

liberty and equality and to Republican France as long as she shared that commitment.

LETTER TO THE DIRECTORY, 28 OCTOBER 1797¹

Citizen Directors,

At the moment when I thought I had just rendered eminent service to the Republic and to my fellow citizens, when I had just proven my recognition of the justice of the French people toward us, when I believed myself worthy of the confidence that the Government had placed in me and which I will never cease to merit, a speech was made in the *Corps Legislatif* during the meeting of 22 May 1797 by Vienot Vaublanc . . . and, while going through it, I had the sorrow of seeing my intentions slandered on every page and the political existence of my brothers threatened.

A similar speech from the mouth of a man whose fortune had been momentarily wiped out by the revolution in St. Domingue would not surprise me, the loser has the right to complain up to a certain point, but what must profoundly affect me is that the *Corps Legislatif* could have approved and sanctioned such declamations, which are so unsuitable to the restoration of our tranquility; which, instead of spurring the field-negroes to work, can only arouse them by allowing them to believe that the representatives of the French people were their enemies.

In order to justify myself in your eyes and in the eyes of my fellow citizens, whose esteem I so eagerly desire, I am going to apply myself to refuting the assertions of citizen Vaublanc . . . and . . . prove that the enemies of our liberty have only been motivated in this event by a spirit of personal vengeance and that the public interest and respect for the Constitution have been continually trampled under foot by them. . . .

Second Assertion: "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

¹From *La Révolution française et l'abolition de l'esclavage*, 14 vols. (Paris, n.d.), 11:1-32; trans. George F. Tyson, Jr.

the result of the uprising of thirty Ventôse [the Villate affair], 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, with the good citizens of the other two colors flew to the rescue of General Laveaux in the Villate Affair and who by repressing the audacious rebels who wished to destroy the national representation, restored it to its rightful depository.

Such was the conduct of those blacks in whose hands citizen Vienot Vaublanc said the military government of St. Domingue found itself such are those negroes he accuses 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? Surrounded by fierce enemies, oft cruel masters; without any other support than the charitable intentions of the friends of freedom in France, of whose existence we were hardly aware; driven to excessive errors by opposing parties who were rapidly destroying each other; knowing, at first, only the laws of the Mother-Country that favored the pretensions of our enemies and, since our liberty, receiving only the semiyearly or yearly instructions of our government, and no assistance, but almost always slanders or diatribes from our old oppressors—how can we not be pardoned some moments of ill-conduct, some gross faults, of which we were the first victims? Why, above all, reflect upon unrepachable men, upon the vast majority of the blacks, the faults of the lesser part, who, in time, had been reclaimed by the attentions of the majority to order and respect for the superior authorities? . . .

Fourth Assertion: "I believed upon my arrival here [in St. Domingue]," continues General Rochambeau, "that I was going to find the laws of liberty and equality established in a positive manner; but I was grievously mistaken; there is liberty in this land only for the commanders of Africans and men of color, who treat the rest of their fellows like beasts of burden. The whites are everywhere vexed and humiliated."

If General Rochambeau had reflected philosophically on the course of events, especially those of the human spirit, he would not find it so astonishing that the laws of liberty and equality were not precisely established in an American country whose connection with the Mother Country had been neglected for so long; he would have felt that at a time when Europeans daily perjured themselves by handing over their quarters to the enemies of their country, prudence dictated that Government entrust its defense to the men of color and blacks whose interests were intimately linked to the triumph of the Republic; he would have felt that the military government then ruling the colony, by giving great power to the district commanders, could have led them astray in the labyrinths of uncertainty resulting from the absence of laws; he would have recalled that Martinique, defended by Europeans, fell prey to the English, whereas, St. Domingue, defended by the blacks and men of color whom Rochambeau accuses, remained constantly faithful to France. More accurately, if he had made the slightest effort to familiarize himself impartially with the law before his pronouncement, he wouldn't have generalized on the intentions of the blacks in respect to some antirepublican whites; he

wouldn't have been so certain that they were all vexed and humiliated. I shall not call upon those among the whites who remained faithful to the principles of the Constitution by respecting them regardless of men's color . . . : it was natural for the blacks to pay them the tribute of their gratitude; but it is to those who, openly declaring themselves the enemies of the principles of the Constitution, fought against them and whom a change of mind, more or less sincere, has brought back amongst us and reconciled with the country; it is these people whom I call upon to report the truth, to tell whether they weren't welcomed and protected and if, when they professed republican sentiments, they experienced the least vexation. When the proprietors of St. Domingue, when the Europeans who go there, instead of becoming the echoes of citizen Vaublanc by seeking to spread doubt about the liberty of the black people, show the intention of respecting this liberty, they will see growing in the hearts of these men the love and attachment that they have never ceased to hold for the whites in general and their former masters in particular, despite all of those who have tried to re-establish slavery and restore the rule of tyranny in St. Domingue.

Fifth Assertion: "I believe," continues General Rochambeau, "it will be difficult to reestablish order amongst the squanderers because by proscribing the Africans they will push them to revolt when they want to reduce their influence and credit; I am not even afraid to predict that after having armed them it will one day be necessary to fight to make them return to work."

The prediction of General Rochambeau will undoubtedly be fulfilled should he reappear at the head of an army in order to return the blacks to slavery, because they will be forced to defend the liberty that the Constitution guarantees; but that this army may be necessary to force them to return to their rustic work is already flatly contradicted by what they have done in agriculture for the past year. . . . I will not be contradicted when I assert that agriculture prospers in St. Domingue beyond even the hopes of this colony's truest friends, that the zeal of the field-negroes is also as satisfactory as can be desired, and that the results of their rustic work are surprising when one reflects that in the middle of a war they were frequently obliged to take up arms in our own defense and that of our freedom, which we hold dearer than life; and, if he finds among them some men who are so stupid as not to feel the need for work, their chiefs have enough control to make them understand that without work there is no freedom. France must be just toward her colonial children, and soon her

commerce and inhabitants will no longer miss the riches they will extract from their greatest prosperity; but, should the projects of citizen Vaublanc have some influence upon the French government, it is reminded that in the heart of Jamaica—the Blue Mountains—there exists a small number of men [the Maroons] so jealous of their liberty as to have forced the pride and power of the English to respect, to this very day, their natural rights, which the French Constitution guaranteed to us. . . .

Eighth Assertion: "A little after their arrival, the Agents had the impudence to welcome the negroes who had fought under the rebel chief Jean François, who had burned the plain and destroyed the greatest part of the colony. . . . These negroes had everywhere abandoned agriculture; their current cry is that this country belongs to them, that they don't want to see a single white man there. At the same time that they are swearing a fierce hatred of the whites, that is to say, the only true Frenchmen, they are fighting a civil war among themselves."

I swear to God, that in order to better the cause of the blacks, I disavow the excesses to which some of them were carried; subterfuge is far from me, I will speak the truth, even against myself. I confess that the reproaches made here against the rebel band of Jean François are justly merited. I haven't waited until today to deplore his blindness; but it was the delirium of some individuals and not of all the blacks, and must one confuse, under the same appellation of brigands, those who persisted in a guilty conduct with those who fought them and made them return to their duty? If, because some blacks have committed some cruelties, it can be deduced that all blacks are cruel, then it would be right to accuse of barbarity the European French and all the nations of the world. But the French Senate will not participate in such an injustice; it knows how to repulse the passions agitated by the enemies of liberty; it will not confuse one unbridled, undisciplined rebel band with men who since the rule of liberty in St. Domingue have given unquestionable proofs of loyalty to the Republic, have shed their blood for it, have assured its triumph, and who, by acts of goodness and humanity, by their return to order and to work, by their attachment to France, have redeemed a part of the errors to which their enemies had driven them and their ignorance had led them.

If it were true that the blacks were so wrong to think that the properties on St. Domingue belonged to them, why wouldn't they make themselves masters by driving off men of other colors, whom they could easily master by their numerical superiority? If they had sworn a fierce hatred against the whites, how is it that at this moment the white pop-

ulation of Le Cap equals that of the blacks and men of color? How is it that more than half of the sugar planters of the Le Cap plain are white? If union and fraternity didn't reign among men of all classes, would whites, reds, and blacks be seen living in perfect equality? Without the union of all classes would European soldiers, along with blacks, be seen pursuing the same careers as their fellow citizens in Europe? Would one see them so lively in combat and often only to obtain the same triumphs as their noble rivals?

And then citizen Vaublanc proceeded to apply himself to inflaming the passions of the men of St. Domingue, to reviving barbarous prejudices, by proclaiming that the whites in St. Domingue are the only true Frenchmen! Does he include under this appellation the traitors paid by the English, those who following odious treachery introduced this perfidious nation into the territory of freedom? In this case, we retain the honor of not meriting this honorable name; but if the friends of freedom classify under this respectable denomination men submitting heart and soul to the French Constitution, to its beneficial laws, men who cherish the French friends of our country, we swear that we have, and will always have, the right to be called French citizens.

Ninth Assertion: "Alternately tyrants and victims, they outrage the sweetest natural sentiments, they renounce the kindest affections and sell their own children to the English, an infamous traffic which dishonors both buyer and seller in the eyes of humanity."

I acknowledge with a shudder that the charge made against the black rebels in the mountains of Grand-Rivière, who are fighting under the English flag and are led by French *émigrés*, of having sold some blacks is unfortunately too well founded; but has this charge ever been made against the blacks loyal to the Republic? And haven't these miserable rebels been driven to these infamous acts by the whites, . . . partisans of the system citizen Vaublanc seems to want to restore to the colony? Against these misguided men, simultaneously guilty and victims, citizen Vaublanc pours all the odium merited by actions so criminal as to be equally reproved by the laws of nature and the social order; but why, at the same time, doesn't he apply himself to tarnishing the monsters who have taught these crimes to the blacks and who have all been, by a barbarous guild on the coast of Africa, wrenching the son from his mother, the brother from his sister, the father from his son? Why does he only accuse those who, kept in ignorance by unjust laws that he undoubtedly wishes to see revived, were at first un-

able to recognize their rights and duties to the point of becoming the instruments of their own misfortune, while glossing over the outrages committed in cold blood by civilized men like himself who were therefore even more atrocious since they committed evil knowingly, allowing the lure of gold to suppress the cry of their conscience? Will the crimes of powerful men always be glorified? And will the error of weak men always be a source of oppression for them and their posterity? No! . . . I appeal to the justice of the French Nation. . . .

Thirteenth Assertion: "It is impossible to ignore that the existence of the Europeans in the colony is extremely precarious. In the South, in the mountains of the East, when the blacks are in revolt it is always against their European managers. Since our arrival, a great number have perished in this manner, and we have the misfortune to see that we are without means to suppress them."

An unanswerable proof that these partial revolts were only the effect of the perfidious machinations of the enemies of St. Domingue's prosperity is that they were always suppressed by the authority of the law, is that by executing those who were its leaders, the sword of justice stopped their propagation. . . . But even supposing that the evils brought about by these movements should be the work of some villainous blacks, must those who did not participate in them and trembled with horror at the news of these disasters also be accused? This, however, is the injustice repeatedly done to black people; for the crime committed by some individuals, people feel free to condemn us all. Instantly forgotten are our past services, our future services, our fidelity and gratitude to France. And what would citizen Vaublanc say if, because the French Revolution produced some Marats, Robespierres, Carriers, Sonthonaxs, etc. etc. etc., the traitors who handed over Tou-lon to the English; because it produced the bloody scenes of the Vendée, the September massacres, the slaughter of a great part of the most virtuous members of the National Convention, the most sincere friends of the Republic and Liberty in France and the colonies; if, because some *émigré* troops took up arms against their country, which they had previously sold to the foreign powers, a voice arose from St. Domingue and cried to the French people:

You have committed inexcusable crimes because you shunned those more informed and civilized than you. The discussions of the legislative bodies, their laws which were rapidly transmitted to you, the enlightened magistrates charged with executing them, were before your eyes, at your side; you have ignored their voice, you have trampled upon your most sacred

duties, you have reviled the Fatherland. Men unworthy of liberty, you were only made for slavery; restore the kings and their iron sceptre; only those who opposed revolution were right, only they had good intentions; and the ancien régime that you had the barbarity to destroy was a government much too kind and just for you.

Far be it from me to want to excuse the crimes of the revolution in St. Domingue by comparing them to even greater crimes, but citizen Vaublanc, while threatening us in the *Corps Legislatif*, didn't bother to justify the crimes that have afflicted us and which could only be attributed to a small number. . . . However, this former proprietor of slaves couldn't ignore what slavery was like; perhaps he had witnessed the cruelties exercised upon the miserable blacks, victims of their capricious masters, some of whom were kind but the greatest number of whom were true tyrants. And what would Vaublanc say . . . if, having only the same natural rights as us, he was in his turn reduced to slavery? Would he endure without complaint the insults, the miseries, the tortures, the whippings? And if he had the good fortune to recover his liberty, would he listen without shuddering to the howls of those who wished to tear it from him? . . . Certainly not; in the same way he so indecently accuses the black people of the excesses of a few of their members, we would unjustly accuse the entirety of France of the excesses of a small number of partisans of the old system. Less enlightened than citizen Vaublanc, we know, nevertheless, that whatever their color, only one distinction must exist between men, that of good and evil. When blacks, men of color, and whites are under the same laws, they must be equally protected and they must be equally repressed when they deviate from them. Such is my opinion; such are my desires.

LETTER TO THE DIRECTORY, 5 NOVEMBER 1797²

The impolitic and incendiary discourse of Vaublanc has not affected the blacks nearly so much as their certainty of the projects which the proprietors of San Domingo are planning: insidious declarations should not have any effect in the eyes of wise legislators who have decreed liberty for the nations. But the attempts on that liberty which the colonists propose are all the more to be feared because it is with the veil of patriotism that they cover their detestable plans. We know that

²From C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1963), pp. 195-97. Reprinted by permission of the author.

they seek to impose some of them on you by illusory and specious promises, in order to see renewed in this colony its former scenes of horror. Already perfidious emissaries have stepped in among us to ferment the destructive leaven prepared by the hands of liberticides. But they will not succeed. I swear it by all that liberty holds most sacred. My attachment to France, my knowledge of the blacks, make it my duty not to leave you ignorant either of the crimes which they meditate or the oath that we renew, to bury ourselves under the ruins of a country revived by liberty rather than suffer the return of slavery.

It is for you, Citizens Directors, to turn from over our heads the storm which the eternal enemies of our liberty are preparing in the shades of silence. It is for you to enlighten the legislature, it is for you to prevent the enemies of the present system from spreading themselves on our unfortunate shores to sully it with new crimes. Do not allow our brothers, our friends, to be sacrificed to men who wish to reign over the ruins of the human species. But no, your wisdom will enable you to avoid the dangerous snares which our common enemies hold out for you. . . .

I send you with this letter a declaration which will acquaint you with the unity that exists between the proprietors of San Domingo who are in France, those in the United States, and those who serve under the English banner. You will see there a resolution, unequivocal and carefully constructed, for the restoration of slavery; you will see there that their determination to succeed has led them to envelop themselves in the mantle of liberty in order to strike it more deadly blows. You will see that they are counting heavily on my complacency in lending myself to their perfidious views by my fear for my children. It is not astonishing that these men who sacrifice their country to their interests are unable to conceive how many sacrifices a true love of country can support in a better father than they, since I unhesitatingly base the happiness of my children on that of my country, which they and they alone wish to destroy.

I shall never hesitate between the safety of San Domingo and my personal happiness; but I have nothing to fear. It is to the solicitude of the French Government that I have confided my children. . . . I would tremble with horror if it was into the hands of the colonists that I had sent them as hostages; but even if it were so, let them know that in punishing them for the fidelity of their father, they would only add one degree more to their barbarism, without any hope of ever making me fail in my duty. . . . Blind as they are! They cannot see how this odious conduct on their part can become the signal of new disasters and irreparable misfortunes, and that far from making them regain what in

their eyes liberty for all has made them lose, they expose themselves to a total ruin and the colony to its inevitable destruction. Do they think that men who have been able to enjoy the blessing of liberty will calmly see it snatched away? They supported their chains only so long as they did not know any condition of life more happy than that of slavery. But to-day when they have left it, if they had a thousand lives they would sacrifice them all rather than be forced into slavery again. But no, the same hand which has broken our chains will not enslave us anew. France will not revoke her principles, she will not withdraw from us the greatest of her benefits. She will protect us against all our enemies; she will not permit her sublime morality to be perverted, those principles which do her most honour to be destroyed, her most beautiful achievement to be degraded, and her Decree of 16 Pluviôse which so honors humanity to be revoked. *But if, to re-establish slavery in San Domingo, this was done, then I declare to you it would be to attempt the impossible: we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it.*

This, Citizens Directors, is the morale of the people of San Domingo, those are the principles that they transmit to you by me.

My own you know. It is sufficient to renew, my hand in yours, the oath that I have made, to cease to live before gratitude dies in my heart, before I cease to be faithful to France and to my duty, before the god of liberty is profaned and sullied by the liberticides, before they can snatch from my hands that sword, those arms, which France confided to me for the defence of its rights and those of humanity, for the triumph of liberty and equality.

GREAT LIVES OBSERVED

Toussaint L'Ouverture

Edited by
GEORGE F. TYSON, JR.

*Toussaint L'Ouverture is a negro and in the jargon of war
has been called a brigand. But according to all accounts
he is a negro born to vindicate the claims
of this species and to show that the character of men
is independent of exterior colour.*

—LONDON GAZETTE, DECEMBER 12, 1798

Toussaint, the first and greatest of West Indians. . .

—C. L. R. JAMES



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