**The Haitian Revolution: A Past Forever Present**

**The Charles Wright Museum of African American History**

**March 31, 2017**

It’s an honor to be here at the Charles Wright Museum of African American History for the Woman’s History Month Celebration. My thanks to the president, Juanita Moore and Charles Ferrell, Director of Public Programs, for this invitation. I bring you greetings from my husband, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who joins me in expressing deep appreciation for you solidarity in the work of our university in Haiti.

The pleasure tonight is all the greater because of the presence of Representatives John Conyers and Maxine Waters. I’ve known Congressman Conyers and Congresswoman Waters – or Aunty Maxine as she is now known – for about 20 years now. Both, committed friends to my husband President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and me and to our country, Haiti. Much of the history of Haiti/US relations can be told through the twists and turns of a story that takes Maxine and us from Washington to Haiti, Central Africa, Jamaica, South Africa and finally back to Haiti. But I’ll get to that later.

When **the word Haiti** is spoken, 4 things come to mind:

1. Successful slave revolution;
2. World’s first Black Republic;
3. Poorest country in the Western Hemisphere; and of course
4. *Vodou*.

Within the last ten years, **2 other realities can be added**: A place of devastating natural disasters and a state of political turmoil.

As a Haitian American, born and raised in New York, I feel a duty to fill in the gap. To open a window on a national identity that is full, integrated, modern, complex, dynamic – carved and molded from its past, but not stuck in its past.

**Barthelemy Boganda**, an African freedom fighter from Central Africa, had a biting take on the colonial past. In his struggle he spoke incessantly of the horrors of French colonialism – even as they attempted to institute reforms to an indefensible system of oppression. At a talk in Paris a French legislature told Boganda point blank: Stop talking about the past. To which Boganda responded: I would stop talking about the past, if the past was not so present.

My talk this evening, ***The Haitian Revolution: A Past Forever Present***, endeavors to explore this temporal fluidity. As Boganda said, a past still present. And I’ll do that by focusing on **3 transformative events** in Haiti’s history: slavery; the Haitian Revolution and the criminal debt that Haiti was forced to pay France – on threat of war and re-enslavement – *after* Haiti had defeated Napoleon’s army. The so-called debt of independence. How these historical events have an ongoing, living legacy. How they persist in forming an ever present back drop to Haiti’s current reality and to the work at our Foundation’s university, UNIFA.

Haiti’s history doesn’t begin with its founding in 1804; or the 1791 start of its 13-year Revolution; or the arrival of the first Africans in 1517. The island’s **first inhabitants, the Tainos**, were a matriarchal society. Rank was inherited through the female line, with women sometimes inheriting chiefly position, like Anacaona. This civilization was decimated by Europe’s thirst for gold. As Noam Chomsky wrote: “It was a general rule among the Spanish to be … extraordinarily cruel …. to prevent the Tainos from daring to think of themselves as human beings.”

In this savage quest for gold the Tainos were worked to death. Literally. A new supply of labor was needed. **With the benediction** of the Catholic Church, Europe looked to Africa. The trafficking in African slaves began with the Spanish, it continued and intensified when possession of the island went to the French, who called the colony Saint Domingue.

Between the 16th and 18th century, there were 28 to 30 thousand Africans transported to the island annually. And **by the start of the Revolution** the slave population was estimated at 500,000. Whereas just north in the 13 English colonies combined, there were only 700,000 slaves. In addition to the breadth of the slave trade, the colonial administration of Haiti was one of **the most ruthless** of the colonial era. The human supply of forced labor was so seemingly unlimited that it was cheaper to work a slave to death and replace her, rather than feed her and maintain her in health.

At the price of this chilling horror Haiti was France’s wealthiest colony. By the middle of the 18th century it supplied all of France and much of Europe with sugar, coffee and cocoa. By 1783, more than one third of France’s foreign trade depended on Haiti. And nearly **20% of its population owed** their livelihood, in some form, to the trade in, or work of, African slaves in Haiti.

I’m giving you these details so that you have a full appreciation of the huge economic importance that Haiti represented for France.

But as the French were pumping Africans into Haiti and reaping enormous profits, something else was happening too. As historian Colin Palmer wrote: **“Africa, in all its cultural** richness and diversity, came to the Americas as well.” Archeological, linguistic and DNA evidence points overwhelmingly to the West and Central African origins of Haitians. According to one study, during the 1780s Congos made up 60% of the slaves in Haiti. In fact the word Congo was a generic term for slave insurgent. On the eve of the Revolution, two-thirds of the slaves of Haiti had been born raised and socialized in Africa. One historian ascribes the success of the 13 year war in part to the trained African soldiers who were veterans of long standing wars in the Kingdom of Congo.

On August 14, 1791, the Haitian Revolution was ignited by a late night *Vodou* ceremony in Bois Caiman. At this secret gathering, Dutty Boukman led an oath to fight for freedom. **But it was a *Vodou* priestess** named Cecile Fatiman who consecrated that vow when she called on African ancestral spirits for protection in the battle to come, and, under a tree she slaughtered a black pig as an offering. This cemented the role of *Vodou* in Haitian history as an emancipatory faith.

Even before this ceremony, the French slave owners knew that revolt was simmering. They must have realized that an out sized slave population – 500,000 compared to 30,000 Europeans – was untenable. France attempted to appease. An emissary was sent to declare the abolition of slavery. And free people of color were promised greater political and civil rights. It was a strategy to temper the spirit of liberty brewing and block an alliance between African born slaves and free people of color.

But it was too late. **Two weeks** after the gathering at Bois Caiman the rebels set plantations on fire, poisoned drinking wells and so started the Revolution.

**Toussaint Louverture**, a former slave emerged as a brilliant leader, soldier, diplomat and strategist. He was able to unite the African slaves, Creoles (slaves born in Haiti) and free people of color. People like Sanite Belair, one of a handful of women revolutionary soldiers who rose from the rank of sergeant to lieutenant in Toussaint’s army. From 1791 to 1801 Toussaint played the Spanish and English – who had designs on the lucrative Haitian colony – against the French, switching allegiance to whichever side that promised to be an ally in his fight for freedom for the slaves.

In 1801, Haiti took its first step toward liberty: Toussaint was named Governor General. His first official act was a constitution in which he unilaterally proclaimed slavery forever abolished, in what was still, technically a French colony. Napoleon Bonaparte recognized that Toussaint was a threat to French sovereignty over its richest colony. Secretly, and with the support of Thomas Jefferson, he plotted. The plan was outlined in a March 16, 1802 letter from Napoleon to his general Leclerc:

The moment that you have defeated Toussaint, Christophe, Dessalines and the principal bandits, and that the black masses are disarmed, return to [Africa] all blacks and persons of color who played a role in this civil disorder. Be firm. Work for the rebirth of the colony and that commerce in France profit from your endeavors.

**Five months later** Toussaint was kidnapped. He was exiled to France where he would die less than one year later.

Toussaint’s kidnapping signaled entry into the **second phase** of the Haitian Revolution, under the fearless leadership of General Jean Jacques Dessalines.

Napoleon wasted no time in reversing the liberties decreed by Toussaint. But Haitians refused to disarm. When news of the re-establishment of slavery in France’s other Caribbean colonies reached Haiti, the collective resolve was strengthened. Leclerc responded with ruthlessness. In his last letter to Napoleon he wrote: “We must destroy all the blacks in the mountains, men and women, leaving only children below the age of twelve.” By the end of the war, Haiti’s population was estimated to have been reduced by one-half.

Not surprisingly accounts of the Haitian Revolution reported from slave nations like the United States rarely mentioned the brutal acts committed against the blacks. Their sole objective was to discredit the idea of black political autonomy and paint Haitians as beasts. Reluctant to attribute the military success of an army of African ex-slaves, some writers opted to credit the mosquito and yellow fever, rather the Haitian army, with the defeat of Napoleon.

The final battle of the Revolution was fought in November 1803, and **on January 1, 1804**, Dessalines and his generals declared independence. The new country threw off its colonial name Saint Domingue and reclaimed the name Haiti. Dessalines went on to be declared the new country’s emperor. But as we’ll see, even when Haiti had achieved national independence the Revolution was far from over.

One year after Haiti’s independence the French minister of foreign affairs wrote to his US counterpart James Madison that “the existence of Negro people in arms is a horrible spectacle for all white nations.” The US banned trade with Haiti. A US Senator declared that “we can never acknowledge [Haiti’s] independence. The peace and safety of a large portion of our union forbids us even to discuss it.” Of course, that portion of the union was the slave owning south. Despite having given Simone Bolivar military and financial assistance to liberate Latin America, on orders from the US, Haiti was barred from the 1825 Pan American Congress and denied recognition.

Across the Atlantic France was still smarting from the stinging defeat and loss of its most profitable colony. And it had not given up hope. In 1814 a French spy named Franco de Medina was captured and **arrested by Henri Christophe**, ruler of Haiti’s north. The French plan was simple: Divide and conquer; promise the mulattos and people of color greater economic and political rights over the blacks, while blacks working in the fields would be returned to former slave owners, and black soldiers and government officials purged from the island. Medina admitted that if Haiti did not submit to the sovereignty of France, Haitians would be “entirely exterminated all the way to their children.” Haiti did not submit, and Christophe ordered Medina to be executed.

But in the face of this aggression, the young nation had no alternative but to invest war depleted resources in its army and **building fortresses** – like the mighty Citadelle – to protect against re-enslavement. The French did not relent.

The campaign to re-impose economic domination culminated in 1825 when **a fleet of French warships** armed with over 500 canons docked at the Haitian port. On board, an emissary carrying a Royal Ordinance signed by King Charles X. The Ordinance conditioned French recognition of Haiti with two demands:

1. That Haiti pay an indemnity of 150 million gold francs; and
2. That Haiti grant French trading ships a 50% tariff reduction.

The conditions were non-negotiable. If the Haitian government resisted, it would be treated as an enemy state. The flotilla of warships was prepared to enforce a blockade of the country’s ports.

Haiti’s then president, Jean Pierre Boyer, believed that he had no choice but to accept **– even when 150 million francs** was the equivalent of 10 years of revenues for Haiti. To make the first payment stipulated by the Ordinance, Haiti was forced to take a crippling 30 million franc loan from a French bank.

Haiti’s principle source of revenues came from its agricultural produce and trade in mahogany and other precious lumber. **To maximize this production** an oppressive Rural Code was enacted. Peasants and farmers were forced to work for a pittance. Debt payment was the national priority. There was simply no money left for much of anything else. The French made sure of that by sending an all-powerful consule general whose only job was to stop the Haitian government from initiating any spending that would drain resources from payment of the indemnity.

Across the Atlantic it was another story. The 1825 Ordinance and this transfer of capital from a war ravaged economy to France, was a boon. But even they were forced to admit that Haiti would not be able to maintain the payment schedule. So in 1838, the indemnity balance was reduced to 90 million francs – still an outrageous sum of money.

Great difficulties in paying this so called debt of independence was the back drop of Haitian politics through the end of the 19th and into the 20th century. Haitian anthropologist Jean Price Mars speaks of a nation burdened with debt and trapped in financial obligations that could never be satisfied. Eighty percent of government revenues went to debt service. Governments rose and fell on their ability and commitment to pay, fostering instability and corruption. The debt mushroomed as Haiti repeated refinanced and rolled over loans, extending its list of creditors to wealthy local merchants; who in turn exacted exorbitant interest rates and effective control of the government.

Then France had an idea. In 1880 it created a Haitian National Bank. This institution had the trappings of a national bank, it collected national revenue, paid government expenses and acted as the government’s fiscal agent. But the fact is, it was a French owned for-profit-corporation with headquarters in Paris. Its main purpose was to insure a steady flow of money to French creditors arising from the indemnity– while turning a profit for its French shareholders.

This opening of the 20th century also coincided with the muscling-up of the American Monroe Doctrine. America for Americans. The US wanted to shut down European interests in Haiti. City Bank of New York was eager to get a piece of these very lucrative Haitian government loans. And that’s just what happened. **By 1911, the Vice President** of City Bank of New York became director of Haiti’s national bank. And by the time the US marines arrived in Haiti four years later the Haitian bank was 100% American owned and would eventually purchase all of Haiti’s outstanding foreign loans; this, under protection of the US marines and a new Haitian army that they created. The national bank of Haiti stayed under American administration a full thirteen years after the occupation. Enough time to make sure that Haiti paid the last installment of the original indemnity of 1825.

As French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher wrote: “Imposing an indemnity on the victorious slaves was equivalent to making them pay with money that which they had already paid with their blood.”

**In 2003, a government commission** estimated the value of the indemnity paid by Haiti of the course of 122 year at over 21 billion dollars. President Aristide called for *dialogue* with France to address this historical injustice; an injustice that set Haiti on a course of financial crises which is one of the principal factors in Haiti’s underdevelopment, poverty and deforestation. Reparations and restitution.

Within a year of this call for dialogue with France, on the night of February 29, 2004 President Aristide was overthrown in a coup d’état. He and I were shuttled to a French military base in Bangui, the capital of the Republic of Central Africa. **Central Africa:** The land of Berthelmy Boganda where the past is still so present. A 21st century Toussaint styled kidnapping, say Haitians. The ever courageous Maxine Waters, Randall Robinson, Ira Kurzban flew to Central Africa in the dead of night. Seven hours later we were on a plane headed to Jamaica – where Congressman Conyers was one of the first people to reach out to us. In doing this, Maxine and John Conyers challenged Washington which had imperially declared that “Aristide had forfeited the right to return to the Western Hemisphere” and that “Aristide was the past.”

Oh how little they knew Haiti! **To think that this** people who had elected this former Catholic priest Haiti’s first democratically elected president, twice; witnessed and denounced the plot to undermine his presidency by blocking government access to loans for vital services like potable water; suffered as paid thugs and a tiny elite attempted to thwart commemoration of the bicentennial of our independence in 2004 – that this people would accept that Aristide was relegated to a forgotten past?? No.

Meanwhile, during that spring of 2004, one of the first actions taken by the illegitimate prime minister installed after the coup, was to high tail it to France, head bent, apologize and withdraw even the suggestion of a request for restitution and reparations for Haiti.

Yet restitution is an issue that persists – as the truth is wont to do. In 2015, the collective heart of France skipped a beat when French President Francois Holland, on the eve of the first state visit of a French president to Haiti, declared that it was time to “settle the historic debt owed to Haiti.” Politicians in France scrambled. They rushed to clarify that Holland meant a “moral debt” and was *not* talking about the infamous 1825 indemnity. **But the cow was already** out of the barn. When Holland arrived in Haiti the next day he was greeted by protests. Said one Haitian law student: The French president is not welcomed unless he’s brought with him the billions of dollars in reparations owed for slavery and the debt for independence.

Slavery. The Haitian Revolution. The forced payment of the crippling so-called debt of independence to former slave owners. These are neither the closed chapters of a long ago history, nor events locked by time. They are stories that must be shared and affirmed – as we are doing tonight; because their real power is in their living legacy. This history constitutes a touch stone for a collective Haitian identity that persists still today.

The recreated Africa that was transplanted to Haiti when the first slave stepped foot onto the new world **is manifest in Haitian** culture, religion, art and its humanistic world view. A straight line can be drawn from African dance and drumming to Haitian music. I urge you to experience it for yourselves. Haiti’s religion, *Vodou*, originated when missionaries converted slaves to Roman Catholicism. **Christianity became a cover** for the continued practice of an indigenous African faith. In *Vodou*, ancestors like Toussaint, Dessalines, Christophe, Boukman, Fatiman are part of the spirit world. An unseen world, a mythic land called *Ginen*, a cosmic Africa. And through song, pray, drums, the drawing of *Vèvè’s* and sacrifice – like at the Bois Caiman ceremony – spirits are called to intercede and help in the natural world.

No doubt because of its liberating role in Haitian history, *Vodou* has always represented a threat to power structures and is the reason why it has been grossly misrepresented. During the US occupation, false and degrading narratives about *Vodou,* seeped their way into American pop culture, and stayed. In 2003, President Aristide initiated legislation to recognize *Vodou* as a religion equal to all other faiths. But evangelical Christians in the US felt compelled to not only denounce that law, but to travel to Haiti and attempt to destroy the sacred site of Bois Caiman. In 2010, Pat Robertson made the outrageous claim that the devastating earthquake happened because Haitians had made a pact with the devil in 1791. Last Saturday night on a CNN show called Believer I heard an American evangelist missionary say this:

Haiti is a little unique in that the nation was given to Satan. It’s kind of the opposite of what happened with the American slaves who got the religion from their slave owners … they – American slaves – got it right. Haitians never liberated themselves from slavery, replacing the evils of the white man with the devil.

Pretty damning thing to say in 2017. Especially when supported by a group of Haitians still under the bondage of mental slavery. Which is one of the reasons that our Foundation’s children’s radio station called *Radyo Timoun*, we have a weekly show called *Dekolonization Mental*.

This recasting of an African-based religion as evil and sinister is racist. But the power of *Vodou* is that in spite of a campaign of subversion, it continues as a system of belief, a world view that brings strength and comfort to millions of Haitians. It is as much alive today as when Cecile Fatiman offered her revolutionary sacrifice in 1791. A past forever present.

**Restoring the name Haiti** to the island was a deliberate act to negate and undo the colonial experience of the previous 4 centuries. But as President Aristide reveals in his linguistic study, *Haiti-Haitii? Philosophical Reflections for Mental Decolonization*, it was more. Add a second letter “i” to the end of the word Haiti and in Swahili you have the phrase “do not obey.” Resistance. This most powerful legacy of the Haitian Revolution has survived the US occupation, **personified in this *Caco*** or rebel woman. Later again in the 27 year Duvalier dictatorship; the 2 coup d’états against President Aristide; a catastrophic earthquake; a cholera epidemic; and a killer hurricane this past October that has triggered famine in parts of the South. It is why after this past year’s long delayed **fraudulent elections** which denied the vote to Haiti’s majority, there were over 50 days of continuous demonstration where people chanted: Do Not Obey.

This resistance is bound to a powerful will to affirm a shared humanity rooted in dignity. In Creole we say: *Tout moun se moun*. Every person is a human being. When my husband first ran for president of Haiti his goal was, at once simple and at the same time deeply profound: **To move the country from misery to poverty with dignity.** This notion of dignity embraces self- determination. People as subject and never object of their history.

**And so when we returned to Haiti** in 2011 after 7 years in exile in South Africa, it was with this vision in our hearts that we worked to reopen our university UNIFA. UNIFA had been seized, its 243 students expelled, and the campus occupied by international forces sent to Haiti as part of the 2004 coup. **UNIFA, would be a place** where young people could train to be leaders in their communities and in their chosen professions. A place to think critically for our country. An institution to address national issues and seek solutions to national problems. Haitians trained and in position to resolve Haitian problems. Not to the exclusion of the international community, but certainly not second to the international community.

For example, the problem of cholera – which was introduced to Haiti by the reckless actions of this same United Nations military force. The epidemic has already killed over 10,000 people and orphaned tens of thousands of children. After 5 years of outright lies and denials by the UN and claims of legal immunity – which were supported in court by the US – the UN has finally admitted responsibility. But to what end? As the *New York Times* reported last week, of the estimated 400 million dollars that it will cost to remediate, the United Nations has so far collected only 2 million.

As much as we will continue to push them, the solution will not come from the UN headquarters in New York. **Solutions must come** from us, Haitians.

**Our 1,200 students across** 8 different schools – medicine, law, nursing, engineering, dentistry, physical therapy and continuing education – refuse to be the objects of their history. Every day they face and **overcome significant challenges** to be behind their desk, ready, prepared to be the subjects of their future.

I’ve spent the evening talking about the past. How it is so ever present. Now I will end on the future, with, what is for me the most compelling example of this spirit to resist, persist and be subjects, not objects. Dr. Henri Ford, an accomplished Haitian American surgeon, who is chief of pediatric orthopedics at LA Children’s Hospital, came to speak at UNIFA recently. His lecture was titled “The Joys of Surgery.” He showed students slides of a very complicated in-utero procedures that he was able to perform to save the lives of new born babies. At the end of the lecture a student thanked Dr. Ford for the inspiring talk then said:

Dr. Ford, everything you showed us today was great. Clearly you work at a hospital with lots of money and resources that helps you save lives. However, you know the situation of our hospitals in Haiti.

My heart stopped. I was afraid that our UNIFA student was going to ask Dr. Ford for a scholarship to go to LA! **But he didn’t. He continued**.

In Haiti we don’t have an LA Children’s Hospital. Tell us, what do we have to do. Who do we have to be as doctors, in order to give our patients in Haiti that same level of care and save lives too.

**Haitians standing united, with dignity, to** be the subjects of our future. A past forever present guiding us to greater future.

Thank you.