal festivity, through labour; and, above all, through a system of agrarian landownership that actively fosters community interaction and cooperation.⁴ Hughes's Haitian oeuvre reflects a similar interest in the rebellious countercultures of the Black Atlantic, especially in 'Congo' drums and the rhythms of Afro-Creole musical forms. These countercultural practices remain important to many Haitian peasant communities in the present. This is a testament to the ideological and cultural resilience of Haiti's peasant community, and affirms the view, held by both Hughes and Roumain, that the 'people without shoes', or peasant classes, were Haiti's true revolutionary legatees (White, 2011: 114).

Moreover, while Hughes's and Roumain's collective body of work invariably demonstrates a concern with broader transnational issues of racial and economic injustice, undoubtedly informed by corresponding Marxist values, it also places at the centre of a revolutionary narrative Black, agrarian-landowning peasant subjects who do not fit the conventional proletarian mould and were ultimately excluded from the narrative of proletarian struggle expounded by Marx (Blackburn, 2011: 57). As they both sought to demonstrate, the revolutionary inheritance of the *ti nèg* is sustained and nurtured in the interdependent relationships between land, labour, and the community. These interrelationships are consolidated in Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* within the motif of the 'coumbite', or *konbit* as it is designated in Haitian *Kreyòl*. In Haitian peasant communities, a *konbit* refers to a community-led initiative

⁴ Although no explicit reference is made to the Haitian *lakou* system in the novel, the commune-oriented village of Fonds-Rouge clearly follows this model. As Dubois notes, the *lakou* in Haiti was often comprised of 'a group of houses—sometimes including a dozen or more structures, and usually owned by an extended family—gathered

centred around collective (agricultural) labour.⁵ This work is often supplemented by music—predominantly by call-and-response labour songs—and facilitated by a group of women who supply food and coffee to sustain the labourers throughout the duration of the working day. The *konbit* is in essence, however, a reciprocal pact whereby those who solicit the support of their fellow community members are implicitly expected to return the gesture when called upon (Smith, 2001: 84-87). In *Masters of the Dew* the *konbit* represents the locus of the Fonds Rouge community's routed identity, and the trope of the *konbit* is deployed by both Roumain and Hughes to signify 'the persistent struggle for freedom and self-determination to the Haitian peasantry' (Kaussen, 2008: 128). It is regarded, in this context, as the apogee of the *ti nèg* experience, and a product of the revolutionary values nurtured by this experience.

The dominance of this trope is registered in the opening pages, as Manuel's father, Bienaimé, recalls an earlier time when 'water had flowed freely' and 'millet had grown abundantly' in the now barren village of Fonds Rouge (Roumain, 1971: 25). During these halcyon times, the reader is led to believe, the *konbit* reflected the sense of concord within the community, which was 'united as the fingers of the hand'. This vision of unity and abundance is contrasted starkly by the images of 'dry weeds' and 'rotten vegetation' that pervade the land in Bienaimé's present, marking the degradation of the communal spirit that had previously reinforced the *konbit*. This is compounded by the pervasive image of 'Zombi Pool', the only remaining water source accessible in Fonds Rouge, described by Bienaimé as 'a pond of mosquitoes' with 'water as rotten as a dead adder' and 'thick stagnant water too weak to flow' (Roumain, 1971: 53). The motif of the zombi, enshrined in *ti nèg* folklore as an 'undead' being resurrected from the grave to do the bidding of a *bocor*, a malevolent Vodou sorcerer for hire, has much potency here, serving to illustrate the static lifelessness of the land and the village more broadly. Within *Kreyòl* lexicon, and within this rural context in particular, the term 'zombi' has a broader resonance for agrarian labour. Indeed, as Laurent Dubois notes, Haitian farmers often use the term '*zonbi*' as an insult against wage labourers, suggesting that 'to sell your labour is to sell your freedom' (Dubois, 2012: 298). In this sense, Zombi Pool also symbolises the

around a common yard.' He further notes that, in a symbolic sense, 'the *lakou* also came to represent specific social conventions meant to guarantee each person access to dignity and individual freedom' (2012: 107).

⁵ Although Hughes and Roumain use the French spelling 'coubite' in the text of *Masters of the Dew*, I choose to use the *Kreyòl*, *konbit*, throughout the body of this article owing to the revolutionary significance of *Kreyòl* within Haitian peasant culture. Roumain's choice not to write in *Kreyòl* will be discussed at greater length later in this article.

subservience of the residents of Fonds Rouge to the capitalist economy controlled by an elite minority of *gwo nègs* in the absence of the *konbit*. As Bienaimé continues to rhapsodise about the virtues of the *konbit* through the free-indirect voice of the narrator, the reader is thus impressed with a sense of its vitality to the health of the community and the land upon which it is built.

The indelible mental image left by the memory of the *konbit* is invariably one of communal pride. The labour of the *ti nèg* is, in this sense, invested with a special cultural significance. Within this aesthetic frame, the scornful designation of the rural poor by the urban elite as ‘barefoot Negroes’ is thus inverted. Bienaimé’s romantic vision of peasant workers whose ‘big flat feet’ are rooted in the ‘soil’, for example, impresses on the reader a sense of the proud inheritance bound up with land and community: as a member of the peasant class that has laboured to enrich the land, he is a true legatee of that land (Roumain, 1971: 29). The pride that Roumain saw as inextricably linked to agrarian peasant labour in Haiti is advanced by the characterisation of Papa Jean in Hughes’s *Popo and Fifina*. As the leading patriarch of the narrative, Papa Jean is represented as a Moses-like figure that oversees the family’s exodus from the countryside. The narrative recounts that ‘like all peasants of Haiti, he was barefooted’. His shoeless condition is nevertheless seen as a hallmark of his proud patriarchal identity, infusing his movements with ‘a happy bounce’ as he ‘lead[s] his family toward the town of his dreams’ (Bontemps & Hughes, 1993: 2). Hughes envisaged the ‘people without shoes’ as the metaphorical backbone of Haiti. As such, he also understood how their labour was exploited and scorned by the elites that wore coats and shoes. He observed in his autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander* that ‘[a]ll of the work that kept Haiti alive, paid the interest of foreign loans, and enriched foreign traders was done by people without shoes’ (2015: 50). The class disparity that he saw in Haiti echoed the exploitative dichotomy between masters and slaves in colonial Saint-Domingue, and made him conscious of ‘how class lines may cut across color lines within a race’. His natural ‘prefer[ence for] the people without shoes’, was nevertheless a reflection on the dignity that he perceived in their struggle. As both Roumain and Hughes strove to demonstrate, land and labour are bound up with a long tradition of subaltern struggle in Haiti. Generally portrayed as poor and without means, the *ti nèg* thus functions as a representational figure with a strong routed revolutionary consciousness that privileges land ownership and community over capital gain. This valorisation of the *ti nèg*’s tripartite connection with land and community also

gestures heroically to the development of the post-revolutionary *lakou* system that allowed peasant farmers to form autonomous, self-sustaining communities built around the land. While in this sense grounded in social realities, the *ti nèg* serves a broad, transgenerational revolutionary function that is not grounded in the historical moment, but reaches back and forth in the routed revolutionary narrative charting the struggle for national sovereignty and the autonomous rights of agrarian landowners.

As such, *Masters of the Dew* inevitably ‘contextualizes the revolt of agricultural workers in the long history of resistance to capitalist modernity that begins with the Haitian Revolution’ (Kaussen, 2008: 106). The symbiosis between land, routed revolutionary inheritance, and the peasant community is reaffirmed by Manuel later in the text when he asserts that, despite his fifteen-year residence in Cuba, the soil of Haiti remains ‘in [his] blood’ (Roumain, 1971: 74). Staking his and his compatriots’ sovereign claim to the land, he declares that ‘[t]his land is the black man’s. Each time they’ve tried to take it from us, we have cleaned out injustice with the blades of our machetes’. This striking image of machete-violence harkens back to the mass-insurgency of enslaved labourers who utilised the tools of plantation labour to exact retribution on colonial residents during the earliest days of the Haitian Revolution (Dubois, 2004: 136). In post-independence Haiti, Manuel affirms, the revolutionary struggle is still very much alive, and the labouring poor are positioned at its vanguard. Without this powerful peasant labour-force, he contends, Haiti would be ‘nothing at all’ (Roumain, 1971: 74). He reinforces this point in a series of rhetorical questions, asking ‘Who does the planting? Who does the harvesting? Coffee, cotton, rice, sugar cane, cacao, corn, bananas, vegetables, and all the fruits, who’s going to grow them if we don’t?’ (Roumain, 1971: 74). Manuel’s compelling oratory, combined with the concatenation of agricultural crops that a peasant labour force makes viable for cultivation—crops, moreover, designed to service a capitalist export economy—work in concert, here, to reinforce the revolutionary power of peasant labourers, who have the power to withdraw their labour from the capitalist machine. The interdependence of the land and the peasant community is thus naturalised in the language of the text, which works to conjure a sense of pathos, on the one hand, for the degradation of land and community, but simultaneously ferments nationalistic desire via a poetics of *ti nèg* resistance.

The *konbit* is at the locus of this poetics, which unites the agrarian labouring community with ancestral custom and a continuous narrative of revolutionary possibility. Indeed, although

the *konbit* is in essence a labouring collective which is often configured around a designated community project, it is articulated through multiple and diverse expressive modes. It thus serves a festive and convivial purpose that extends beyond agricultural labour and draws heavily on the Afro-Creole customs of the Haitian peasant community. In this way, it functions symbolically to nurture the enduring routed spirit of the *ti nèg* and gives voice to the anonymous multitude, helping to rehabilitate the revolutionary voices of those so often occluded or overshadowed in historical narratives by white colonialists and *gwo nègs*. As Jennie Smith notes of *konbits* in Haiti:

The work is hard, but the atmosphere is a festive one, accompanied as it is by drumming and singing, animated conversations, laughter, performances, disputes, and play. At the end of the day, if the host has been generous with food and drink, the workers will pay a compliment by transforming the gathering into a full-blown *banbòch*, an impromptu dance party that may well last through the night. (2001: 86)

The very nature of the *konbit* thus transforms the act of labour into an act of collective festivity which solicits a series of pluralistic gestures from each member of the community, be it through the contribution of refreshment, physical labour, or performance. This collective culture of festivity is bound up with a routed tradition of countercultural resistance embedded at the heart of the agrarian labouring community in Haiti (and sustained across the Black Atlantic in creole cultures more broadly). These expressive modes, which can trace their origins back through the slave experience to precolonial traditions in Africa, underpin the symbolic identity of the *ti nèg* and the collective culture associated with this symbolic identity. Indeed, as Gilroy suggests, these festive practices offered a countercultural route to survival for diasporic cultures denied the conventional means of cultural preservation through the written word (1993: 123-124). In this way, the *konbit* can be seen to serve a broader routed purpose in *Masters of the Dew*, preserving historic creolistic routes of resistance for the residents of Fonds Rouge.

The primacy of music within the expressive poetics of the *konbit*, and the percussion sounds that serve to preserve the ‘rhythm’ of the agrarian labour force in particular, reinforces the potency of this routed narrative of resistance from below. Indeed, the percussive rhythms that define the *konbit* share connections with numerous other musical traditions in Haiti in which the drum plays a central role—traditions which have been a central component of subaltern countercultures since the age of slavery. Martin Munro, for example, has called attention to the

ways in which music was deployed by Haitian revolutionaries to stimulate anxiety among their colonial aggressors. He notes that colonists ‘had long feared the hidden messages and meanings of slave music and its capacity to retain and incite a sense of black subjectivity and resistance that could not be completely nullified by the processes of slavery’ (2010: 30). These rhythms of resistance would reverberate in the memory of white interlopers who arrived in Haiti during the occupation years such as Faustin Wirkus, the United States marine and self-avowed ‘white King’ of La Gonâve who was mesmerised by the ‘hypnotic’ and ‘feverish’ quality of the *rada* (Vodou) drumbeat (Wirkus & Dudley, 2011: 103). Such sentiments invariably reflected a pervasive white colonialist fear of black countercultures, affirming their revolutionary potency and potential threat to the established colonialist order. As Munro notes, for those of African descent in the circum-Caribbean, ‘rhythm became a marker of [...] impenetrable black subjectivity’ (2010: 15). According to Hughes, the subjective spirit of these percussive rhythms could be attributed to their incontestable ancestral routes. Indeed, Hughes, like Roumain, viewed the percussive sounds of Haitian peasant communities as an important archive of revolutionary routes and a gateway to diasporic countercultural identities, recording ‘movements as old as Africa’ and ‘rhythm[s] as old as the earth’ (2015: 45).

The recordings of Alan Lomax, an ethnographic contemporary of Hughes and Roumain, who travelled to Haiti to record the divergent musical traditions of peasant communities between 1936 and 1937, corroborate the diverse expressive repertoire of the *konbit*. These recordings demonstrate the naturalistic quality of musical performance and the percussion sounds in particular. Each of the songs in his *konbit* volume follow a distinct ‘call-and-response’ pattern, for example, with a choral group that echoes the vocals of a solo leader. The lyrics have a distinctly vernacular quality that take inspiration from everyday themes, events, and personalities, which range from the mundane to the profane. Lomax’s recordings incorporate *konbit* songs about labour, mountain-climbing, and burying dead family, for instance. They also incorporate songs with bawdier themes that draw heavily on vulgarity, such as ‘Bare, bare, bare fanm’ about a woman charged with adultery who is caught with pubic lice (Lomax et al, 2009: 9:4). Although such lyrics appear steeped in misogyny, it is important to recognise that vulgarity (or *betiz* in Haitian *Kreyòl*) serves a particular political function in peasant folk culture. As McAlister notes, *betiz* lyrics are often a cryptic vehicle for political satire (2002: 61). In this way, *betiz* culture functions as a lower-frequency route to political agency. Although, as Mimi Sheller

notes, ‘Haitian peasants are the “mounn andéyo”, the outside people’, typically precluded from the public sphere (2000: 89), such vehicles of expression facilitated the genesis of rebellious peasant countercultures.

Comparable *betiz* motifs are observed in the *konbit* songs of *Master’s of the Dew*. The lyrics to ‘Antoine’s song’, for example, tell the story of a woman who tries to repel the advances of a sexually rapacious predator:

That woman said, man!
Behave yourself!
And don’t touch me!
Behave yourself! (Roumain, 1971: 27)

Moreover, in the context of the Fonds Rouge villagers’ exploitation at the hands of the mercenary police chief Hilarion Hilaire, who the reader witnesses administering sexual violence against his mistress, the narrative of these lyrics invariably takes on another meaning. As such lyrics testify, vulgarity serves an inversive carnivalesque function, which, deployed in a communal context, can serve to reinforce common goals and beliefs. In this way, *betiz* culture can be seen to serve a political purpose that is inherently bound up with the revolutionary counterculture of the *ti nèg*. It also serves to anchor the corporeality of the performance and of the *konbit* more generally.

The vernacular vocals of *konbit* songs are also supplemented by a percussive accompaniment that is sometimes offered by a drum, but is also serviced by the instruments of labour. Indeed, in many of the recordings on Lomax’s *konbit* volume, the percussion has a distinctly metallic sound. The notion that such a sound is achieved with the instruments of labour is at least in part corroborated by Lomax’s first-hand observations. Referencing a *konbit* led by a M. Le Font de la Mar, organised to cut sugarcane on his plantation during Lomax’s stay, Lomax observed in his notebook that the participants used a ‘hoe blade with a knife’ to create the percussive rhythm accompanying the group vocals (‘Notebook’ in Lomax et al, 2009: 121). The resulting sound is improvised, raw, and ‘organic’.⁶ As a performative medium, the *konbit* thus

⁶ I use the word ‘organic’ here to capture the spirit of the *konbit*’s inherent connection to the land, cultivation, and organic matter, rather than in the sense that it is deployed by Celia Britton in speaking about Roumain’s ‘ideal of organic community’ (2006: 165).

reflects the symbiosis between the peasantry, land, labour, and ancestral performance cultures, and serves to highlight, above all, the resourcefulness of those cultures.

These tightly woven connections between mind, body, and community are reinforced by the collective emotional response and sense of community cohesion elicited by the rhythms of the *konbit*. In Bienaimé's recollection, the *konbit* generated a 'rhythmic circulation between the beating heart of the drum and the movements of the men', creating a 'powerful flux penetrating deep into their arteries and nourishing their arteries with a new vigor' (Roumain, 1971: 28). Musical performance is the metaphorical lifeblood of the *konbit*, and the *konbit*, in turn, serves to maintain the rhythmic unity between the land and the community. The arterial force of rhythm within the peasant labouring community is also foregrounded in the depiction of Vodou ritual in *Masters of the Dew*. This is most perceptible in the account of the Vodou festivities that take place in Délira and Bienaimé's compound after Manuel's return from Cuba. The entire scene is articulated as an improvised communal song punctuated by phrases of musical verse and evocative descriptions of ritual dance. As Gerdès Fleurant notes, even Manuel, the secular pragmatist that scorns the belief systems of his compatriots, identifies passionately with the expressive modes of Vodou ritual (2006: 54). Caught up in the Vodou festivities held in his honour, he 'let[s] himself go in the upsurge of the dance' (Roumain, 1971: 71). This dichotomy between Manuel's simultaneous repudiation and veneration of Vodou custom was a reflection of Roumain's own conflicted sensibilities. Indeed, despite his own Marxian economic pragmatism, he invested the expressive modes of Vodou with great cultural value and, as Dara Green acknowledges, understood how 'vodou can serve as a powerful catalyst for social action' (2008: 70). The Vodou feast is the locus of social action, where the community of Fonds Rouge comes together in active communal celebration, and Manuel and Laurelien begin to lay the foundations for uniting the peasant labour force under a new irrigation project serviced by the *konbit*. Roumain, like other Haitian *indigénistes*, saw the expressive modes of Vodou as part of a wider rhythmic cultural heritage that spoke to Haiti's diverse revolutionary routes, and made a conscientious effort to rehabilitate these expressive modes.

Hughes likewise deployed rhythm to showcase the routed connections within Haitian peasant communities. This is made manifest in Popo's experience of the Congo dance in *Popo and Fifina*. After settling into a new life in Cap Français, Mamma Anna takes Popo and Fifina back to the countryside to visit her family in the hills. While sleeping over at an aunt's house,

Popo is roused from his slumber by the sound of the Congo drums. Enticed by the noise, Popo is compelled to follow the rhythm, feeling ‘sure he could find his way down the hill and up the main road to the place where the drums were.’ Popo’s sentiments are recounted through the free-indirect voice of the narrator, as he imagines the proximity of the drums ‘booming deep and quick in a lively sound that made your feet want to keep in time’ (Bontemps & Hughes, 1993: 43). As with the *konbit*, the rhythm of the Congo dance generates corporeal agency. This corporeal energy, in turn, serves to unite the community. When Popo arrives at the scene of the Congo dance, he stands ‘very close to the drummers, thrilled by so much noise and so many people’, and bears witness to the way in which the rhythm connects the crowd as ‘everybody mov[es] in time to the music of the drums, laughing and dancing’ (Bontemps & Hughes, 1993: 45). Despite the overwhelming scale and cacophony of the scene, imagined by the young Popo as ‘even livelier than the market at the Cape on a Saturday afternoon,’ he identifies his cousin André amid the throng, whom he observes ‘twirling round and round, and crossing his feet in quick, rooter-like movements’. In this way, rhythm is seen to offer a vehicle for the solidification of broader kinship networks.

Musicality, and rhythm more broadly, can thus be viewed as central to the *ti nèg* poetics adopted by both Hughes and Roumain, serving to reinforce the rhythmic ‘harmony’ between the Haitian peasantry and the land on which they laboured and lived. Certainly, representations of Black musical cultures would be frequently redeployed in the creative works of Hughes, especially in his many works on jazz and blues. This was a reflection on the routed revolutionary connections of Black countercultures across the Atlantic world and the broader expressive transferrability of *ti nèg* experience for Black cultural and intellectual circles. Indeed, as Fowler notes, ‘Langston Hughes and Jacques Roumain shared a vision of the function of art as the articulation of a people’s condition, as a reflection of the culture which that people develops to cope creatively and to express their hope for the fulfilment of universal human aspirations’ (1981: 88). Their respective interpretations of peasant performance cultures in Haiti serve to highlight the revolutionary possibilities embedded in diverse Black expressive modes.

The importance of performative and expressive routes within *ti nèg* communities is amplified in Roumain’s *Master’s of the Dew* by the linguistic flow and narrative structure of the text, which simulates the rhythmic activities of the the Fonds-Rouges peasant community. The intimate parallels between textual and physical bodies thereby works to instil within the mind of

the reader the force of the interconnections between ancestral communities, land, labour, and routed revolutionary countercultures. As Martha Cobb notes,

Through the simple eloquence of the people, we comprehend how intimately their lives are connected with the succession of days and seasons, daybreak and nightfall, planting and harvest. The vigorous poetry of black folk expression reveals the demanding labor necessary for making the earth produce, and the need for dynamic release (both spiritual and physical) which their religion offers. It is the breaking of these rhythms—by the drought, by the feud—and the consequent loss of direction, hope and meaning in their lives, that constitute the crisis that Manuel sets out to resolve. (1979: 98-99)

This active celebration of folk expression and folk rhythms, which operate as the reader's principal hermeneutic gateway to peasant life in Haiti, is compounded by Roumain's artistic 'reinterpretation' of *Kreyòl* linguistics. Although it is important to acknowledge that Roumain wrote the narrative of *Masters of the Dew* in French and *not* in *Kreyòl*, various scholars have drawn attention to his unique 'peasant' style, which incorporates many *Kreyòl* phrases, not least in relation to the *konbit* and its attendant vocabulary. *Kreyòl* proclamations associated with Vodou worship, such as 'abobo' are also woven into the fabric of this peasant language, serving to anchor it within the broader narrative and figurative realm of the *ti nèg* (2013: 99-100). This is intensified by conspicuous allusions to ancestral folk traditions of oral storytelling, which are embedded in the *Kreyòl* phrase 'Cric? Crac'—a popular call-and response cry that signals the commencement of the storytelling ritual in Haitian peasant communities. As Hénock Trouillot acknowledged, 'Roumain a procédé à la stylisation d'un milieu paysan. On ne saurait dire que dans son roman, ce ne sont pas des paysans qu'il d'écrit. Le langage qu'il leur fait parler, on ne saurait nier leur identité avec le langage des paysans' (1981: 183).⁷ The spoken language of the villagers of Fonds Rouges is therefore, without question, routed in *Kreyòl* idiom and linked strongly to the figure of the *ti nèg*. In translating the novel into English, Hughes also chose to preserve certain *Kreyòl* idioms and phrases, an understanding and cultural contextualisation of which he strove to promote through the inclusion of a glossary appended to the narrative. The reader is told, for example, that the phrase '*Urine that spreads doesn't foam*' is a 'Haitian

⁷ Translation: 'Roumain developed a peasant style. One cannot say that it is not the language of the peasants that he uses in his novel. One cannot deny the identity of the language that he makes them speak with the language of the peasants.'

proverb equivalent to, “A rolling stone gathers no moss” (1971: 192). In this way, Hughes transcribes and translates the voice of the Haitian peasantry, extending their lexicon to English-speaking communities across the Atlantic. The resultant French and English texts gesture toward the production of an ‘authentic’ folk language that channels the narrative agency of the *ti nèg*.⁸ While it is important to question the inherent power imbalances between subjects whose language is primarily verbal and interlocutors with an ethnographic interest in transforming verbal languages into literary languages that are accessible to mass-audiences, it should also be acknowledged that Roumain and Hughes were writing against the grain of a paracolonialist western culture defined by racist travel narratives and derisive ‘zombie’ films in which Haiti’s expressive routes were frequently disconnected, disavowed and, as bell hooks might say, ‘subject to a process of decontextualization’ (qtd. in Sheller, 2003: 114). In striving to replicate this language for wider audiences, Hughes and Roumain helped to convey a sense of the circumventional and defiant force of community values and peasant folk customs and situate them within a specific historical, geographical and cultural context that resonated across the wider Black Atlantic imaginary.

Manuel’s efforts to reassemble the *konbit* and, by extension, the Fonds Rouge community in Roumain’s *Master’s of the Dew*, offer a metaphorical template for the communitarian model that Hughes and Roumain strove to promote in their writings and in their creative and political activities. In translating Roumain’s seminal novel and engaging in other collaborative ventures drawing on his experiences and knowledge of Haiti, Hughes also advanced the aesthetic purpose of the *ti nèg* and the *konbit* in Black Atlantic culture more broadly. Indeed, while Hughes and Roumain sought to prove in their exploration of Haitian peasant culture that the essential tools for nation-building that lie at the heart of a revolutionary culture were rooted (or rather *routed*) in the peasant community, their creative efforts showed that the communal values held by the *ti nèg*

⁸ I use ‘authentic’ in inverted commas as I recognise the inherently problematic nature of this type of language. As Regina Bendix notes, authenticity offers ‘deceptive promises of transcendence’ and creates a ‘vocabulary’ that is embedded in the ‘global script’ (1997: 7). As such, those that attempt to model ‘authenticity’ are not necessarily ‘neutral’ arbiters, but are complicit in perpetuating cultural hierarchies.

could also be extended to the practices of artistic collectivity and collaboration.⁹ As White notes, ‘Hughes’ interest in Haitian folk culture, his suspicion of the Haitian elite and his desire to interact with the poor peasantry was consistent with his priorities and his particular conception of the role of the black artist and his vision for the role of black art’ (2011: 112).

As with a *konbit*, Hughes’s translation project relied on a process of exchange and collaboration from within the (Black/intellectual/artistic) community, and the product helped to stimulate other collective revolutionary endeavours across these networks. Hughes and Cook were both later part of the United States delegation to the First World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar in 1966 coordinated by Léopold Sédar Senghor, for example (Rampersad, 2002: 400). In cultivating this collaborative, internationalist creative vision centred around a Haitian *ti nèg* aesthetic, Hughes and Roumain shone a global spotlight on Black subaltern narratives and the diverse countercultural articulations of those narratives. This vision has been preserved in the present by the I, Too Arts Collective, an artistic community based in the Harlem brownstone once owned by Langston Hughes whose mission is to nurture ‘voices from underrepresented communities in the creative arts’ (I, Too Arts Collective).

Certainly, Hughes and Roumain were living in a Black international cultural moment when artists and intellectuals inserted themselves into what Scott has called the ‘public transcript’ (1990: xii). This was especially true of the interwar period during which Hughes and Roumain first met. However, the perceived subaltern, routed, countercultural struggle of the Haitian *ti nèg* reinforced the political merits of alternative *hidden* transcripts recorded and articulated via diverse expressive modes. Beyond a culture of economic pragmatism that served to highlight class struggles across exploitative capitalist economies, Hughes and Roumain fostered a culture of creative and political ingenuity drawn from their shared diasporic, routed experience that spoke to the experiences of marginal Black communities in the Atlantic world, and in Haiti in particular. This internationalist, communitarian vision was enshrined in the poetic tribute that Hughes wrote on Roumain’s death:

You’ve gone—
But you are still here

⁹ It is, of course, important to acknowledge that the type of ‘community-based organization’ that Smith notes the *konbit* gave rise to in Haiti (2001: 87) would not necessarily be perceived as ‘revolutionary’ by members of the

From the point of my pen in New York
 To the toes of the blackest peasant
 In the *morne*,
 Because you found out
 What it is all about. (1945: 25)

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Haitian peasant community. As such, the routé communal practices of the *ti nèg* valorised by Roumain and Hughes should be viewed as a set of aesthetic ideals rather than the real beliefs of a sociological group.

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