

# Thinking Through The Unthinkable: The Haitian Revolution

# Main Ideas

- C.L.R. James' "Lectures on the Black Jacobins":
  - Mostly illiterate enslaved Haitians rose up
  - First successful slave revolt: threw off capitalist colonizationist efforts
  - Whites had oppressed the slaves by, among other things, denying education
- Ghachem: "The Antislavery Script": Haiti's Place in the Narrative of Atlantic Revolution":
  - Idea of "political slavery" v.s. "chattel slavery"
  - The antislavery script after the Haitian Revolution

# Lectures on *The Black Jacobins*

C.L.R. James:

- Trinidadian: thought his good education “didn’t suit the West Indies” (65)
  - When he went to Europe, history was taught with the perspective that “blacks are lowly people”

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# Education and Literacy in *The Black Jacobins*

- L'Ouverture: former illiterate slave
- Undereducated Haitians resisted exploitation and shaped their own destiny
  - “They couldn’t read but they could make a revolution,” (76).
- “It will take time, once the ideas are there. It is always so because they [‘the obscure people’] begin and then some intellectuals come in and make great speeches. But it has to begin from below,” (106).
- In America today:
  - African American English is viewed as an uneducated and inferior way of speaking
  - This is used to disenfranchise the black communities who speak it

# The White Narrative on Black History

- White author's memoir on slavery in San Domingo:
  - Negroes are “unjust, cruel, barbarous, half-humans, treacherous, deceitful, thieves, drunkards, proud, lazy, unclean, shameless, jealous to fury and cowards,” (99).
- Media representation of oppressed groups fighting back
- “Writers on the West Indies always relate them to their approximation to Britain, France, Spain and America, that is to say, to Western Civilization, but never in relation to their own history,” (83).



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# “The Antislavery Script”: Haiti’s Place in the Narrative of Atlantic Revolution

“Political Slavery” v.s. “Chattel Slavery”

- Political Slavery

- “[T]his was slavery in a very specific, eighteenth-century political sense: it denoted a state of servitude induced by corruption in the body politic that destroyed the capacity of the people for independence.” (151)

- John Dickinson: “[t]hose who are *taxed* without their own consent expressed by themselves or their representatives are *slaves*.” (151)

- “John Adams...opined that under British rule the Americans were ‘the most abject sort of slaves’,” (151).

# What Language We Use Matters: Mental Health and the Black Community

- Overuse of the word “slavery” effectively trivializes it by diluting the meaning, abstracting it from its original context
- Similarly, the language of mental health conditions often trivialized
- Mental health conditions trivialized in black communities:
  - Sign of weakness
  - “Happens to other people”
  - Barrier to accessing care



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# “The Antislavery Script”: Haiti’s Place in the Narrative of Atlantic Revolution

## Priorities of the Haitian Revolution

- Main foci: renounce France and abolish slavery; both of equal importance
  - Consequence: marginalization of issues of structural injustices that lead to slavery, like “the practice of coerced labor and the ability of some to claim property rights in others,” (161).
- “Post Racial Society” after Obama elected



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# Discussion Questions

- How do we marginalize individuals by re-appropriating their language and applying it to our own contexts? Are there any examples in your own biographies where you felt uncomfortable with hearing other people using your language?
- C.L.R. James talks about how the oppression of the enslaved Haitians was achieved in part by withholding education and telling black stories through white perspectives, thus controlling the political dialogue. What are ways we can ensure that today's history will not be written solely in the perspective of the dominant group?

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