

# Echoes of Past Revolutions: Architecture, Memory, and Spectral Politics in the Historic Districts of Port-au-Prince

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the life history of Ulrick Rosarion, a Haitian federal prosecutor who built his career during the Duvalier dictatorship. Rosarion lived his entire life in a small house of downtown Port-au-Prince, in a neighborhood formerly inhabited by the Black middle-classes that gained prominence in the political and administrative sphere during the dictatorship (1957-1986). Rosarion was also a writer who produced four books of nationalist poetry. Based on interviews and readings of his literary production, and beyond, through an exploration of architectural forms and material remnants echoing the dictatorship, this paper explores how an idealized version of the dictatorship today haunts the political landscape of Haiti. Moreover, this article argues that the state takes on a sensual form that allows for the diffusion and/or rupture of past ideologies.

**Key words:** materiality; architecture; memory; sensory politics; ideology; Duvalierism, Haiti.

# Ecoss de revoluções passadas: Arquitetura, memória e políticas espectrais nos bairros históricos de Porto-Príncipe

## Resumo

Este artigo analisa a história de vida de Ulrick Rosarion, um juiz federal haitiano que construiu sua carreira durante a ditadura dos Duvalier. Rosarion viveu toda sua vida em uma pequena casa no centro da cidade de Porto-Príncipe, em um quarteirão que foi outrora a morada de membros de uma classe média que ganhou proeminência nas esferas administrativas e políticas da ditadura (1957-1986). Rosarion também escreveu quatro volumes de poesia nacionalista. Baseado em entrevistas e leituras de sua produção literária, além de uma interpretação das formas materiais e arquitetônicas deixadas pelo governo autoritário, este artigo detalha como uma versão idealizada da ditadura assombra hoje a paisagem política haitiana. Por fim, este texto analisa como o Estado assume uma forma sensorial que permite a difusão e/ou a ruptura com ideologias do passado.

**Palavras-chave:** materialidade; arquitetura; memória; política sensorial; ideologia; duvalierismo; Haiti.

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Vincent Joos

“When you look at the trees, you will see in their swaying, the invisible and mystical body of the spirits. When you listen to the wind groaning over the countryside, it will be their voices cursing you.”

Jacques Stephen Alexis, *Les Arbres Musiciens* (1957: 359)

*Alexandre Pétion’s house in downtown Port-au-Prince.*



Photo by Aland Joseph, March 2014

## National Mythologies and Urban Memory

Rue de l’Enterrement is a one-mile paved street that links the largest cemetery of the country to the oldest house in Port-au-Prince, where Alexandre Pétion<sup>1</sup> was born in 1770. The two-story brick building is fissured and boarded up, and its front yard is invaded by derelict cars. A caretaker lives in a small room on the left side of the house and spends most of his time hanging out with the younger men who run a small auto-parts business from the front yard, or with the women who sell dry goods along the fence of the house. As the caretaker explained to me when I visited this house on a hot afternoon of September 2013, the building and surrounding area are key sites of Haitian history that should be better preserved:

<sup>1</sup> Pétion was a revolutionary leader and the first President of the Republic of Haiti from 1807 until his death in 1818.

“Soon after this house was built, there was a terrible earthquake [the 1770 earthquake that completely destroyed Port-au-Prince]. Pétion was a baby when it happened, but during the quake, his nurse was able to run in the house and to save him. So, this house sustained two big earthquakes, it’s a miracle that it’s still standing. Today, it’s infested with bats, but before the 2010 earthquake, it served as the Ministère des Affaires Sociales. It’s listed as a national monument by the state, but it’s now left abandoned.”

As we walked around the house, he showed me a hole that looked like a sewage drain and said:

“Dessalines is buried behind the Saint-Anne church, three blocks away from here. However, he died at the Pont-Rouge, the northern entrance of the city, which is about three kilometers (2 miles) from here. When he arrived at Pont-Rouge in 1806, he was killed by soldiers and dismembered by a mob. A woman named Défilée picked up his remains and put them in a bag. It is said she was crazy, but she was not. She picked up his remains and came back to the downtown cemetery via a tunnel. Well, this hole is the end of the tunnel Défilée used. She came out from there and then asked soldiers to bury Dessalines in the cemetery that used to be next to the Saint-Anne church. So, some people say Dessalines was killed here in this very house. Well, that’s still a debate...”

While mentioning these historical narratives, the caretaker talked about the question of skin color and power in Haiti. He used the settings of the house, its state of decrepitude, to suggest that the government has abandoned the people living in downtown Port-au-Prince, the majority of whom are black Haitians. In this narrative, Pétion, the first president of the Republic of Haiti (1807-1818) betrayed Dessalines, here seen as the egalitarian leader of black Haitians. Like many people, the caretaker believed that racial categories still largely shaped social, political, and economic exclusion in Haiti. What interests me here are not the still powerful legacies of colonial systems of race-based exclusion, which is outside of the scope of this article and has already been well analyzed (Labelle 1978, Trouillot 2012b, Daut 2015, Giaferri-Dombre 2007). Rather, I want to explore the relations between the built environment, the historical narratives its spurs and shapes, and political discourses. This article tracks how politics and social issues are *felt* by people who have been abandoned by the government and international institutions after the devastating 2010 earthquake that took the lives of more than 300,000 Haitians.

The type of conversation I had with the caretaker of Pétion’s house often takes place in the city center, in the neighborhoods adjacent to the National Palace. The statues of national heroes and the national history museum on the Champ de Mars, the main plaza of the capital, along with the institutional buildings and residences of formerly powerful figures that dot these streets, create what sociologist Geneviève Zubrzycki calls a “national sensorium” – a space where visual and material culture embody polyvalent national mythologies that, in turn, shape present understandings of the state functions and capabilities. As Zubrzycki argues, national mythologies are “created, congealed, and disseminated in multiple sites and through manifold sensory media” (2011: 21). In Haiti, Pétion and Dessalines appear in books, plays, radio shows, and oral narratives. Their statues and images are omnipresent in the downtown neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, and the streets, houses, buildings they once used or inhabited are still haunted with their presence. Their bodily remnants are encased in the same marble tomb at the National Mausoleum, right in the heart of the former colonial city. These multiple and polyvalent presences structure varied patterns of nationalistic discourse and action and “endow [them] with emotional force” (2011: 37).

This article ethnographically tracks these political afterlives in the urban environment in order to understand how people narrate and imagine their political world through the use of both material and immaterial elements. I am especially interested in the figure of dictator François Duvalier who ruled the country from 1957 to 1971, as his presence is forceful in the central neighborhoods of the city. Duvalier used what James Ferguson called “supernatural messianism” where he blended references to Catholicism and Vodou religion to encourage a

cult around his persona. In a famous 1964 propaganda pamphlet entitled “Le Catéchisme de la Révolution,” we read that “Dessalines, Toussaint, Christophe, Pétion, and Estimé are five distinct Chiefs of State who are substantiated in and form only one and the same President in the person of François Duvalier” (Fourcand 1964: 17). In other words, “chiefs of state” do not die, they have various afterlives that allow them to haunt the political landscapes of their nation. Their spectral presence in the political landscape of Haiti can be invoked as agentive forces that structure specific discourses and practices.

Downtown Port-au-Prince used to be, and to some extent remains, the residential area for the small black middle-class that formed the backbone of the first Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1971). François Duvalier’s presence is not acknowledged by any monuments, besides his desecrated grave in the Grand Cimetière. However, in the same area of the city, the state employees’ humble houses, along with the places where Duvalier hid during his internal exile (1954-1956) and the buildings where the violence of his regime was exerted, such as prisons, military barracks, institutional buildings, etc. make the presence of Haiti’s most autocratic leader spectral, yet forceful. Like in the “Catéchisme” written by Jean Fourcand, a notorious intellectual and Duvalier propagandist, state leaders are kept alive by people who write about them or who can assert their presence in a haunted built environment. They, too, are part of a national sensorium, of a fragmented script that enables past ideologies to resurface in modified forms.

In order to describe fragments of the Haitian national sensorium and to describe the agentive presence of Duvalier and of his messianism, I draw on archival materials, conversations I recorded in my field notes, interviews, descriptions of urban landscapes and dwellings to reflect on how the simultaneous presence of powerful male leaders whose names, actions, and ideologies still shape debates about sovereignty and the nature of the Haitian state. In particular, I focus on the house, life history and literary works of Ulrick Rosarion, a judge and poet I met in Rue de l’Enterrement in September 2013. Rosarion gave informal tours of his house and was a well-known and respected writer in Port-au-Prince. He passed away in June 2014, after working for forty-three years in the highest spheres of the Haitian judicial world. His father was a personal friend and ally of François Duvalier who took refuge in the Rosarion’s family house when he felt his life was in danger. In his writings, and in our conversations, Ulrick Rosarion touted François Duvalier as a national hero and often recalled other chiefs of state and revolutionary leaders to describe the political values that animated him and the members of his family. Rosarion’s house on Rue de l’Enterrement and his life were haunted by powerful political leaders and the ideologies, work ethics, and values they left behind. This house, along with Rosarion’s life history and writings, offer an example of the varied and fragmented reconstitution of past ideologies through the interplay of emotional, material, and intellectual elements.

## Ulrick Rosarion: Narrating and Living the Revolution(s)

*Ulrick Rosarion (Joos, March 2014)*

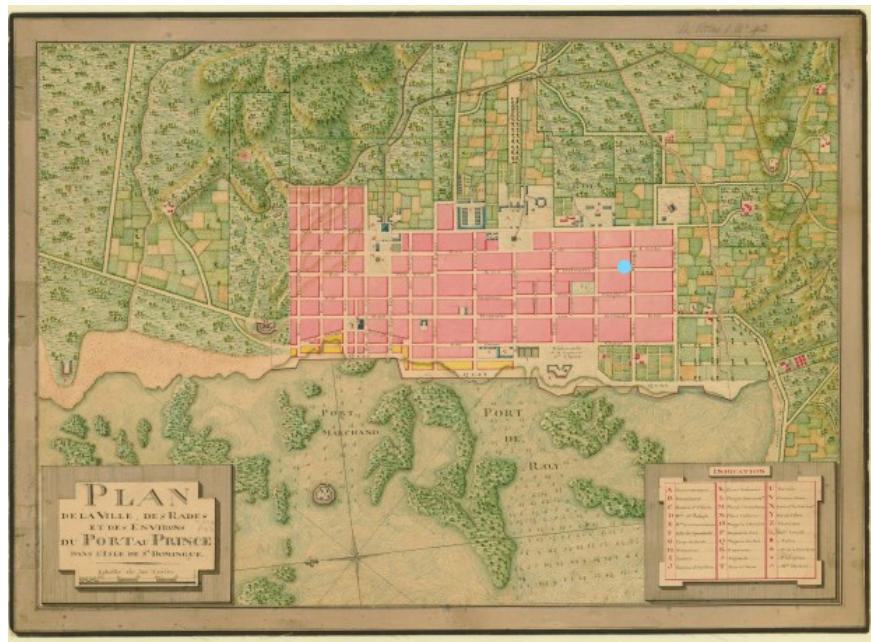


Ulrick Rosarion was born in Port-au-Prince on November 11, 1932. He still lived in the same two-story house where he spent his childhood, on Rue de L'Enterrement, when I met him in September 2013. Sitting right in front of the Saint-François hospital, which was being rebuilt at the time, his gray and orange house did not stand out from the rest of the built environment. The house is a two-story timber and concrete shotgun comprising six rooms, an outdoor kitchen and an 8x24 ft. (2.4x7.3m) side courtyard covered by shade trees. This humble shotgun house reflects the middle-class status and the provincial origins of the Rosarions, who came from Les Gonaïves, a city of the Artibonite region, to Port-au-Prince in the 1920s. The façade of the house, however, is peculiar. The front porch is surrounded by a heavy metal fence that anchors the house design in what Haitian architect Albert Mangonès called the “architectural aesthetic of enclosure” that became prevalent in the Duvalier years (Mangonès 1992: 848). In brief, the front entrance of the shotgun, which is traditionally the entry point into the house for visitors, is barricaded, and guests enter the courtyard through a thick metal door opening onto the left gallery of the house.

*Ulrick Rosarion's house on Rue de l'Enterrement (Aland Joseph, August 2015)*



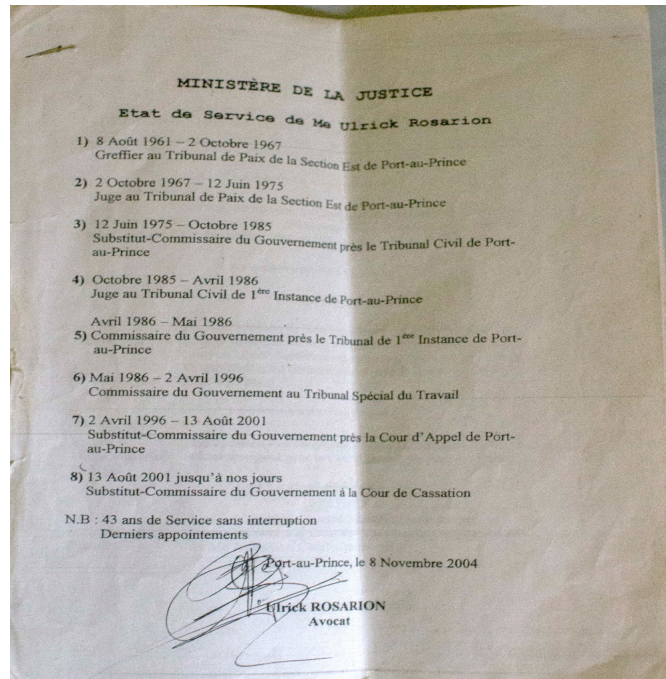
Colonial map of Port-au-Prince. Rosarion's house is located in the former colonial grid (blue dot on map), on Rue de l'Enterrement.



The paint was peeling away and the back walls of the house had been seriously damaged by the 2010 earthquake. The two most spacious upstairs and downstairs rooms, located in the back of the house, were not used for this reason. Besides the heavy protective armature surrounding the house and rendering it secure, almost bulletproof, nothing indicated the house belonged to a family where many men had worked in the highest spheres of the government. It was a house cherished by the people who inhabited it and who liked to speak about its history and functions.

Ulrick Rosarion was eighty-three years old when I met him. He had suffered a stroke in 2004 that impeded his speech and forced him to express himself slowly. Nonetheless, he was an alert man who often referred to some of his writings and documents to make a point. We all called him by his official title: Maître Rosarion, or in Kreyòl, Mèt, which translates as "Your Honor" in English legal language. Mèt Rosarion worked for the state for forty-three years without interruption. His career was launched under François Duvalier's regime in 1961 and ended soon after the coup that removed Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power in 2004.

*Ulrick Rosarion's Curriculum Vitae (Joos March 2014)*



Léandre Rosarion on the left and his son, Ulrick Rosarion on the right.

Both were lawyers in Port-au-Prince (Joos, March 2014)



Ulrick Rosarion followed somewhat in the footsteps of his father, who worked in similar positions in his youth, but who took important decision-making positions under the Estimé presidency (1946-1950) and under both Duvaliers. Léandre Rosarion ended his career as a Secretary of Justice in the mid-1970s. His son's longevity in the high spheres of the legislative body is surprising, given the turbulent political landscape before and after 1986. Keeping a position in the Duvalier state was quite challenging, as both dictators never hesitated to oust their major collaborators or to kill them on a whim. Remaining in high administrative positions in the Haitian state was not, and is not, an easy task. Rosarion managed to work for chiefs of state whose affiliations covered a broad spectrum of the Haitian political world. When I asked him about his uninterrupted career, Mèt Rosarion explained:

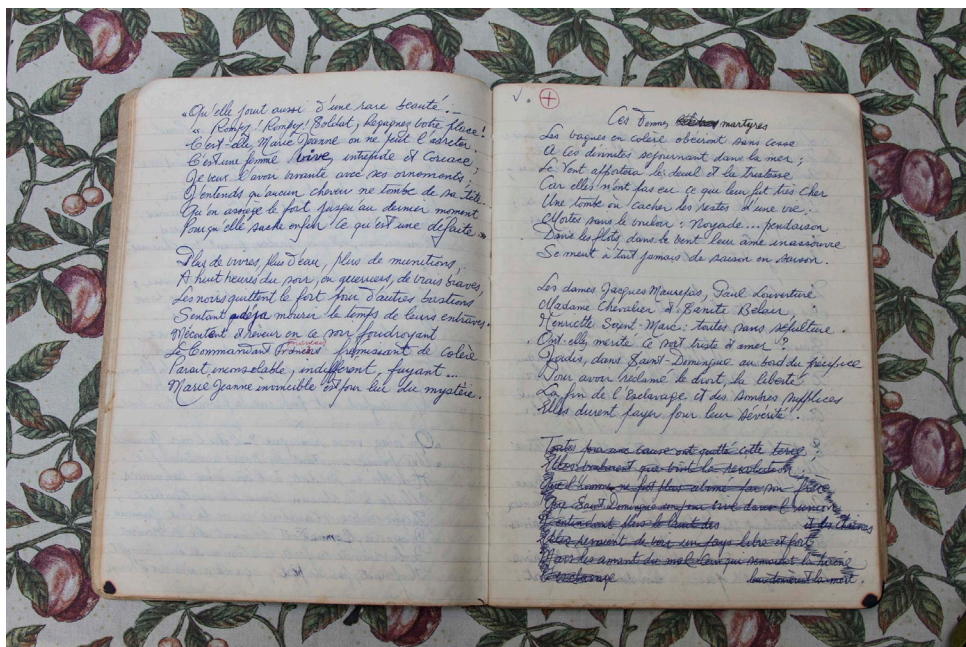


“Everyone knows I am UN-COR-RUP-TIBLE! All presidents offered me a car and a chauffeur. I never accepted, I never took anything from the state. I always walked to work [Je marchais au travail, Monsieur!] I talked with everyone, I lived a simple life! I like to write, to sit outside and talk with friends. Everyone knows me. I was a righteous judge and a guardian of the rule of law. I am a legalist! A legalist! My knowledge of the law earned me the respect of all presidents.” (Fieldwork notes, March 23, 2014)

Mèt Rosarion often stated his devotion to the law and did not like what he deemed to be extra-legal political practices. For instance, he told me that he did not like the Tontons Macoutes—Milice de Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale, or Militia of National Security Volunteers—precisely because they were supported by the state and yet functioned as a paralegal system of “volunteer militia.” His condemnation was not a moral one, however, even though it is common knowledge that the Macoutes detained, tortured and killed thousands of people without trials. The state and its servants should all be under the rule of law, according to Mèt Rosarion, but nothing was ever said about the nature of these laws. I will never fully know to what extent he was complicit in the waves of brutal arrests and mock trials that punctuated the Duvalier eras, and later, during the violent coup years (1991-1994). Nor will I know his margins of choice and his role during the periods of intense political violence that have plagued the country since 1957. From the documentation I found on him, Rosarion stands as an ambiguous jurist who both supported and worked against Duvalier, once using anti-communist laws against Christian activists in the early 1980s, once using anti-corruption laws to sue Jean-Claude Duvalier right after his 1986 ousting.

Rosarion wrote extensively about Haitian history in French, in the form of metric poetry and theater plays. He published five books from 1970 to 1984 and wrote many unpublished poems about the role of women in Haitian history, great battles against the French, and the life and death of Haitian revolutionary and intellectual figures. Most of his poetry is akin to the French nationalist vein he enjoyed reading.

One of Rosarion’s many manuscripts with one of his favorite poems entitled “These Martyr Women”



## Specters of Duvalier

François Duvalier was born in 1907 in Port-au-Prince. His father, a justice of the peace, and his mother, an employee at a bakery, were part of the then-disadvantaged black middle-classes who were barred from positions of power in a state mainly controlled by a wealthy light-skinned elite, referred in Haitian Creole as *milat* (Nicholls 1975). Duvalier grew up during the American occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and studied medicine in Port-au-Prince and one year at Michigan State University, completing a degree in medicine from the University of Haiti in 1934. As a doctor, he participated in American campaigns for the eradication of tropical diseases and traveled the countryside extensively. From these experiences, several crucial facets of Duvalier emerge. First, he was keenly aware of the resentment a majority of black Haitians nourished against the mulatto elites who were seen, during the Occupation, as the servants of American corporate and state interests. Second, as a student and intellectual, he participated in the indigenous movements of the 1930s that forged new cultural identities by reclaiming their African heritage and that forcefully condemned American interventions in Haitian affairs. Third, as a country doctor who worked for the Americans, he developed ties with the United States while conducting ethnographic studies of Haitian religious life in the provinces. Manipulating the color questions in order to obscure the major class divides between people living in Port-au-Prince and in the provinces, and collaborating with the Americans while professing an intransigent form of nationalism would be the trademarks of his dictatorship.

When nominated Director General of the National Public Health Service in the government of President Dumarsais Estimé in 1946, Duvalier already had a solid reputation as an ideologist, ethnologist, and doctor. He entered the government as a member of the leftist party *Mouvement Ouvrier et Paysan*, while, in the same year, he published a series of black nationalist articles advocating for the need of dictatorial politics in Haiti (Abbott 2011). In brief, Duvalier could navigate a broad spectrum of political values and could appear as a benevolent and paternalistic doctor, an expert and advocate of the Haitian black masses, and a member of the nascent extreme-right that claimed that people of African descent could not operate in a democratic regime. Though his dictatorship would only amount to a self-serving kleptocracy, this polyvalent set of values and his aura of an intellectual close to his people still shape many narratives associated to him. Ulrick Rosarion, like many Duvalierists, picks and chooses fragments of Duvalier's life to eulogize him and to craft narratives that stand as "unofficial, subaltern histories, rather than a nebulous 'midway point' in between myth and history genres" (Rasmussen 2009: 571). Indeed, Rosarion's accounts of the lives of Haitian political figures are not a mix between 'objective' historical research and imagined narratives, but rather interventions made of selected and concealed materials that have the goal of asserting the cultural and political identity of his family. As Michel Rolph Trouillot has famously argued, there is a silencing of history in the making of sources and creation of archives, which is redoubled with the exclusion of certain narratives of the official corpus of histories that constitute the "past" (Trouillot 1990). In a way, Rosarion's poems and plays are an attempt at shedding light on questions of race and class that are silenced in the narratives that frame Duvalier only as a mad leader.

In the many stories Rosarion told about François Duvalier, the narrative of a man hunted by the men of President Paul Magloire was the most recurrent. Rosarion's house was a crucial element of this narrative. After the ousting of Dumarsais Estimé from power by a military junta led by Magloire in 1950, key members of the toppled government either left the country or went into internal exile. By the mid-fifties, Duvalier was the head of the political opposition and carefully prepared his ascent to power. During this two-year period, Duvalier moved incognito in Port-au-Prince, once disguised as a "myopic, moon-faced woman" to reach the house of one of his allies (Abbott 2011: 51). Ulrick Rosarion liked to recall this era, when, as a young man, he witnessed François Duvalier arriving at night in his house. His father, Léandre Rosarion, also worked for the government during the Estimé presidency, and was an early political ally of Duvalier. As Ulrick Rosarion often explained, "the Revolution was plotted in this house!" The first time I visited his house in September 2013, Rosarion showed

me his own bedroom, in which every object seemed tied to his own political and career trajectory. “You see the bed I’m sleeping on? It was offered to my father by François Duvalier, who slept in this very bed when he came to hide in our house. He would also come here during his presidency, at times he felt threatened.” The simple, steel-framed bed was a key part of the informal tours Rosarion sometimes gave to his visitors. This unremarkable object had been moved downstairs after the earthquake, from the upstairs back room where Duvalier used to occupy when hiding in this house. Rosarion took me upstairs a couple of times to show me the exact place where Duvalier slept. This aspect of Rosarion’s narrative perpetuates Duvalier’s own practice of establishing himself as a mysterious and impenetrable figure, especially through a subverted use of Vodou religion. As Paul Christopher Johnson has shown, secretism, or “the active invocation of secrecy as a source of a group’s identity, the promotion of the reputation of special access to restricted knowledge, and the successful performance or staging of such access,” was a key method of Duvalier to maintain himself in power (Johnson 2006:421). By showing visitors Duvalier’s hiding place, Rosarion establishes his family as part of a closed inner circle that had access to a bounded political world and perpetuates Duvalier’s own staged mysticism.

Mèt Rosarion showing the room where Duvalier slept when hiding in his house (Joos, April 2014)



Once Duvalier became president in 1957, the Rosarions, along with former members of the Estimé government, came back to positions of power. Léandre Rosarion worked at the Minister of Justice while his second son, Dr. Bernadin Rosarion became Duvalier’s personal doctor after saving him from a stroke in 1959. Bernadin Rosarion would eventually become prefect of Port-au-Prince and a well-known pillar of the two Duvalier regimes. In April 2007, along with members of the old Duvalierist guard that vows a cult to Papa Doc, Bernadin Rosarion created the Fondation François Duvalier to commemorate the former president’s life and works, and to impose the conditions for the return of his son Jean-Claude to power (Le Nouvelliste 2007). While Mèt Rosarion liked to remember his father Léandre, the name of his brother Bernadin never came up; he is neither present in the rest of the house, nor in photographs or documents.

Léandre and his sons, Bernadin and Ulrick, personify the ascension of the black middle classes to administrative and judicial power. However, it seems that they had very different perceptions of what it meant to be a statesman and a member of the middle class. Ulrick Rosarion led an ascetic life in the modest family home on Rue de L’Enterrement and did not talk publicly in favor of the Duvaliers like his brother flamboyantly did. I also noted that while Mèt Rosarion often talked about the first years of François Duvalier’s regime and

of the rise of a small educated black elite to positions of power, he rarely mentioned Jean-Claude Duvalier, whom he knew well and worked for nonetheless. Mèt Rosarion admired his father's generation and in a sense adopted their nationalist aesthetics and ethics.

What Mèt Rosarion saw in François Duvalier sheds light on his own ambiguities. He rarely talked about politics, but on a late afternoon in March 2014, my friend Aland Joseph and I had a conversation with him on the subject. Rosarion was emotional during our conversation and often placed his right hand in front of his eyes. The following is a fragment of the conversation we had in French, as I reproduced it in my field notes:

*Rosarion:* François Duvalier was a revolutionary. He was a hunted man.... He was a doctor who knew the Haitian people well. He was a writer who wrote about Haitian people. We can't like everything in a man. I would have liked for him to build more schools. But he was a great man.... He liked this house. It was like a secret bunker! He was a man of the people [homme du peuple]. And a man of culture and science. Very few men achieved what he did....

*Joos:* Who was your favorite president?

*Rosarion:* Dumarsais Estimé....

Mèt Rosarion surprised me when he sobbed when stating the name of Estimé. A tear rolled down his cheek, and he took his head in his hands and paused for a long time. He then lit a cigarette and told me: "Estimé voulait l'égalité de tous les Haïtiens dans un état de droit...."<sup>2</sup> When Mèt Rosarion talks about François Duvalier, but does not talk about Jean-Claude Duvalier, I sense that his political views have been defined by the qualities he admires in Dumarsais Estimé, who promoted a moderate version of black nationalism. Duvalier indeed posed as a successor of Estimé and proposed a liberal program that was in phase with his predecessor's beliefs. In 1957, he campaigned on a leftist platform while Estimé's widow, Lucienne Heurtelou Estimé, showed up at all the meetings he held (Abbott 2011). He promised investments in agricultural infrastructure, democratic pluralism, trade union rights, a free press, and a new system of wealth redistribution (Ferguson 1987: 38; Lundhal 2002). The Duvalier who seemed in line with the progressive record of Estimé and who vowed to bring back black-middle classes to power is the one Ulrick Rosarion admired. Indeed, François Duvalier left behind him a large body of published works and a systematic ideology that seduced a generation of statesmen – the 1946 generation – who only had the chance to realize their potential under the short presidency of Estimé. Lyonel Trouillot, in an incisive article about Jean-Claude Duvalier, states a major difference between the father and son regimes in a reading of their personal trajectories and personal ethics:

Between François Duvalier, doctor coming from the disadvantaged middle classes, hard worker and ascetic to the point of mysticism, cultural ideologist, patient politician who made his career in public administration, who grew roots in particular groups while effectively perverting popular opinion (on questions of color, social injustice, conflicts between the city and the country...), who subdued the armed forces, who raised a body of National Security Volunteers in his own pay, fought against the Vatican and the United States and nullified all Haitian civil and political forces; and Jean-Claude Duvalier, profession: son of a president; political merits: son of a president; social origin: son of a president; way of life: spending money and partying, there seems to be a world of difference.<sup>3</sup> (Trouillot, 2012a, p. 9-10)

2 "Estimé wanted equality for all Haitians under a state of law..."

3 «(...) entre François Duvalier, médecin originaire des classes moyennes défavorisées, bucheur, ascète jusqu'au mysticisme, idéologue culturaliste, politique patient ayant fait carrière dans la fonction publique, posé ses bases dans certains milieux en opérant une perversion efficace de la sensibilité populaire (question de couleur, injustices sociales, contradiction ville campagne...), dompté les forces armées, levé un corps de Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale à sa solde, bataillé contre le Vatican et les Etats-Unis, réduit à néant toutes les forces politiques et la société civile haïtiennes; et Jean-Claude Duvalier, profession: fils de président; mérite politique: fils de président; origine sociale: fils de président; manière de vivre: dépenses et bamboche, il semble bien avoir un monde.»

François Duvalier is a spectral figure on Rue de l'Enterrement, and especially in the house of Mèt Rosarion. His presence, perceptible in material remnants, such as a fractured tomb in the Grand Cimetière, a small iron-framed bed and papers signed by his hand, is felt even more strongly through a certain asceticism and a precise idea of how the black middle class should behave and think. It is akin to what Gérard Barthélémy named Duvalierism without Duvalier, an ideology based on a return to the values of the early François Duvalier and a refusal of “macoutism,” seen as a totalitarian derivative of the regime (Barthélémy 1989). It would be hard to define what middle class means in today's Haiti; however, the ethos associated with this term powerfully traverses Rue de l'Enterrement. Thus, the spectral aspects of the black middle classes—an ethos of hard work and humility and a good dose of brash nationalism—filter their way into the present. The humble houses of former statesmen and the mythico-histories where François Duvalier's violence, paranoia, and greed are silenced allow for the nostalgia of a “pure” Duvalierism, seen as the “noiriste” philosophy purged of its dictatorial and terrorist aspects, is far from uncommon in Port-au-Prince and resonates through the material traces it left in the city.

## Specters of 1946

When referring back to Estimé and the 1946 revolution, as he often did, Mèt Rosarion referred to the intellectual and political breakthrough of middle-class, black Haitians who entered the Estimé government after years of exclusion during the American occupation. During his four-year tenure, Estimé supervised large urban planning projects that left their mark on the capital's landscape, by commissioning, for instance “the construction [in Port-au-Prince] of a chic waterfront development along a wide boulevard that included 57 pavilions, plazas, and parks, complete with an artificial lake and a reflecting pool” (Payton 2018: 16). These waterfront constructions, named the Bicentenaire, housed the 1949 International Exposition celebrating the bicentennial of Port-au-Prince. Many of these modernist buildings later became the sieges of state institutions. The 2010 earthquake erased most of the Bicentenaire; however, certain key features of this major urban development still stand today, conjuring the ideals of the 1946 generation.

Between 1915 and 1946, vibrant intellectual movements used Haitian folklore and history to craft a nationalist ideology respectful of Haitian linguistic, cultural and historical specificities. Jean Price-Mars' ethnographic studies, *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle*, were the intellectual compass of this politically diverse generation of intellectuals who saw their first political victory in the election of Sténio Vincent, in 1930, himself heavily influenced by the intellectual nationalism of Price-Mars (Nicholls 1975). In his ethnography, Price-Mars attacked a Haitian political and economic elite he accused of borrowing European values and ways of life. It was a harsh critique of a bourgeoisie lost in what Price-Mars coined “collective bovarism,” namely a form of alienation stemming from European values, lifestyles and ideals held by the elites. Price-Mars called for an acknowledgment of Haitian peasant culture, one that valorized Kreyol, Vodou and the revolutionary history of the country. Anthropologist M.R. Trouillot sees in that movement a cultural revolution, in the sense that, for the first time, vernacular art, practices and religion were the basis of a political and aesthetic program (1986). This “période indigéniste” propelled Haiti in its second independence and offered, to quote historian Millery Polyné, “a rich and organized radical culture that has challenged the structures of political and economic power and influence in Port-au-Prince” (2013: 165). The actors of this cultural revolution – socialists, Marxists, Noiristes – come from different political currents, but nonetheless propose new forms of sovereignty and national identity to Haitians.

After the end of the occupation in 1934, “two intimately woven ideologies” stemming from the nationalist folkloric movement of the 1920s emerged (Nicholls 1975: 662). “L'école des Griots” was an intellectual school founded by François Duvalier, Lorimer Denis and their elder Louis Diaquoi. The school's journal *Les Griots* became the main organ of racial nationalists. The group founded its racial and social thinking on the works

of Price-Mars, considered their “Evangelist”, but used blackness, African origins and Vodou to make claims about the biopsychological nature of the Haitian Geist. Duvalier and Denis, as the main political activists of this group, wrote extensively about a collective personality based on essentialist African attributes, such as docility and savagery, that fully achieved its potential under “a dictatorship which works for order, truth, and the common good,” as stated in a *Les Griots* editorial of 1938 (cited by Dash 1998: 76). This romantic view of Haitian collective sensibilities distorted and simplified the peasantry’s folklore to assert a very urban and class-based notion of black power, and established simplistic racial binaries to circumnavigate questions of class inequality.

La Fontaine Musicale, built in 1949 for the Bicentennial Exposition  
commissioned by Estimé (Joos, January 2014)



François Duvalier, to a lesser extent, would use the urban landscape to assert the noiriste ideology and to make sure that he would be remembered once gone. The statue of the Unknown Maroon of Saint-Domingue, depicting a runaway slave and placed on the Champ de Mars in 1967, allowed Duvalier, for instance, to inscribe his regime in the practice of maroonage. Declaring the defiance and independence of Haiti vis-à-vis major economic power was however purely symbolic, as the regime depended heavily on U.S. funds. Duvalier himself would pretend to be “the last maroon, president for life of the Republic” in the speech he pronounced at the statue’s inauguration. As mentioned above, Duvalier presented himself as the reincarnation of both the early revolutionary heroes Pétion, Christophe, Dessalines, Toussaint, and of president Estimé. All these past chiefs of state are materially present in the capital in the form of statues, but not only these. Pétion and Dessalines are buried together in the National Mausoleum located at the southern tip of the Champ de Mars, while Dumarsais Estimé’s remains are buried in a mausoleum in the heart of the former Bicentenaire neighborhood. His remains were transferred there in 1968, and the mausoleum inaugurated in 1968 by Duvalier and his guard.

### Writing the Revolution and Practicing Anti-Revolutionary Politics

Downtown Port-au-Prince physically centralizes key material elements that provide tangibility to subaltern histories. The mausoleums and monumental graves of the Grand Cimetière, the state buildings and the Dessalines military barracks, the schools named after revolutionary heroes, the statues and museums, the elaborate villas of past leaders and the modest houses of state employees form an environment that allows for the unfolding of “banal nationalism” where the “existence of the nation is taken for granted” (Zubrzycki 2011: 57; Billig 1995). This banal nationalism also unfolds through political performances, such as the discourses of Duvalier in symbolically charged areas of the city, and cultural performances. The Théâtre National, designed by Albert Mangonès and built for the Bicentenaire celebrations in 1949, was and remains a major center that diffuses national culture. It is there that Ulrick Rosarion’s tragedy, *Les Dernières Heures de Boisrond Tonnerre*, was performed in 1996. As he often stated, his written works and his play were meant to educate the Haitian youth and to make them realize that the 1804 revolution remained unfinished, that the past still had some bearing on Haiti’s future as the promises of freedom and independence were never fully fulfilled. When writing about former Haitian chiefs of states, both François Duvalier and Ulrick Rosarion do more than honor previous leaders. They invoke them “as active interlocutors in ongoing political struggles” (Moffat 2018 180). However, this rhetoric cannot mask the fact that members of the Haitian state and its complacent bureaucrats operated with values that stand in opposition with the revolutionary ideals of 1804.

Rosarion’s poetry sheds light on key facets of his ideology. He published five books of poetry and allowed me to photograph his books and handwritten manuscripts. As Mèt Rosarion explained in March 2014:

“There are two sides to my poetry. A patriotic side. I wanted young people to know our heroes and martyrs. I wrote about women too. I honored their role in Haitian history. They were also heroes. The other side is more personal and sentimental. It talks about love, about life. But Dessalines is the main character of my works. Toussaint, Capois, Boisrond. But mainly, it’s Dessalines and his exploits.”

In *The silence of whispers*, the first section of the book is dedicated to Haitian history and talks extensively about the great battles fought by “belligerent blacks” and their chiefs. His poetry is essentially martial. Images of glorious deaths on the battlefield, of thunder, war, blood, agony and military bravura abound. The poetry of Mèt Rosarion, full of interjections to readers and particularly to an indistinct Haitian youth, should be read in the light of subaltern history of Haiti in relation to France. The historical records of Haiti are located elsewhere, so Rosarion uses popular references and writes vernacular poetry to fill the void in historical texts

and cultural memory. It is a call for remembrance and forms of politics based on a selective nostalgia for heroic times. In one of his poems entitled “Ils nous aimaient tant...” [They loved us so much], we can note a certain despair and a sense of historical and cultural loss, a call to fathers who could be the men of the 1946 generation or the founding fathers of Haiti:

[talking about Toussaint Louverture and Dessalines]  
For fraternity, rights and justice,  
Freedom for all and equality,  
Of death they drank the gloomy chalice.  
Why so many blanks and absurdities  
In the wake of our age?  
What fate guided us among so many wrecks?  
Look at our gardens, our fields, our houses,  
They bear the weight of their cruel absence  
Never our heart will heal (...)  
Have pity upon us from where you are  
For our saddened fields nothing is certain without you  
For in the future may our harvest be better  
Our children happier, and the sun more radiant.  
On us, have pity, Generals.

The poem may describe the situation of the early 1980s, of Baby Doc’s ideologically soft Duvalierism that had lost the memory of the ideals and struggles of Dessalines and Louverture. Written in 1983, at a time when most people in Haiti were dealing with the ecological and economic ravages of Duvalierism, this poem implores the generals to return to the political landscape.

Rosarion wrote about the demise of revolutionary ideals and about the sad state of his country, but nonetheless actively participated in the repressive political apparatus of the Haitian state. While he called for democracy, freedom and justice in his poems, he simultaneously presided over farcical trials. In the early eighties, for instance, Rosarion was involved in a parody of justice. In his “Report on the August 1981 trial and November 1981 appeal of 26 political defendants in Haiti,” lawyer and human rights activist Michael S. Hooper relates the mass arrests that led to the exile of many Haitian journalists and scholars and details a parody of a trial, over which Ulrick Rosarion presided. As Hooper writes:

“On August 25, 1981, twenty-six people were tried and convicted in Haiti for arson and plotting against the internal security of the state (...) The verdict was handed down at 5:00 A.M. Twenty-two of the defendants were sentenced to fifteen years at hard labor and four to one year in prison (...) In political cases particularly, the Haitian justice system offers virtually no protection to the individual who falls out of favor with members of the government. The trial of 26 people in 1981 was in part in response to these criticisms, from human rights groups and others, that no political prisoners are ever brought to trial. It was, in fact, the first political trial in Haiti, since the Duvalier family came to power in 1957. Ironically, this trial, as much as any incident in the last several years, illustrates the extent to which the rule of law has broken down in Haiti.”

This trial was deemed “in accordance with Haitian Law by the U.S. Department of State” and marked a new era in Duvalierism: the growth of judicial powers that gave a legal facade to political terror in order to maintain the Reagan administration’s support, which supplied financial aid to Haiti until 1987. The civilian judicial body, which was severely weakened during the first years of the Duvalier regime to the benefit of a powerful Military Jurisdiction and later of the militias (Trouillot 1990: 151), made a tragic come-back through



a budgetary surge and through the enactment of legal decrees that authorized the possibility of trials where only regime officials, such as Ulrick Rosarion, could speak (Holly 2011). On Tuesday, August 25, 1981, the twenty-six political opponents were led to court in handcuffs and had to walk through double rows of military police armed with Uzi guns, who threatened and ridiculed them. The plaza in front of the Palais de Justice was encircled by Tontons Macoutes, and most of the people sitting in the tribunal were armed and were taking notes on who was attending the trial. The twenty-six defendants were mostly between 20 and 40 years old and members of the hard-working middle class of Haiti (including an accountant, a secretary, a cartoonist, a chauffeur, a zoologist, a tailor, etc.). At the trial, they learned that they were accused of something they never participated in—arson and plotting against state security—and were condemned a few hours later to fifteen years of hard labor. Three people got a one-year prison sentence, which was often similar to the death penalty in those days (Nérée 1988). The Hooper report is chilling and presents a Kafkaesque trial where existing criminal codes and laws were invoked to silence political opponents. With this new form of political repression, the arbitrary and expedited justice of the Macoutes entered the legal sphere of the state, and organized trials that reflected its blind practice of “justice.” In this sense, being a guardian and servant of the law strictly meant to obey the whims of the dictator and his henchmen.

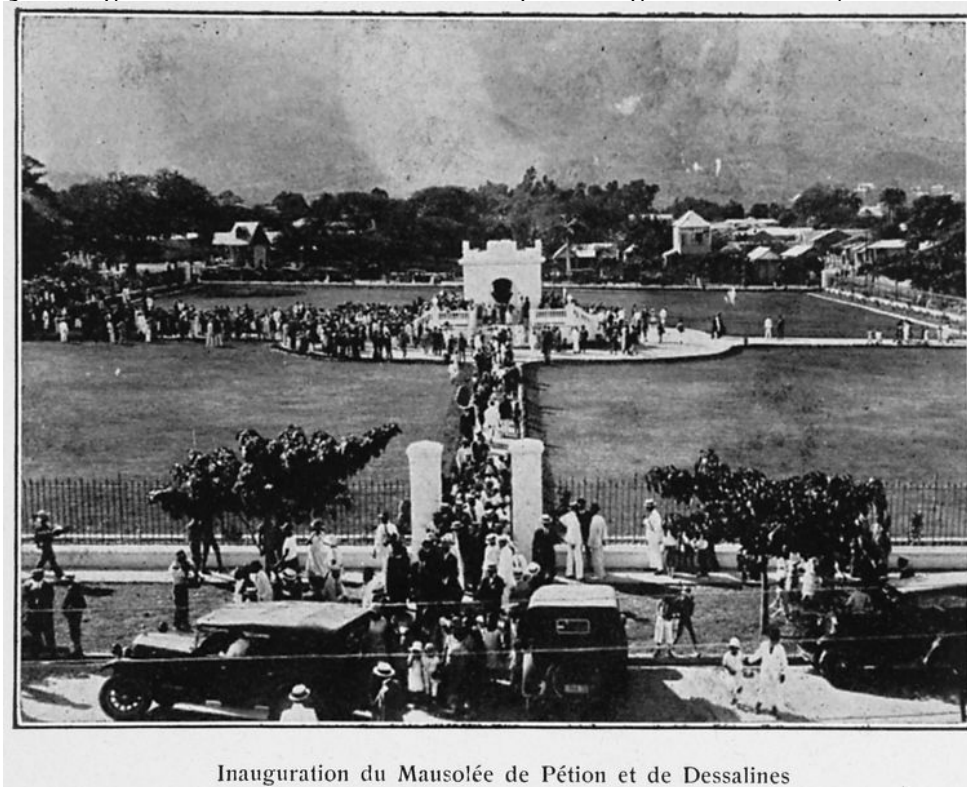
On April 18, 1986, Ulrick Rosarion, then Commissaire du Gouvernement (state prosecutor), issued instructions for the investigation of members of what he referred to as the “Duvalier criminal organization.” He nominated Emmanuel Dutreuil as the main investigative judge. The same year, a case was launched against Luc Desir for crimes that included murder and torture. The corruption case lingered and was reopened in 1999, 2008 and finally in 2011, when Jean-Claude Duvalier came back to Haiti and lived freely in his luxurious residence in Pétion-Ville. Starting in 2008, the case of corruption and bribery was supplemented with charges of crimes against humanity. Several dignitaries of the Duvalier regimes were mentioned in the case. Mèt Rosarion’s brother, Bernadin Rosarion, was accused of participating in financial crimes, crimes against humanity and “acts of corruption, abuse of authority, embezzlements of funds, gang association” (RNDDH 2012: 5). Mèt Rosarion remained only one month in the position of state prosecutor at the Court of First Instance, then he quit this political tribunal in May 1986 to work for the Labor Court. For most of his career, as a friend told me, Mèt Rosarion worked on small cases, since the executive powers bypassed the tribunals for important issues or simple repression. Some documents Mèt showed me detail his day-to-day functions. Mainly, he took care of land litigations, burglaries and thefts or petty crimes. His role in major prosecutions seems to have been sporadic, yet forceful.

I could placate an interpretive grid and state that, like many old guard Duvalierists, Mèt Rosarion condemned a profligate and shapeless state and advocated for the return of Indigéniste/noiriste values. However, he co-presided over the most arbitrary trial of the Duvalier era, which marked a period of intense repression of political dissent through legal means. The Dessalines Mèt Rosarion talks about in his poems is, in this regard, closer to the person of François Duvalier. After all, the Dessalines of Mèt Rosarion speaks French and not Kreyol. He’s the Emperor who speaks from Port-au-Prince and who does not allude to his provincial origins. In a sense, the French-speaking Dessalines of Mèt Rosarion’s French poetry is the revolutionary voice of what we could name a “Class-State,” which was slowly eroded with the abandonment of noiriste and classist politics by Duvalier’s son. In this regard, the poem “Ils nous aimaient tant...”, in which Mèt Rosarion decries the disappearance of the founding fathers from the physical Haitian landscape, tells of a nostalgia for a bygone era where the ideals of the Haitian middle class have been crushed by military repression in 1950.

## The King's Two Bodies

In 1926, Louis Borno, then president of the Republic of Haiti and fervent collaborator of the American occupants, inaugurated the National Mausoleum where the remains of Pétion and Dessalines were reburied. This was a symbolic gesture that sought to show that mulattoes and blacks were reunited under the presidency of Borno and that his own regime followed in the footsteps of these great revolutionary heroes. However, the Haitian state was mainly governed and funded by the Americans. Likewise, in 1968, François Duvalier ordered the reburial of Dumarsais Estimé. A colorful mausoleum was built in the Bicentenaire neighborhood and Estimé's remains were reburied there. When he passed in 1953, while in exile in New York, his opponent Paul Magloire, then president of Haiti, organized state funerals. Estimé's body was exposed at the Bicentenaire in an open casket to signify that noirisme was gone for good, according to historian Matthew Smith (2009: 160). Reburying Estimé was a way to reclaim his legacy at a time when the Duvalier regime became a full-fledged kleptocracy funded by the United States and the state a mere tool for maintaining a small elite in power. As Katherine Verdery has shown, reburials of political leaders allow for identification with their life stories and for a rewriting of history. Words can be put in the mouths of the dead, and even if their ideologies were polyvalent and ambiguous, the dead have a single body and a single name and can "present the illusion of having *only one* significance" (Verdery 1999: 29). Duvalier posed as the heir of Estimé in order to further this illusion of national unity and ideological continuity with the noirisme he professed in his youth. Duvalier, who became president for life in 1964, wanted to establish a dynasty and wanted his regime to outlast him. The Duvalier regime lasted 29 years, and its longevity cannot only be explained by the use of state violence or by foreign interventions that kept the Duvaliers afloat in order to prevent the fall of Haiti into the communist camp. The subaltern histories and their materialization in monuments, graves, and buildings acted as forces naturalizing state politics and rendering a certain idea of the Haitian nation palpable.

1926 Inauguration of the National Mausoleum (credit: Digital Public Library of America)



In *The King's Two Bodies*, Ernest Kantorowicz traces the medieval origins of English state authority in a doctrine that conferred a visible and invisible body to the king. According to this doctrine, two bodies coexist in the person of the king: a mortal “body natural” with physical attributes, and a “body politic” that incarnates at once “the government, the office, and majesty royal” (Lewis 1958: 453.) Also called the “mystic body,” the body politic organically joins the king and his subjects “together as head and members” (Kantorowicz 1957: 316). The mystic body evokes the failures and mortality of the natural body by making the king’s decisions permanent. The king never dies and only passes the kingdom on to another when his natural body passes away. The body politic always survives and goes on to live conjoined with the natural body of the new king. This doctrine of the crown as a double body mainly applies to the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods of English history, but nonetheless sheds light on the perennial nature of the legal systems of secular states and political values everywhere. While doing fieldwork in the streets adjacent to Haiti’s National Palace, I could not help reflecting about the striking similarities between the English kings’ bodies, and the “*corps naturel et corps mystique*” of Emperor Jacques Dessalines, whose remains have been buried in different parts of this administrative and residential neighborhood of Port-au-Prince. Dessalines’ presence, however, extends beyond the legal framing of the crown’s body politic as understood by Kantorowicz.

I encountered the notion of the two bodies of Jean-Jacques Dessalines in 2013, while visiting Dessalines-Ville (called Marchand until 2008) in the Artibonite region. Dessalines-Ville is a small urban center located at the junction of a vast dry plain and of steep hills on which seven military forts built between 1804 and 1806 are perched. Dessalines, who was born there, made this small provincial town the capital of newly independent Haiti in 1804. This was a powerful symbolic gesture, as it bestowed prestige to the nascent Haitian peasantry that made the bulk of the soldiers of the Haitian Indigenous Army during the revolutionary period (1791-1804). Today, this small town, which was once the first Black capital of the Americas, remains a center of political contestation and a major site of Vodou pilgrimages.

When I visited this place for the first time with my friend and field associate Aland Joseph, we met Monsieur Bob, one of the tour guides who brings (mainly local) tourists to the forts. Monsieur Bob also holds the keys of the two *kay spirituel* – spiritual houses – of Dessalines and his wife, Empress Marie-Claire Heureuse Félicité Bonheur (see Figure 2). The *kay spirituel* are 6x6 ft. (1.8x1.8m) houses where Dessalines and his wife had private ceremonies for the *lwa*, the deities of Vodou religion. “When they kneeled down on their knees and *fe ti sevis lwa pa yo* [had a small ceremony for the *lwa*],” as Monsieur Bob explained, “their mystical bodies were leaving their natural bodies. The mystical body is visible too. When Dessalines was assassinated on the Pont-Rouge, his wife saw his mystical body in the *kay spirituel*. She saw him dying. He died with her. She knew he was dead before getting the news from Port-au-Prince.” (Joos, Field Notes September 14, 2013).

The dualistic view of humans, where the body and the soul are separate yet intertwined, and the idea of the soul leaving the body after death traverse a wide range of religions in Haiti. However, the Vodou interpretation of life and afterlife emphasize the presence and agency of multiple spiritual bodies. After his passing, Dessalines became a powerful *lwa* who is generally associated with Loko Atisou, a key mystical figure of the Revolution and one of the most important *lwa* of the Rada family<sup>4</sup> (Jenson 2012: 615; Gaffield 2015: 202). As such, Dessalines is not only a historical actor who is glorified for defeating the French and paving the way to independence, he is also an active spiritual force whose agency extends far beyond the realms of religion. And once again, the most important material proof of his duality that he left behind are two simple worship houses that are today used to convey certain versions of the Dessalianian past.

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4 *Rada lwa* are the deities that act as guardians of principles and moral values.

Left: Kay Spirituel of Claire-Heureuse Dessalines;  
Right: Kay Spirituel of Jean-Jacques Dessalines



As Michael Largey puts it, the myths created around important political figures enable people to experience historical ideas “through metaphors that allow for multiple interpretations in the present” (2006: 69). As such, Dessalines as *lwa* – Ogou Desalin – is “a brave and selfless warrior pitted against the forces of slavery, as well as a gruesome reminder of the peril of attempting to bring about social change in the face of determined resistance” (2006:70). While agreeing with Largey about the political potency of contested historical narratives that emerge through religious practices, I argue that the presence of political leaders who reshaped Haiti is felt beyond the realm of myths and spiritual practices. It is felt in the material traces they left behind, in the places and houses they inhabited, or in the monuments where they are celebrated or desecrated. As Rodrigo Bulamah has shown, this presence of political figures is also felt in the realm of daily life, as ancestors – *zansèt* –, which refers to a native category that refers both to deceased family members and revolutionary heroes (Bulamah 2019). *Zansèt* left a kind of heritage in the form of material remnants that allow, at a ritual level, for the rethinking of relations between places, living and spiritual bodies, and at a quotidian level, for discussions and reinterpretation of history.

While Haitian revolutionary and counter-revolutionary leaders activated telluric political machineries to eliminate opponents or buy allegiances, the vast majority of them also took titles: Emperor, King, President for Life. They used political symbols and spaces—statues, street names, the National Palace, the golden crown of Emperor Soulouque or the many material markers of power that are today displayed in the Museum of National Pantheon in the very heart of the capital—to ensure the legacy of their political practices and ideas. The bodily remains of political leaders, their immaterial presence in the form of a “*corps astral*” (etheric body) or in the form of *Lwa* (Voudou divinities, such as Ogou Dessalines) and their enduring materiality in the form of houses, books, codes of laws, etc. are as important as the *corpus naturale* of the mortal political leader. In the meantime, these ethereal legacies that I have attempted to read in verses of vernacular poetry are carried by the social body that enables what Clifford Geertz names the “inherent sacredness of sovereign power” (Geertz 1983). But understanding the city, country and traces of political power as texts is not enough, and does not render the complexity of polyphonic embodiments of the state.

As anthropologist Uli Linke suggests, the diffuse presence of the state is to be seen in more than its symbolic, discursive or imagined cultural forms. “Political worlds have a visual, tactile, sensory and emotional dimension: the life of the state has a corporal grounding” (Linke 2006: 206). When Mèt Rosarion sobbed while stating the name of his favorite president, there was more than the “effect or symptom of the ideo-symbolic machinations of national discourse” at play. His visible emotions pointed to an ambiguous embodiment of a collective national culture that could not be enclosed in a readable system of political signification. In other words, the state enters our subjective experiences and moves in our bodies in seemingly imperceptible ways. It has an emotional force that has the power to hinder critical visions from arising. It partially enters our gaze and nourishes our anxieties, notably by relying on outward signifiers, such as race and class identification. Through the life story of Mèt Rosarion, I have shown the complexity and plurivocality of revolutionary poetics and ideologies, nationalist feelings and ambiguous positions vis-à-vis realpolitik through the conflicting values at play in one man’s state career and of its material traces. Port-au-Prince cityscape encapsulates political forces that presently haunt the country and that could make a forceful comeback. However, these affective forces, carried through material remnants, symbols, and images, are not linearly structuring political projects, rather they bring the forefront ruptures and ambiguities. As Ananya Roy suggests by borrowing Walter Benjamin’s notion of “dialectics as standstill,” the ruins and remnants of past political projects expose the ruptures and disenchantment contained in a materiality that bears witness to history (Roy 2011). Rather than trapping citizens in a given political project, the sensual state – or national matters – also open the possibility of alternative futures by allowing us to discuss, see and feel ideologies at a standstill.

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