La femme, une Patrie, une Légende: Issues of Documentation and Memorialization of Haitian Women Revolutionaries

The preservation and presentation of history is never a neutral act. No matter the intentions of the historian, archivist, or scholar, every person who approaches an event with the intention of recording it for posterity brings with them their own specific viewpoint and context. This lack of neutrality ultimately impacts what, and who comes to embody specific historical moments. In eras of revolution, these memorialized participants and deeds tend almost exclusively to be those of men. The American Revolution is defined by figures like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and the Marquis de LaFayette; the Haitian Revolution, by Toussaint Louverture, Henri Christophe, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. While women have played roles in every revolution across world history, their contributions are frequently seen to be sidelined; if they are mentioned at all, they appear as a somewhat performative footnote to the exploits of their male contemporaries. Who, in studying the French Revolution, learned substantially of Charlotte Corday or Olympe de Gouges; when considering the Haitian Revolution, who thinks instantly of Catherine Flon or Sanité Bélair?

Mentions of women's interaction with revolution may be generally read, in a modern era more interested in representation and gender, as a burgeoning effort to promote the idea that women too can contribute to world-shaking events. Undertaking this work, however, must involve more than simple engagement with surface-level inclusivity — essentially checking off a "diversity" box — but rather demand true reorientation of our traditionally male-centered and static view of history. Attempts at this reorientation, which frequently takes the form of a renewed focus on the lives of historically less-documented individuals, are best achieved through

the discovery and analysis of historical primary sources. A primary source's purpose is often twofold: while it documents, in "real-time," an event or a person's life, it also serves to counter the equally not-neutral act of myth-making for future generations. Legends, particularly on a national or cultural level, are frequently established for the purpose of cementing a community and its proposed values—forging a sense of unity out of a shared past and heroes. If the goal of studying history is a broader, more complex (and thus more comprehensive) understanding of the past, national myths, and mythic figures must be interrogated—and frequently disassembled. Nations must consider not only who they are putting forth as their heroes and icons, but who in society raised those figures to such an idolized status—and who was not given a voice in the myth-making process. National myths are undoubtedly significant, the mere fact of their existence can be read as a statement on a culture and its values, but without primary sources evidence to either complicate or refute the picture painted by a legend, these mythologized figures and events are also particularly vulnerable to manipulation. A legendary account of a person's life can be made to support nearly any agenda—it is only with primary source research that we can arrive at something closer to the truth.

What, then, can be said for figures who have flourished in legend but vanished significantly from the concrete historical record? How much can be extrapolated from myth, or incomplete, antagonistic, or contradictory primary and secondary sources? What is the true significance of a woman's contributions to a revolutionary movement if she has been denied the complexities and the broader historical understanding that a primary source archive would provide? While these questions may be posed in regard to female contributors to any revolution, they prove particularly applicable in the case of the Haitian Revolution, where the illiteracy of the majority of the revolutionaries and their descendants, as well as the racism of the primary

sources of the colonial archives, resulted in a particular lack of primary source evidence. This project explores issues of documentation and memorialization during and after the Haitian Revolutionary context with particular regard to three specific women: Catherine Flon, who reportedly sewed the first Haitian flag at the Congress of Arcahaie in 1803; Sanité Bélair, soldier and wife of General Charles Bélair; and Dédée Bazile—rendered particularly notable for her role in the aftermath of the assassination of Emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines. While each of these women was selected due to their more "active" role in the revolutionary effort (as a seamstress, sutler, and soldier, respectively), this paper reveals how their stories have nevertheless faced simplification and alteration—essentially making out of an absent historical record a legend through which to amplify the deeds and values of either their nation or their male contemporaries, as well as the greatly condensed narrative of Haiti and its revolution within a broader global context.

In exploring and problematizing the effect a paucity of primary sources has had on a broader understanding of the lives of Haitian revolutionary women, one must first ask: what *can* we find in both primary and secondary sources to speak to the lived experiences of these women and their resistance to systems of colonialism, slavery, and white supremacy? This question is a weighty one, particularly when the power imbalance between Haiti and its colonial enemies (most prominently France) is taken into account. A dominant power in an incredibly exploitative system, even facing defeat in conflict itself, is still better equipped to preserve and maintain its version of the past and its events. For that reason, scholars seeking to research the lives of Haitians before and during the events of the revolutionary period (roughly 1789-1804) access records located in the archives of colonial powers (France, Britain, and Spain) with far more ease than they might find traces of Haiti's self-told stories. Any source stemming from the colonizing

power, however, must be thoroughly analyzed for biases both blatant or unconscious. Even then, the accuracy of events and practices reported must remain in some doubt. The frustration that may arise from this process — attempting to understand a multifaceted event when only one "facet" has left the grand majority of physical traces — also calls attention to the Western historian's emphasis on written texts as sources of utmost significance. This approach not only impacts what history is verified and validated by future generations but essentially shapes the making of the historical record itself. In a society where reading and writing are privileges afforded only to the wealthy and educated, any view of the past and its struggles will naturally come from those lucky few. Issues of this nature are only sharpened, however, when non-literate or largely illiterate societies become the object of historical study. The task of the historian, as Nicole Wilson explains in her article "Unmaking the Tricolore: Catherine Flon, Material Testimony, and Occluded Narratives of Female-Led Resistance in Haiti and the Haitian Revolution," is to consider traces of the historical record in a broad variety of cultural art forms and traditions — including "textiles, folklores, songs, dances, or spiritual practices" (Wilson 2) — to compile as accurate a picture of the past as possible. Ultimately, however, the written word maintains a dominance in Western scholarship. Even Wilson, who traces women's relationship to sewing and cloth as a means of locating their presence in Haitian history, largely discusses examples of textiles mentioned in written/printed formats such as newspapers and letters.

The use of textiles to cement evidence of women in the historical record is also the primary lens through which Wilson addresses the first of my selected Haitian revolutionary women: Catherine Flon. The task is a difficult one, particularly with a reliance on the written word: Flon is essentially nonexistent in the historical record. Her folkloric reason for fame involves her part in the creation of the Haitian flag at the 1803 Conference of Arcahaie: Wilson,

citing “popular accounts,” explains that, as goddaughter of Haitian general and future ruler Jean-Jacques Dessalines, as well as “a nurse and a seamstress, Flon was purportedly commissioned… to stitch back together the red and blue panels of the French *tricolore* after [Dessalines] had torn out its white central panel, thereby creating the Haitian *bicolore”* (Wilson 4). The Conference of Arcahaie, however, along with the details surrounding the flag’s creation, are unfortunately hazy. In the landmark text *The Black Jacobins,* C.L.R. James supports the Conference’s existence and declares that “the new flag was unfurled on May 18th” (James 365); Wilson places the conference itself on the same day. Philippe Girard, however, casts doubt on both claims: in “Rebelles with a Cause: Haitian Women in the War of Independence, 1802-04,” he emphasizes that “several women (including Dessalines’ daughters) played roles in the popular version of the creation of the Haitian flag… but the entire story is highly dubious” (Girard 9). In his article “Birth of a Nation: The Creation of the Haitian Flag and Haiti’s French Revolutionary Heritage,” he takes the challenge a step further, noting that “archival sources support few of the details… in fact, [the flag creation’s] very date (May 18, 1803) and place (Arcahaye) are most likely inaccurate” (Girard 1).

The profound lack of primary documents related to this event has not only left a significant portion of early Haitian history obscure but has also created conflict among scholars who struggle to determine the validity of the few sources left to analyze. Wilson notably pushes back against Girard’s claims, emphasizing that he is “a historian working predominantly within the colonialist archive,” who “places disproportionate weight on the value of written texts and conventional forms of authorship that were often inaccessible to women of color in slave societies” (Wilson 5). Girard’s article centered most forcefully on the origins of the Haitian flag, incorporating the works of both Beaubrun Ardouin (1796-1865) and Thomas Madiou

(1814-1885), two early Haitian historians considered—due to their proximity to the revolution and its aftermath—to be essential references in understanding the events of the period. Furthermore, while each of their written bodies of work *would* likely remain inaccessible to a formerly enslaved woman, their accounts can nevertheless be considered external to the colonial archive. That does not mean, however, that their respective works are free from error; according to Girard, Ardouin "concluded that some of the events related by [Madiou] were not grounded in fact" (Girard 2). Madiou relates that after the French "published a pamphlet alleging that the rebels did not aspire to declare independence since they still fought under the tricolor," Dessalines "designed a bicolor blue-and-red flag *before* the Arcahaye conference" (Girard 2). Ardouin, according to Girard, casts doubt on the notion that Dessalines took an active role in the flag's development, merely giving "an order to his subordinates that the flag be blue and red" (Girard 1). Neither historian, however, mentions the person or role of Catherine Flon. Even Nicole Wilson is forced to admit that "any surviving trace of [Catherine Flon's] real lived identity can only be recovered from spurious sources" and that "her story has been co-opted by colonialists and nationalists alike" (Wilson 4). And while Wilson's examination of women's relationship with textiles—including their ability to use various forms of clothing to challenge and subvert colonial power systems—does offer an alternative means of considering women's contributions that may have fallen outside of the more notable historical record, her discourse on Flon revolves by necessity around the significance of her legendary status.

Philippe Girard's swift dismissal of Flon's importance, based largely on the grounds of historical accuracy, fails to grasp the means in which her story (even unverified), has impacted Haitian culture, values, and traditions. Nevertheless, Wilson's examples of Flon's appearances in Haitian culture and art only underline the malleability of a legend with no foundation of primary

source evidence. Catherine Flon has, for example, appeared in several pieces of artwork, including street art produced during the aftermath of the devastation wrought on Haiti by the 2010 earthquake by graffiti artist Jerry Rosembert. In the image, Flon once again stitches the *bicolore* as her fellow citizens reach for Rosembert's message: "'Haiti pap peri' (Haiti will never die)" (Rosembert, qtd. in Wilson). The message of solidarity, community, and re-unification emphasized by Rosembert's Flon art is contrasted, however, with other, more performative or sinister, evocations; Wilson describes "pageants such as the 'Miss Catherine Flon' contests" and quotes from Haitian journalist Roxanne Fequière, who wrote of "compulsory demonstrations of national pride" (Fequière, qtd. in Wilson) enforced by dictator François Duvalier during Haitian Flag Day (celebrated on May 18th and most closely tied to Flon's revolutionary narrative). Flon's inclusion on national currency (the *dix gourdes*) is also problematized; Wilson notes not only that the year of the money's release, 1988, was "marked by political instability that saw several candidates accede to the presidency," but that "in a society in which women are counted among the most financially precarious, it is difficult to perceive such gestures as anything but lip-service" (6). Even Flon's inclusion in what Wilson describes as "one of the most canonical works of Haitian art"—a surrealist painting by the artist Madsen Mompremier, visualizing the events of the Conference of Arcahaie—emphasizes the potential for use (or minimization) of Flon's story. Though Flon is credited with sewing the first *bicolore,* the painting is titled "Dessalines Ripping the White from the Flag."

The two remaining colors of the Haitian *bicolore,* red and blue, may also be imbued with potential meaning. Philippe Girard explains that the *tricolore's* red, white, and blue had "come to represent the colony's three basic racial groups"—white, Black, and mixed-raced occupants (Girard 3). The removal of the white and the closer proximity of the red and blue thus symbolize

the unity that would need to be forged out of Haiti's strict color hierarchy in order to obtain freedom and self-rule from the French. This, often uneasy, alliance is often represented by the Black Dessalines and the mixed-race general Alexandre Pétion. In any case, however, the impact of colorism, and attempts to rectify it, is not a topic typically considered in relation to the women of the revolutionary period; though her hands may have been the ones to bind together the blue and red fabric, Catherine Flon's own potential standing in this hierarchy and its repercussions are not discussed. Lost so completely to the historical record, she is thus easily reduced to a setpiece—a component either of the story of Dessalines, unity, and the Conference of Arcahaie, François Duvalier's terror-filled reign, or the general resilience of her nation. While not every manifestation of her story is negative—she is, after all, honored as a heroine—the lack of primary material to document her actual everyday experience as a woman of color in a period of immense upheaval nevertheless represents a profound loss for historians. Her legend may survive and thrive but her personal life, everyday experiences, and agency—and with them, the ability to both temper myth-making and establish a more comprehensive picture of women's life in a record dominated by men—do not. Catherine Flon remains, essentially, unknowable.

Sanité Bélair, the second of this paper's Revolutionary Women, has survived to a marginally greater extent in the historical record. Again, however, her story is most closely linked to that of a man. In this case, her husband, General Charles Bélair. C.L.R. James describes Bélair as Toussaint Louverture's nephew and potential successor, having "fought with distinction against the British and in the civil war against the south… hansome, with distinguished manners… he loved military parade and display. He did not like the whites" (James 257). Sanité is first introduced in this same context: she "hated them [the whites] and encouraged him [Bélair] to treat them harshly" (James 257). James has likely retrieved this claim from the work of

Thomas Madiou, who in his treatise *Histoire d'Haïti: 1799-1803*, relates an occasion in which Sanité (spelled Sannitte or Sannite by Madiou), "who shared against the Whites all the hatred of her husband, declared frankly that she no longer wanted to take care of a young White [man] that General LeClerc had placed… dangerously ill, in the middle of the rebels"[1] (Madiou 362).

No context is given in either work for Sanité's supposed hatred of whites, and while she is referred to as an "'affranchis' (emancipated slave)" in a brief biography by the British Museum, no distinction is made between whether she was an *ancienne* or *nouvelle libre*—freed before or during/by the Revolution. While she is also reported to have actively served as a sergeant in Toussaint Louverture's army, her most remembered actions involve her role in her husband's attempt to lead the Artibonite department in a rebellion against the French after Toussaint Louverture's capture and deportation—as well as the rebellion's eventual failure. According to Madiou, Sanité had been left by her husband in the village of Corbeil Mirault, where she was surprised by French forces and captured. Her husband soon joined her and they were tried for insurrection. Madiou explains that "Charles Bélair was guilty and Sannitte was convicted as complicit in the revolt of her husband"[2] (Madiou 404). Both were to be executed, Bélair by firing squad and Sanité, due to her sex, by decapitation. On the day of their deaths, October 5, 1802, Sanité "refused to let herself be blindfolded"[3] and struggled so forcefully against the executioner's chopping block that "the officer who commanded the detachment was obliged to shoot her"[4] (Madiou 404).

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[1] Unless otherwise specified, all translations from the French are mine. Madiou 362: "qui partageait contre les Blancs tout la haine de son mari, déclara hautement qu'elle ne voulait donner des soins, plus longtemps à un jeune Blanc que le Général LeClerc à placé… dangereusement malade, au milieu des insurgés"

[2] "Charles Bélair était coupable et Sannitte était convaincu d'être complice de la révolte de son mari"

[3] "refusa de se laisser bander les yeux"

[4] "l'officier qui commandait le détachement fut obligé de la fusiller"

With her valiant death as a martyr for liberty—as well as the defiance displayed at the moment of her execution—Sanité Bélair has been easily swept into the national legend of the Haitian Revolution. She, like Flon, was featured on a banknote, produced in 2004 to celebrate the bicentennial of the Revolution and founding of Haiti as an independent country. Yet this view of Sanité and Charles Bélair and their grimly heroic fates is a vast oversimplification of the shifting power dynamics of the many stages of the Revolution. Portraying Sanité's death as caused by a battle against the French, sent to reconquer Haiti and led by Napoleon's chosen general and brother-in-law Victor Emmanuel Leclerc, avoids the fact that it was not Leclerc himself who subdued the Bélairs, but Jean-Jacques Dessalines. In fact, Dessalines, as well as Charles Bélair and future Haitian leaders Henri Christophe and Alexandre Pétion, spent approximately six months loyally serving the French army after Toussaint Louverture's capture. Though all eventually deserted the French, uniting to lead Haitian rebel forces to victory, Sanité and Charles Bélair chose to defect early. They were quickly overpowered without the support of their fellow Black and mixed-race generals. The strategy employed by Dessalines and his fellows—capitulating until the moment when the French forces, including Leclerc, had been incredibly diminished by battle losses and tropical diseases—was successful, leading to the eventual French defeat and official independence. The fact remains, however, that Sanité's death came largely at the hands of a fellow hero of the Revolutionary era. Even the military tribunal that condemned the Bélairs to death, according to James, consisted "entirely of coloured men" (James 352).

It is with this knowledge that Sanité Bélair's story becomes positioned to subvert the standard simplification of the historical record. While in broad strokes, the Haitian Revolution was a rebellion of the enslaved growing into a fight for both freedom and the right to self-rule,

the details of its many stages of conflict, as well as the particular actions of its many key players, are often slotted more neatly into that frame narrative than the historical record would support. The life and death of Sanité Bélair, as well as the mere act of positioning both her and Dessalines as heroes of the Revolution, invites a challenge to this act of historical myth-making. Madiou, in his account of the Bélairs' ultimate fate, includes a letter — sent by Dessalines and later printed in the "Gazette official de Saint Domingue"—in which the general specifically incriminates Bélair and his "ferocious wife"[5] as the leaders of the Artibonite insurrection (Madiou 368). The question then arises by necessity: can two people be said to be heroes for the same cause if one betrayed the other, to the point of leading to her death?

The complexity that Sanité creates in regard to Dessalines' own legendary status, however, is further complicated by additional descriptions of her behavior and actions, recorded primarily by Thomas Madiou. While a rough description of her appearance is given—"[a] black woman, very beautiful"[6]—he focuses largely on ways in which Sanité's behavior appears to have strayed from a feminine norm (Madiou 367). In addition to being accused of killing her husband's white secretary—a claim that Madiou admits may have been invented by the authorities to stoke anger against the Bélairs' insurrection—she is compared unfavorably to another general's spouse, Claire-Heureuse, the wife of Jean-Jacques Dessalines (Madiou 364). In describing the two women's stances on prisoners of war, Madiou notes that Sanité "had always shown herself to be… unyielding towards the prisoners. What a difference between her and Madame Dessalines! [She], at the risk of her life, was often the protector of unfortunate blacks,

[5] "féroce femme"
[6] "femme noire, d'un grand beauté"

yellows [mixed-race people], and whites"[7] (Madiou 405). In Madiou's account, Sanité even acquires a portion of the blame for the Bélairs' fates;

> "Charles Bélair and his wife could have saved themselves, if they were less trusting of the mercy of LeClerc… but Sannitte, immediately after the first days of the insurrection, had not felt the courage to tolerate the weariness and the privations that one experiences in the mountains."[8] (Madiou 405)

While Madiou's descriptions on the whole do not paint a particularly flattering picture, his references to Sanité Bélair are also notable for what they do not include: any mention of her service in Toussaint Louverture's army. Sanité is held to a feminine standard (merciful and generally generous, as embodied by Madame Dessalines) that she appears to fail to meet. Her greatest revolutionary contribution, in contrast, is entirely absent. While Madiou's own historical and social positionality would need to be more forcefully analyzed to draw definite conclusions about his choices made when describing Sanité, the effect can be more easily encapsulated—Sanité appears as a secondary reference, a component (and a hindrance at worse) in the story of Charles Bélair. While the details of her betrayal and death do emphasize the true complexity to be found when any historical event is treated to an exploration that delves deeper than the standard surface level (for example, fundamentally challenging an aspect of Dessalines' hero mythos), the narratives of Sanité's own upbringing and viewpoint remain absent. As with Flon, these narratives represent a supreme loss, for they would prove instrumental in further explaining—or perhaps challenging—the traces of Sanité Bélair's life located in the records of men.

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[7] "s'était toujours montrée… inexorable envers les prisonniers. Quelle différence entre elle et Madame Dessalines! Celle-ci, au péril de sa vie, fut toujours la protectrice des infortunés noirs, jaunes, et blancs"

[8] "Charles Bélair et son épouse se seraient sauvés, s'ils étaient moins fiés à la clémence de LeClerc… mais Sannitte, aussitôt après les premiers jours de l'insurrection, ne se sentait pas le courage de supporter les fatigues et les privations qu'on éprouve dans les montagnes"

The third revolutionary woman, Dédée Bazile, has survived in primary and secondary sources to the same marginal extent as Bélair. The two traits/actions associated with her life and story that have flourished in posterity, however, also concern her revolutionary contributions only nominally. Bazile is known to have served in a support role for the army of General Jean-Jacques Dessalines—Jana Braziel, author of "Re-membering Défilée: Dédée Bazile as Revolutionary Lieu de Mémoire" asserts that she was a sutler, while Philippe Girard, citing scholar Joan Dayan, identifies her profession as "a cook (or prostitute)." Her notoriety, however, stems from her perceived mental illness and her last interaction with then-Emperor Dessalines, which took place shortly after his assassination in October 1806. Bazile was reportedly mad, her moniker, which has also survived into the modern day, was "Défilée-la-folle." Assorted explanations for her madness were described by (comparatively) contemporary sources. According to descendant Didi Coudol, she was sexually assaulted by her enslaver at the age of eighteen, though other sources attribute her mental instability to the atrocities committed by French soldiers against loved ones, including (in varying narratives) her parents, two brothers, and three sons. While Défilée's year of birth is unknown, a historian in the 1930s asserted that "she was more than seventy years old in October 1806… she lived on public charity" (Petit, qtd. in Braziel 5)

While the image of a woman able to survive only through public charity appears somewhat at odds with the notion of the otherwise unclear records of a peddler, cook, or even sex worker—all capable of working and used to the rigors of traveling and providing for troops—Haitian historians Beaubrun Ardouin and Thomas Madiou recorded her actions on the day of Dessalines' death in memorable detail. Dessalines had been killed by his own soldiers—after being dragged for approximately two miles to Port-au-Prince, his body was

mangled beyond recognition. Braziel specifically notes that "in some versions, Dessalines was stoned and hacked to pieces by the crowd"—a claim supported by Madiou, who describes a body that "was no longer recognizable: the skull was broken, the feet, the hands had been cut [off]"[9] (Braziel 5, Madiou 325). Whatever the exact state of Dessalines's body, however, the subsequent actions of Dédée Bazile are described similarly:

> "[A]n old madwoman, named Défilé, was passing by. She approached the group of children… and demanded what it was. They told her that it was Dessalines. Her lost eyes became suddenly calm; a light of reason shone on her features; she went to the shops to look for a sack, came back to the square, put the remains there [in the sack] and transported them to the interior cemetery of the city."[10] (Madiou 326)

The account of Beaubrun Ardouin, who claims to have known Bazile, differs slightly; while he insists that "she was not strong enough to carry such a heavy load," he nevertheless states that "Défilée followed the soldier who transported le corps de Dessalines… and she was the last to leave the funeral procession" (Braziel 6).

While Bazile's specific mental state and exact actions on the day of Dessalines' death and dismemberment thus vary slightly, she has nevertheless become intertwined with the emperor and his legacy. The mythologization of this moment may be attributed, in part, to the fact that Bazile's reaction to Dessalines's corpse differed so drastically from the crowd surrounding her. The incessant linkage of Bazile's legacy to Dessalines instead of to her earlier service to the Revolutionary cause is also significant. By assuring Dessalines a proper burial, Bazile—much

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[9] "[qui] n'était plus reconnaissable: le crâne était brisé, les pieds, les mains étaient coupés"

[10] Une veille femme folle, nommée Défilée, vint à passer. Elle s'approcha de l'attroupement que formait les enfans… et demanda ce que c'était. On lui dit que c'était Dessalines. Ses yeux égarés deviennent calmes tout-à-coup; une lueur de raison brilla sur ses traits; elle alla à la course chercher un sac, revint sur la place, y mis ses restes et les transporta au cimetière intérieur de la ville.

like Catherine Flon, as portrayed in “Dessalines Ripping the White From the Flag”—takes on what is essentially a supporting part in a story that is primarily the Emperors’. The fact that Bazile’s actions are also frequently portrayed as having come about due to a “moment of lucidity” brought on by her recognition of Dessalines further underscores the notion of Dessalines’ role in this moment as the more active one. Despite his death, it is his presence that frees Bazile, at least momentarily, from her madness. Her quest to ensure his burial may thus even be read as a tribute to a benefactor—something underscored by scholar Joan Dayan, who claims that “with Dessalines’s death, Défilée becomes the embodiment of the Haitian nation: crazed and lost, but then redeemed through the body of the savior” (Dayan, qtd. in Braziel, 6). While this interpretation does grant Bazile a sort of legendary pedestal—she is, at this point, seen as representative of Haiti in its entirety—it also minimizes her control not only of her mind (with an external factor necessary to help her regain her faculties) but of her actions. Though it is Bazile who makes the purposeful choice to preserve Dessalines’ body, she is instead seen as being *acted upon*, even redeemed, by Dessalines, who gains a sort of mythic significance. The two become equal actors in this historical moment—a moment in which, in truth, one of them no longer had independent agency at all. Even in death, therefore—as a purely symbolic presence rather than a physical one capable of asserting a will—Dessalines essentially “outranks” Bazile, making her role significant only as it relates to him.

The contexts in which Dédée Bazile is remembered share similarities with those of Catherine Flon. Jana Braziel in particular discusses Octave Petit, a Haitian historian who in 1931 attempted an exploration of Bazile’s life and presented his findings to the Société d’Histoire et de Géographie d’Haïti. Petit too acknowledges that Bazile has been “enveloped in the meshes of history and legend — above all, legend” (Petit, qtd. in Braziel 3). Yet in the same article, he also

manipulates the myth of Dédée Bazile, linking her more firmly to the ideal notion of la Femme Haïtienne (the Haitian woman):

> One could not fail to recognize that la Femme has profoundly contributed to giving us une Patrie: Honor and glory to the Haitian woman who, following the example of Our Mother of the Heavens, offered a generous proprietary sacrifice, her children, the flesh of her flesh, inspiring in their hearts the sentiment of la Liberté… By her patriotic action, she efficaciously contribute to the edification de la patrie commune." (Petit, qtd. In Braziel, 3)

In this moment, as Petit endows, both Bazile and her actions gain both immense patriotic and religious significance. He also underlines the ideal norms and behavior of La Femme Haïtienne—a figure who lives and works for her country, even to the point of accepting (or prompting) the sacrifice of her children for the cause of freedom. This notion prioritizes a stoicism capable of minimizing the true extent of a mother's love, loss, and grief—a female standard of behavior that seems poorly applied to Bazile, whose cause for madness was frequently attributed, including by her descendant, Filius Bazile, to the killings of her loved ones, most notably her sons, in battle (Braziel 5). While death or sacrifice for a country and its cause is certainly not a new concept or one traceable only to Haiti, the mold Haitian women are meant to occupy—and are specifically praised for—is nevertheless revealed to be a narrow one. And Petit's reasons for acclaiming (and further shaping) this ideal are also shaped by his own historical context, written during the period of "US imperialism and military occupation" (Braziel 3). This era of neo-colonialism, which lasted from 1915 until 1934, prompted a surge of interest in the figures of the Haitian Revolution—particularly those who, like Jean-Jacques Dessalines, had been more forcefully unwilling to compromise with white Western colonial

powers. Dédée Bazile and her legend are thus evoked in this later time primarily to bolster support (once again) for true Haitian independence. While the comparison between the two periods is not necessarily inapplicable, Petit's specific agenda nevertheless flattens Bazile's history, promoting her as an ideal by draining away the complexity—particularly Bazile's supposed mental illness and its possible causes—revealed in the historical record.

The specific significance of utilizing a broad collection of historical records to search for a more complex (and thus accurate) picture of the past can also be particularly exemplified by Dédée Bazile. While the vast majority of accounts detailing Bazile's role on the day of Dessalines' death adhere to the information related above, one source, located partially in the papers of writer John Kobler and held at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, deviates from the standard narrative. The source's origins are not entirely certain—Kobler, developing notes for a planned project, merely handwrote the name "L'herisson;" the archives' citation gives a full name (Leonidas Caroux Lherisson) but no further detail.

The work, apparently a portion of a pamphlet or article entitled "For Dessalines,"[11] published on the 100th anniversary of his assassination, would be strictly considered a secondary source. In this accounting, however, Dédée Bazile was not the only member of the public gathering the remains of Dessalines. Instead, encountering the desecration of the corpse, "there were only two mad people, living on charity, Défilée and Dauphin, who desired to bury his corpse"[12] (Lherisson 8). Scant further details are given. Bazile is described as "an old black woman from Port-au-Prince"[13] with Dauphin said to originate from the same city, identified as

[11] "Pour Dessalines"
[12] "'Il ne se trouva que deux misérables aliénés, vivant d'aumônes, Défilé et Dauphin, qui voulurent se charger d'inhumer son cadavre'
[13] "une vieille femme noire de Port-au-Prince"

"un griffe," a derogatory term for the child of a mixed-race and a Black person (Lherisson 24). In this version, Bazile continues to maintain a stronger commitment to Dessalines' memory—"for a long time after that sad day, she [Défilée] continued to go to the cemetery, throwing flowers"[14] (Lherisson 8). In his description of the scene, Lherrison also cites a source, Edmond Bonnet, whose own work would need to be located and evaluated in order to assess the veracity of his information. Nevertheless, the fact that Dédée Bazile may have been accompanied in her most notable moment by a companion, a man as destitute and as mentally ill as the popular perception of Bazile herself, allows for further questioning of both the recorded history and the legend from which it has evolved.

The mysterious Lherisson appears to find the two-person version of Bazile's narrative as touching and compelling as others have found the idea of Bazile acting alone. After including the brief historical details, he adds, "Two mad people, two noble hearts! Two unknown people, but two apostles of the chariot and two patriots… peace for their beautiful soul!"[15] (Lherisson 24). If *two* marginalized citizens' contribution to the legacy of their murdered emperor is seen as equally touching, the question then arises as to why has Bazile alone been popularly memorialized in this moment. The answer might involve historical accuracy; perhaps later scholars ascertained that the figure of Dauphin was an invention or error of a prior historian and ceased to mention his potential contribution to the scene. Further research would be required to determine a definite answer. If, however, Dauphin's involvement is to be believed—or at least considered—the reason for his absence from other sources might instead be related to societal concerns, either of Bazile's and Dauphin's own era or a later one. Is, for example, Bazile less able to be idealized as "the embodiment of the Haitian nation" and "la Femme Haïtienne" if her

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[14] "longtemps après ce jour triste, elle (Défilée), continua d'aller au Cimetière, jetant des fleurs"
[15] "Deux fous, deux nobles coeurs! Deux gens obscurs, mais deux apôtres de la chariote et deux patriotes… Paix à leur belle âme!"

striking and momentous act is not undertaken alone—or is specifically undertaken alongside a man (Dayan, qtd. in Braziel; Petit, qtd. in Braziel)? A deeper understanding of gender roles, particularly within the context of Haitian society across assorted periods of history, would add further structure to this possibility. So too would research on perceptions of madness, specifically as related to gender. Nevertheless, even one additional source—and one piece of information—related to Bazile's life is capable of shifting her story dramatically. The power of the archive remains, however, frustratingly limited, for as yet nothing has been discovered to reveal what Dauphin's relationship might have been to Bazile. The specifics of Bazile's life—particularly her earlier service to Dessalines and the revolutionary effort—appear, if they ever existed, to also be lost. And with them, therefore, is our broader understanding not only of a specific female historical context during this era, but a greater sense of Bazile's own agency. The archives as they exist complicate our picture, yet remain vacant enough to fail to fully combat or correct the legend that has arisen around the figure of Dédée Bazile.

What, ultimately, *can* be made of the significance of a woman's revolutionary actions if—as in the cases of Catherine Flon, Sanité Bélair, and Dédée Bazile—she now exists more completely in legend than in the historical record? As discussed above, historical and national myths are in themselves essential; the fact that Flon and Bélair appear on Haitian banknotes emphasizes the high regard with which their stories and contributions are held by their nation. They embody values—courage, compassion, fortitude, and a dedication to the revolutionary cause and emerging nation—that are seen as laudable. They are exalted as examples of what to aspire to and who to be. The banknotes themselves, however, also emphasize the performativity involved in that praise—for without a variety of archival material, these accounts of each woman's contributions and "worth" to the revolution are in many ways unverifiable.

Furthermore, the events that *can* be largely ascertained to be true—Sanité Bélair's defiant death, for example, and Dédée Bazile's reaction to Dessalines' corpse—remain stripped of the layers of meaning that would tie most intimately to the lives and minds of the women themselves. We cannot know what in Bélair's past led to her specifically noted hatred of white colonists—Bazile's ultimate state of mind and the reason behind her decision to gather Dessalines' remains appear frustratingly opaque. The void left by this information is instead filled by the agendas and ideas of historians and politicians, who frequently present Flon, Bélair, and Bazile as a means of emphasizing their own values, biases, or historical circumstances. The women's importance and a perception of their dedication may remain. The depth behind it, however, remains largely inaccessible. It is possible to say, therefore, that the contributions of these three women to the Haitian Revolution *are* significant—but in doing so, one must also recall the importance of continuing to question the origins of those legendary contributions, especially for the many ways in which they may have been altered or portrayed throughout the centuries. It is also essential to recognize that, whatever modern scholars may determine as to the worth of these women's revolutionary efforts, their views and their voices can only go so far. It is the most essential voices, those of Catherine Flon, Sanité Bélair, and Dédée Bazile, who remain missing from the conversation—and without them, a degree of obscurity regarding their real lives and experiences will always persist.

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