



Staging Eden; Staging Power: Landscaping the Royal Garden of the Kingdom of Haiti

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Abstract

A uniquely successful slave revolt enabled King Henry (Christophe) I to lead an engagement with native plants, animals including humans, built structures, and landscaped gardens in The Kingdom of Haiti, a tropical country liberated from colonial rule. The new ruler's political and economic exigencies and hopes had points of both collaboration and contention with the expectations of the new citizens. He would make full use of both local traditional knowledge and the latest for-profit agricultural management techniques. The engagement resulted in general prosperity, especially for the new proprietors of the largest landholdings. He set aside a portion of royal property that preserved the original flora and fauna, but most of the kingdom maintained the former plantations. There were schools and medical clinics for everyone. Yet the peasants worked even harder than they had as slaves and held little political power. Beyond the Royal Garden and the preserved forest, exploitation of the tropical ecosystem continued and even increased.

Keywords: Native ecosystems, decolonization, economics, Kingdom of Haiti, garden landscape, Royal Garden of Haiti, tropicality

Palais Sans Souci, the luxuriant tropical Jardin Royale, and the Pic Laferrière rising to the defending Citadelle at its summit, were King Henry Christophe’s Garden of Eden, the creation and protectorate of a ruler of contested ground in a contested Atlantic World.

Figure 1. Jardin Royal with View of Forest Preserve



Photograph by Antonio Marcelli, with permission

While Palais Sans Souci, the Royal Gardens and the Citadelle are internationally noticed and discussed, the forested slopes are scarcely mentioned, except for the one arduous road that links the two built sites. Even more rarely mentioned are the roles of those who created and maintained that semblance of Earthly Paradise: engineer Baron Thomas Béliard the king’s chief gardener and forester, and the hundreds of workers of all degrees and types of skill. The royal secretary, Chevalier de Prézeau’s meticulous accounts of each garden and forest worker’s name, hours and wages, disappeared when the palace was pillaged in October 1820. Yet, insignia still remain: The king’s carpenters marked their signs at special joinings, and those who made the bricks left their unique fingerprints, while some of the native fauna

populate copies of the coats of arms of counts and barons (Cheeseman, 2007), in the design of which Henry had participated.

Henry Christophe was daily and hourly involved with planning and working directly with every facet of his creation: the Royal Chapel at the Palace Gates, the Royal Gardens, the road, the forest, and the fortress. The local animals on the coats of arms, the awareness of birds, and his knowledge of the healing properties of certain plants, all these aspects taken together, indicate detailed attentiveness to his surroundings. He had needed and developed that attentiveness as a successful general in a war waged with who and what was at hand and what could be captured.

The war was the contest to liberate the enslaved majority of Saint-Domingue's human population and to take possession of a territory that had once been a continuously lush, balanced ecosystem from shoreline to mountain peaks. On landing in Haiti in December 1492 on his first voyage to the Caribbean, Christopher Columbus wrote, "...there is a very beautiful beach and a grove of trees of a thousand kinds, all loaded with fruit." (Fuson, 1987 p.187) He thought he might be near Eden. Antonello Gerbi has discussed further Columbian observations, noting that the explorer wondered about the lack of large fauna (Gerbi, 1985, pp. 15-16). He recorded no sighting of the curious *zagouti*. Rats and mice scrambled off the ships and into the forests. On his second voyage Columbus brought in cattle, mice, dogs, cats, and pigs, novel plants such as barley and olives (Cleveland-Peck, 2011), and invisible European disease organisms. The newcomers began to alter the entire insular ecosystem – irreversibly. Even before the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick two centuries later, French settlers had begun to level forests and thickets. Sugarcane and coffee plants arrived as early as 1510 from Africa in quantities sufficient to begin plantations. Colonists marked out cleared lands in the remunerative and devastating geometry of export crop plantation landscapes.

The geometric clearings were mostly on the more level plains. Yet still in 1799, with the battle for independence in full heat, M.E. Descourtilz, in *Voyage d'un Naturaliste en Haiti 1799-1803*, could record that on reaching the harbor of Port-au-Prince he looked up to see crests of mountains powdered with snow but also covered with the verdure of trees. (His visit was during the "little ice age" of 1770-1800.). He rejoiced to walk on land after a fearful voyage, admiring the lovely butterflies swirling around him. As he continued to travel through the countryside he saw plantations in ruin, retaken by palms and hedges of lemon trees. Some habitations were still productive despite the war. Food was scarce or abundant depending upon where conflict had

occurred. The environment he reports was still abundantly watered. Native and colonially introduced plants were flourishing except in battle sites (Descourtilz, 1935). Captured by the revolutionaries, but rescued by General LeClerc, Descourtilz as a medical doctor and botanist made devoted attempts to establish a Lycée Colonial to institute scientific study and instruction based on local observation. LeClerc, who also supported the re-institution of the Cap François Cercle de Philadelphes and their investigations, assigned him housing for the school, the Philadelphes, and the books and reports. Shortly afterward LeClerc perished from yellow fever. His replacement, General Jean Baptiste Rochambeau was concentrated on the war, but he did grant Descourtilz and all his records safe passage on a ship bound for France in August of 1803. The multiple volumes published in 1809 included meticulous observations of the environment and of the brutal war from the point of view of the medical expertise that spared his own life as well as those he attended.

With Saint-Domingue now become Haiti, the remnant Taíno indigenous population who had not died of overwork, disease, or pathological sorrow, remained in marronage in the hills. Hundreds of thousands of imported Africans that had risen up against the colonial injustices to seize the territory, were soon free citizens. Yet the plantations and the battles left their marks. The war that liberated the enslaved did not restore any aspect of the ecosystem. The documents from that time, produced in European languages and writing, describe the land holdings, domestic animals, and buildings, streets, and roads. The formal cadasters, done even during the conflict, describe extents, and sometimes notations of forested sections or waterways, but are silent about any flora or fauna not directly related to the production of crops. Those aspects appear in the writings of European or European-trained travelers or residents, including those with special interest and expertise in the developing sciences. The more intimate and collaborative observations that understood that everything in the environment, including the people, was inspirited, were not recorded until the efforts of John Lomax in the later nineteenth century, and his son Alan in the twentieth (Lomax Collection). This animism still continues, sometimes recorded and more often not, in the repeating of old stories, and in religious beliefs and rites of communities throughout Haiti.

It was this entwined nature-culture landscape – the lay of the land, the flora and fauna, the habitations, the varied populations and their cultural beliefs, together with the stinging fresh memories of vicious war, that revolutionary hero and self-proclaimed King Henry Christophe knew in mind and bone and blood. The enslaved would now be the masters, and Christophe would use all his knowledge skill – both

European and African to transform the new domain of Haiti. Christophe took deliberate steps to use the tools and beliefs of the European, especially the British, to exercise dominion over the total ecosystem of the newly won, presumptively owned, territory. In addition to ensuring that the seized coastal forts were in good order and well-manned, he rapidly created or upgraded plantations and constructed guarded mansions for his periodic personal visits. In parallel, he used the African sensibilities with which he had grown up. He knew Vodou, its sense of human-environment embedment in environment, and remembered its use of traditional medicines and healing techniques. (He would use this knowledge of curative herbs in the last hours of his life.) He was also aware of the exchange of healing techniques that had continued throughout the revolution: Mesmerism and its therapeutic baths and wands had been the rage among colonists, soon incorporated as a feature of Vodou healing ceremonies. Of course, the medicinal leaves, barks and roots from the forests and allotment plots had been taken into the plantation great houses from the beginning of French settlement.

King Henry's constructed and managed ecosystem is highly visible and decipherable. However, the observations and knowledge of those who lived and worked on the land were rendered nearly absent: to read or write was strictly forbidden, especially for those who were literate in Arabic. That any of the indigenous African languages had a writing system was thought to be impossible. And yet, these local knowledges did exist and were passed on. The rapidly developing Kreyòl was rarely recorded, but was spoken and sung, told in stories and visual symbols, and celebrated in religious rites and ceremonies. Folk tales, even those that entered oral tradition from Charles Perrault's French collection of fairy stories, yield little glimpses of distinctively Haitian frogs and birds, trees and flowers, and sometimes even certain caves and streams. The songs and ceremonies of the syncretic Haitian Vodou religion, so strongly ecological, are revealing sources. Haitians, Gerdes Fleurant, Max Beauvoir and Erol Josué, practitioners as well as scholars, have written and recorded many songs and stories. Multiple scholars are now collecting and discussing these treasures. There is much to be learned from careful attention to this witness passed along in the intimacy of ordinary people in their habitual ecological niches. Today's *Dokte fey* (leaf doctors) who serve as pharmacists and healers in the rural districts have names and detailed knowledge of every plant and its parts in their district.

Henry Christophe lived in the binomial world of French language coupled with military, political and economic expertise, as well as the Kreyòl language coupled with African and Indigenous expertise. He tightly paired that knowledge with an

unusually attentive observation of the fine details of everything from the lay of the land, look-out points, where ambush was possible, where water and food was to be had, which clays could heal, which leaves could ease pain, and which were poisonous. He also knew which French forts or plantations were best sited or most productive. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, another leader of the Haitian Revolution (and later named Emperor Jacques I) had shown him the site of the best vantage point in the whole country for a fortress, and they both knew how to use the dense forest cover, steep slopes, and caves of the surrounding land.

Henry likewise knew all the chit chat and serious discussion in the La Couronne inn where he had served as waiter and groom. The philosophers and scientists of the Cap François Philadelphes were likely to have been among those there to eat, drink, play billiards, and gossip. Henry heard and remembered. A lover of dance and music, he knew the music tunes in La Couronne and the grand themes heard in the Cap Opera house, played out in *mesure*, according to composer Rameau, a devotee of René Descartes. Yet, Henry also knew in hearing and action and results the music of Africa out in the hills, its rhythms responding to the moment. The talk of the philosophers and scientists of the Philadelphes also made him aware and appreciative, as no other war leader except Toussaint seems to have been, that Saint-Domingue was one of the colonial lands that were under the magnifying glass of professional and priestly botanists and biologists. They were laying out their discoveries in categorical lists as neat as the surveyor's geometries of the fields, as measured as the music. Henry saw the usefulness of the categories. He also knew the Krèyol names that often indicated the culinary or medicinal use of specific plants, which parts could be used and when. He knew the time to plant and the time to gather, the part to hold back and the part to ship.

With the war concluded in a fragile victory, Henry oversaw creation of a fortress to protect against Napoleon, who planned to retake, re-enslave and restore lost profits to France. Having gained the land, Henry considered it of paramount importance also to take possession of the gathered humanistic, dramatic, musical, and scientific knowledge generated by decades of creative production and philosophical and scientific research in Haiti and around the globe – particularly the tropical belt of the world. It is of interest to see that the dates of the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade and its official endurance are contemporaneous with the search and classification rage of the voyages of discovery and conquest. Brian Ogilvie has described the rising interest in the fifteenth century to precisely describe and classify plants and how this led to the situation in which "...scholars and amateurs no longer had as much to say

to one another” (Ogilvie, 2003, p. 40). Swiss naturalist Conrad Gessner published *Historia Animalia* in 1561-1558 and had begun *Historia plantarum* before his death in 1565. Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus created his *Systema Naturae* in 1735, published in 1738.

The Englishman, Sir Joseph Banks had direct connections with Linnaeus and was responsible for supporting the voyages of William Bligh who brought breadfruit into Saint-Domingue in 1797 – the height of the conflict. It was Banks, in direct correspondence with abolitionists supportive of King Henry I and directly with Christophe himself, who would send the British botanists and agronomists needed to provide the nascent nation with instructors and practitioners for the new department of agronomy along with experts and plants for the Royal Gardens. Documents rescued by these British who, despite haste and danger gathered the papers cast to the floor when Sans Souci was sacked in October of 1820, are still being re-discovered: someday we may know precisely which native Haitian plants were sent to Kew Gardens in London. The known documents of this correspondence indicate an exchange between equals, though one senses a bit of initial surprise on the European side that this Black King and his cabinet ministers were so knowledgeable and able.

Both the forests of La Ferrière and, after the war, the Royal Gardens, were an intricate intertwining of the native and foreign plants, and animals, as well as humans. German geographer Carl Ritter’s report from his visit in 1820 details interplanting of both native and foreign plants interplanted in the Royal Gardens. (Ritter 1836). The animals consisted of native species as well as introduced farm animals, domestic dogs and cats, as well as those pestilential rats and mice which continued to breed. The humans were indigenous peoples (but originally from elsewhere), freed slaves of African descent, and visiting botanists. King Henry, himself of mixed heritage, had furthermore also come from another Caribbean island (which one is disputed), while all his instructed education had apparently been in the French army. As a result of the military victory, he owned several productive monocrop plantations. And these foreign crops were of great importance to the new Kingdom. Work on all the plantations in the Kingdom, whether the King’s or belonging to others, was six days a week as hard-driven, and sometimes even more so, than when the French were ruling. With the introduction of new methods and their associated terminology taught by the British agronomists, and the novelty of the plough to replace the hand pick and hoe, many plantations were more productive than they had been before the war. Their exports furnished the substantial wealth of

the Kingdom from its thriving commercial exchange with nations that officially refused diplomatic recognition.

If documents are ever discovered it will be interesting to learn about any new hybrids of sugar and coffee or even of the local food crops such as rice, yams, and squashes, that may have resulted from exchanges of information between visiting experts and residents. Anyone entering or leaving the Port-au-Prince airport knows that aromatic and medicinal herbs are grown in both home plots, and for sale (including to tourists). They are the same herbs as those the Taíno used, taught the Africans to use, and perhaps learned new uses for plants the Africans recognized were the same as those back home.

A trip around Haiti, or over it, will reveal that the imported plough, championed by the king, quickly fell out of use after the Republic of Haiti took over what had been the Kingdom. Today's vast plantation landscapes use cost-effective imported machinery for mechanical planting and harvesting. Nevertheless, on the small farms picks and hoes are the most common tools, sometimes with an old plough pulled by an ox or mule, and seeds are saved for the next planting. An international agricultural company donated seeds, but this was strongly resisted by many farmers and farming collaboratives. The initial donation was tied to a contract to buy seeds for future crops. Moreover, the seeds were from patented hybrids, which would yield indifferent reverted crops and also incur copyright litigation: scientific knowledge pay-walled in. These were not problems in the time of the Kingdom of Haiti, and the exchanges with Great Britain of plants, cuttings, seeds, and information traveled on naval and commercial vessels in both directions.

The Taíno had exercised power over the environment from their first landfall from northern South America, but by every evidence this seems to have been, at least in part, mutual, calling upon the forces of nature, understood as spirits, in order to maintain a balance that would support mutual well-being. The Europeans arrived with radically different habits of attention and relationship, seeing all nature as land, flora, and fauna to be developed: ruled for profit for those who established their hegemony. Such attitudes and expectations are notably presented in the eighteenth-century scientific endeavors and writings of Georges-LeClerc de Buffon (published 1749) who, as Antonello Gerbi analyzed, saw the land, flora and fauna of the Americas as "immature" and in "a state of arrested development", i.e., as yet unexploited (Gerbi 1985). Buffon was influential, surely a source of information for the French botanist who managed the Royal Gardens in Port-au-Prince during the colonial era. After

independence President Alexandre Pétion appointed a military officer to the position. Under President Jean-Pierre Boyer and the military it devolved into disuse.

A plantation, or even a modest farm, is inevitably a presentation of power with or over an environment. A planned landscape is that power exponentially increased as community power, expressed in multiple, often subtle, effects, even if scarcely attended. The materialized plan itself gives witness to control. While every general and probably most of the top officers leading the Haitian revolution concentrated on the power of military cleverness, even in the absence of the might of weapons and trained troops, Henry had broader, and evidently more personal conceptions. He recognized the ecological/social power of tightly managed agriculture and building, together with the environmental potentials for profit. Buffon would have approved. Henry was also astute about the necessity and benefits of staging power. He knew it would be directly perceived not only by those he ruled but above all by the visitors from Europe who began arriving soon after Dessalines's declaration of independence. The gardens, the curated forest, and the fortress were his staged power resting on the firm substrate of power over a population and over nature and all its secondary materials: territory held and managed. Productive farms, a preserved forest, every quarried stone and baked clay brick was material evidence of control and power.

Yet, there was more to the gardens than staging power. It was also staging Eden. Notions of a blessed land of contentment appear early in human history and in many societies around the globe. In Saint-Domingue/Haiti the legendary condition was in active memory of the remnant Taíno who had so recently inhabited it. The imported Africans painfully remembered being wrenched from *Lan Giné*. Human memory is selective, and nostalgia occludes unwanted aspects of past events. The point is that for the residents of this place the actuality of lush, productive beauty was more immediate and detailed than the ancient Eden of European Christianity. There were places where some of that lost Eden was still present. The survival values of beauty, as well as what beauty *is*, have been argued for millennia, but humans keep on looking for it, imagining, and creating or re-creating it. King Henry I of Haiti was unexceptional in his wish to create a dwelling place that was beautiful. To be able to create beauty is a clear sign of power. It may have been for him and for many people, perhaps especially for the powerful, as strong a motivation as presentations of temporal power. His personal attentiveness to the royal gardens included the kitchen garden, surely understood in the vernacular by both the cooks and Henry, is an indication that this desire for reassuring beauty was present for Henry Christophe.

The several reports of his attention to the smallest detail of the masonry in a line of brickwork, or the mitering of a carpentered joint bespeaks of a developed, if somewhat rigid, aesthetic sensibility. The forest that was less disturbed than most areas of the exploited land was a remnant of Aiti Kiskeya (as the indigenous Taíno called the island), and a replication of Lan Giné (Africa) with many plants in the same family as those in the homeland. The royal gardens were a hubristic but also loving attempt to establish a managed paradise: a walled, safe, restful, Eden.

Ritter's accounts and the investigations of two Cuban landscape architects, Gustavo Araoz and Enrique Govantes, working toward a possible restoration of the gardens (Benson et al., 2022), document that there was a mix of native and imported trees, bushes, flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Ritter mentions breadfruit, along with palms, cabbages interspersed with pimento. Edibles, including herbs for flavor and for medicine, were in the kitchen garden and some vegetables were also in the formal garden. Tropical climate, eleven to twelve hours of sun throughout the year, and plentiful water enabled a wide range of plants and their pollinators to thrive. With high rainfall on the nearby mountains, water was plentiful, and managed with the intervention of Henry's several able engineers. They controlled a large stream from La Ferrière to water the compound and to prevent serious flood damage to buildings and plantings during the two rainy seasons. From just above the Queen's Palace, and from there in a series of slanted runs, the stream fed into the royal garden, spouting from a central fountain. One part of the stream flowed to a swimming pool, the kitchen gardens and finally to the latrines, then ultimately descended into a larger stream that flowed past Milot to the ocean. The other stream was routed into the palace where it fed a fountain at the front grand stairway, a small interior fountain and pool, the royal bathtubs and toilets, and the sinks in the kitchen. While all of this staging served as a presentation act of political, engineering, and botanical power, it was simultaneously a production created for ease and pleasure.

It is also true that this walled garden of a short-lived kingdom was planned, directed, and directly worked on by a monarch. The known documents indicate that King Henry I was staging Eden and power as a presentation to the world, not simply of himself, but also of "his" people and the new nation. The complex was a far reach beyond the royal vanity often supposed in the reports of historians and travelers from that time to this. Conscious of being African and having won the contest between enslaved Africans and French colonists, the staging was a deliberated attempt to show the worthiness of Black Haitians. The means by which to do that was to use the language, the military, diplomatic and social structures the Europeans regarded as

truth and reason. Positioning the largest and probably best constructed fortress in the Americas, saving the remnant flora and fauna ecosystem of Pic LaFerrière, building Palais Sans Souci, the Palais de la Reine, the military and government quarters between them, and the comforting eco-niche of the paradisaical Jardin Royale, required the training, skill, and intelligent creativeness of dozens of those Africans and descendants of Africans who had advanced abilities and creative insights. There were as well the hundreds whose skills were well-honed and valuable. Politically, economically, culturally, linguistically, religiously, and ecologically the new king and kingdom's presentation to the powerful colonizing nations positioned a front face that showed off their ability to meet the habitual expectations of the Europeans with exceptional competence. Entwined in the display and making it possible was a nearly invisible, nearly silent structure of Taíno and African knowledge and wisdom held in common from scullery maid to king.

The historians and travelers who came to praise Henry (few) and those who came to disdain him (more), paid attention on the one hand to the grandeur of the kingdom's built environment and on the other to the obvious arrogance, the cruelties both actual and alleged, the vanities and the severely authoritarian rule that prepared the Kingdom of Haiti to be defeated and then ruled from afar by the Republic of Haiti. Some travelers have remarked on upon the state of the gardens reverting over time to native plants that require no care, interpreting this state as a degeneration, and as both material evidence and metaphor for the failure of king and kingdom. Other visitors, notably Ritter, reported on the forest, commenting especially on the varieties of plants that thrive in the tropical climates of the lower altitudes, in comparison to those in the cool, sometimes even frosted or snowy areas near the peak, that resemble plants of the European alps. Travelers sometimes mention birds, especially those considered exotic to observers from North America and Europe. Reports describing the small animals that tend to scurry away from the gaze of intruders are mostly missing. Fortunately, so as not to attract too much attention. The interesting *zagouti* (Hispaniola hutia: *Plagiodontia aedium*) is still present, the only extant member of the hutia species remaining on the island.

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