

Freedom: A Dream Gained, a Dream Lost

Patrick Sylvain

Posted to The World Orders Forum: 9 July 2024

Patrick Sylvain, PhD, MFA, is a Haitian-American poet, writer, social and literary critic, and photographer who has published widely on Haiti and Haitian diaspora culture, politics, language, and religion. He is the author of several poetry books in English and Haitian, and his poems have been nominated for the prestigious Pushcart Prize.

I often wish that I had been a witness to Haiti's final battle against the French. How proud I would have been to see men and women fighting valiantly alongside Capois Lamort, who kept on the attack even after a cannon blew off his hat and another killed his horse. I likely would have climbed the hills of Vertières, and then sauntered atop the last Fort that the French occupied to scream at the top of my lungs. On second thought, I probably would have picked up a gun and fought for my own freedom as well, for I would have been a slave. But, imagine for a second that one might travel back through time, invisible but still present, to witness that glorious morning of January 1st. At that moment, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and his generals would finally declare national independence in Gonaïves, the place where slaves-turned-soldiers battled for liberty on sugar and rice plantations. Imagine that the gigantic cauldrons that once boiled molasses were now being used to make squash soup (soup joumou) laden with spaghetti, beef, potatoes, yams, carrots, leeks, and other ingredients that the house slaves could always assemble but never eat. Now, that the Creole slaves were joined with the newly arrived slaves from Congo, Arada, Ibo, and Dahomey to finally enjoy their first full meal of independence in half-calabash gourds, tin cans, or bowls. In rags, in uniforms, with broken limbs and lashed backs, their proud grip on spent rifles, all were singing: *For the flag, for the country, we'll walk in unity and we'll be the master our soil.*

Often, tears fill my eyes and I feel like cursing—cursing history, cursing the voracious Europeans that fragmented and scarred our lives in the New World, cursing the rapacious Americans who multiplied our pains, and cursing at the cowardly and power-hungry Haitians who became a cancer upon the existence of the nation. I also curse myself for being powerless. It is as if history has become my own ball and chain, a burden that I know so well that I have become complacent having it in tow. Just as the slaves knew their masters well, I too know the weight of history, the intimacy and intricacies of the linked chains, and the grooves of suffering it leaves behind. As an academic however, I know cursing is useless and would be seen as

emotionally and intellectually immature. So, I must rationalize and be subjective. Forget wanting to dream the past through idealistic voyeurism, and forget expressing angry thoughts for fear of being discredited and judged deranged. Instead, I enter the morphological stasis of this work's title and compartmentalize the three territories of freedom: dreams, victory, and loss.

Dreaming Freedom

Dreaming, in the social sense, is to hope for a better outcome than one currently experiences. Freedom is the ability to decide one's fate and destination in life without imposed restraints. When a person, community, or nation dreams of freedom, it implies that some form of restraint has been imposed, necessitating a shift in outcome so that the entity, rendered incapable of self-determination, might take charge of its own destiny. Thus, we can assume that some form of exploitation, or at least a negative power dynamic, was involved. Since we know that New World slavery was a plantocratic institution run by and for European profit, and that although Africans were the "necessary" engine propelling those institutional gains, they themselves were deprived of the right to self-determination, we can safely and logically argue that Africans, in this case, the Haitians, had a legitimate aspiration in dreaming freedom.

Now, can dreaming of freedom by unfree subjects be a threat to the beneficiaries of imperial economic exploitation? Absolutely. The dream of freedom among slaves on Hispaniola became a danger to the beneficiaries of the system. Once the slave was marked as a threat-induced subject, there arose a psychological disposition of fear among those who perceived and created this threat. Therefore, all subsequent interactions between master and slave were based on irrationality, anxiety, and hatred. For the slaves, dreaming of freedom became an obsession, the ultimate goal to attain in order for life to feel complete. The dichotomy between the master dreaming of domination and profit versus the slave dreaming of liberation and autonomy could not have been more polarizing than on the island of Hispaniola.

The idea of freedom itself is exhilarating and emotionally liberating. It overtook the backbreaking work, the mind—and spirit—numbing process of plantation labor, and imbued the slaves with a determined, instinctual drive to survive beyond the filth and dehumanizing conditions of the plantations. Dreaming of Freedom was the slaves' first weapon.

The concept of freedom itself is not just an abstract notion but a powerful and uplifting force that brings a sense of emotional release and exhilaration. This feeling of liberation was so potent that it transcended the grueling physical labor and the soul-crushing experiences of working on plantations. For the slaves, this dream of freedom ignited a deep, instinctual determination to endure and rise above the squalid and dehumanizing conditions they faced daily. The mere act of dreaming about freedom became their initial and most crucial tool for resistance and survival.

Freedom Gained, Ethical Responsibility

It is implicit in the time marker verb “gained” that a sort of victory or win was achieved; and with any form of achievement, there is expected to be some form of celebration, symbolic or real. Implicit in victory are the notions of success and replication, or at least, the desire to replicate an achievement where such successes were not the norm. Haiti’s monumental freedom from the French in 1803 ended the master-slave relationship in which the French were the beneficiaries of a hyper-exploitative system for almost two centuries. However, what is not suggested in the idea of victory, or the verb “to gain,” is the notion of resentment and retaliation. Of course, loss or *perdant* is implied as it is evident that one has gained something. But it is the systematic and entrenched wrath of the loser that is not anticipated and can never be fully known since unethical behavior is post—and not pre-attributive. The unethically vile behavior of Western slave-owning countries has brought post-revolutionary Haiti to explicate, celebrate, and mourn her conditions following her monumental historical victory. Furthermore, what remains hidden from the notion of victory is the existence of a post-victory vision and the assumption of responsibility as freedom is celebrated and autonomy begins to be structured. The responsibility of the new state is to create a reasonable polis that must be reflective of the newly independent nation-state’s requirements as it assesses, negotiates and reformulates its own identity around notions of freedom, security, and sovereignty.

Here, the notions of remnants, scars, and fragments have to be raised to properly contextualize the issue of responsibility as a nation-state. As slave-owning countries benefited for centuries from slavery, one must wonder what could be the overall consequence for the inhumanely deprived laborers. History tells us that the West reacted to Haiti’s independence by punishing her through a draconian embargo that helped cripple the economy. The French, having complained of lost property, subsequently threatened Haiti with gunships and forced her to pay damages, an indemnity. The victim paid the victimizer, in the same way that a brutalized prostitute has to pay a lazy and abusive pimp. These punitive measures had a degrading impact on the nation, its environment, and the overall functionality of those newly freed slaves after being subjected to centuries of cruel and atrocious bondage. Can a person conditioned by severe abuse be expected to show compassion and confidence immediately after severing ties with that abuser?

The French had ferociously abused Haiti, and the internal disruptions post-victory only revealed the dysfunctional pathologies of power that resulted in Haiti’s multiple coup d’états. Those internal battles for power, regardless of external manipulations, can be viewed not only as chaotic variants on the concept of freedom but as remnants of a brutal institution that slavery fragmented. The dysfunctional behavior of the Haitian state reflects the family who never had a change to properly make love, to properly discuss the ways in which their children would live and how they would live. Instead, the nation-state, much like hard working, poorly paid, and

exhausted parents, never had time to properly take care of themselves, let alone the children. Hence, a cycle of neglect continues, and the exploiter-exploited relationship remains status quo, though under slightly different conditions than those of the early days. Yet, years pass and the victimized stands with all her scars and homeless children, haggard on the side of the road. Passersby scream at her and never once wonder about the real circumstances that brought her there. Of course, the abuser, the exploiter, the unethical loser who wanted to see her remained shackled, has faded into history as an old baron, a permanent aristocrat with an unchecked past. After all, he has mansions and has been able to keep his past victims silent or psychologically traumatized. They cheer for the old master regardless of how he is masking or reshaping his identity.

Freedom Lost

Poverty in Haiti is an extension of *enslavement*. The dilemma of the slave, the hyper-exploited subject, is always one of representation or representability. The freedom gained and vociferously celebrated in the ecstasy of victory was soon lost or muffled as the West carved territories into dominions of enslavement and servitude. By the time Haiti was celebrating the coronation of the nation-state, every island in the Caribbean was dancing to the tunes of the whip. The entire world, give or take five countries that remained free, was under the control of the West and the newly formed United States. Haiti would never have been welcomed in the high-stakes game of exploitation, where whiteness was a prerequisite.

In contrast to the French, who suffered a decisive defeat on the battlefield, Haiti's subjugation was a gradual process involving both external and internal factors. Externally, Haiti faced numerous setbacks (note: Haiti's independence was not fully recognized until 1860 when it signed a contract with the Vatican to ensconce Papal power and the French language, denouncing the Vodoun religion and Haitian Creole). In 1825, Haiti was forced to pay an indemnity to France that crippled the economy. The Germans then took over the banks and liquidated the country's logwoods. Following this, the Americans occupied the country for 19 years (1915-1934), depleting the gold reserves of the National Bank, cutting down and exporting mahogany wood, extracted bauxite, and exploiting Haitian labor for the Panama Canal and sugar plantations in Cuba and the Dominican Republic (D.R.). Finally, they destroyed the Haitian Army's arsenal so ensure it could never to surpass the D.R. militarily. The remaining army responded to American interests instead of those of its own country.

Internally, Haiti has endured a brutal and dictatorial legacy. The nation has often seemed to be at war with itself as various actors vie for power, never managing to create a national agenda that benefits the majority of Haitians. Instead, the country has cycled through twenty-two constitutions and over fifty coup d'états, each bringing further internal strife. Its wounds never heal. It has suffered through several dictatorships, including a long-lasting familial regime where

a father and son butchered, stagnated, and robbed the country, leading thousands to flee. This undoubtedly accelerated the fragmentation that slavery initiated. The earthquake of January 12, 2010, further exposed the structural vulnerability of a country whose dream was never realized. Just like the houses that were shattered, Haiti is a fragmented nation.

Do we truly know who we are as a people? Is there a Haitian identity? Is there a Haitian religion? Is there a Haitian language? If so, then what is it? And who does it serve? This fragmentation is a cancer. Again, I find myself angry and wanting to curse.

I want to suggest, and maybe dream, that freedom, as long as it remains the ultimate ideal for Haitians, is precisely why we seem so contradictory. Yet, it will also lead us to an insurgency of will, where the dream dreamt, gained, and lost will be regained and this time treasured. We will long for national enfranchisement into the realm of dignified personhood where freedom and Haitian identity will be synonymous. After all, we were the first to bring and actualize freedom for all from below, achieved in the dominion of Western imperial slavery and colonialism.

The ultimate dream is for Haiti to achieve a state where freedom is an integral part of its national identity, and where the people enjoy dignified personhood. This vision is rooted in Haiti's historical significance as the first nation to overthrow slavery and colonialism, setting a precedent for freedom from oppression.

Am I wrong to dream?