



Evolving Narrative

## From Paris to Port-au-Prince: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Global Echo of Revolution

### Historical Context

In the late 1700s, major changes were happening around the world. The French Revolution began in 1789 and called for freedom, equality, and an end to monarchy. French revolutionaries believed that all people were born free and had rights that no government should take away. These ideas spread far beyond France and reached the French colony of Saint-Domingue, which is now known as Haiti. Saint-Domingue was the richest colony in the Caribbean, but its wealth came from the hard labor of enslaved Africans who worked on sugar and coffee plantations. While white colonists and free people of color argued about who should have more rights after the French Revolution, the enslaved people had their own idea. In 1791, they began a massive uprising that would become the Haitian Revolution, the only successful slave revolt in world history. One of the most important leaders of this revolution was Toussaint L'Ouverture. He had once been enslaved but gained his freedom and became a skilled military leader. L'Ouverture helped lead the fight against European armies, including the French, British, and Spanish. He worked to end slavery in the colony and tried to build a strong and fair society. He believed that the ideas of the French Revolution such as liberty, equality, and brotherhood should apply to everyone, including people of African descent. Although France later tried to bring back slavery, the people of Haiti kept fighting for their freedom. Toussaint L'Ouverture was eventually captured by the French, but his legacy continued. In 1804, Haiti became the first independent Black republic and the first country to be founded by former slaves. The Haitian Revolution had a powerful impact on the world. It made people think differently about freedom, race, and human rights. It also showed that people who had been enslaved could fight for and win their independence. Toussaint L'Ouverture's leadership helped connect the revolutionary ideas of France to the fight for justice in Haiti. His story reminds us that the struggle for freedom often crosses borders and can inspire change in many parts of the world.

### Connection to Habit

The story of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution is a strong example of the Evolving Narrative habit of mind. For a long time, the Haitian Revolution was left out of mainstream history books, especially in Europe and the United States, even though it was one of the most important events of its time. As more scholars and educators revisit this history, they are showing how revolutionary ideas about liberty and equality were not limited to white men in France or the US. By reexamining this event and giving attention to leaders like L'Ouverture, we gain a fuller, more honest understanding of how global revolutions for freedom were connected. This habit encourages us to ask why certain stories have been left out and to keep updating our understanding of the past as new perspectives and voices are brought in.

## Discussion Questions

- What were the main goals of the French Revolution, and how did those goals inspire enslaved people in Saint-Domingue?
- Who was Toussaint L'Ouverture, and how did his leadership shape the outcome of the Haitian Revolution?
- What contradictions existed between the ideals of the French Revolution and the actions of the French government in its colonies?
- In what ways were the French and Haitian Revolutions similar in their causes, methods, or outcomes? In what ways were they different?
- How did class and race play different roles in the French and Haitian Revolutions?
- Why might the Haitian Revolution have been ignored or minimized in many traditional historical narratives about revolutions?
- What does Aimé Césaire mean when he says Haiti was where the "colonial knot began to unravel"? How does this change how we view the importance of the Haitian Revolution?
- What moral arguments did L'Ouverture and other revolutionaries use to justify their fight for freedom?
- How did the Haitian Revolution reshape global discussions around slavery, rights, and colonialism?
- Why do you think the Haitian Revolution had such a lasting global impact, even though it was geographically small and initially politically isolated?

## Suggested Activity

### Materials Needed:

- Printed or Digital Copies of the Historical Context
- Printed or Digital Copies of [Letter: Toussaint L'Ouverture Addresses the French Directory \(1797\)](#)
- Printed or Digital Copies of [\[Vocabulary\] Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Global Echo of Revolution](#)
- Highlighters/Markers (two colors)
- Notebook Paper
- Pencil/Pens

### Step 1: Understanding the Context [10 mins]

Have students read the Historical Context and Vocabulary. Also, mention the historical moment that sets the stage for the letter, which is the French attempting to reassert control over Saint-Domingue and reimpose slavery. Ask students to consider what L'Ouverture's goals might be when addressing French leaders.

### Step 2: Read Aloud and Annotate [15 mins]

Distribute L'Ouverture's letter. As a class or in pairs, read the document aloud. Have students annotate:

- Words or phrases related to liberty, loyalty, or justice (highlight in one color)
- Any appeals to reason, morality, or shared values (highlight in another color)
- Phrases that show leadership or warning

### Step 3: Guided Discussion Questions [15 mins]

In small groups, students respond to:

- What message is L'Ouverture trying to send to the French government?
- How does he balance loyalty to France with his commitment to freedom?
- What persuasive techniques does he use?
- What does this speech reveal about the values of the Haitian Revolution?

Step 5: Exit Ticket [5–10 mins]: If needed, students may use the Expanded Connection for this resource on the NCHE website to aid with writing their response. Prompt: Write a paragraph response to the following question: If you were a French leader reading this letter, how would you respond? What does it say about L'Ouverture's character and goals?

## Primary Source

### Toussaint L'Ouverture Addresses the French Directory (1797)

Context: In the late 1700s, Toussaint L'Ouverture led a successful revolt in Haiti to end slavery. However, he remained deeply concerned that France, which still controlled Haiti as a colony, might try to bring slavery back. Many French leaders and colonists had already spoken in favor of doing so. In response, Toussaint wrote a letter to the French Directory to firmly oppose any effort to reestablish slavery in the colony.

“Second Assertion [made by a critic in the French Assembly]: Everyone is agreed in portraying the Colony in the most shocking state of disorder and groaning under the military government. And what a military government! In whose hands is it confined? In that of ignorant and gross negroes, incapable of distinguishing between unrestrained license and austere liberty.

This shocking disorder in which the Commission found St. Domingue was not the consequence of the liberty given to the blacks, but the result of the uprising of thirty Ventose [mulattos], for prior to this period, order and harmony reigned in all Republican territory as far as the absence of laws would allow. All citizens blindly obeyed the orders of General Laveaux; his will was the national will for them, and they submitted to him as a man invested with the authority emanating from the generous nation that had shattered their chains.

If, upon the arrival of the Commission, St. Domingue groaned under a military government, this power was not in the hands of the blacks; they were subordinate to it, and they only executed the orders of General Laveaux. These were the blacks who, when France was threatened with the loss of this Colony, employed their arms and their weapons to conserve it, to reconquer the greatest part of its territory that treason had handed over to the Spanish and English. . . . These were the blacks who . . . flew to the rescue of General Laveaux . . . and who, by repressing the audacious rebels who wished to destroy the national representation, restored it to its rightful depository.

## Primary Source cont.

### Toussaint L'Ouverture Addresses the French Directory (1797)

Such was the conduct of those blacks in whose hands . . . the military government of St. Domingue found itself, such are those negroes accused of being ignorant and gross; undoubtedly they are, because without education there can only be ignorance and grossness. But must one impute to them the crime of this educational deficiency or, more correctly, accuse those who prevented them by the most atrocious punishments from obtaining it? And are only civilized people capable of distinguishing between good and evil, of having notions of charity and justice? The men of St. Domingue have been deprived of an education; but even so, they no longer remain in a state of nature, and because they haven't arrived at the degree of perfection that education bestows, they do not merit being classed apart from the rest of mankind, being confused with animals. . . .

Undoubtedly, one can reproach the inhabitants of St. Domingue, including the blacks, for many faults, even terrible crimes. But even in France, where the limits of sociability are clearly drawn, doesn't one see its inhabitants, in the struggle between despotism and liberty, going to all the excesses for which the blacks are reproached by their enemies? The fury of the two parties has been equal in St. Domingue; and if the excesses of the blacks in these critical moments haven't exceeded those committed in Europe, must not an impartial judge pronounce in favor of the former? Since it is our enemies themselves who present us as ignorant and gross, aren't we more excusable than those who, unlike us, were not deprived of the advantages of education and civilization?"

## **[Vocabulary]**

### **Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Global Echo of Revolution**

**Negro:** In Spanish and Portuguese, "negro" simply means "black". In English, it was historically used to refer to people of Black African heritage, but it is now generally considered offensive and outdated. While it was once a common term in English, its use is largely avoided today due to its historical association with racism and discrimination.

**Mulatto:** A racial classification that refers to people of mixed Sub-Saharan African and European ancestry only.

**Saint-Domingue:** This was the name of the French colony that encompassed the western third of the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). It was one of the wealthiest colonies in the world, due to its sugar and coffee plantations, which were worked by enslaved Africans.

**Haitian Revolution:** This was the name given to the series of conflicts from 1791 to 1804, where enslaved Africans and their descendants fought for their freedom and independence from French colonial rule. This was a direct challenge to the colonial system, where European powers controlled and exploited territories and populations in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. France's colonial rule in Saint-Domingue, based on slavery, was overthrown by the revolution.