

Fire in the House

Author(s): Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Translated by Benjamin Hebblethwaite and Translated by Mariana Past

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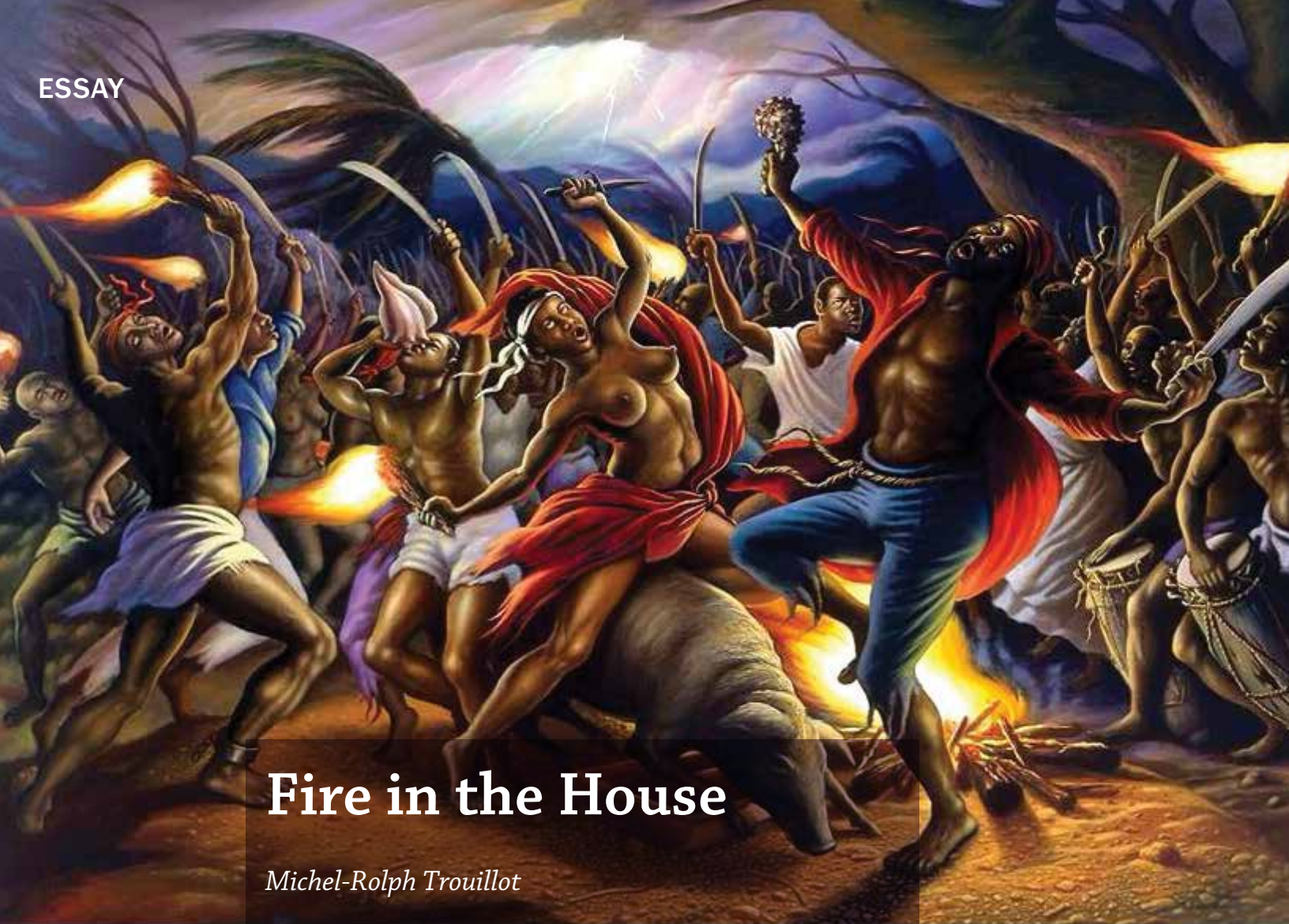
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Fire in the House

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

Ago, blow, blow
 He blows the Nor'easter
 He blows the southwest wind
 Ago, rumble, rumble
 Ago, blow, blow
 He blows, blows
 Ago, coming from Ginen,
 he blows, he rumbles¹

On the twenty-second day of the month of August, in 1791, an enormous tornado rose up in the land of Haiti. A bunch of slaves in the North, on the **Tipin, Flavil, Kleman, Noye, and Galifèt** plantations, broke the bonds of slavery and took on the colonists. In the blink of an eyelid, fire engulfed the cane fields from **Morne Rouge** all the way to **Trou Bodèt**. Businessmen and powerful landowners were caught in an uncomfortable position. They called upon Americans to help: nothing. They called

upon the middle class to help: nothing. They cried out for help from France: no kit, no caboodle.

On the twenty-second day of the month of August, in 1791, a relentless tornado rose up. It was a tornado that cut its path for thirteen burning years before the arrival of 1804.²

How did that war begin? What wind helped it grow in strength? How did the slaves manage to turn Saint-Domingue upside down? What makes a revolution take off?

In order to understand how the slaves turned Saint-Domingue on its head, we have to know how Saint-Domingue was teetering on the edge. [. . .]

Saint-Domingue was leaning, but it hadn't yet flipped over, and it wouldn't have flipped over if the slaves hadn't pushed it. They say that the scorpion stung its own head, but to know that the scorpion is dead, you

ABOVE *Ceremony Bois Caiman*, 2 (Haitian Revolution, August 14, 1791), by Ulrick Jean-Pierre. Oil on canvas, 40" x 60" (1995). Owned by Dr. Fritz Fidele. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.



have to put the sole of your foot on him. They say weeds wither on their own, but whoever does not rip out weeds can't plant beautiful fields. For Saint-Domingue to yield nicely, **the slaves had to get involved.**

But for heaven's sake we know that no historical event occurs for nothing. Certainly in 1791, the slaves decided to get involved. But **why** did they? Why on earth was it at that time that they chose to set the plantations ablaze?

For the lower class to rise up, the fundamental contradiction had gone beyond the complicated crossroads. The situation in the society arrived in a merciless season. But that isn't everything. People aren't the same as the river, the river does not have knowledge; it knows neither what it is nor whence it goes. It does what the current requires of it. It encounters a slope, it hurries down. It encounters a split, it rushes in. It encounters a mountain, it goes in between. It encounters a cliff, it is unleashed. If someone could manage to count how many splits, how many slopes, how many mountains, how many rocks, how many cliffs are on the way, you'll know what the river did. You'll know what the river is going to do. But you will never be certain about what people are going to do because people are individuals. In the same situation, they can take several positions. There are even times, believe me if you want, they take a position that isn't in their interest. It is based upon the notion that traverses their minds, based upon the ideological situation of the society.

Therefore, for the lower class to rise up, not only must the political and economic situation be complicated, but the idea of fighting must also take root in the minds of the little guys. They have to decide to defend their class. In Saint-Domingue, around 1791 there were three enormous events that put the idea of fighting into the minds of the slaves, three enormous events that made them decide to defend their interests, three enormous events that made the ideological situation itself arrive at a merciless season.

The conflict of the other classes showed the slaves the power of the gun. The slaves thought about the declaration of the French bourgeois who said that all people were equal. The slaves had already created an indigenous culture. Several rebel slaves had begun to discover the rallying call of freedom for all people.

A Note on *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti*

Trouillot's early masterpiece, *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* (Controversial Issues in Haitian History), is an important populist history of Haiti, but it remains largely unknown beyond specialists because it was written entirely in Haitian Creole, was never translated or widely circulated, and remained out of print until 2012 (two editions have appeared). In these excerpts from chapter 4, Trouillot dives into a cross-examination of conventional understandings of Haitian revolutionary history. He explains how the Vodou ceremony of Bwa Kayiman—which took place August 22, 1791, and unleashed the Haitian revolution—was able to come about. The ruling class of powerful landowners and French administrators was supposed to be unified. The ruling class was supposed to have the class of free people—whether white, mulatto, or black—in their fold so that their profiteering would remain undisturbed. The revolution erupted when the ruling class could no longer balance competing interests and when the lower classes refused to participate in the conspiracy any longer. Trouillot traces the roots of discontent in Saint-Domingue to the class struggles between the French aristocracy, bourgeoisie, and workers in eighteenth-century Enlightenment France.

He also considers the reverberations French class conflicts had in Saint-Domingue. In the late 1780s, the local landowners began clamoring for access to the international market (France required exclusivity). By 1790, a rift emerged between the French colonial administrators and the local landowners. At the same time, whites and free mulattos fought: Ogé and Chavannes demanded greater equality for mulattos, but the whites rejected it on the basis of their culture of racism. Instead of cultivating a strategically advantageous coalition with the mulattos, the ruling class sent 1,500 white soldiers and 3,000 black recruits to smash the mulatto movement. The ruling class's traditional coalition was severed in several places. The leaders of the enslaved population saw the power they had when armed with guns; they detected the conflict among the whites and the whites versus mulattos; and they received and transmitted the exciting news of equality proclaimed by the rising French revolutionaries.

Underneath this political quicksand, the slaves had established the cornerstones of an indigenous culture: farming, Vodou religion, and the Creole language. The small plots the slaves cultivated for food and income created a passion for self-sufficiency. Vodou gave slaves the conviction they needed to fight and a means of organization. The Creole language provided a foundation for a common culture. The chapter closes with an analysis of maroon culture and why it was unable to secure widespread independence, and it introduces the geographic and demographic realities that favored an uprising in the northern plains of Haiti. — Benjamin Hebblethwaite & Mariana Past

In the rainy country
the owner of a porch is king.

The slaves had watched the clashing of horns among the classes of Saint-Domingue since 1789. They saw the shedding of blood. They learned of the power of guns. They learned with their own two eyes that in a dog-eat-dog society, the dog with the biggest teeth commands. In a rainy country, the owner of a porch is the only chief.

Many of the slaves also fought. When there was a big collision, certain colonists put guns into the hands of the slaves to reinforce the army of their partisans. Colonel Kanfó, in the North, marched on Ogé with 3,000 slaves, and it was those 3,000 slaves who made the mulattoes make a run for it. Thus the slaves began to understand the power they had with a weapon in their hands.

The *kalinda* rhythm is there
to be drummed

But the land was not the only sensitive issue among the rebel slaves of Saint-Domingue. The Vodou religion was very important because it gave them **conviction**. It made them take the chance to fight, it made them take the chance of winning. The Creole language was important, too. In order to succeed at understanding the special role of both Vodou and Creole in the whirlwind of Saint-Domingue, we have to try to understand the conditions in which they were weaned.

When colonists invade a land, they come with all of their cultural baggage. They arrive with their language, with their history, with their songs, with their laws, with their services. When colonists invade a land, that indigenous culture enters into tireless war against the culture of the foreigners. When the English left Europe to go invade the Hindu culture, that indigenous culture confronted the English culture.³ However, that culture was there before the English came. When the Spanish left Europe to go invade Peru, the indigenous culture confronted the Spanish culture. However, that culture was there before the Spanish had ever arrived.

And yet, in Saint-Domingue, when the French colonists appeared **there wasn't an indigenous culture**. When the French appeared, the Native Americans had already died off. The Spanish destroyed both the religion and the culture and all the practices of the Native American people.⁴ After that, the Spanish got out of there. The Africans arrived together with the French. (It was the French who went looking for most of the slaves who were in Saint-Domingue.)

Almost all of the cultural wars in colonies go through three seasons:

- the indigenous culture is born in the country on its own
- the colonists' culture comes to strike it
- the indigenous culture responds

In Saint-Domingue those three seasons had disappeared. Those three acts were all mixed up in the storm of a single day.

- while the indigenous culture was rising up
- the colonists' culture was striking it
- the indigenous culture responded **while it was weaning**

In Saint-Domingue, the indigenous culture of the plantation slaves **learned how to fight while it was learning to breathe**. It was a culture that was born in struggle. It wasn't born before, it fought afterward. **It was born because it was fighting**. In that way both Vodou and Creole were baptized in fire. They bear all the marks of Saint-Domingue. They bear the marks of suffering, they bear the marks of resignation, but they bear marks of struggle, too. Both of them have in their marrow an element of trouble, an element that is struggling against the upper classes.

Under the covering of my *lwa*
I speak all the words I want to speak

In the whirlwind of Saint-Domingue, Vodou helped the class of slaves in two ways:

- it gave them more conviction to fight
- it allowed them to organize themselves

One week before the slaves began to set the fire, a bunch of slave leaders held a ceremony

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in Mòn Rouj, in a place called Bwa Kayiman, on the plantation called Lenòman de Mèzi. In that ceremony, Boukman, an *oungan* rebel leader, prayed to God to support the rebels. It is Bwa Kayiman that we know best, but a lot of other guerrilla leaders held ceremonies before they went to fight. Biasou used to tell the slaves: don't run away from death, because if we die the Ginen lwa are going to take us back to Africa.⁵ And that notion helped rebel slaves brave dangers. Colonel Malanfan was never so surprised when he saw Yasint's rebels shove their hands into the mouths of cannons, so great was their belief in the power of the spirits they were serving.

But that wasn't everything. Many of the leaders of the guerrillas were *oungan*: Boukman, Biassou, Yasint, Lamour Dérans, Romèn-la-profètès . . . And three-quarters of them were *oungan* before they were guerrilla leaders. Their status as fathers of spirits helped them organize the rebel slaves. We also mustn't forget, the Saint-Domingue *kalinda* dances were the only meetings the slaves had. In that way a *kalinda* dance was simultaneously a cultural party, a Vodou party, and a political "meeting."

In all truth, when the slaves of Saint-Domingue were making moves to take the streets, they needed an organization. They took the only kind of organizations they knew of: the Vodou organizations. The Bwa Kayiman Ceremony can serve as our witness. . . .

They disrespected Bwa Kayiman in two ways. They said it was only a **political meeting**. They said it was only a **religious ceremony**. Whether they take it seriously, or whether they take it as mumbo jumbo, they don't grasp it for what it was. In addition to the invocation of Boukman, four things took place in Bwa Kayiman:

- a manbo killed a pig
- the rebels drank the blood of the pig
- the rebels swore they wouldn't betray the cause



- they decided how they were going to strike

People who have studied the religion of the Dahomian spirits find a similar ceremony in Africa (killing pigs, drinking pig blood, oath-taking). That ceremony has three meanings: solidarity, confidence, secrecy. That ceremony means: all initiates must stay strong, all initiates should believe in one another, and all initiates would rather die than speak about the secret.

Therefore there was no **political meeting**, which would mean sucking on pencils, speaking French, being competitive. What took place was political, but it wasn't **only** politics. In any case, it wasn't politics in the fashion of most of the European people. But the slaves weren't clowning around either, nor were they cracking jokes. It was a **Vodou ceremony** that was, **at the same time**, the biggest **political guarantee** they could make with each other before they decided to turn Saint-Domingue upside down.

In 1791 Vodou gave the slaves more **conviction** to fight, but it also gave them more **organization**, it was like sticky glue that made them cohere.

*Translation from the Haitian Creole
By Benjamin Hebblethwaite & Mariana Past*

¹ Ago is an exclamation common in Vodou songs.

Although the *lwa* (spirit) is not mentioned above, this song resembles those for Agawou Tonnè, one of Vodou's great spirits of the wind, storms, lightning, and thunder.

² On January 1, 1804, revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared Haiti's independence from France.

³ Although the published book gives *blan fransé* (French), we believe this is in fact a misprint since the French had nothing to do with the colonization of India. The 2012 edition reproduces this 1977 misprint.

⁴ Here we translate *Zémès* as "religion" and *Sanmba* as "culture."

⁵ Trouillot writes *Gelefre*, a Vodou term for Africa.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1949–2012) work in anthropology, political science, and history reshaped Caribbean and Haitian studies. *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* (1977) was Trouillot's first publication after emigrating to the US during the Duvalier dictatorship. His Marxist analysis, emphasizing Haiti's oral tradition, highlights the underappreciated role of the slave masses in the Haitian Revolution and the foundation of the modern state of Haiti. Trouillot's publications include *Haiti, State Against Nation* (1990) and *Silencing the Past* (1995).



Benjamin Hebblethwaite

is an assistant professor who specializes in Haitian Creole and French linguistics at the University of Florida.



Mariana Past

is associate professor of Spanish and Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Studies at Dickinson College.