

Decolonizing through Academia: A Haitian American Scholar Activism

By Wendie Richard

Photos Courtesy of Dr. Cécile Accilien

The struggle with one's identity is always confusing. But for a nation that has been colonized, there are lasting impacts. Traditionally in most American School systems, Haiti is taught through the lens of slavery, colonization, and the Haitian Revolution. However, there is more to the country than what traditional schools teach. There are professionals in the academic sphere who are trying to bring to light the art, music, film, literature, and the beauty of language that Haiti has to offer.

An important leader to highlight is Dr. Cécile Accilien, an author, educator, and inspiration for her students, peers, and the Haitian diasporic community. She specializes in the literature and cultures in primarily French-speaking regions of West Africa and the Caribbean. She's lived in various states in the US, several countries in the African Diaspora, and in France. But most importantly she considers herself Haitian-American.



Why did you get into this field?

“It almost became, in a way, natural. When I was growing up in New Jersey and I moved to the States in the late eighties and when I moved here, I was 12 years old. So I was in school in Haiti, but when I first came to the US, I went to elementary school for one year and then went to high school. And I think for me, it was something natural.”

In college, she started off majoring in biology. She was on track to go to medical school and was involved in programs to figure out if this was the career she wanted for her life. However, during a dissection in the lab, she could not handle the sight of blood. This was when she realized that there was no interest in that field and changed her mind. After building strong ties to her ethnic identity while living in the US, she decided to change her major to French Literature. Dr. Accilien says, “I was always interested in literature and in also learning more about Haitian culture. When I was growing up in Haiti, we weren't allowed to speak Creole at school. I always spoke Creole at home because of colonization. So schools at the time will punish you if you spoke Creole in school.”

During her undergraduate program, Dr. Accilien spent a year abroad in France. There she had a professor who opened her to the true extent of French colonization. While pursuing her master's at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette she learned about the other countries in West Africa that are primarily French-speaking. She says, “I learned about the diversity and depth of the French-speaking world...there is over thirty countries in West Africa where French is the

primary language or official language... So all this was really a wow moment for me. The impact of colonization.” It was at this “wow moment” that she discovered her mission and role in life and decided she wanted to do her part in decolonization and creating diversity, equity, and inclusion.



What continues to inspire you to do the work that you do?

“I think for me there is so much work that needs to be done. Umm, I see my work as a way to attempt to do my part in decolonizing our community and decolonizing our minds. And that's what inspires me.”

When asked what her favorite word in Haitian Creole is, her answer was *konbit* and *lakou*. It is a simple word in Creole that has many meanings. *Konbit* traditionally means communal labor. Everyone in the *lakou* or neighborhood would get together to work, either in the fields, in manual labor or just to share a meal. This force of togetherness is what drives Dr. Accilien today. She reiterates that “*We exist in community. We don't exist separate from one another.*”

In February of 2022, Duolingo launched its 41st language course in Haitian Creole. The course spent over a year in the works with various people such as Anaïca Saint-Fleur, Nick Andre, Nyya Toussaint, and Sony Ton Aime, working together and truly embodying the word “*konbit*.” When asked about her experience she says, “It was an amazing thing for me to be a part of something like that. You know, this is not something I did. This is something I got a chance to be a small part of. It's the larger *konbit*. It's the *lakou*.”

Where do you see yourself being in the next five years?

“I think I want to continue in whatever I am doing, whether in the classroom or doing work such as this project. To see how my work can be part of the larger project of decolonizing. Just really being part of something that's creating diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

Dr. Accilien defines her work as “soul work.” She believes that her role is to help people recognize each other and their humanity. With her books *Teaching Haiti: Strategies for Creating New Narratives* (2023) and *The Antiracist World Language Classroom* (2022), she strides to teach inside her own classroom and others the importance of new narratives and changing implicit biases. She has also collaborated on *KREYÒL MODÈN: Modern Creole Language* (2020) which



is a guide to readers on the modern language of Creole that is always changing and *Haitian Creole Phrasebook: Essential Expressions for Communicating in Haiti* (2010) which is an extensive dictionary-like book that provides readers with the basics of Haitian Creole.

What does Leadership mean to you?

“So for me, leadership means not being afraid. To make a hard decision. Being a leader means standing your ground.

Through the years she has worn many hats from being a French and Francophone Studies professor at Portland State University and Columbus State University to being an Interim Chair and Director at the University of Kansas. Currently, she is a professor of African and African Diaspora Studies at Kennesaw State University in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies and is the President of the Haitian Studies Association.

To learn more about Dr. Cécile Accilien's current work on diversity and inclusion check out her website at www.soleydei.com and her partner's website at www.ulrickjeanpierre.com



Student Biography:

Wendie Richard is a Haitian American student at Kennesaw State University. She is currently majoring in Chemistry and hopes to pursue a career in the cosmetics industry creating products for women of color. In her free time, she enjoys reading, crafting, and spending time with her family and friends.

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