



**University of Guelph  
Department of History**

**MA Thesis Defence**

Student: Matthew Robertshaw	Date: Thursday, December 15, 2016
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**Title**

"Pawòl Gen Zèl: Language Legitimation in Haiti's Second Century."

**Abstract**

"*Le créole, est-il une langue?*" mused Haitian poet and public intellectual Georges Sylvain in 1901. As the only language spoken by all Haitians, Sylvain believed that Haitian Creole should be recognized as the true language of Haiti. He called for its widespread use in Haitian literature and education. He and his contemporaries took the first steps toward establishing an authentic national literature, but it was another half century before Haitian authors began to use Creole as a versatile and self-sufficient literary language. The first innovative works of theatre and poetry in Creole did not appear until 1953, and the first Creole novel was not published until 1975. The Bernard Reform, which mandated the use of Creole in education, did not occur until 1979, and Creole was not named an official language, on par with French, until 1987. When one considers the long history of eloquent support for the popular language, it is surprising that Creole legitimation has advanced so fitfully. The country's political elites are often accused of using French to maintain their hold on power, but the Creole legitimation project is not simply a tug-of-war between the elites and the masses. This thesis examines the strategies that Haitians have used to promote the wider acceptance of Creole, and the complex factors that hindered their efforts.

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