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The Indigenous: A History of the Idea

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The Haitian Declaration of Independence famously refers to the revolutionary army as the Armée indigène. What did “indigenous” mean on the eve of the Haitian revolution? How and when was it adopted there? And how did its adoption there transform its meaning? This article answers these questions with an eye toward the politics of the term today. In early modern Europe, the indigenous named the relationship between land and nationhood. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the term especially came to connote ideas about Africa and the Americas. The Haitian revolutionaries domesticated and redirected these ideas toward anticolonial ends. Subsequent users in postcolonial Haiti struggled to sustain the meaning the revolutionaries intended, however. The itinerary of “indigenous” before, during, and in the wake of the Haitian Revolution reveals that it has connoted for a long time a critique of European imperialism, but has also enabled imperial government and ethnonationalist violence.

The Armée indigène

On 1 January 1804, the generals who won freedom for the nation they now called Haiti under the leadership of General Jean-Jacques Dessalines signed their names to a declaration of independence that referred to their troops as the Armée indigène. This made Haiti the first free black nation-state in the western hemisphere. It also marked the first time that a group of people who had been colonized and/or enslaved by Western European empires referred to themselves as *indigènes*, or “indigenous.” What did *indigène* and/or “indigenous” mean on the eve of the Haitian revolution? How and when was it adopted in the colonial society of Saint-Domingue which was reborn as Haiti in 1804? How did its adoption there transform the term’s meaning, if at all? And what, if any, short- and long-term impacts did this have on the meaning and use of the concept of the indigenous itself, in postcolonial Haiti and elsewhere?

The concept of the indigenous is in the first instance an artifact of the upheavals of early modern European philosophical developments. It churned through the anxious and weird sixteenth century, the bombastic and belligerent seventeenth century, and the meteoric eighteenth century as a means of negotiating identity and difference in the fermenting nationalist, and imperialist, discourses of Western Europe. Over this period of time, the concept wandered through satire, natural history, monarchical and proto-national histories, the writings of the French *philosophes*, and abolitionist

appeals to the French National Assembly, before arriving in the Caribbean, maybe on the eve of the outbreak of the revolution in Saint-Domingue, but certainly by 1803 at the latest. Throughout this itinerary—that is, between the sixteenth century and the late eighteenth—*indigène* and the indigenous accreted a series of associations with the confused and confusing evolution of racial triangulations between Africa, the Americas, and Europe, usually in the course of European authors' more or less critical assessments of attempts to establish coherent national identities at home and imperial regimes abroad. After it was adopted in Saint-Domingue/Haiti by Dessalines and his men, the concept of the indigenous continued to follow this kind of bipolar career, at once in the service of and in the struggle against empire and its afterlives. That duality continues to prevail today.

Saint-Domingue and the Haitian Revolution served as a crucial inflection point in the evolution of the concept of “the indigenous,” though this was not the term’s teleological destiny. Nevertheless, placing the adoption of the concept in the lead-up to and the realization and aftermath of the Haitian Revolution at the center of the history of the indigenous is one way to focus the otherwise unwieldy archive that the concept contains. Focusing on this episode follows the calls of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Marlene L. Daut, and other historians of Haiti for scholars to attend to just how deeply that revolution, and the black people who carried it out, have shaped the political dynamics and ideas which characterize much of the modern world and our very understanding of the modern itself. And studying the adoption of the title “indigenous” in the Haitian setting suggests several significant points of consideration in the ongoing and contentious debates regarding the complex politics of the term.¹

This is a necessary exercise not just for the purposes of elucidating a still somewhat enigmatic feature in the Haitian Revolution. As we will see, scholarship on the revolution remains uncertain about how and by whom *indigène* was first claimed as a political identity in Saint-Domingue/Haiti, and this article attempts to contribute to this quiet, if ongoing, inquiry. But tracing the genealogy of the indigenous through its adoption in Haiti is also necessary because the concept broadly has generated an increasing amount of excitement and anxiety in recent years. Advocates and critics of the term within and beyond the academy today more or less plausibly endow it with world-making and/or world-threatening powers. Daut has recently argued, for instance, that when Dessalines and his men proclaimed the birth of their nation under their adopted title of the *Armée indigène*, they announced a “twin fight to eliminate slavery and color prejudice from the colony in Saint-Domingue ... [and] laid the foundations for the first antislavery, anti-colonial, and anti-racist state the world had ever seen to be constituted in Haiti.”² Daut’s claim about the meaning and significance of the adoption of the term among the freedom fighters in Saint-Domingue and, then, Haiti is a fairly typical example of the excitement regarding the moral, political, and perhaps even spiritual powers of the indigenous. Critics of the term, by contrast, hold that the supposed distinctiveness

¹Marlene L. Daut, *Awakening the Ashes: An Intellectual History of the Haitian Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2023), 1–27; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995), 70–107.

²Daut, *Awakening the Ashes*, 34.

that “indigenous” is supposed to mark is naive at best, and as dangerous as any other ethnonationalist ideology at worst.³

The prehistory and then the history of the arrival in Saint-Domingue and Haiti of the indigenous tells a more complicated story than either of these positions would probably care to admit. The term’s long-standing association with Africa and the Americas made it, by the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, equally useful for anticolonial and colonial ambitions, given how those associations marked a set of constitutive differences from Western European nation-states and empires through their connotations of primal originality and moral claims to belonging. This somewhat contradictory career suggests that rather than naming some survival of originary premodernity in the modern world, or the threat of a backslide into that mythical period in which humans were supposedly more barbarous toward each other than we are today, the indigenous is a peculiarly modern concept.

The indigenous, that is to say, is every bit as recent and has the potential to be every bit as liberating or oppressive as the nation, race, class, gender, religion, and so forth. Like all those terms, it had crucial “premodern” precedents, but it took a distinctive, if varied, shape beginning around the sixteenth century. Its adoption by the Haitian revolutionaries gives the term its long-standing anticolonial pedigree, but in that regard, Haitian champions of the indigenous used it to point toward a more universal set of propositions, values, and programs for governance. The indigenous, then, is best seen as a unique artifact of that curious moment at the end of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment which is supposed to have produced the modern vocabulary of human rights.⁴ And so, if we take any of the terms we claim to inherit from that period

³The scholarship advancing the powers of “the indigenous,” usually written about as “indigeneity,” is too vast to cite comprehensively here. Some foundational texts include Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London, 1999); Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, “Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism,” *Government and Opposition* 40/4 (2005), 597–614; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis, 2017); Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis, 2011); Tim Rowe, “The Indigenous Redemption of Liberal Universalism,” *Modern Intellectual History* 12/3 (2015), 579–603. For critics of this move as an intellectual pivot in recent years see David Chandler and Julian Reid, *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene* (London, 2019); Manvir Singh, “It’s Time to Rethink the Idea of the ‘Indigenous,’” *New Yorker*, 20 Feb. 2023, at www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/02/27/its-time-to-rethink-the-idea-of-the-indigenous; Olufemi Taiwo, “It Never Existed,” *Aeon*, 13 Jan. 2023, at <https://aeon.co/essays/the-idea-of-precolonial-africa-is-vacuous-and-wrong>. For the way this debate has played out, explicitly and implicitly, in studies of the Haitian Revolution specifically see Daut, *Awakening the Ashes*, 31–49; David Geggus, “The Naming of Haïti,” *New West Indian Guide* 71/1 (1997), 43–68; Amanda T. Perry, “Becoming Indigenous in Haiti, from Dessalines to La Revue Indigène,” *Small Axe* 21/2 (2017), 45–61; Robbie Shilliam, “Race and Revolution at Bwa Kayiman,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45/3 (2017), 269–92; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State against Nation* (New York, 1990), 109–36.

⁴Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (New York, 2015); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2007); Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters* (Oxford, 2013); Johnathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton, 2015); Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham, NC, 2010); Naomi J. Andrews, “The Romantic Socialist Origins of Humanitarianism,” *Modern Intellectual History* 17/3 (2020), 737–68; Jonathan Green, “*Fiat Iustitia, Pereat Mundus*: Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Gentz, and the Possibility

seriously as markers of the highest achievements of our humanity and modernity—man, citizen, rights, independence, liberty, and equality—then we ought to do so for the indigenous as well. But as anyone familiar with the fortunes of the rest of that lexical cohort is well aware, the laudable and hopeful appearance of the indigenous at that unique moment of modern liberation and world-remaking did not and does not prevent it from enabling strategies and tactics of politics, warfare, and government that seem to betray the very principles of humanity it was supposed to name. The point of studying the indigenous therefore is not to ensure only its most correct use by the most preferable actors. It is to inquire into the visions of humanity that those who invoked and developed the concept sought to articulate.

In the next three sections of the article, I trace the contours of this history and demonstrate its implications by, first, focusing on its translation out of the Greek concept of autochthony and its early adoption in efforts to define European national identity in terms of both natural and political histories in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I then demonstrate how the term accrued a dense set of associations with America, Africa, and Europe particularly between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The following section traces the relationship between those developments and the uptake of the term in Saint-Domingue/Haiti proper. I cannot go into depth on all of the urgent questions these points on the itinerary of the indigenous raise, but in the final section of this article, I discuss matters for further investigation in assessing the legacy, both “colonial” and “anticolonial,” of the term’s evolution.

The first *indigènes*

What did *indigène* and/or indigenous mean on the eve of the Haitian Revolution? We could do worse than to locate the answer to this question in the brief entry for the term written by the Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt in the eighth edition of the *Encyclopédie*, first published in 1765. Jaucourt’s short article categorizes the indigenous primarily as a concept of geographic interest. He comments that while *indigène* does not appear in the dictionaries he has consulted, it has been in regular use in French for some time, and that its use tends to correspond more or less exactly with its Latin root, meaning “the first inhabitants of a place [whom] it is believed did not come and settle from somewhere else.” But even as Jaucourt’s entry strives for a straightforward definition, he admits that the concept raises at least two somewhat more complicated questions: the indigenous is at once a category that articulates a people’s inherent relationship with the land of their ancestral origin, on the one hand, and it is also a racial category defined by the relationship between two or more groups in the context of colonial occupation, on the other. The connotations of land that the concept of the indigenous raises, for Jaucourt, emerge from the fact that the notion has its origins in the myths of the ancient pagans (by which he means the Greeks), who “figured that the first [of their people] had been begotten by the land. They believed that the land was made for them to live

of Prudential Enlightenment,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14/1 (2017), 35–65; J. C. D. Clark, “How Did the American Revolution Relate to the French? Richard Price, the Age of Revolutions, and the Enlightenment,” *Modern Intellectual History* 19/1 (2022), 105–27; Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, “Ideas of Revolution in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions,” *Modern Intellectual History* 20/4 (2023), 997–1022.

on.” The second, and not unrelated, set of connotations that the indigenous raises, concerning race and colonialism, consist in the fact that *indigène*, Jaucourt reports, is often used to refer to “the natives of a country ... in order to distinguish them from those who came later and settled there.” Jaucourt offers as a recent example of the latter the “Hottentots,” or the Khoikhoi peoples who originally inhabited the southwestern parts of the African continent, writing that they are “indigenous in relation to the Dutch, who established a colony on the Cape of Good Hope.” This use of the term is further complicated, however, Jaucourt adds, by the fact that, at least on some accounts, “the posterity of these Dutch have [also] become indigenous to this country in contrast to those new families who go to join them.”⁵ On the eve of the Haitian Revolution, therefore, “indigenous,” or *indigène*, connoted a relationship between a people and the place they were from (or, alternatively, that they now inhabited), and it had recently been brought into focus through processes of colonization and the “racial” distinctions that often accompanied such endeavors.

Jaucourt’s definition is the culmination of several loosely related uses to which the term had been put prior to the late eighteenth century. In the first, and probably the oldest, instance, dating to at least the first century BCE, was the Latin use of *indigena* to translate Hellenic Greek ideas of autochthony (αὐτόχθονες)—the explicitly mythological notion that the original people of Athens, like other *poleis* in the ancient Mediterranean, “had been begotten by the land,” as Jaucourt put it. A second use for the term began to appear after 1500, as *indigena* and its vernacular offspring became increasingly prominent terms of the art in the writing of natural history—especially, according to Alix Cooper, in works that sought to catalogue the flora, fauna, and physical features of specific localities across the European continent.⁶ Third, and somewhat relatedly, we find the term deployed in what we might broadly categorize as the proto-nationalist writings of early modern European historians, especially as they sought to articulate the possible origins of their own peoples against the intrusive claims of authority by either the Church or powerful neighboring monarchies within their own states’ domains. And finally, we also witness variations of “indigenous” used to designate peoples who were marked as historically, geographically, religiously, and racially different from those of early modern European nations or, perhaps more accurately, proto-nations.

That Jaucourt rooted his definition of the indigenous in the earlier concept of autochthony should be of no surprise. Questions about autochthony were the conceptual ancestor to the Latin term and concept of *indigena*, particularly among Hellenistic Athenians in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Autochthony, James Roy demonstrates, grew up against the backdrop of Pericles’ citizenship law of 451–450 BCE, which mandated that the inheritance of citizenship and the possession of priestly office in Athenian democracy simply required both parents of the person in question to have been citizens of Athens themselves, rather than descent from noble lineage, or *genos*

⁵Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, “Indigène,” in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 17 vols. (Neufchâtel, 1765), 8: 676.

⁶Alix Cooper, *Inventing the Indigenous: Local Knowledge and Natural History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007).

(γένος), as had thus far been the case. To be autochthonous, in this new democratic context, *was* to be noble, and therefore worthy of citizenship and public office.

But this new meaning of the concept was not without controversy. Autochthony did, no doubt, carry a largely positive valence in the works of fifth-century Athenian writers such as Aeschylus and Thucydides. But several fourth-century authors—especially Euripides, Aristophanes, and Plato—appear to have identified internal contradictions and challenges in the appeal to autochthony. Euripides, as Roy notes, identifies, examines, and attempts to resolve the confusing equivalencies between autochthony and nobility that underlay the logic of the Periclesian reforms in the interfamilial tragedy of his *Ion*. Aristophanes, on the other hand, as Nicole Loraux points out, simply lampoons the equivalency altogether in his *Wasps* and *Lysistrata*.⁷ Plato, meanwhile, might be read—if we follow Jill Frank’s recent calls for greater attentiveness to the ways he depicts Socrates’ efforts to distance himself from his interlocutors’ propositions and conclusions—to have offered pointed critiques of the concept in both the *Menexenus* and the *Republic*.⁸

It is not clear when Roman authors began to translate αὐτόχθονες as *indigena*. But the latter term does not seem to have carried, for the Romans and their Christian inheritors, the same fraught questions of mythology and its value to the constitution and reproduction of the social order that it did for the Athenians. *Indigena* and its declensions began to appear, as Roy observes, at least as early as Julius Caesar’s commentaries on his campaigns in Britain and Gaul in the first century BCE, and it would later be used by Tacitus to describe both Cypriots and Germans in the first century of the Common Era, as well as by Pliny the Elder in his *Historia Naturalis* just a short while later. By the early seventh century, Isidore of Seville, in a chapter cataloguing and explaining categories of citizenship in the ninth book of his *Etymologies*, would be able to write with some certainty, drawing from ancient sources, that “indigenous people (*indigena*) are those ‘therefrom begotten’ (*inde genitus*) born in the same place in which they live [whereas] the term *incola* signifies not an indigenous person, but a resident alien.”⁹ The *Etymologies* does not, however, contain an entry for autochthone, and Isidore does not add much in the way of a moralizing gloss on his entries for *indigena*.

Some time around the early sixteenth century, however, *indigena* and its vernacular offspring began once again to refer to the intimate, if perplexing, relationship binding peoples to lands that autochthony had connoted for fifth- and fourth-century BCE Athenians, and which *indigène* would signal for a later author like Jaucourt. In the first instance, as Cooper has helpfully shown, “indigenous” and its variants were

⁷James Roy, “Autochthony in Ancient Greece,” in Jeremy McInerney, ed., *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean* (New York, 2014), 241–55; see also Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago, 2013), 21–6; Nicole Loraux, *Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens* (Ithaca, 1996), 37.

⁸Plato, *Gorgias*, *Menexenus*, *Protagoras*, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge, 2010), 235d–247b; Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge, 2000), 414d–e; Jill Frank, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato’s Republic* (Chicago, 2018), 118–21. It should be noted that Henri Estienne’s Latin translation of Plato’s complete works in 1578 renders αὐτόχθονες as *indigena*. See Plato, *Platonis opera quae extant omnia*, ed. Henri Estienne (Geneva, 1578), 237b.

⁹Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, and Muriel Hall (Cambridge, 2006), 205.

often put to use to describe the flora, fauna, and physical features of specific localities. This usage was oriented toward consolidating a notion of national selfhood as Europeans came into greater contact with exotica from throughout the world in the wake of increased imperial expansion beyond Europe's shores in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1657's *Physical Dictionary, or, An Interpretation of Such Crabbed Words and Terms of Arts, as Are Deriv'd from the Greek or Latin* and the *Medicinal Dispensatory* of Jean de Reanou (aka Renodaeus), "indigenous" is used exclusively to describe plants and, occasionally, animals relevant to the medical and pharmacological knowledge the authors wish to convey. Renodaeus's *Medicinal Dispensatory*, for instance, dedicates an entire section to "Indigenous Calefactives."¹⁰ Still, these pharmacological and botanical uses of "indigenous" were not altogether value-neutral. Robert Plot's histories of Oxfordshire (1677) and Staffordshire (1686) offer a case in point: Plot dedicates whole chapters in both books to indigenous plants and animals of the counties they aim to describe.¹¹ In these settings, as Cooper points out, "indigenous" was rarely meant as literally (that is, the literal generation of people from the earth) as some Athenians had understood autochthony some two millennia prior. Nevertheless, these uses of "indigenous" inaugurated, or at least helped to facilitate, a process of intellectual and affective connection between specific environments and the individuals and institutions charged with defining them as distinct, national realms.¹²

These naturalist understandings and usages of *indigena*, *indigène*, or "indigenous" translated easily into the genres of political history and/or religio-racial surveys of people throughout Europe and beyond that became increasingly popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Benjamin Isaac has pointed out, for example, *indigena* was adopted by humanist historians of Germany in the Renaissance like Conradus Celtis, who repeated many of Tacitus' first-century claims about the autochthonous, sometimes rendered as "the indigenous," identity of the tribes of ancient Germany in his own 1502 treatise, *Germania Generalis*.¹³ And the use of the Latin *indigena*, specifically, crops up not infrequently to describe the purportedly original or at least naturalized status of specific groups or institutions, though it is often recovered from older, Roman texts. In this vein, the French poet and historian Étienne Forcadel's 1580 *De Gallorum imperio et philosophia* regularly describes France's ancestral Gauls as the *indigenae* of the ancient world from whom the modern nation emerged.¹⁴ Likewise, the Scot George Buchanan, in his *History of Scotland* of 1579, looked to the *indigenae* of the ancient Mediterranean world as the ideal model for (and possible literal sources of) claiming a unique national ancestry for his countrymen, a tradition which, he argued,

¹⁰Renodaeus, *A Medicinal Dispensatory, Containing The whole Body of Physick: Discovering The Natures, Properties, and Vertues of Vegetables, Minerals, & Animals: The manner of Compounding Medicaments, and the way to administer them*, trans. Rich Tomlinson (London, 1657), 291, available at Early English Books Online (hereafter EEBO).

¹¹Robert Plot, *The Natural History of Oxford-shire, being an essay toward the natural history of England* (Oxford, 1677), 143, 155; Plot, *The Natural History of Stafford-shire* (Oxford, 1686), 199, 202–3.

¹²Cooper, *Inventing the Indigenous*, 1–50, EEBO.

¹³Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 2006), 137–44; see also Roy, "Autochthony in Ancient Greece," 250.

¹⁴Estienne Forcadel, *De Gallorum imperio et philosophia libri septem* (Paris, 1580). EEBO.

his contemporaries had regretfully abandoned. Writing about earlier narratives regarding the origins of Britain in general and of his own Scottish nation in particular, for example, Buchanan lamented that “the *Brittons*, and after them, some of the *English*,” preferred to trace their ancestry to the parricide Brutus of Troy. “I cannot but stand amazed,” Buchanan reflected on his contemporaries’ and predecessors’ preference in this regard, “at their design, who might easily, and without any reflection at all, have imitated the Athenians, Arcadians, and other famous Nations, and have called themselves, *Indigenæ*, seeing it would have been no disgrace to them to own that Origin, which the Noblest and wisest City in the whole World counted her Glory.”¹⁵

Buchanan’s comments are especially noteworthy to the extent that he suggests that there is another origin that one might claim for the Scots when compared to the prevailing historiographic treatments of that question, and that that other origin lies in the *indigenae* of Athens. These comments illustrate that while *indigena*, “indigenous,” and *indigène* were no doubt terms of the art of defining early local and national identities, as Cooper suggests, deployments of “indigenous” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tended nearly as often to emphasize the human *difference*—in time and space—of any group described as such. Like Buchanan, many of the earliest uses of *indigena* and its vernacular outgrowths from 1500 onward maintain its original imagined geography, describing the inhabitants of the Mediterranean: Julius Gaius Solinus’s *De Memorabilius Mundi* (1503) describes the Cappadocians as an “indigenous people,” Giacomo Strada’s *Epitome Thesauri Antiquarium* (1557) describes a Phoenician idol using the term, and Antoine Fumée’s *Histoires* (1574) refers to the Carians as “indigènes et Originaires.” The use of *indigena*, *indigène*, and/or “indigenous” was just as preponderant in descriptions of “barbarians” who had dwelled just a little further afield from the ancient Mediterranean. Johann Boehme’s 1542 *Omnium gentium mores, leges, et ritus*, for example, uses *indigena* to describe ancient Ethiopians, Scythians, Russians, and Germans, while 1544’s *Aliquot opuscula* by the Portuguese humanist Damião de Góis similarly categorizes Ethiopians and the Lapps (present-day Sámi peoples) as *indigenae*.¹⁶

Notably, too, chroniclers of the recent “discoveries” in America deployed the Latin *indigena* during roughly this same period to describe the original inhabitants of the western hemisphere, but only inconsistently so, and in a largely more taxonomical manner than later designations of those populations under this category seemed to intend. *Indigena* appears throughout the original text of Peter Martyr d’Anghiera’s eight *Decades de Orbe Novo* (c. 1511–21), one of the first and most popular chronicles of the Spanish conquest of the Americas to appear in the sixteenth century, for example, as well as Hugo Grotius’s *De Origine Gentium Americanarum Dissertatio* (1642). Thomas More (1511), too, deploys the term in his *Utopia*, in a vague description of the original

¹⁵George Buchanan, *A History of Scotland Written in Latin by George Buchanan, Faithfully Rendered in English* (London, 1690), 41–2, EEBO.

¹⁶Julius Gaius Solinus, *De Memorabilius Mundi* (Paris, 1503), f. iv, EEBO; Giacomo Strada, *Epitome Thesauri Antiquarium* (Zurich, 1557), 108, EEBO; Antoine Fumée, *Les histoires d’Antoine Fumée, Chevalier, seigneur de Blandé, conseiller du conseil privé du Roy* (Paris, 1574), 155, EEBO; Johann Boehme, *Omnium gentium mores, leges, et ritus* (Venice, 1552), Bibliothèques virtuelles humanistes (hereafter BVH); Damião de Góis, *Aliquot opuscula* (Louvain, 1544), BVH.

inhabitants of the North American mainland whom the Utopians may need to displace in the event of the overpopulation of their cities.¹⁷ *Indigena*, *indigène*, or “indigenous” do not, however, appear in any vernacular (Spanish, French, or English) descriptions of the original inhabitants of the New World from this period. Nor was *indigena* consistently used throughout or exclusive to Latin descriptions of the original inhabitants of the western hemisphere. Francisco de Vitoria’s lectures on America, *De Indis* and *De Jure Belli* (1538), among the most famous Latin works describing the American Indians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, prefer variations of *barbari*.¹⁸

Jaucourt’s little account of the concept of the indigenous surely distills many of these themes. There, the indigenous is an ancestor of the Hellenic notion of autochthony; it connotes a unique relationship between a people and the land they have inhabited before any others, and it had, after 1500, become increasingly popular in France, and elsewhere, especially as European Christian powers were setting forth to conquer unknown lands and peoples and their scholars were racing to make sense of the new orders of humanity that these “discoveries” were catalyzing. As we will see, too, Jaucourt’s definition is notable in the development of the term broadly, and in its adoption in Saint-Domingue/Haiti in particular, given his association with Denis Diderot and Abbé Raynal, both of whom used the term, as did abolitionists who used the term in addresses to the National Assembly before and during the early years of the revolt in the Caribbean. Even still, the associations Jaucourt draws between autochthony, land, colonialism, and race raise as many questions as they offer answers about why and how the indigenous would have been so eligible for adoption by the Haitian revolutionaries under Dessalines.

Indigènes before the Armée indigène

Several statements by Dessalines and his men, roughly concurrent with their adoption of the moniker L’Armée indigène, indicate that when they took this title for themselves, they did not mean to suggest that they were the original inhabitants of the island they were liberating, but that they did want to tie their new national identity to that of the original inhabitants of the island, and probably of the western hemisphere more generally. The revolutionaries decided to rename the nation whose independence their

¹⁷Peter Martyr, *De Rebus Oceanicis et Novo Orbe, Decades Tres, Petri Martyris Ab Angleria Mediolanensis* (Cologne, 1574); Hugo Grotius, *De Origine Gentium Americanum Dissertatio* (Paris, 1642), John Carter Brown Library (hereafter JCBL); Thomas More, *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More in Latin from the Edition of March 1518 and in English from the First Edition of Ralph Robynson’s Translation in 1551*, ed. and trans. J. H. Lupton B.D. (Oxford, 1895), 154. On More’s dependence upon early reports of America to develop his depiction of the Utopians see George Logan’s comments in Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Robert M. Adams (Cambridge, 1989); Christopher Heaney, “Marrying Utopia: Mary, Philip, Richard Eden, and the English Alchemy of Spanish Peru,” in Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, ed., *Entangled Empires: The Anglo-Iberian Atlantic, 1500–1800* (Philadelphia, 2018), 85–104.

¹⁸On the nominations for indigenous peoples in the Americas, especially in Spanish and English, see Timothy Vasko, *Making All the World America: Native Information and the Doctrine of Discovery* (Philadelphia, 2026); for French see Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas* (Lethbridge, 1984); C. E. S. Franks, “In Search of the Savage Sauvage: An Exploration into North America’s Political Cultures,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 34/4 (2002), 547–80.

declaration announced Haiti—the Arawakan name its Taíno original inhabitants had once given to the place. Dessalines, in the 1804 declaration, repeatedly alludes to the memory of the Taíno, whether it is in the course of describing a nation whose liberty has been “consecrated by the blood of the people of this island,” or in calling on the new citizens of Haiti to “walk in other footsteps [and] imitate those nations who, carrying their solicitude all the way to the future and not willing to leave an example of cowardice for posterity ... preferred to be exterminated rather than to lose their place on the list of free nations,” an extermination which, Dessalines would famously declare three months later, he and his generals had “avenged” in their revolutionary success.

This was neither the beginning nor the end of such associations. But what was it about the indigenous in particular that captured this complex set of associations? It is likely that when the revolutionaries adopted *indigène*, they were tapping into a critical register that had begun to increasingly adumbrate through certain uses of the term from at least the sixteenth century onward, and which crescendoed in the discourses of Enlightenment abolitionists in the lead-up to and early years of the French and Haitian Revolutions. During this period, certain uses of *indigena*, *indigène*, and “indigenous” came to be associated with questions about the meaning and status of Africa, the Americas, and their original inhabitants, relative both to Christian Europe and, often, to each other. However, the uses of “indigenous” or *indigène* to invoke these identities and differences obscured as much as they revealed about the various racial standings of each of these groups. “Indigenous” or *indigène* usually named a perplexing confluence of these geographic and racial identities. Even when it possessed a definite racial content (to name Amerindians, as Thomas Browne’s use of the term did, for example), it appeared in the course of extended, often critical, reflections on the confused and confusing nature of racial theories. The indigenous therefore operated during this period as a kind of explicitly ambiguous racial and colonial category that enabled its users to mount a critique of the certitudes of European reason as this was supposed to be embodied in national or sectarian identities, and/or imperial prerogative in colonial states.

The development of this critical register of the indigenous through its association with ideas about Africa, America, and Europe can be grouped into three overlapping but more or less distinct clusters of enunciations of the term stretching from the sixteenth century up to the months before the onset of the revolt in Saint-Domingue in 1791. In the first cluster, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we can isolate the development of these associations first in a crucial episode of the sixteenth-century novels *Gargantua et Pantagruel* by the French satirist François Rabelais and then, a little over a century later, in a chapter from the English doctor and philosopher Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, a work of natural history and epistemology which doubled as a critique of the theological and partisan enmities animating the English Civil War. A second cluster of enunciations can be isolated in the works of the French *philosophes* of the eighteenth century. The use of “indigenous” in this cluster is most evident in Jaucourt’s *Encyclopédie* entry and in Diderot and the Abbé Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes*.¹⁹ Third, and finally, the term began to appear in parliamentary

¹⁹While authorship of the *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des européens dans les deux Indes*—originally published in 1770—has traditionally been attributed to Raynal

debates in France about the moral and material imperatives for the abolition of the slave trade in France's colonies—especially, but not exclusively, Saint-Domingue.

Beginning with François Rabelais and, later, Thomas Browne, the term appears to have allowed critical questions about truth, right, and authority in both Europe and its growing global outposts to condense upon the surfaces of the imagined entities of Africa and America in a new, more intense way. Although separated by about a century, and therefore also by considerably distinct political contexts, Rabelais's and Browne's invocations of "indigenous" can be helpfully bundled together for a few reasons: Rabelais was widely seen by seventeenth-century English authors like Browne (who makes reference to the French satirist multiple times in his works) as an indispensable source of "wit," that elusive skill of concisely and critically enunciating wisdom through the observation and harnessing of social, political, and religious absurdity.²⁰ And in this regard, both Rabelais and Browne use the apparently critical powers of "indigenous," derived from its ambiguous associations with Africa and/or the Americas, to articulate shared (if obviously contextually distinct) concerns with questions about the shifting terrain of knowledge and power against the backdrop of imperially expanding, convulsing, and conflicted nations.

The association between "indigenous," Africa, and America is more circuitous when it appears in Rabelais's first, 1532, novel *Pantagruel*, but no less firm than it would later be in Browne or the *philosophes* and abolitionists of the eighteenth century. Rabelais's *indigène* appears in an early and relatively important episode of the opening volume of his pentalogy, during an encounter with the story's protagonist, the eponymous giant prince named Pantagruel. Pantagruel encounters a young man just outside the city walls of Paris, as our protagonist leaves behind a festive sojourn among several cities and institutions of humanistic higher learning in France (Bordeaux, Orleans, Montpellier), and sets out to practice his playful intellectualism at the center of French cultural, economic, and political life. Pantagruel initiates the encounter by asking the young student where he is coming from and about the nature of scholarly life in Paris. But he is met with obscure and frustratingly obfuscatory answers that the student supplies through a Latinized Parisian French. Pantagruel grows increasingly infuriated. The student refuses one final chance to speak as Pantagruel thinks he ought to be speaking. Pantagruel demands to know where the student hails from. The student responds that "the primeval origin of my atavics and avics was indigenous [*indigne*] to the Lemovic regions." Finally, Pantagruel announces, he understands what the student is saying: he is originally a provincial of Limoges who wants to imitate Parisian manners and speech. And with this recognition, Pantagruel proceeds to grab the *indigène* by

alone, scholars since the 1970s have established that several *philosophes*, including Jaucourt and especially Diderot, contributed to the text, particularly as it underwent revisions for new editions that were published in 1774 and 1780. Laurent Versini has estimated that as much as "three quarters [but] at least two thirds" of the new entries that appear in the 1780 edition of the *Histoire* can be attributed to Diderot. See Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres: Tome III, Politiques*, 5 vols., ed. Laurent Versini (Paris, 1995), 1: 581–6; and Michèle Duchet, *Diderot et l'Histoire des deux Indes: Ou, l'écriture fragmentaire* (Paris, 1978).

²⁰Thomas Browne, *The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Norman J. Endicott (New York, 1967), 28, 29, 436; Anne Lake Prescott, *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England* (New Haven, 1998); Nicholas McDowell, "Wit, Conversation, and Literary Transmission in Mid-Seventeenth-Century France and England: How Andrew Marvell Heard His Rabelais" *Renaissance Quarterly* 69/3 (2016), 940–65.

the throat, forcing his victim to struggle in pain before finally releasing him. Upon his release, the *indigène* switches back to his provincial accent and dialect, which Pantagruel approvingly describes as “finally speaking naturally.”²¹

Readers of the episode have rightly found in the *indigène* a foil for Pantagruel, though no one has yet remarked upon the *indigène*’s description of himself as such. The choice of this description is significant, however. The *indigène*, as *indigène*, demonstrates Pantagruel’s ability to restore France’s provincial cultures to their “natural” conditions even as Pantagruel himself, paradoxically, consolidates and enforces a new linguistic, educational, and perhaps politico-theological standard of French national identity.²² Surprisingly, however, Rabelais only achieves this meaning for his *indigène* through a quiet contrast between the *indigène*’s European natal pedigree and that of Pantagruel’s possible non- or supra-European-ness: Pantagruel, Rabelais writes in the first chapters of the novel, was born in Utopia, the name of Thomas More’s famous, eponymous, fantastical island nation which More had situated near the coast of the New World. However, Rabelais also says that Pantagruel was born in Utopia at a moment when there was a “great drought over all the country of Africa.” In other words, Pantagruel was born in Utopia, a land which is supposed to be situated in America, but the prevailing climatic conditions at the time of his birth suggest that he was somehow *also* born in, or at least in proximity to, Africa.²³

The geography and conditions of Pantagruel’s birth enable Rabelais to ultimately, violently, consummate the naturalness of the *indigène*’s belonging to the French, European, and Christian land of his nativity in Limoges: Pantagruel’s birth inaugurated a cleansing flood that delivered the common people of the drought-ridden kingdoms in Utopia from their devastating thirst. Pantagruel’s name commemorates this deliverance, Rabelais tells us, “for panta in Greek means the same as ‘all’ and gruel in Hagarene means the same as ‘thirst,’ making the young prince the “Ruler of the Thirsty-ones.”²⁴ Pantagruel later violently demonstrates the depth of this power in his encounter with the *indigène*: after Pantagruel leaves the *indigène* behind to conduct his own studies in Paris, Rabelais tells us that the *indigène* of Limoges “was so remorseful and parched that he often said ‘Pantagruel has got me by the throat!’ After a few years, he died the death of Roland, brought about by the vengeance of God.”²⁵ The *indigène*’s death, following his encounter with Pantagruel, therefore renders the meaning of his indigenouness, his “natural” and original existence, contingent upon the facts of his attacker’s birth

²¹François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (New York, 2006), 34–6. I have here relied upon translations of Rabelais’s works, which are capable of capturing the subtle complexities of the author’s linguistic play better than my own translation would be. An earlier translation has the indigene of Limoges saying “indigenary,” which may be more in keeping with the spirit of the absurd Latin the character seeks to affect, but is less in keeping with the original French, which is just *indigène* and which the more recent translation has preserved as simply “indigenous.” I have preferred the latter for ease of understanding. See François Rabelais, *The Works of François Rabelais*, 5 vols. (London, 1922), 2: 37.

²²Timothy Hampton, *Literature and the Nation in the Sixteenth Century: Inventing Renaissance France* (Ithaca, 2001), 24. See also Eric MacPhail, “The Elegance of the Ecolier Limousin: The European Context of Rabelais’ Linguistic Parody,” *MLN* 123/4 (2008), 873–94.

²³Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 22.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 23–4.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 36.

in Utopia—that is, in the impossible geographies of the New World and, in Rabelais's figuring anyway, also Africa. Conversely, the very authority of Pantagruel's name, not to mention his epistemic mission, is confirmed in his restoration of the *indigène's* indigenoussness.²⁶

Browne's use of "indigenous" is comparatively straightforward in the way that it mobilizes the contrasting racial images of America and Africa. Here, too, the term works to stabilize a sense of European Christianity generally, and no doubt national identity specifically. Browne's use of "indigenous" arrives in the midst of the *Pseudodoxia's* turn to cultivate a familiarity and even comfort with epistemic ambivalence through a meditation on the supposed causes and meaning of phenotypical "blackness" among African peoples. This is part of Browne's larger project in that book, as Kevin Killeen has shown, of cultivating a greater comfort with epistemic novelty and ambivalence among readers in hopes of correcting the errors in the habits of mind which he believes have encouraged the violent religious divide between Catholics and Protestants in England and Europe at large which had led to the "utter social entropy" of the bloody sectarian strife wracking Browne's home in particular and the continent more generally.²⁷ Any brief consideration of either the indigenous inhabitants of America or the inhabitants of black Africa, Browne contends, demonstrates that the cause and therefore meaning of phenotypical difference can quickly fall apart when we consider the available information about those places and their inhabitants. And if one can arrive at this conclusion when considering the differences of those peoples, Browne quietly asks his reader, how can one fail to see the politically dangerous and epistemically precarious hubris at work in any dogmatic vilification of his fellow Englishmen and Christians?

Browne arrives at these conclusions by attacking the two most prevalent accounts of the cause of "the gloss and tincture of blackness." The first account of the cause of blackness which Browne targets is inherited from archaic and Hellenic Greece. This theory articulated an essential relationship between geography and physical human difference, and argued that "the heat and the scorch of the sun" had left the inhabitants of Æthiop—the name for the region in Greek geography—with "burnt and torrid countenance." The second erroneous argument Browne sets out to dispel is the scriptural account of "the curse of God on [Noah's son] Cham and his Posterity" as the cause for the black complexions of the peoples who lived at the southern end of the Sahara and beyond. Confronting the thesis of the "fervour of the Sun," Browne observes that the logic of this argument would have all the peoples (and, indeed, animals) inhabiting the hottest and most convex points on the Earth's surface throughout Asia share black Africans' phenotypical attributes—which, of course, they do not.²⁸

Browne places the term "indigenous" in the middle of this discussion. "This defect" in the original logic of racial difference, Brown continues, is even "more remarkable in America; which although subjected unto both the Tropicks, yet are not the Inhabitants

²⁶See François Rigolot, *Les langages de Rabelais* (Paris, 2000), 34–6.

²⁷Kevin Killeen, *Biblical Scholarship, Science and Politics in Early Modern England: Thomas Browne and the Thorny Place of Knowledge* (London, 2009), 18.

²⁸Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica or, Enquiries into Commonly Presumed Truths* (Oxford, 2009), 480–81.

black between, or near, or under either ... And although in many parts thereof there be swarms of Negroes serving under the Spaniard, yet were they all transported from Africa, since the discovery of Columbus; and are not indigenous or proper natives of America.”²⁹ Turning next to the thesis of the “Curse of Cham,” Browne is no more convinced. In the first instance, Browne argues, if we take this theory at face value, then we would “denigrate a greater part of the earth than was ever so conceived.” The curse, popularly understood, also applies to Cham’s posterity, and therefore would not only descend upon “Æthiopians and reputed sons of Cush,” but also, possibly, the Egyptians, Arabians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and even, by some accounts, Browne contends, Italians. Further, Browne argues in a striking rejoinder, that

wheras men affirm this colour was a Curse, I cannot make out the propriety of that name, it neither seeming so to [black peoples] nor reasonably unto us; for they take so much content therein, that they esteem deformity by other colours, describing the Devil and terrible objects white. And if we seriously consult the definitions of beauty, and exactly perpend what wise men determine thereof, we shall not apprehend a curse, or any deformity therein.³⁰

The implication of all this, for Browne, is that one ought to exercise subtlety, humility, and even circumspection regarding what we take to be true and beautiful, cursed and deformed. As any brief consideration of either the indigenous inhabitants of America or the inhabitants of black Africa shows, those assumptions can be easily disproven by the available information about those places and their inhabitants.

It is unclear whether we could plausibly attribute a direct line of causality connecting the associations that this first cluster of enunciations establishes between the indigenous, Africa, and the Americas to that which would follow, starting about a century after the *Pseudodoxia* was published, in the writings of Jaucourt, Diderot, and Raynal. They surely were quite familiar with Rabelais: in 1774, for example, Diderot went so far as to write a letter to one of his friends in Catherine II’s court in a “*pan-tagruélique*” style.³¹ Browne, too, may have found a receptive audience among the famously Lucretian *philosophes*; d’Holbach (who wrote in his *Système de la nature* that “l’éléphant est indigène à la zone torride”³²), like Diderot, shared with Browne a commitment to a Lucretian ontological materialism—which played a significant role in the earlier Englishman’s account of the ultimate causes of blackness, phenotypical and otherwise.³³ Browne was also well known to that great theologian of the early French Enlightenment, Pierre Bayle, and may have therefore also been familiar to

²⁹ Ibid., 482.

³⁰ Ibid., 489–91.

³¹ See Sergueï Karp, “Diderot déguisé en Rabelais,” in Myrtille Méricam-Bourdet and Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, eds., *La fabrique du XVIII^e siècle au temps des Lumières* (Paris, 2020), 199–206.

³² Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach, *Système de la Nature ou, des Loix du Monde Physique du Monde Moral* (London, 1770), 82.

³³ On the reception of Lucretius in the Enlightenment generally see Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York, 1966), 98–105. On d’Holbach see Brunello Lotti, “D’Holbach’s Critique of the Scholium Generale and the Reception of Newton’s Theology in the French Enlightenment,” *Foundations of Science* (2025) (Online First), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10699-025-10000-9>. On Browne’s materialist accounts of blackness see Siobhán Collins and Louise Denmead, “‘There is All Africa [...] Within

Bayle's later readers not least for his sensitive responses to the paradoxes of belief and theology.³⁴ Whatever the case, any direct genealogical inheritance is less important for our purposes here than the fact that Rabelais's and Browne's uses of "indigenous" demonstrate how the term began to accrue a series of associations with the imagined, troubled, geographies of Africa, the Americas, and Europe, and particularly in ways that facilitated the articulation of broader critiques of European religion and politics.

At first glance, the *philosophes'* later uses of *indigène* arguably entertain less literary allusion or epistemological ambiguity than do those of Rabelais or Browne. Jaucourt, after all, is aiming to offer a relatively concise and straightforward definition of the term in his *Encyclopédie* entry. And Raynal deploys "indigenous" in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, more or less exclusively, to refer to the inhabitants (or occasionally, some of the native flora) of the Americas. But closer scrutiny of both Jaucourt's entry and, especially, Diderot's use of the term in the *Histoire* reveals that "indigenous" carried for these authors an unstable epistemological status that made it particularly suited to meditations on the colonial question. When Jaucourt writes, for example, that the posterity of the Dutch in southwest Africa "have [also] become indigenous to this country in contrast to those new families who go to join them," he is raising, probably very deliberately, several obvious questions: have the earlier, presumably displaced, "Hottentot" *indigènes* in southwest Africa lost their status as such with the arrival and implantation of the Dutch? If so, at what point did this happen and what is their current status? If not, how should one understand them in relation to those later arrivals who have themselves become *indigènes*? And at what point would "those new families who go to join" the indigenous Dutch themselves become *indigènes* and, potentially, threaten the status of the prior settlers, as these latter may have done to the "Hottentots"? Likewise, in a musing on how one might establish justice in the colonies after the abolition of slavery, Diderot suggests that any such condition would require tribunals in which "indigene [*l'indigène*] and foreigner [would not] be made to promise reparation for wrongs done to them."³⁵ We should compare these comments, for example, to Diderot's entry on *citoyen* in the *Encyclopédie*. There, Diderot distinguishes between two types of citizen: those born in the country and those who have been naturalized. But he does not use *indigène* to describe the former type of citizen. Rather, he writes that "les *originaires* sont ceux qui nés *citoyens*."³⁶

The ambiguous racial—and therefore, more importantly, legal and political—status of Jaucourt's and Diderot's *indigènes* can probably be explained as a function of their complex and conflicted commitments to the abolition of slavery and, at least for Diderot, the eventual dismantling of the empire. On the one hand, Jaucourt, Diderot, and Raynal vigorously (if sometimes anonymously) opposed the slave trade within and between European colonies on the basis of a firm commitment to principles of natural

Us': Language, Generation, and Alchemy in Browne's Explication of Blackness," in Richard Todd and Kathryn Murphy, eds., "A Man Very Well Studied": *New Contexts for Thomas Browne* (London, 2008), 127–48.

³⁴Peter Harrison, "'I Believe Because It Is Absurd': The Enlightenment Invention of Tertullian's Credo," *Church History* 86/2 (2017), 339–64.

³⁵Guillaume-Thomas Raynal (Denis Diderot), *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, 11 vols. (Geneva, 1780), 10: 46.

³⁶Denis Diderot, "Citoyen," in Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1753), 488, original emphasis.

law and morality as they understood and had helped to position these as the constitutive philosophical and political architecture of Enlightenment. In Diderot's view, as Sankar Muthu has pointed out for example, "European imperialism [was] catastrophic for non-European peoples ... [it had] destabilizing effects on European countries ... [and] Europe itself [was] so degraded ethically and politically, and [its] few genuine achievements [were] so fragile, that it [was] hardly a model of society that should be exported by force to the non-European world."³⁷ On the other hand, however, such antagonism toward European empires and their trade in slaves did not necessarily translate into a program for immediate and unequivocal decolonization and suffrage.³⁸ In the above-quoted meditations on the prospects for justice after the end of slavery and empire, for instance, Diderot readily admits that "tyrants never freely consent to the end of servitude, and to correct for this order of things, it is necessary to destroy or exterminate them." But, he continues, "with this obstacle overcome, how to elevate from the mindlessness of slavery to the sentiment and the dignity of liberty those peoples to whom these are often foreign? They will be either paralyzed or ferocious when one breaks their irons." While the formerly enslaved ought to eventually be enfranchised through some kind of *tiers-état*, it might take many centuries to achieve the right outcome, Diderot surmises. "Perhaps," he therefore proposes, "colonists [might be] assigned from the free countries of Europe," in order to help "accelerate," through their tutelage, the achievement of such a state of affairs among the *indigènes* of those colonies.³⁹ The *indigène* was therefore, for these abolitionist *philosophes*, a racially ambiguous and politically and legally unsettled subject peculiar to the colonial condition. The indigenous subject was a person who was probably, but not necessarily, and not forever, of Amerindian and/or African origin. The *indigène* was a creature endowed with those natural rights whose universality it was essential to insist upon, but who did not immediately inherit those peculiar rights of citizenship which, say, a person born in France did. The *indigène* was, in short, a marker of the inequities of the imperial arrangement, a promise for its correction, and, standing between those two poles, a moderating force ensuring that the equalization of that figure with the European citizen would be a slow and measured process.

These uses of *indigène* probably inspired the subsequent cluster of its enunciations, which we find in addresses from abolitionist societies like the Société des amis des noirs and several of its prominent representatives to the National Assembly beginning in 1790. It is probable, as historians of both the *société* and the *philosophes* have noted, that Raynal and Diderot's *Histoire* and their writings on slavery and liberty more generally exercised considerable influence on founding members of the *société* and its preceding organizations.⁴⁰ Indeed, in an address to the National Assembly on 8 March

³⁷Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, 2003), 76.

³⁸See especially Louis Sala-Molins, *Le code noir ou le calvaire de Canaan* (Paris, 2018), 248–55; Sala-Molins, *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment* (Minneapolis, 2006).

³⁹Raynal (Diderot), *Histoire*, 45.

⁴⁰See, for example, Erica Johnson Edwards, "The Revolution and the Atlantic: The Society of the Friends of the Blacks," in Wim Klooster, ed. *The Cambridge History of the Age of Atlantic Revolution* (Cambridge, 2023), 118–42; Christopher Iannini, "'The Itinerant Man': Crèvecoeur's Caribbean, Raynal's Revolution, and the Fate of Atlantic Cosmopolitanism," *William and Mary Quarterly* 61/2 (2004), 201–34.

1790 calling for the cessation of the slave trade, Jérôme Pétion de Villeneuve, a founding member of the *société* (and later president of the National Assembly and mayor of Paris), states that “philosophy has sounded the alarm about the traffic in slaves,” to such a degree that the planters and their investors have found it necessary to mount a spurious defense of their industry.⁴¹ Here, in the abolitionists’ hands, *indigène* remains a specifically colonial subject who retains his racially and legally ambiguous status. And with the onset of the revolt in Saint-Domingue, we see the term deployed in explicit reference to that colony for the first time—although still not exclusively so. In this regard, the abolitionists, like the *philosophes* who envisioned the ends or futures of slavery and colonization according to the principles of natural law and reason, continued to deploy the *indigène* as a mediating figure, tempering the exuberance and therefore rendering palatable the otherwise radical prescription to end the traffic in, and sometimes even institution of, slavery altogether. But whereas for the *philosophes* the *indigène* figured more prominently as a moral subject of rights, for the abolitionists the tempering effect of the *indigène* consists in appeals to the logic and grammar of population.⁴²

Two of the earliest instances of such enunciations before the assembly demonstrate this fact. In the *société*’s first address to the National Assembly on 21 January 1790, the author of the address—probably the *société*’s founder, Jacques Pierre Brissot—reminds the audience that the organization is not calling for the immediate abolition and enfranchisement of slaves altogether. The *société* is instead simply calling for the cessation of the slave trade and for the creation of a system of benevolent tutelage of the formerly enslaved as they make their way from abjection to humanity. Evidence for the complete abjection of the enslaved consists in the fact that the colonists “need to bring over more blacks from Africa, to keep the population of the colonies stable ... because they have overworked them, cutting them down by the whip and starving them.” “If they treated them with gentleness and were good fatherly figures,” the *société*’s letter continues, however, “the blacks would populate the colonies, this population would grow consistently and would benefit their cultivation and prosperity.” Such “gentle treatment,” the letter concludes, “benefits the population and the indigenous population does not need to recruit foreigners. This enriches the master and ameliorates the lot of the slave.”⁴³ Two months later, in his own exhortation to the National Assembly on the moral and material degeneracy of the slave trade, Villeneuve deploys *indigène* in much the same way. Echoing the *société*’s address, Villeneuve declares to the assembly that “the traffic in slaves does not help to grow the colonies ... if colonists do not [continue recruiting] to keep the number of workers close to their current levels, they will be forced to rely more on the indigenous population. If they favor this population, they will generate a much greater number of individuals, less subject to mortality.” As evidence of this proposition, Villeneuve recounts for his audience a story about the marooning of a relatively fortunate cargo of enslaved Africans on the island of Saint

⁴¹Jérôme Pétion de Villeneuve, “Discours sur la traite des noirs,” *Archives parlementaires*, first series, 103 vols. (Liechtenstein, 1969), 12: 80.

⁴²On the importance of the concept of the population in late eighteenth-century French thought see Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78* (New York, 2004).

⁴³Société des amis des noirs, “Adresse de la Société des amis des noirs de Paris, pour l’abolition de la traite des noirs,” *Archives Parlementaires*, 11: 275.

Vincent seventy years prior whose descendants now form an independent community there:

Despite the battles they sustained with the Caribs, today, they have grown to 3000 people, they have quintupled in 60 years, since they started out around 500. And can one doubt the fecundity of the blacks even in the climate of Saint-Domingue, when one considers the rapidity with which these free negroes multiplied and spread across [Saint Vincent]? Therefore [favor] is not contrary to the black indigenous population, they will become numerous, [and] one will have no need for recourse to foreigners.⁴⁴

Opponents of abolition did on at least one occasion mobilize the notion of the indigenous prior to the onset of the revolt in Saint-Domingue. But even these uses of the term reveal its gravitational pull in triangulating (if not necessarily coherently organizing) geographic and racial significations of Africa, the Americas, and Europe in the context of Atlantic imperialism. In an address to the National Assembly on 12 May 1791, in the course of the assembly's debate over whether to grant limited rights to free men of color in the colonies, Hilaire-François Chabert de La Charrière, representative for Guadeloupe, would insist on the necessity of maintaining and "rigorously observing" the distinction between black and white in the colonies "even after slavery," because if one observes the "life of the indigenous negro" one will clearly see that "his color is destined for servitude."⁴⁵ Over the course of the ensuing debate on the policy, which would culminate in the short-lived 15 May decree granting limited rights of suffrage to free people of color in the colonies, the term appeared at least twice more. The Abbé de Maury, in a seemingly interminable repudiation of the proposed measure, warns his peers in the assembly that

if you try to [extend the principles of the French Revolution to the colonies] you will substitute your citizens who know your laws, who have studied them, who have never been separated from the metropole ... you will substitute for these natives [*indigènes*] foreigners to the nation, men with whom you are not united by any bond, nor by any shared climate, nor by blood ties nor by ties of relations of patriotism.⁴⁶

These uses can probably be read as an attempt, in effect, to reclaim "indigenous," and whatever purchase it may have held in the debate, for an understanding of continental French citizenship. Maury's ally, Jean-Louis Menneron, almost immediately (and no doubt unwittingly) undercuts this effort of reclamation, however. Menneron declares that those who would abolish slavery would

imitate those Kings of Spain, in order to contain the great destruction of the governors of the West Indies, making a law which guarantees the indigenes

⁴⁴Villeneuve, "Discours sur la traite des noirs," 88.

⁴⁵Hilaire-François Chabert de La Charrière, "Sur le projet de décret présenté, au nom des comités de Constitution, de la marine, d'agriculture et de commerce et des colonies," *Archives parlementaires*, 14: 28.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 57.

of America the rights of citizens, and pronounces that their liberty can never be assailed. And in order to assure these incontestable laws, from all other passions of avarice and cupidity, these Kings established that most beautiful trustee of humanity, that of the Protector of the Indians. Until now we have ignored the blind vanity and interest of these men in [nothing but] their own self-righteousness.⁴⁷

Indigène, Haitian, aborigène, human

So how did the concept of the indigenous arrive in Saint-Domingue? And how did the meaning and use of the idea change upon its arrival? It is unlikely that the revolutionaries had in mind the exact genealogy stretching from Rabelais to Villeneuve that we have just traced when they adopted it for themselves. But Raynal and Diderot's *Histoire* did have some presence in Saint-Domingue and, later, Haiti.⁴⁸ And the residents of Saint-Domingue, enslaved and free alike, did closely follow developments in Paris in the months and years following the revolution there, particularly as these related to the recognition of the rights they were beginning to fight and die for.⁴⁹ Determining the exact moment and means of arrival is probably impossible, but these two facts may help to explain the uptake of *indigène* among the colony's inhabitants, at least in its initial phases.

In Saint-Domingue/Haiti before and after the revolution, "indigenous" possessed at least two, and possibly three, rather different valences, each of which corresponded to different stages of the revolution and the complex racial dynamics that characterized

⁴⁷ Ibid., 59. Menneron's declaration here would have almost certainly undercut his colleagues' efforts to reclaim the indigenous from their opponents by tying "a law which guarantees the indigenes of America the rights of citizens" to the "Protector of the Indians," Bartolomé de Las Casas, a figure who was widely revered by French *philosophes* and abolitionists for precisely the reasons Menneron outlines—however sarcastically. It is untrue that, as Menneron claims, such laws made the original inhabitants of Spain's empire in the Americas "citizens." Native Americans remained subjects to the Spanish Crown. But the legal reforms and activism Menneron recalls here were very much aimed at carving out a unique legal status for the natives [*naturales*] of the western hemisphere to be protected by the Spanish Crown against the rapacious overreach of the *conquistadors* and *encomenderos* who established the Crown's colonial presence in the Americas. Ironically, in this regard, Menneron's pro-slavery criticism of Las Casas and his legacy as little more than "blind vanity and interest ... [in his] own self-righteousness" anticipates much of the contemporary critique of Las Casas's role in Spanish imperialism and his legacy. On the changing legal and conceptual status of Indigenous peoples in the Spanish empire, especially thanks to Las Casas, see Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge, 1986), 114–96; Vasko, *Making All the World America*, 36–118; Robert A. Williams Jr, *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest* (Oxford, 1990), 74–121. On the reception of Las Casas in the Enlightenment see Daniel Brunstetter, *Tensions of Modernity: Las Casas and His Legacy in the French Enlightenment* (London, 2010), which also offers an illustrative example of the criticisms Menneron anticipates (albeit from a very different set of political values), as does Daniel Castro, *Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Indigenous Rights, and Ecclesiastical Imperialism* (Durham, NC, 2007).

⁴⁸ Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (New York, 2020), 11–12, 33–4.

⁴⁹ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 60–90; Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, 1990), 76–88; John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in Colonial Saint-Domingue* (New York, 2006), 227–64.

them. The term may have begun to circulate in the colony sometime around 1789 or 1790. If this is the case, then those uses more or less corresponded to the registers which *indigène* carried among the *philosophes* and the abolitionists during roughly this same period. But it remains unclear whether *indigène* was a term of self-identification for the *gens de couleur*, or whether it continued to be largely used by whites. More fundamentally, it is unclear whether the term really was in meaningful circulation as an identity within Saint-Domingue during this period at all. About a decade later, however, it is clear that *indigène* took on its rather different, more politically intense, set of meanings in the declarations of Dessalines and his revolutionaries. These uses of the term, as we have already seen, to some degree, explicitly evoked a whole series of associations between the enslaved black population and the original Taíno inhabitants of the island once again known as Haiti. These uses of *indigène* were probably more than a revolutionary grammar that expressed the singular moral and political horizons of Haitian independence, though they were surely that. They were likely also part of a series of careful political negotiations on the part of Dessalines and his generals aimed at mitigating prevailing racial, national, and class tensions among the various constituencies of the revolution, especially as independence began to seem more assured. Ultimately, this set of associations with the original inhabitants of the western hemisphere loosened and became more variegated in the hands of the first historians of the new black nation.

Daut has argued that the earliest known instances of *indigène*'s use as a political category in colonial Saint-Domingue occurred among the *gens de couleur*, beginning around 1789.⁵⁰ These were individuals of African ancestry who were not held in bondage, either because they had been manumitted or because they had been born free, although this group tended to be represented in eighteenth-century colonial politics by a core of about one or two hundred men of mixed ancestry, such as Vincent Ogé and Julien Raimond, who possessed considerable wealth and property.⁵¹ The evidence that these *gens de couleur* invoked *indigène* as a self-nomination is shaky, however. Raimond, probably the most prolific free man of color prior to the onset of the revolt, does not seem to have used the term in any of his correspondence or petitions to the National Assembly in any form.⁵² Neither did Vincent Ogé, the wealthy *homme du couleur* who, along with another free man of color, Jean-Baptiste de Chavanne, was accused of and executed for raising an armed revolt in the pursuit of voting rights for free colored men in late 1790. Ogé did, as John Garrigus has pointed out, propose an *assemblée des américains* in a petition for the enfranchisement of Saint-Domingue planters he developed while he was in Paris. And Ogé just a little while later also participated in the drafting of a series of complaints that emphasized the identity of *colons américains* which, Garrigus argues, was an attempt to redress the increasingly strict

⁵⁰ Daut, *Awakening the Ashes*, 34.

⁵¹ Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 1–21.

⁵² Raimond's works are too extensive to cite in their entirety here, but see, as some examples, Julien Raimond, *Observations sur l'Origine et les Progrès du Préjugé des Colons Blancs contre les Hommes De Couleur* (Paris, 1791); Julien Raimond, *Memoire sur les Causes des Trouble et des Désastres de la Colonie de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1793); Julien Raimond, *Correspondance de Julien Raimond Avec ses Frères de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1793), BNF Gallica.

divisions that colonial whites had enforced between themselves and *gens de couleur* since the end of the Seven Years War in 1763. But *indigène* does not appear anywhere in either of these pamphlets.⁵³

Daut's evidence for the early adoption of the term among the *gens de couleur* comes from an undated declaration from the Assembly at Saint-Marc, cited by the postcolonial historian Henri Dumesle in his 1824 account of the revolution. The assembly was composed of white planters who had gathered in April of 1790 to exploit the political vacuum left by the toppling of the *Ancien Régime* in Paris, in order to consolidate white supremacy in the colony, which they feared might be under threat given the agitations for free colored enfranchisement by the Société des amis des noirs and by men like Raimond and Ogé in Paris. In the letter Dumesle cites, the assembly stakes its claim to its rights of discretionary independence from Paris on a kind of doctrine of discovery that, they argue, grants white planters a unique dominium over the island. Whites possess this right because, the letter contends, they are the true descendants of the first Flibustiers who had seized the western half of the island from the Spanish in the 1650s. But the author(s) of the letter also affirm this right by asserting a special patrimony and affinity with the "primitive inhabitants of this island, whom the Europeans inhumanely massacred," and goes on to demand that its audience ask the ashes of the massacred Indians what they would say to anyone who would now usurp powers from those colonists whose ancestors' own blood and ashes have been mixed in with those of the original inhabitants in the very soil of the island. The spirits of the "primitive inhabitants" of Saint-Domingue would respond to such an inquiry, the letter curiously goes on, that

after you made us disappear from this land ... you depopulated Africa through wars sustained by your greed, in order to tear away its peaceful inhabitants and bring them to another hemisphere, where they were destined to replace us with forced labor. There, they formed a new indigenous class [*nouvelles indigènes*], who sought to pay their debt to us by avenging us. Since they have completed this task, we declare them our successors.⁵⁴

This rather mysterious and deeply strange letter raises more questions than answers about how and in what way *indigène* might have been adopted in colonial Saint-Domingue. In the first instance, it is not clear when the letter was actually written, to whom it was addressed (Dumesle writes that it was addressed to the Assemblée des notables, but that was an organ of the *Ancien Régime* that had been defunct for at least three years by the time the Assembly at Saint-Marc had formed), or what Dumesle's source for the letter might have been. We should entertain the possibility that Dumesle fabricated the letter, in order to underscore his broader point in the passage in question

⁵³John D. Garrigus, "Vincent Ogé 'jeune' (1757–91): Social Class and Free Colored Mobilization on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution," *The Americas* 68/1 (2011), 33–62; Vincent Ogé, *Motion faite par M. Vincent Ogé, jeune à l'Assemblée des Colons, Habitans de S.-Dominge, à l'Hôtel de Massiac, Place des Victoires* (Paris, 1790), BNF Gallica; Estienne de Joly, *Cahier, contenant les plaintes, doléances & réclamations des citoyens-libres & propriétaires de couleur, des isles & colonies françaises* (Paris, 1789), JCLB.

⁵⁴Herard Dumesle, *Voyage dans le Nord D'Hayti ou, Revelation des Lieux et des Monumens Historiques* (Cayes, 1824), 355–6.

that the whites, so suicidally committed both to independence from Paris and to the strict maintenance of race hierarchy in Saint-Domingue, were in fact oracles of their own destruction. Dumesle was also, as we will discuss below, quite given to associations between Haiti's revolutionaries and the original inhabitants of the western hemisphere, and *indigène* is a regular feature of his prose.

But even if the letter is real, the claim that *indigène* was a self-nomination among the *gens de couleur* in 1789–90 on the basis of the evidence Dumesle supplies would require modification. Dumesle's citation puts the use of the term in the mouths of the white planters in the Saint-Marc assembly, not those of the *gens de couleur*. And even if we accept that the letter is real and that the assembly is here simply repeating a popular self-nomination common among the *gens de couleur* roughly around 1789–90, Dumesle's citation suggests that both white planters and the *gens de couleur* could find in the memory of the island's original inhabitants and their brutal extermination what the letter calls the “most sacred basis” for their right to govern the island and to own and cultivate its land. To claim to be *nouvelle Indigènes* (and this term, notably, is only used to describe African-descended inhabitants of the island in the letter), on this understanding, is also to invoke some association with the island's original Taíno inhabitants. At the same time, the use of this term in Dumesle's letter also suggests something of the substitutive logic that Jaucourt earlier claimed made the first Dutch settlers and their posterity *indigènes* of southwest Africa. Whatever the case, the possibility that *indigène* was a term circulating among the *gens de couleur* and/or the white planters of Saint-Domingue in 1789–90, in ways that echoed the racial, geographic, and political registers that it had begun to carry across the Atlantic, remains inconclusive and may require further investigation.

Most scholars of the revolution, by contrast, have tended to focus on the adoption of “indigenous” by Dessalines and the revolutionaries. It is certain, of course, that Dessalines and his men adopted *indigène* in the final stages of the revolution, probably sometime in 1803. Julia Gaffield has recently, in her biography of Dessalines, dated his earliest adoption of the term to a letter the general wrote to the British admiral John Thomas Duckworth on 2 August of that year. The letter, Gaffield notes, both adopts the title *Armée indigène* for Dessalines's troops and names him the *général en chef de l'Armée indigène*. By 17 October, Dessalines had chosen to use the name publicly for the first time, as the title of a published account of his campaigns to take the cities of Saint-Marc and Port Républicain indicates. The title of the article was accompanied by the declaration *Liberté ou la Mort*, as the 1 January Declaration of Independence would be. From that point forward, it seems, *indigène* became the primary lens through which Dessalines and his usual scribe, Louis Boisrond-Tonnerre, wrote and spoke about his troops and citizens of the new nation.⁵⁵ And in doing so, as we have seen, the general and Boisrond-Tonnerre made definite and repeated gestures toward some kind of connection between their new nation, the original inhabitants of the island, and indeed the original inhabitants of America more generally once they formally declared independence in 1804. What is more, Dessalines's adoption of

⁵⁵ Julia Gaffield, *I Have Avenged America: Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Haiti's Fight for Freedom* (New Haven, 2025), 162–5, 174–5.

the title *indigène* for the army he was leading, and the constitutional associations he declared upon their victory, arrived on the heels of a trend among certain contingents of the revolutionary army to refer to themselves and their troops as “Incas” (although, interestingly, *indigène* does not appear in any documents that record this practice), linking their fight to Tupac Amaru II’s 1780–83 rebellion in Peru, the news of which had been circulating in Saint-Domingue since shortly after its onset.⁵⁶ The first decades of the postrevolutionary period in the new black nation, too, continued to emphasize these associations between Haitian national identity and the original inhabitants of the island, and indeed the Americas more generally. An 1816 revision of the constitution, for example, included explicit provisions encouraging the immigration and naturalization of fugitive “Indians” and blacks alike from the many remaining colonial and slave societies in the Caribbean basin.⁵⁷

Dessalines’s choice to refer to himself and his troops as *indigènes*, and to route the new nation’s identity through associations with the island’s—and, by extension, the western hemisphere’s—original inhabitants is remarkable, as Gaffield and David Geggus have respectively commented, for the political acuity and ingenuity it reflects. Dessalines and the revolutionaries’ choice to refer to themselves as *indigènes*, with explicit reference to some kind of historical connection to the original inhabitants of the western hemisphere, was a deliberate effort to construct and manage a coherent national identity out of the racial, linguistic, and class diversity that characterized the demographics of the revolt. As the example of the *gens de couleur* illustrates, colonial Saint-Domingue was stratified along a complex color and class line that separated free individuals of varying degrees of wealth and power who were often (though not exclusively) of mixed-race ancestry from enslaved individuals. By the first years of the nineteenth century, that line had only grown more intense and stressed amid two parallel revolutions and counterrevolutions on either side of the Atlantic, as well as the civil and international factionalisms that constantly shuttled the allegiances of the revolutionary generals like Toussaint, Christophe, Sans-Souci, Rigaud, and Dessalines, among others, between the various imperial attempts of the French, the British, and the Spanish to maintain (in France’s case) or wrest (in Britain and Spain’s case) control over the world’s most profitable colony from both their European competitors and a self-determining black people.

These divisions were probably further intensified by the fact that much of the enslaved population in colonial Saint-Domingue on the eve of the revolution was composed of individuals hailing from different West and Central African polities, language groups, and “ethnicities,” many of which were mutually unintelligible at best.⁵⁸ Indeed, as Gaffield notes in the latter regard, in the early days of his 1802 defection from his

⁵⁶Sinclair Thompson, “Sovereignty Disavowed: The Tupac Amaru Revolution in the Atlantic World,” *Atlantic Studies* 13/3 (2016), 407–31.

⁵⁷Michel Camus, “Une lettre du General Capois,” *Revue de la Société haïtienne d’histoire et de géographie* 141 (1983), 69–72; M. Esmangart, Vicomte de Fontagnes, and Alexandre Pétion, *The Constitution of the Republic of Hayti: to which is added, documents relating to the correspondence of His Most Christian Majesty, with the president of Hayti, preceded by a proclamation to the people and the army* (New York, 1818).

⁵⁸There has been an intense recent debate regarding exactly how much of the population was composed of people brought directly from Africa. See, for example, John K. Thornton, “‘I Am the Subject of the King of Congo’: African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 4/2 (1993), 181–214;

uneasy alliance with Napoleon's henchmen Leclerc and Rochambeau, Dessalines reorganized some of his troops and gave this new unit the name "Polonais"—not as an homage to the Polish soldiers who had sometimes fought on the side of the liberated blacks but rather "because the soldiers were mostly Africans, and their languages were so poorly understood by the creole troops that it may as well have been Polish."⁵⁹ Such tongue-in-cheek names were not enough to carry such a diverse and complex set of relations into new nationhood. But evidently Dessalines and the revolutionaries thought that *indigène*, and associations with the original inhabitants of the island that it evoked, were. And like the title *indigène*, the choice of an Arawakan and not, say, an African name for the new nation—Haiti—was probably a deliberate choice on the part of Dessalines and his generals to mitigate any potential conflicts that might arise in a country composed of citizens whose cultural, religious, and political origins traced to multiple African ethnicities, as well as mixed and black citizens who had been born on the island itself.⁶⁰

Strategic, partisan, and/or ethnic concerns were no doubt a driving force behind the revolutionaries' decision to adopt *indigène* and an associated web of references to the original inhabitants of the western hemisphere. But it also seems evident that, as Daut contends, these gestures signaled a unique moral and political sensibility, if not vision, that amounted to something like a more comprehensive stance against imperialism, colonialism, race hierarchy, and slavery, on the basis of a set of judgments about the moral scandal that characterized the history and society of the Americas. Indeed, Dessalines and his *Armée indigène* appear to have understood the claim to indigenous status and its associated memories of the island's first inhabitants as posing a set of questions essential to the values of their new nation: what do those in the present inherit from and owe to those who have died, often violently, in the construction of the society that presently exists? What does it mean to be forcibly thrown into that kind of society? How to relate the force of one's own subjugation to the facts of another's? Is it possible to become original to the place of a society built in this way, at what point would that happen, and what would it mean to do so? What is the form of politics, in one's own nation as well as in the international order in which that nation operates, that would follow from a society that observes this responsibility? How would the dominant scripts of humanity need to be rewritten to countenance these facts, affects, and values? And how should we foster a spirit of fidelity to the past which made us and the present political order in order to achieve a future that corresponds more precisely to those rewritten concepts of humanity? For Dessalines and the *Armée indigène*, their new nation of Haiti was to provide the answers.

Postrevolutionary histories sought to make these answers explicit by tracing an entangled, though still not entirely continuous, relationship that bound postcolonial Haitian indigenism to the actions and ideas of the island's, and the Americas', original inhabitants. As Daut has shown, Haitian authors like the Baron de Vastey, Thomas Madiou, Herard Dumesle, Émile Nau, and others all, to varying degrees, narrated the

Matt D. Childs, David Geggus, Christina Mobley, John F. Schwaller, James H. Sweet, and John Thornton, "Forum on 'Kongomania,'" *The Americas* 81/2 (2024), 207–96.

⁵⁹ Gaffield, *I Have Avenged America*, 150.

⁶⁰ Geggus, "The Naming of Haïti," 44.

island's history beginning with the violent collision between Columbus and the Taíno and the latter's subsequent resistance to it. Like Dessalines and the Armée indigène, these authors counted the struggles that characterized relations between the Taíno and the Spanish, as much as the struggles of previous generations of enslaved Africans on the island, as the fount from which the new nation would draw its values. In doing so, these authors sought to connect previous indigenous rebellions (mostly on the island but also, as we have already noted, Tupac Amaru II's 1780 revolt) with a long history of colonial revolt that legitimated the revolution and animated the anticolonial, antiracist, antislavery values they espoused.⁶¹ At the beginning of his history of the revolution, for example, Dumesle would evoke the origin stories of the Inca (which authors like Dumesle had almost certainly come to know through the works of Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca, the first published author of indigenous descent), writing that Vincent Ogé "appeared as a Manco Capac who carried enlightenment to the ancient peoples of America, in a context where Revolution had given momentum to his [abolitionist] opinions, and [he] quickly conveyed this movement to Haïti (then Saint-Domingue)."⁶²

Vastey, Madiou, Dumesle, and Nau were, as Daut has argued elsewhere, often enchanted by the romance of Amerindian rebellion. These postcolonial historians cast the records of such events, especially in sixteenth-century Haiti, as preludes to the almost teleological culmination of the liberation struggle that the achievement of nineteenth-century Haitian independence heralded. But in this effort, those historians struggled to fasten the connections between what they saw as the Amerindian past and Haiti's "indigenous" present, even as they called forth these associations. *Indigène* was absent from Vastey's unveiling of the colonial system (although it did appear in his history of the revolution), sparingly and ambiguously deployed in Madiou's voluminous history of Haiti, pregnant with its revolutionary meaning in Dumesle's travelogue and history of the nation, and then, ironically, more or less severed altogether from those earlier associations in Nau's history of the island's leaders and their revolts against Spanish colonization. Indeed, neither Dumesle nor Nau used *indigène* to describe the original inhabitants of the Americas, only the black and colored residents of Saint-Domingue and then citizens of postcolonial Haiti.

The opening pages of Émile Nau's 1855 *Histoire des Caciques d'Haïti*, perhaps the most comprehensive and outstanding of the histories of the original inhabitants of the island produced in postcolonial Haiti, illustrate the point well. Nau divides the history of the island into four distinct eras. The first, the focus of Nau's book, is that of the *aborigènes*, the Taíno, and their destruction at the hands of Columbus and the Spanish colonists. The second era began, Nau continues, with the introduction of the African slave trade to the island in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Nau names as the island's third era the thirteen-year period of the revolution itself. The fourth and present era, Nau concludes, is the era defined by the *indigènes*—that is, the new citizens of the island of Haiti which the revolution had brought into political being. Nau's schematic reflects his desire for and simultaneous struggle to establish a connection

⁶¹Daut, *Awakening the Ashes*, 31–49. See also Marlene L. Daut, *Baron de Vastey and the Origins of Black Atlantic Humanism* (New York, 2017).

⁶²Dumesle, *Voyage*, 75–6. For evidence of the awareness of Garcilaso de la Vega see Baron de Vastey, *La Système Colonial Dévoilé* (Cap-Henry, 1814), 1.

between Taínos and Africans. Nau dismisses the possibility of the *indigènes* having much of a filial relationship with the *aborigènes* whom Columbus had confronted three centuries prior. Rather, the bond between the *aborigènes* of the sixteenth century and the *indigènes* of the nineteenth is a historical–spiritual one. It consists in their shared experience of bondage, and in the revolution’s echoes of the Taínos’ earlier efforts to break the chains of slavery and genocide. The spirit of the *indigènes*’ revolution is, for Nau, as it was for Dessalines, in the first instance the materialization of the spirit of avengement, a reformation of the present in response to the atrocities of the past. This avengement is manifested, Nau is clear, in the form of the sovereign Haitian nation-state. As Nau puts it, “to restore a country to liberty is to avenge all the oppressed, it is the avengement of oneself and at the same time vengeance for the unfortunate Indians. In inheriting their servitude, we have also inherited their patrimony.” But Nau also insists that there is a categorical difference between the *indigènes* of the present and the *aborigènes* of the past. To appreciate the specific contours of this difference, we would need to inquire further into the emergence, circulation, textures, and resonances of the *aborigène* in the mid-nineteenth-century Atlantic world.⁶³

Postcolonial historians of the island like Dumesle and Nau therefore do not seem to have shared the revolutionaries’ exact sense of the meaning of “indigenous.” While the historians did appreciate and seek to extend the associations with the original inhabitants of the western hemisphere that the revolutionaries’ use of the term carried, authors like Nau also seem to have retrieved something of the substitutive, Jaucourtian logic that prevailed in the late eighteenth century. The power of “indigenous” in Nau’s hands may limit us from fully finding in his work a kind of coalitional “antislavery, anti-colonial, and anti-racist” prelude to the prevailing connotations that the indigenous sometimes carries today. But focusing on how the indigenous may or may not represent the spirit of Nau’s meditations on the colonial history of the island and its philosophical import risks overlooking what is indeed politically and morally quite remarkable about his examination of those bonds of violence that tied the fate of the sixteenth-century *aborigènes* to the people who became nineteenth-century *indigènes* and avenged that long record of cruelty.⁶⁴

Nau does not articulate the ultimate import of his history in terms of indigeness. Rather, he argues that the ultimate importance of the connection that ties the fate of the *aborigènes* to that of the *indigènes* consists in a more universal *humanity*. Just a few pages after echoing Dessalines in calling the revolution an act of vengeance, Nau suggests that this may not be enough. Neither the spirit nor the act of vengeance alone are sufficient grounds to make the case for the global and universal significance of the island, its history, and the new polity that has been founded with a vision of rectifying the violence that that place has witnessed. The society of the present which has inherited the patrimony of the island’s previous inhabitants and victims holds an obligation to its predecessor. This obligation can be met through the study and transmission of the archive of this patrimony. While the most immediately important students of this

⁶³Émile Nau, *Histoire des Caciques d’Haïti* (Paris, 1894), 15–16.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

transmission are, naturally, the citizenry of the new nation, no less important an audience for this research will be the students of humanity itself: “The annales of Haiti, despite the minor position they occupy according to those of the world,” Nau writes, “abound in useful lessons for the study and instruction of humanity.” “These annales, recent and limited as they are, only have their value and interest when our most skilled hands have found them, and when great thinkers have endeavored to meditate on them most profoundly ... For the historian, these are rich mines by which we will be satisfied to have provoked [their] discovery and use.”⁶⁵

Focusing on the extent to which Nau may or may not extend the status of *indigène* would therefore, ultimately, and a little ironically, be a disservice to the much more universal project he is proposing here: Nau is framing his project as an effort to unearth an archive relevant to the “study and instruction of humanity” in general and articulating a grander ambition to reframe the history of the Americas, and the world they have shaped, from the perspective of those whose deaths and enslavement constituted that hemisphere as such. This is something more than just a long history of struggle and revolution. As Dumesle’s words about Manco Capac’s bringing of “enlightenment” to the inhabitants of the Andes suggest, it is an effort to name a constitutional spirit that challenges the very measure of what counts as the foundation of an accurate and adequate moral code from which we might evaluate the conduct of human societies. For the intellectuals tasked with meeting this challenge, the spirit of the *indigène* therefore requires a more sustained engagement with the social-historical record and intellectual genealogies shaped by the colonial relations in the post-Columbian Americas. The *indigène* itself may name something like what Dumesle calls “enlightenment” (again, a complex term whose registers in the early nineteenth century require further discussion), or what Nau calls “instruction of humanity.” But if this is the case, then *indigène* may also be seen less as an end in itself and more as a means of pointing those who encounter it to a whole series of more fundamental, more complex meanings and problems. Here, those meanings would probably include those questions that Dessalines and his army had posed about the relationship between past and present, the dominant scripts of humanity, and the appropriate kinds of politics under the heading of the *indigène*. And as with any means, eventually, obsessing over the exact rights and claims of the *indigène* itself would become an exercise in overwriting and sequestering the very ends it was originally intended to achieve.

“No indigenous nation on Earth”

Thierry Hoquet has recently commented in a survey of the colonial and racial terms, presuppositions, and problematics in the history of modern French philosophy that *indigène* holds a curiously particular kind of purchase for speaking about colonized peoples. For Hoquet, “the figure of ‘the indigene’ is at once held in an unequal and perhaps colonial relation, [whereas] the autochthone appears to be more autonomous.” Hoquet locates support for this claim in Sartre’s famous exordium in his preface to Fanon’s *Les damnés de la terre* that “Il n’y a pas si longtemps, la terre comptait deux

⁶⁵Ibid.

milliards d'habitants, soit cinq cents millions d'hommes et un milliard cinq cents millions d'indigènes. Les premiers disposaient du Verbe, les autres l'empruntaient." For Hoquet, Sartre's comments capture the fact that "if 'the indigène' is the one who does not grant language but who is imprinted by it, it is on the one hand because he does not have language (like an animal, he is deprived of *logos* and reduced to *phône*), and on the other hand because he is condemned to speak the language of another."⁶⁶ It is true that the history of *indigène* is to some extent the record of colonial authorities attempting to give a palatable, perhaps even comforting, name to the colonized. But to focus exclusively on this trajectory of the term—particularly in the francophone context—would be to overlook the significance of its use in the waning days of the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath. As Daut and Gaffield have suggested, the great genius that, say, the use of *indigène* by Dessalines and the postcolonial historians of Haiti exemplifies is their domestication of the grammars of empire and colonization to make these their own.

Hoquet's comments echo a broader range of criticism of the origins, meanings, and powers of the indigenous, especially prevalent among anglophone writers today. These critiques have emerged in response to the rise in prominence of "Indigeneity" as a mode of individual and group identification and as an a priori postulate of the production of knowledge. "Indigeneity" and indigenouness more generally, these critics argue, tend to replicate the very binary forms of thinking that the category's proponents contend it disrupts. Recourse to the indigenous, on this account, recapitulates divisions which organize understandings of different peoples and forms of knowledge along lines of premodern and modern, victims and invaders, the righteous and the wicked, and so on. The indigenous, these critics hold, is at best an inheritance of the antiquated vocabularies of nineteenth-century empires and the anthropologists they dispatched to survey the human terrain of their global holdings. At worst, this inheritance continues to animate ethnonationalism and other monological forms of identity consolidation embedded in claims to the indigenouness of a particular place and constituency.⁶⁷

We need to take these critiques seriously. It is true, as historians of nineteenth-century African colonialism have noted, that *indigène* was regularly deployed by the French, especially, as a means of administering its efforts in indirect rule on that continent. These studies have helpfully (if usually passingly) highlighted the peculiar status and detrimental legacies of the designation of certain ethnic groups as "indigenous" to particular regions of that continent, often at the expense of others.⁶⁸ But given that, as we have just seen, *indigène* had already transmitted a radically anticolonial

⁶⁶Thierry Hoquet, *Histoire (dé)coloniale de philosophie française de la Renaissance à nos jours* (Paris, 2025), 12–13; Jean-Paul Sartre, "Préface à l'édition de 1961," in Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris, 2002), 17; Sartre, "Preface," in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), xliii: "Not so long ago, the Earth numbered 2 billion inhabitants, i.e., 500 million men and 1.5 billion 'natives'. The first possessed the Word, the others borrowed it."

⁶⁷Cf. note 3 above.

⁶⁸Christoph Bonneuil, "Development as Experiment: Science and State-Building in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Africa, 1930–1970," *Osiris* 15/1 (2000), 258–81; Dickson Eyoh, "From Economic Crisis to Political Liberalization: Pitfalls of the New Political Sociology for Africa," *African Studies Review* 39/3 (1996), 43–80; Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, 2001); Mamdani, "The Invention of the *Indigène*," *London Review of Books* 33/2 (2011), at

and insurrectionist connotation a little less than a century before the term reappeared in the French imperial vocabulary, further research would do well to interrogate any potential relationship between the revolutionaries' rejection of imperialism and race hierarchy in the name of the *indigène* and the empire's effort to reconsolidate its claims to domination in the same terms.

The risk of ethnonationalism is real too. As Daut and Trouillot have both pointed out, the claim to the indigenous—what Trouillot calls *indigénisme*—did, in the course of the twentieth century, mutate into a kind of blood-and-soil racial nationalism that François Duvalier channeled in his ascent to authoritarian rule in Haiti.⁶⁹ And in recent years, the apparent moral unassailability of indigenous status has increasingly facilitated the retrenchment of conflicts over territory, largely by enabling parties to a conflict to recast its more historically proximate causes as questions of original, primeval belonging and ownership. On 1 February 2024, for example, Regent Xami Thomas of the Khoi Kingdom of South Africa stood before an audience at the Friends of Zion Museum in west Jerusalem, telling them, “I want to apologize for the horrible thing the South African government did. We are sorry,” referring to the case alleging that Israel was conducting a genocide in the Gaza Strip, which the government of South Africa had brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at the United Nations a little over a month prior. “We [the Khoi Kingdom] were horrified ... Anybody who says that Israel isn't indigenous doesn't know what they're talking about. If Israel isn't indigenous, there's no indigenous nation on Earth.” The occasion for Regent Thomas's address was the opening of a so-called Indigenous Embassy in Jerusalem.⁷⁰

The indigenous, its history, and its powers therefore present us with something of a contradiction. On the one hand, the term's genealogy testifies to a moment of anticolonial triumph at the height of the age of Enlightenment revolutions. It also testifies to the not inconsiderable achievements of the twentieth-century push for the placement of the indigenous as a relevant category of international law in a largely state-centric system by descendants of the original inhabitants of the Americas and the Pacific.⁷¹ On the other hand, not only has the term functioned as a tool of imperial governance, but in

www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n02/mahmood-mamdani/the-invention-of-the-indigene; Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

⁶⁹Daut, *Awakening the Ashes*, 1–27; Trouillot, *Haiti*, 109–36.

⁷⁰Ilse Strauss, “Jerusalem welcomes opening of world's first Indigenous Embassy,” *Jerusalem Post*, 24 Feb. 2024, at www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-788322. This has been a small but significant part of the narration of the long conflict in Israel/Palestine and especially since the onset of the most recent round of hostilities. Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* (New York, 2021); and Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal, “On Indigenous Refusal against Externally-Imposed Frameworks in Historic Palestine,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 51/1 (2023), 212–36, for example, have characterized Palestinians as an “indigenous people.” Pro-Israel authors such as Thomas Friedman, “What I'm Thinking about on the First Anniversary of the War,” *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 2024, too, have argued that both Israelis and Palestinians should be understood as “two indigenous peoples” to the region.

⁷¹On the achievement of the recognition of indigenous status in international law see S. James Anaya, *Indigenous Peoples in International Law* (Oxford, 2004); James (Sa'ke) Youngblood Henderson, *Indigenous Diplomacy and the Rights of Peoples: Achieving UN Recognition* (Chicago, 2008); Burke Hendrix, *Strategies of Justice: Aboriginal Peoples, Persistent Injustice, and the Ethics of Political Action* (Oxford, 2019); Sheryl Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics: A Subtle Revolution* (London, 2016); Elsa Stamatopoulou, *Indigenous Peoples in the International Arena: The Global Movement for Self-Determination* (London, 2025).

the wake of empire, the moral claims of indigenusness have been, and continue to be, grounds for conducting and evading responsibility for ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Like claims to the indigenous today, the Haitian adoption of the category announced an attempt to conceive of a new kind of politics. In this regard, Haitian claims to indigenusness in the early nineteenth century demonstrate some of both the perils and the promise of the term. For the revolutionaries and historians who invoked the indigenous, its power may have consisted in its ability to name belonging and association as a problematic that, directly and soberly confronted, might enable a fuller realization of universal principles such as truth, reason, human dignity, freedom, equality, and the like. The Haitian use of the indigenous therefore pointed, in its best moments, toward a spiritual, historical, and political sensibility that demanded a broader conception of humanity and the modes through which human life could be made good and sustained as such. But the indigenous offered a new vocabulary for the consolidation of imperial legitimacy later in the century. Moreover, Haitian notions of indigenusness also eventually enabled new forms of social stratification as the postcolonial state reached for a new national identity as the grounds of its legitimacy. This contradictory nature of the indigenous named, in sum, what we might call—echoing Dumeslé's words—another Enlightenment, one which domesticated as much as it contributed to European forms of sociopolitical and epistemic order, and one which also pointed to sources and ancestries of its forms of reason from those peoples who had been deemed incapable of possessing, much less exercising, reason altogether. Claimants and disputants of the term today would do well to reflect on these facts.

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