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# **Of Bosal and Kongo: Exploring the Evolution of the Vernacular in Contemporary Haiti<sup>1</sup>**

Toni Pressley-Sanon

## **Abstract**

*In this article, I trace the multiple layers of meaning behind the words “bosal” and “kongo” in contemporary Haiti. I read the socio-political origins of the two terms, both of which issue from the slave era, and trouble the attributes that scholars traditionally ascribe to them. I also explore how two Haitian folklore characters, Uncle Bouki and Ti Malis, reflect and comment on historical and contemporary class divisions. Then, using interviews as a basis for my discussion, I explore the two terms’ varied meanings within popular culture before analyzing them as terms not only of denigration but also of empowerment. To do this, I compare popular uses of the terms with the appropriation of the term “nigger” in African American popular culture.*

*Nèg sa, li bosal anpil!<sup>2</sup>*

—Heard on the streets of Port-au-Prince

*So, who is the real bosal? That’s the question they’ll have to answer.*

—Welele Noubout

## **The Origins of Kwa Bosal**

In the city of Port-au-Prince, there is a bustling area called Kwa Bosal (Croix des Bossales). There, people live in small houses they have fashioned out of corrugated tin, which sit precariously close to open sewers covered with planks of rotting wood that buckle and threaten to give under the weight of the thousands of souls who traverse them daily. There is, in addition, an open market where women, men, and children sell everything from hair combs to crabs. Other such areas exist in Port-au-Prince, but many,

such as Cité Soleil, were established in the 1950s amidst a general promise of increased employment. In contrast, Kwa Bosal's history dates back to the slave era. Despite this, its existence as foundational to the formation of the nation is not publically acknowledged nor commemorated in any official way.

Moreau de St. Méry, colonist, writer, lawyer, and onetime resident of Saint Domingue, wrote in the late 1700s that Croix des Bossales was where unbaptized African captives—*bosal*—who had died soon after their arrival were buried. This practice was supported by the 1685 Code Noir, which governed the treatment of enslaved people in the French colonies and stipulated that those who were unbaptized were to be buried “at night in a field near the place where they died . . . around Croix Bossales.”<sup>3</sup> St. Méry speculated that it was these graves that brought enslaved people to the area for “dances” on Sundays and on holidays. His comments reflect not only the interconnectedness and intimacy of life and death in the colony but also the deeper metaphysical meanings and implications for the populations that danced at these gravesites.

### **The Living and the Dead**

The belief system with which captives came to the New World dictated that they respect their dead as ancestors who must be honored. From the Kongolese cosmological perspective, the living and the dead are connected in a never-ending circle. This worldview reflects what philosopher Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau articulates in the opening pages of *Tying the Knot*: “I am because I was and re-was before, and . . . I will be and re-be again.”<sup>4</sup> Further, it supports feminist scholar M. Jacqui Alexander's counsel that “[t]he dead do not like to be forgotten, especially those whose lives had come to a violent end . . .”<sup>5</sup> If, as Fu-Kiau states, people were and will be reborn again, and those dead needed to be attended to,<sup>6</sup> then the dances that St. Méry witnessed were part of the work of attending to the dead.

Historian Laurent Dubois's discussion of colonial Saint Domingue illustrates the ubiquitous presence of death during the slave era. He says, “The dead were inescapable in Saint-Domingue, as St. Méry lamented in describing the entrance to one town where the sight of a pleasant fountain was offset by the cemetery

beside it.”<sup>7</sup> Though St. Méry conjectured that the enslaved had taken a vow “to strike travelers with the ‘lugubrious’ presence of the departed,” the practice of placing cemeteries at the entrance of towns actually seems to have originated in the Kongo, where graves are considered medicine or *nkisi*—an object, substance, or collection of materials that contains spirit powers and makes them available to humans.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the entire cemetery, with its graves, is believed to serve as protective medicine and is placed at the entrance to villages as a shielding force and a source of order for the community.<sup>9</sup>

However, it was not only the sociopolitical environment of Saint Domingue that determined the ubiquitous presence of the dead. The spiritual beliefs of the island’s enslaved inhabitants also ensured that those who had passed on remained present among the living. Robin Poyner notes that the BaKongo<sup>10</sup> believe the living maintain close communications with the dead and thus assure the dead’s longevity.<sup>11</sup> Again, those beliefs may very well have been behind the vow to which St. Méry referred. Both the spiritual beliefs and the sociopolitical conditions of the past continue to hold sway in the present, where, as a result of structural violence, most of the living in contemporary Haiti “eke out an existence to survive physically,”<sup>12</sup> which makes death a close friend to many. In addition, in Haiti’s spiritual tradition of Vodou, among *sèvitè* (those who serve the spirits), there is the belief that “the dead are not dead.”<sup>13</sup> Rather, the metaphysical plane is seen as “but a layer that penetrates the physical world, and the body, mind and psyche are inseparable alloys of a very complex and complete reality.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Bosal’s Meanings**

The story that St. Méry tells about the area’s origins is the one most often repeated by historians. But there is at least one other story of both Kwa Bosal and the people who originally occupied it. Max Beauvoir, *oungan* (Vodou priest), biochemist, and founder of the *Fédérésasyon Nasyonal Vodou Ayisyen* (The National Federation of Haitian Vodou), maintains that the term bosal, which inspired the name of the city, resulted when Europeans misheard the name that people from the Sine-Saloum region of what is now present-day Senegal used for themselves. The captives brought

from this region identified with their king in the way that people today identify with their country. According to Beauvoir, “The word for king was ‘bour’ and Saloum is a big area in Senegal. They said that they were the children of the king of Saloum. That’s why they were ‘boursal’ . . . and the Croix des Bossales here is where the children of boursal used to be sold.”<sup>15</sup>

Aside from its association with the place, the term *bosal* is commonly used in contemporary Haiti to describe someone who is considered brutal, savage, or fierce. In this article, I trace the multiple layers of meaning of *bosal*, as well as another word with a similar connotation: *kongo*. I read the sociopolitical origins of the term *bosal* and trouble the attributes that are traditionally ascribed to it. I also explore how two Haitian folklore characters, Uncle Bouki and Ti Malis, reflect and comment on historical and contemporary class divisions. Finally, using interviews as a basis for my discussion, I explore the two terms’ varied meanings in popular culture before reflecting on them as not only terms of denigration but also terms of empowerment. To do so, I compare them with the appropriation of the term *nigger* in African American popular culture. I propose that in much the same way we can read the term *nigger*, as an enactment of historical memory that is simultaneously dynamic and can be claimed by those against whom it was originally used as a weapon, so too can we read the deployment of the terms *bosal* and *kongo*.

### **Misreading Experience**

Ultimately, two factors are responsible for the association of the term *bosal* with unbaptized Africans or, more popularly, with savagery: colonizers’ conceptualization of the world and the fact that they misheard and misread captives’ language. I argue that the naming was also a misreading of the experience of the people who stepped off the slave ships. Rather than seeing them as members of the communities with which they were connected or through the relationships by which they identified themselves, Europeans conceptually characterized captives as “savage beings,” “wild,” “with no kinship ties and devoid of history.”<sup>16</sup> Not only did Europeans negate the lives captives had known before, but they also disregarded the trauma that captives had endured in the process of enslavement. Such negation and disregard were

part and parcel of an acculturation process that also entailed promoting the illusion that enslaved Africans' preexisting ties were severed. This process, in turn, helped facilitate the transformation of captives into the *tabula rasa* that colonizers envisioned. Indeed, as anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot have argued, an enslaved person's prior status and the rhythms of his or her daily life in the society of origin were traumatically broken by enslavement and the middle passage.<sup>17</sup> By the time Africans arrived on the shores of Saint Domingue, their old lives and cultures were "remote, even if not forgotten."<sup>18</sup> Thus, by the time captives stepped off those boats, their acculturation process was already well underway. Nonetheless, as evidenced by the continued use of the terms *bosal* and *kongo* in the present, enslaved Africans' memories of their past lives persisted. However, I suggest that internalized racism, a consequence of African and African-descended people's exposure to European denigration, has resulted in a distorted historical memory that is evident in language.

### **Prolonged Liminality**

If we consider the term *bosal* through both Beauvoir's explanation and the notion of the African rites-of-passage ritual, in which a person dies to one way after a period of exile and trial but is reborn to another, then we recognize Europeans' double misrecognition of the captives who arrived in Saint Domingue. First, if the men and women whom the colonizers encountered identified themselves in relation to a particular polity, then the colonizers' misunderstanding erased the captives' sociopolitical histories and shifted their point of reference from what they knew to what Europeans valued as part of their system of exploitation: Christian baptism. Second, even though the captives had already undergone a profound transformation in their traversal of time and space before, during, and beyond the middle passage voyage, Europeans did not recognize this transformation. They continued referring to the captives as *bosal*—as they understood it. This misrecognition and subsequent misnaming not only denied the trials endured by those who survived capture and enslavement but also symbolically prolonged the moment beyond the liminal space, the ocean. In other words, if we think of the middle passage metaphorically as

the liminal period in the rites-of-passage ritual, then the captives had already undergone a period of exile or trial. Although their arrival in the New World should have signified a (re)entry into a society that was also transformed by their rebirthed presence, they were instead labeled *bosal* (uninitiated) by Europeans and positioned outside of it.

### **The *Bosal* in Memory and History**

The term *bosal* was incorporated into the Haitian popular imagination during the slave era when enslaved people told stories whose “deepest meanings can be understood only in relation to the fundamental period in the history of the West Indies,”<sup>19</sup> in the words of Martiniquais poet and writer Patrick Chamoiseau. While many stories told were humorous, “when taken as a whole,”<sup>20</sup> they also provided “a practical education, an apprenticeship in life—a life of survival in a colonized land.”<sup>21</sup> This is indeed what stories did in Saint Domingue, where humorous tales of how the wily and sophisticated Ti Malis outsmarted the dimwitted, gullible country bumpkin Uncle Bouki simultaneously reflected and commented on the sociopolitical and economic conditions of different classes in the colony.

Jean Price-Mars, ethnologist and founder of Haiti’s *Indigénisme* movement, discusses the *bosal* in relation to Haitian folklore. He speculates that in the popular stories of Bouki (Bouqui) and Ti Malis (Ti Malice), “Bouqui is typical of the ‘nègre bossale’ newly brought from Africa to Saint Domingue whose clumsiness and stupidity were the object and frequent bullying and merciless joking by Ti Malice, personification of the ‘nègre créole’ generally considered more adroit and even a little shy.”<sup>22</sup>

Price-Mars pushes the connection between the folkloric figure and his African counterpart further with evidence of a “generic name borne by a seventeenth century tribe from the Grain Coast,” members of whom were smuggled into Saint Domingue by the British. According to Price-Mars, they were reputed to be unmanageable and could not “accommodate themselves to the colonial regime.”<sup>23</sup> His discussion, of course, raises the question of what it means for Africans to be unable or unwilling to “accommodate themselves” to the colonial regime. Were they rebellious? Were they prone to suicide as the Ibo were reputed to

be? Did they head for the hills shortly after landing on the island? Perhaps, as Price-Mars notes, their inability to assimilate was why they were subjected to mockery by the Creole population through the use of Bouki and Ti Malis as metaphors for the colonial relationship between the two groups.<sup>24</sup>

We may extend this reading of the enslaved population's inability (or unwillingness) to accommodate the slave system as a "shortcoming" not only of those who had just arrived or who were not baptized but also of others. In *La civilisation du bossale* (1978) the Guadeloupean novelist and critic Maryse Condé suggests that Bouki, as a metaphor for resistance, may be read as "playing fool to catch wise," as the Jamaican saying goes. Using the arsenal of the weak, Bouki speaks through indirection. His stories throw points (*voye pwen*), which is a mechanism the disfranchised deploy to send critical messages through comments or actions without engaging in direct confrontation. In such a way, a critique is leveled against oppressors from behind the veil of ignorance; this is a strategy often employed by people in societies where "speaking back" to those more powerful has been culturally and politically forbidden."<sup>25</sup> According to Condé, "la civilization de bossale est une civilization de faux semblants; l'esclave y offre au maître l'image que celui-ci attend de lui se monquant avec les siens de cette étonnante incrédulité" (The civilization of the bosal is one of false appearances. The slave offered the master the image that the latter expected of him with tricks that were surprisingly believable).<sup>26</sup> In other words, the world of the subjugated is one of deception. Thus, the enslaved present the face of foolishness that masters expect. Bouki, therefore, serves as a metaphor for a cunning worker who, as an Anansi figure or, in the context of Haiti, a Legba—a trickster—feigned ignorance in order to escape a powerful master's wrath.

Such tales were told under the repressive system of slavery, and storytellers had to mask their lessons, which were intended for an audience that was "starving, terrorized, living in the cramped postures of survival."<sup>27</sup> Uncle Bouki and Ti Malis have continued relevance in discussions about contemporary issues such as disfranchisement and exploitation, which in turn speaks to the power of storytelling as a way of commenting on and reflecting society: a way of understanding history and memory and their legacies in the contemporary moment.



## The Contemporary Bosal

Bosal has made its way into everyday contemporary Haitian Kreyòl and is usually used to characterize someone who is perceived as ill-mannered or wild. During interviews that I conducted with several people in Port-au-Prince in the winter of 2012, people spoke about both the place and the expression, and a more nuanced and complex understanding of the term, as well as its West Central African counterpart, *kongo*, emerged.

While Haitians' persistent usage of *bosal* to describe other Haitians may be seen as evidence of the internalization of the disdain with which slave traders held the enslaved—a crisis of consciousness, as it were—it may also be seen as a way of “working” on the expression in the Haitian popular imagination through appropriating and transforming its meaning. As such, the expression may also connote both physical and spiritual strength and endurance: qualities to be admired and fostered among those who labor daily to sustain themselves and their families.

One person with whom I spoke, Welele Noubout, is an *oungan* (Vodou priest) and a musician in Port-au-Prince. In his interview, Welele made seamless connections between the ancient history of the transatlantic slave trade and the dehumanizing conditions under which people currently live in Port-au-Prince and other larger Haitian cities. Strikingly, he turned the expression on its head and drew a connection between it and the relationship human beings have with the earth, which is an important relationship in Vodou—a nature religion. In Vodou, a balanced relationship between human beings and the natural world is invaluable. Humanity's relationship with the land, which provides everything people need, is celebrated rather than Christian baptism, which was instrumental in the efforts of Europeans to subjugate Africans in the New World in order to accrue material wealth. Welele reflected a similar sensibility in his explanation of *bosal*:

The word *bosal* is tied to the word *savage*. What does it really mean? People who are living in a natural state. So you imagine a child out in the woods. The child never sees a TV; never hears a radio. He's not in that system. That's what they call a “savage.” But when they have a headache, they know what leaf to use to relieve the headache. In the same way you have

traditional medicine people. If you compare “savage” to the way we understand it you can compare it to the spirit we have in Vodou called Gran Bwa. It is the one who gives all the leaves that are good for all kinds of sicknesses. And we know very well that the pills that come from the pharmacy; they came from the “savages.” What do they make us understand about the word savage? They are people who are brutal, who like to fight. But all animals that are cornered will fight back. I don’t know if it’s the way they treated them on the slave ships; how they educated them, but the surroundings that people grow up in shape them. From the slave ships to here, they developed a different way of behaving. They left their royalty. They were people who had knowledge of the earth: people who lived in nature. So when they [slave traders] came here with them, they were not used to this kind of suffering and cruelty. It is normal that they became terrorists. They made these people become terrorists. But the colonists made ships to torture people. So, who is the real bossal? That’s the question they’ll have to answer.

It’s normal that people see bossal as a really bad thing. Just imagine, if you take twenty people from their different nation and another twenty from another nation and thirty people from another nation, and you don’t give them the same level of care that you give a dog in your own home. The same thing is happening now. The way the people are put in shelters and there is money to take care of them, but they don’t put them in a condition that is human. It’s like a slave ship. Take Camp Canaan, for example.<sup>28</sup> It doesn’t have trees; it doesn’t have water. So what do they expect from these people? People have lived for years in this kind of state. It’s another Haitian society in the country of Haiti that we will create. . . .

But it began in the slave ships. So you take these people and the state they were in on these ships; like sardines in a box. After a week in this state, what are you going to expect from these people? They are violent, they become criminals. To call them savage is a kind of arrogance, because we are saying that we are supposedly civilized and other people are not civilized. But if I look at people who are not “civilized,” the difficulty that we have living in our civilized society, they don’t have.<sup>29</sup>

Welele’s understanding of the term echoed Condé’s reading of the bossal. According to Condé, a bossal is not simply an enslaved

person newly arrived from Africa; a *bosal* is someone who evolves in a universe governed by the principle of slavery. The writer's emphasis on the evolution of a person in a universe governed by slavery raises the issue of the impact of slavery on not only those who were introduced into the system and labeled as savage but also those who were born into the system—the Creoles who were enslaved, as well as their masters.

As in every colonial society, Caribbean society was born of blood and violence.<sup>30</sup> Those who wrote slave narratives from the United States and the Caribbean have shown repeatedly that the slave system degraded everyone involved.<sup>31</sup> Narratives such as those by Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs paint pictures of barbarism and savagery among the masters and overseers that are hard to imagine. They also portray subjugated people who were forced into positions that even the lowest beast should not have to endure. Thus, while *bosal* has been used to label unbaptized, enslaved Africans, the label is equally applicable to the Creole population and to slave masters: those whose lives were also shaped by the “blood and violence” of the slave system. This rethinking of language and meaning in the contemporary moment is illustrated when Welele asked an important question: “Who is the real *bosal*?”<sup>32</sup>

### **Understanding the Kongo**

*Kongo*, a word related to *bosal* in its contemporary usage, comes from the name of a kingdom in Central West Africa that was comprised of several polities. From this kingdom, a large number of people were imported to Haiti in the last half of the eighteenth century, and they became the majority of enslaved workers on coffee plantations.<sup>33</sup>

The term *kongo* has recently entered into the Haitian cadre of colloquialisms as a way to denigrate people. I asked Mona Augustin, a visual artist, singer, and musician from Port-au-Prince, to explain the word's usage. Notably, his explanation was relegated mostly to Dominican perceptions of Haitians:

It's a recent word, actually. We know that Congo is a country in Africa and the people there are called Congolese<sup>34</sup>. . . . At first, there were more Dahomeans, but then more people came from the Congo. So the word stayed. When the Haitians started

going to the Dominican Republic to cut cane, the majority of the people who left Haiti to cut cane in the D.R. were people from the countryside. They didn't have the same kind of clothing as people from the city. They also didn't have education. So when they arrived in the D.R., the way that they dressed and the way they lived wasn't normal because of the work they were doing. They had to wear big boots, big shirts, their pants inside their boots. They also had a problem because it is a tropical country. If they didn't bathe often and they couldn't buy deodorant to put under their arms, their bodies gave off a bad odor. So when they would come from the *bateys*<sup>35</sup> and go into the city—the Dominicans love their beauty because they're descendants of the Spaniards, but they know what "kongo" means because it was their own ancestors who went and got them from Africa—as soon as they saw the Haitians they would say, "Oh, those are the Kongos!" I remember when I was in the D.R. as an artist, I looked a certain way and with my hair<sup>36</sup> there were two Dominicans who asked me if I was Jamaican. I told them I was Haitian. They said, "No, you're not a Kongo." So, there is this idea amongst Dominicans that Haitians aren't dressed well, don't smell good, don't walk in a sophisticated way. Because this word has been used a lot, we brought it into our own vocabulary. So, we use it for a person who's less refined or less culturally sophisticated.<sup>37</sup>

Mona's explanation echoed ethnographer Harold Courlander's explanation of the source of the characters Uncle Bouki and Ti Malis in Haiti; the ancestry of the former originates in the Kongo, and the ancestry of the latter traces back to Dahomey. Courlander explains that "Uncle Bouki, whose grandfather was a Congo<sup>38</sup> man in Africa, is big and black."<sup>39</sup> As a farmer from the countryside, his skin shows the ravages of working in the fields under the hot sun all day. He probably does not have the clothes that Ti Malis, someone from Port-au-Prince, has. Nor does he have the "reddish-brown skin" that Ti Malis—or someone from the Dominican Republic—has.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, "he speaks so thickly that only the mountain people can understand him."<sup>41</sup> While the descendant of the Kongo man in the past inspired the character of Uncle Bouki, who is "strong and hard . . . sooner or later turning up at the market,"<sup>42</sup> the contemporary *moun andeyo* (a person from the province or countryside), who travels to the Dominican Republic to cut cane, also shows up in the marketplace after working in the

fields for weeks and carrying on the back-breaking tradition of his ancestors. And he or she is still being denigrated for it.

Mona's story seems to illustrate how, in the words of Paul Farmer, the past is present—partly because of language and oral traditions but also because of the structural violence that began with Columbus's arrival on Haiti and that “continues to play itself out in the daily lives and deaths” of the majority of the population.<sup>43</sup> In other words, Haitian people live the country's history every day. Thus, as Mona said, “Haitians who have means do not consider other Haitians who don't have the same means as them. They're like the previous exploiters. So if someone has a little means and they get a position of power, they keep the other down without any problem.”<sup>44</sup>

### **Re-appropriating Heritage**

My interview with a third artist, a musician and lay ethnographer from Port-au-Prince named Francky Joseph, also offered insight into both *bosal* and *kongo*. His reading of *bosal* turned the expression on its head in a way that associates it with strength. His knowledge of Vodou also gave him insight into the mystical significance of the term *kongo*.

Like Welele and Mona, Francky referred to the history of slavery. In his discussion of *bosal*, Francky also cited the *bosal*'s large feet, which is a characteristic that Courlander attributes to Uncle Bouki:

As you may know Croix des Bossales is an area that is incredibly dirty. Not a good area at all. But the identity of Croix des Bossales comes from the time when the slaves were coming to Haiti, they were really big with large feet. . . . And when they got out of the ship, that's where the slave traders used to bring the *bosal*, and they called the area Croix des Bossales.<sup>45</sup>

Francky also provided an example of a contemporary understanding of the word: “The same way when the young are playing football and they say ‘it's *bosal* football,’ they mean it's a very harsh and brutal game, with people fighting with one another, basically very brutal. These slaves were very large and looked mean and brutal.” Francky's contemporary usage of the term was the exact opposite of the description that Courlander gives of the *bosal* Uncle Bouki,

who is “usually a kind and gentle man. He tips his hat and bows to strangers and neighbors alike.”<sup>46</sup> But upon further probing, Francky provided some alternative meanings of *bosal*. He explained:

It’s not really used to denigrate people, but this word entered the Kreyòl language sort of like a slang term. For example, a young child can be playing outside and someone may say, “Wow, this child is *bosal*.” This means he plays with all his strength, all his energy and dedication. Or another example: someone who takes up a bucket and enters the shower with it but carries it with a lot of strength would be called *bosal*. That’s what *bosal* means.<sup>47</sup>

In his explanation of the term *bosal*, Francky cited the word’s origins in the slave era and commented that for the slave traders, *bosals* were the preferred captives because they were strong and were thus perceived as being able to work harder than someone who was frail and thin. Francky also identified himself as *bosal* when he plays the drums:

It’s also positive because . . . anybody can have some *bosal* in them sometimes; all Haitians in general. For example, Haitian women are really *bosal*. You imagine they leave the house early in the morning with buckets on their head; they are going to the markets. They are *bosal* women, with a lot of strength. The word *bosal* is really not a negative word. When they say someone is *bosal*, it’s when they have too much energy to contain. You can’t hold it in. . . . In life, you have to live with energy; the *bosal* energy within you. That’s why I say it is a word that is quite positive and not negative at all.<sup>48</sup>

Further, unlike Mona, Francky, who has informally studied Vodou for a number of years, characterized the term *kongo* as a site of cultural origin. As he told me:

Haitians use *kongo* in various ways. My way of using it, which is cultural and spiritual, signifies Africa, the motherland. There is also a rite called *Kongo*. That rite is mostly found in Gonaïves. The *Kongo* rite is played with two drums. Today, if you go to Gonaïves, in Badjo Lakou, you will see they play two rites. They play *Kongo* first, then they play *Nago*. When you first come into the Lakou, you first see the *Kongo* rite. But in Congo [the country], they play that rite too, meaning the Africans brought it to us in Haiti.<sup>49</sup>

The figure of Uncle Bouki was also invoked in Francky's description of Kongo spirits when he related that a spirit "stays in the mountains. He's really a savage, with really large feet and hands. He stays hidden in the mountains; remains uncivilized."<sup>50</sup> In his description, Francky invoked not only Uncle Bouki but also the maroons who ran away from plantations and established communities in the mountains to escape the brutality of the slave system. Francky continued his contemporary explanation of the term kongo:

Now, the people from the capital that don't do their research, they think when you call somebody kongo, it means *abitan*: people from the provinces. But the context is a little bit different. When you leave an area for another—for example if I leave Haiti, and I go to the States—I'm a kongo. Why am I a kongo? Because I'm a stranger, and I don't know anything. That's what people in Port-au-Prince call kongo. The person who leaves the province and comes to Port-au-Prince is automatically labeled a kongo. That means there are things they don't know. The capital is much more evolved than the province. Everywhere you go, you see cars and lights.

When the person from the capital seems to be from the provinces, they tell themselves there are things they don't know, so they label them kongo. . . . In the same way, you came from the US, and there are plenty of things you don't know, so you are a kongo. You can't take the taxi by yourself to go to Pétionville. If you try to go, you will get lost, so you are a kongo. That's why people call others kongo. But like I said, there is also a rite called Kongo. Myself, philosophically and culturally, I know where kongo came from, but there are plenty of people who don't. They always say Haitians ignore their culture. If they did not ignore it, they would know what kongo is.<sup>51</sup>

Francky's explanation of kongo echoed his explanation of bosal; the two could very well be synonyms, depending on how they are used. For both, he noted the trait of big feet and the insider versus outsider status that in Vodou distinguishes someone who is bosal (uninitiated) from someone who is *hounsi* (initiated). And though Francky, as someone who is knowledgeable about Vodou and Haiti's history, noted that he understood the words' origins, he also noted that many people use the terms without knowing their origins.

Some words that have been used to denigrate people historically have been appropriated by those very people to describe their contemporary realities. This argument has been made in an African-American context with the term *nigger*, which African Americans have appropriated as part of hip-hop culture. As Geneva Smitherman, a noted scholar of African-American Language (AAL), argues, although the word *nigger* is a racialized epithet in European-American English, African-American Language embraces its usage, which encodes a variety of unique black meanings.<sup>52</sup> “Crazy niggers” are rebellious people who resist racial supremacist domination and who draw attention to their cause by acting in ways that are contrary to roles proscribed for Africans in the Americas.<sup>53</sup> Like “crazy niggers,” *bosal*—people who had trouble conforming to the plantation system—headed for the hills and chose maroonage over the savagery of slavery. Today, descendants of the *bosal* have left their mountain homes and have made their way down into the concrete jungle of Port-au-Prince or into the *bateys* of Cuba and of the Dominican Republic—where they are treated as less-than-human. They are indeed outsiders, and descendants of people who remained on and supported plantations take advantage of them.

The term *nigga* has a variety of positive meanings in AAL.<sup>54</sup> It can be used to refer to a person’s best friend or to a boyfriend. Encoded within the rhetoric of racial resistance, *nigga* is used to label a black, culturally rooted stance. The same thing seems to happen in Haiti; Francky contended that *bosal* also has positive meanings, “because . . . anybody [all Haitians] can have some ‘*bosal*’ in them sometimes.” In his discussion of Haitian women as “really *bosal*,” he referred to the majority of women who eke out a living each day as street vendors. Their designation as *bosal* recalls their distant history as daughters of those who made the middle-passage crossing and who were sold at Kwa Bosal. It also invokes their rich heritage as children of the land and as people whose backs are strong. Finally, in his initial explanation of *kongo*, Francky positioned the term’s relationship to Haitian cultural roots in a way that is comparable to how Smitherman proposes the term *nigga* is used in popular African-American culture—as a rhetoric of resistance expressed through a sense of cultural rootedness. Some scholars have argued that African Americans have “flipped the script”—they have inverted the meaning of words that were historically and continue to be used to denigrate them.



Similarly, I suggest that Haitians have appropriated *bosal* and *kongo* in equally innovative ways.

## Conclusion

*Bosal* and *kongo* are only two examples of many expressions that have had negative connotations as a result of slavery and that are currently used by Haitians to address other Haitians. Such expressions reflect a crisis of consciousness that is also manifest concretely in the sociopolitical and economic disenfranchisement of the majority, both internal to the country and internationally. In contrast, the terms may also be seen as evidence of the creative ways members of the underclass have reflected and commented on their contemporary realities through invoking the memory of their foundational histories at multiple levels: before and after arrival in Haiti and in the physical and metaphysical worlds, which are constantly shaped by that history. Similarly, contemporary usage of the term *nigga* by African Americans, while controversial, seems to be a similar reflection and commentary on their fraught history and a linguistic appropriation that serves their own purposes—a rewriting of the language or a “flipping of the script” that potentially empowers those who would be victimized.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to Max Beauvoir, who transitioned to the realm of the ancestors in September 2015.

<sup>2</sup> “That guy, he’s really *bosal!*” (wild, crazy)

<sup>3</sup> Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo: Tying the Spiritual Knot, Principles of Life & Living*, 2nd ed. (New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2001), n.p.

<sup>5</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 289.

<sup>6</sup> Fu-Kiau, *Tying the Knot*, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 12; Robin Poyner, “The Western Congo Basin,” in *A History of Art in Africa*, ed. Monica Blackburn Visoná, Robin Poyner, and Herbert M. Cole (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 373.

<sup>9</sup> Poyner, “The Western Congo Basin,” 373-374.

<sup>10</sup> The people of the Kongo, commonly called Kongolese.

<sup>11</sup> Poyner, "The Western Congo Basin," 376. According to philosopher John Mbiti, as long as the deceased are remembered by those who knew them, they continue to live. John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 83.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *The Breached Citadel* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2004), 26.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Max Beauvoir, personal interview with the author, July 2012. Though I have found no exact evidence of Beauvoir's etymological explanation, we do know that many of the names that indigenous people had for places and things were changed under colonial rule. There is, in fact, a city called M'bour or Mbour in the Thiès region of Senegal.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Sidney Mintz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Social History of Haitian Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 125.

<sup>18</sup> Mintz and Trouillot, "The Social History," 125-126.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau, *Strange Words*, trans. Linda Coverdale (London: Granta Books, 1998), xii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, trans. Magdaline W. Shannon (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1983), 18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> In the contemporary moment, Bouki may be read as a Haitian peasant who is "representative of a certain force borne of patience, of resignation, and of intelligence."<sup>See</sup> Jean Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*<sup>18</sup>. However, this characterization of "bosal" in opposition to Creoles, as is commonly proposed, may not be as set as believed; as Patrick Bellegarde-Smith asserts, although "several scholars have agreed that the bosal slaves were more likely to be belligerent than their Creole counterparts, based on what transpired historically, this difference could only have been a matter of degree."<sup>See</sup> *The Breached Citadel*<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Jennie Smith, *When the Hands are Many: Community Organization and Social Change in Rural Haiti* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 47.

<sup>26</sup> Maryse Condé, *La civilisation du bossale: réflexions sur la littérature orale de la Guadeloupe et de la Martinique* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 1978), 35.

<sup>27</sup> Chamoiseau, *Strange Words*, xii.

<sup>28</sup> Camp Canaan is above the northern part of Port-au-Prince at the end of Bon Repos. Many people were relocated there following the 2010 earthquake that devastated the country.

<sup>29</sup> Welele Noubout, personal interview with the author, Winter 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Condé, *La civilisation*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Mary Prince. *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave Related by Herself* (London: Pandora Press, 1987) [1831], Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2014) [1845], and Linda Brent. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) [1861].

<sup>32</sup> Welele's question calls to mind James Baldwin's 1963 interview, in which he rhetorically asks the unseen reporter, "Who is the nigger?" and then declares, "You're the nigger, baby; it isn't me." See "Who is the Nigger?" (clip) KQED (1963) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0L5fciA6AU>

<sup>33</sup> According to historian John Thornton, many of those enslaved were prisoners of war, and their skill in battle may be responsible for the revolution's success (2000). John Thornton "African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution" in *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World: A Student Reader*, eds. Shepherd, Verene A. and Hilary McD. Beckles (Princeton: James Currey, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Mona refers, I believe, to the country Democratic Republic of the Congo, which was once part of the original kingdom of Kongo.

<sup>35</sup> A *batey* is a company town consisting of barracks and a few houses located close to sugar cane fields so that groups of workers can live nearby to the site of their labor.

<sup>36</sup> Mona has roots dreadlocks—these are a style of dreadlocks that are not neatly coiffed; rather, the person lets his or her hair grow "organically."

<sup>37</sup> Mona Augustin, personal interview with the author, January 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Harold Courlander, *Uncle Bouqui of Haiti* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1942), 11. While I refer to the Kingdom of the Kongo, Courlander, like Mona from the interview, refers to the country. Thus, the spelling is different.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Paul Farmer, "An Anthropology of Structural Violence," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 3 (June 2004): 311.

<sup>44</sup> Mona Augustin, personal interview with the author, January 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Francky Joseph, personal interview with the author, January 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Courlander, *Uncle Bouki*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Francky Joseph, personal interview with the author, January 2012.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Geneva Smitherman, "The Chain Remain the Same: Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation," *Journal of Black Studies* 28, no. 1 (Sept. 1997): 8.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> In AAL, "nigger" becomes "nigga," and the plural is "niggaz." *Ibid.*, 19.