Reviews of Books

Archives of the Revolution:
Toward New Narratives of Haiti and the Revolution

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*Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue.*


*Dangerous Neighbors: Making the Haitian Revolution in Early America.*

*The Haitian Declaration of Independence: Creation, Context, and Legacy.*


We search with curiosity for the ruins of ancient civilizations whose glory has inspired admiration, and we engage in painstaking research and learned dissertations to arrive at imperfect knowledge of the cultures and government of these peoples. Greece and Italy call out to observers every day. Well! With this work, one may meditate on Saint-Domingue; and no doubt we may, in some respects,

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receive as much from this contemplation as from that of the debris of Herculaneum, which is to be drawn from the ashes that have covered it for so many centuries.

— Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, Description . . . de la partie Française de l’île Saint-Domingue

These perceptions [of economic poverty and artistic wealth] actually incarcerate Haiti—restricting it to dystopian narratives of desperation that obscure the republic’s complexity. In so doing, these views come dangerously close to dehumanizing Haitians.

— Gina Athena Ulysse, Why Haiti Needs New Narratives

Six years ago, Celucien L. Joseph described the growth of works written in North America on the Haitian Revolution and its impact as the “Haitian Turn.” As Europeanist scholars join their Caribbeanist, Africanist, and (Latin) Americanist colleagues in studying Haiti, it is imperative that we not misunderstand the term, for Haitian history is not new. The novelty of the past twenty years lies in the growing inclusion of Haiti and its colonial predecessor, Saint Domingue, in these various historiographies, a deepening sophistication of the analysis of the Haitian Revolution available to readers of English, and, most significantly, a broadening recognition of both the complexities of Black political agency before, during, and after the revolution and its significance to developments across the Americas. More teachers of history include the signal achievement of the Haitian Revolution in their classes, and more scholars connect events in the mainland and island Americas, Europe, and Africa to developments in Haiti. These welcome changes lead to better histories. But the strong temptation to oversimplify the Haitian story, or to assert one interpretation of the revolution for the

2 “Nous recherchons avec curiosité les ruines des anciens établissements qui ont fait la gloire & l’admirations des peuples & nous recourons à de pénibles recherches, à de savantes dissertations pour arriver, par elles, à la connaissance imparfaite des mœurs & du gouvernement de ces peuples. La Grèce, l’Italie appellent, chaque jour, les observateurs. Eh bien! avec cet Ouvrage, on méditerait sur Saint-Domingue; & sans doute on peut, à quelques égards, retirer autant de fruit de cette contemplation que de celle des débris d’Herculanum, qu’on va tirer du milieu des cendres qui les recouvrent depuis tant de siècles.” M[édéric]-L[ouis]-E[lie] Moreau de Saint-Méry, Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie Française de l’île Saint-Domingue . . . (Philadelphia, 1797), viii; Gina Athena Ulysse, Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: A Post-Quake Chronicle, trans. Nadève Ménard and Évelyne Trouillot (Middletown, Conn., 2015), 21. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are the reviewer’s. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized.

sake of present-day political arguments, is made more acute by a unique aspect of Haitian Revolution historiography: the archives of the revolution are, for the most part, in the hands of the former colonizers. By their initial design these archives amplify the voices of the defeated imperial forces rather than the arguments of the silenced victors.

The books reviewed here draw on archives in the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, and France, as well as a few Haitian-created and Haitian-preserved collections. Together, they point to three challenges in advancing the English-language historiography of the Haitian Revolution. First, the archives of revolution are vast and scattered. Second, as an event at the fulcrum of key questions regarding human rights, citizenship, the development of global capitalism, and postcolonial imaginings, the significance of the Haitian Revolution for our conceptions of modernity has always been contested, with defenders of white supremacy consistently striving to silence or distort aspects of the revolution, particularly Black political agency. Third, we must distinguish between the aspects of the Haitian Revolution that are indeed unique and those aspects that are consistent with trends elsewhere in the Americas, and we need to avoid simplistic narratives. In 1789, the crops grown by the enslaved formed the linchpin for the Atlantic economy, but little of the wealth remained in the hands of the producers; thus we must not call Saint Domingue the “wealthiest colony in the world.”

Furthermore, though plantation uprisings were the sites of greatest unrest in Haiti, transitions from slavery across the Americas often included organized violence, mass desertions, and political lobbying for emancipation. Finally, revolutionary and early national Haiti’s postemancipation society featured arguments about forced labor and plantation-centered production that presaged similar struggles elsewhere. Rigorous research into the Haitian past therefore enables us to better understand larger histories of slave resistance, emancipation, and postcolonial society in the Americas and beyond, and Haiti’s role therein.

Due to Haiti’s colonial status (until 1804), its economic importance, and the contemporary salience of the slave uprisings, most primary sources for revolutionary events reside in foreign hands, particularly those of the countries that lost the military, diplomatic, and cultural battles. France houses the most, followed by the United Kingdom, the United States, and Spain. This staggering archival spread is seen in the works under discussion here. For example, in An Islandwide Struggle for Freedom, Graham T. Nessler draws upon the Rochambeau Papers at the University of Florida, Gainesville, and the records from the Audiencia de Santo Domingo in Seville, Spain, as well as the Notariat de Saint-Domingue and the Collection

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Moreau de Saint-Méry, which are housed in Aix-en-Provence, France. This last collection was assembled by its namesake to write his *Description topographique et politique de la partie espagnole* of both colonies on Hispaniola, originally published in the 1790s. The foundation of Paul Cheney’s *Cul de Sac* is the privately held Ferron de la Ferronnays family archive in Saint-Mars-la-Jaille, though he also uses departmental archives from across France, the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, and the appropriate files assembled by the Comité des Colonies, now in Paris. Other key sources are scattered within collections focused on non-Haitian topics; for example, James Alexander Dun’s *Dangerous Neighbors* builds his history of the image of the revolution from more than a decade’s worth of Philadelphia newspapers.

The victors of the revolution also produced surviving sources, and some of the reviewed works draw on them to good effect. These include two essays edited by Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Michael J. Drexler in *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*. Colleen C. O’Brien uses *The Haytian Papers*, a compilation of early Haitian government publications compiled and edited by the educator Prince Saunders, to explore African American ideologies of labor in the early 1800s, while an essay by Marlene L. Daut does important work on the Baron de Vastey, an early literary defender of the Haitian state. The essay collection edited by Julia Gaffield, *The Haitian Declaration of Independence*, centers on a key Haitian-produced source: the 1804 Declaration of Independence, rediscovered by Gaffield in the National Archives of the United Kingdom. Examining this document also required creative use of archives. Laurent Dubois’s contribution, for example, draws upon “contemporary Vodou songs” collected from across Haiti to explore what independence might have meant for the majority of Haitians. The archival scope of the Haitian Revolution, in short, is dizzying.

As these works show, furthermore, from its inception the Haitian Revolution provoked interpretive debates in the greater Caribbean, North America, Europe, and beyond. These stories often featured sensationalized tales of the rebels’ violence. The men who declared Haitian independence in January 1804, accordingly, faced two interrelated problems: preserving Haiti’s sovereignty and producing a narrative of the revolution that countered stereotypes of slaves’ capacity for violence. A major theme running through the works reviewed here is the entrenchment and evolution of

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prerevolutionary narratives. In her contribution to *The Haitian Declaration of Independence*, Deborah Jenson uses the appellation “tiger-man” (‘l’homme tigre’) (72) for Jean-Jacques Dessalines, given to him by a French hostage, to explore questions of author and authority in the telling of the national Haitian story. In the same collection, Erin Zavitz traces how in the immediate aftermath of Dessalines’s assassination early Haitian leaders cast him as a tyrant. After 1845, Zavitz shows that popular memory led to a resurgence of public mourning for Haiti’s first national leader and to Dessalines’s eventual emergence as a Vodou “lwa” (spirits) (225), the only revolutionary leader to enter the pantheon.

Outside of Haiti as well, others created histories and archives of the revolution as it occurred and after independence. Dun details how the near-daily reports of the slave rebellion arriving in Philadelphia by late 1791 provided “options, not acuity” (57) for partisans seeking to interpret events through their own convictions concerning the limits of liberty and the future of slavery. By focusing on women of color in eastern Hispaniola, Nessler shows how individuals needed to create their own archives to preserve their freedom.

In *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*, essays by Ivy G. Wilson and Drexler and Ed White highlight the close connection between material produced about (or by) the revolution and the development of African American aesthetics, with Wilson exploring the iconography of Toussaint Louverture as a locus of countermemory and Drexler and White arguing for the importance of Louverture’s constitution as an origin point for African American literature.

By contrast, the archives Cheney relies on provide a vivid reminder of the way many members of the French colonial elite viewed the Haitian Revolution: as a disturbance to their opportunity for profit, a problem of labor supply, and ultimately a disaster for which losses needed to be recouped. This is the historiographical school of which Moreau de Saint-Méry might be considered the founder, preserving information about the colony’s past exploits for further use in France.9 Cheney adapts this model by reintroducing the plantation study into French colonial historiography after a long period out of favor. There are benefits to this approach, as it allows Cheney to illuminate the link between one estate and France’s larger economy, as well as the connections between violence, “characteristic pathologies” (13), and “the patrimonial state” (11) in Saint Domingue. However, the work’s limitations demonstrate some of the potential hazards of the wider Haitian turn. Scholars trained in metropolitan history sometimes neglect to read against the grain of colonial documents by incorporating the perspectives of historical actors who were present but silenced. In that vein, the commentary in *Cul de Sac* is often credulous.

9 Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique*, ix.
toward the remarks of the plantation manager, Jean-Baptiste Corbier, concerning the enslaved and his colonial rival for power, his employer’s spouse, Marie-Elisabeth Thimothée Binau. For example, Corbier provides the enslaved teenager Agathe to his son as a concubine explicitly so the son would not patronize sex workers. Cheney presents this as the creation of an “ersatz family contrived by fatherly pimping,” “protection from a more serious moral evil,” and the dissipation of “tension between father and son” (99). Binau’s maneuvers against her husband’s philandering, which cost him a promotion to governor, are regarded as “a precocious sort of Bovaryism” (138). Scholars of the early Americas have long discussed the potential pitfalls of using both documents created by enslavers to present the lives of the enslaved and letters and notes from colonial men to analyze the choices of colonial women; historians of Europe moving into early American work should immerse themselves in this literature and engage their own field’s traditions of “history from below” and gender history to prevent replicating the ideological frames of colonialism anew.10

Critical analysis of sources’ perspectives and production leads to more inclusive and more fruitful studies of not just Haiti but also the revolution’s impact on other Atlantic societies. Many recent studies by American historians and literary scholars have used responses to the Haitian Revolution to better illuminate the politics and culture of the early American Republic. Dun’s work meticulously analyzes how U.S. policy makers and politicians misread the news and how pundits of the 1790s United States came to place limits on the universality of liberty; similarly, historians of abolitionism can study such responses to better trace the transition in the ideological underpinnings of calls for emancipation by white Americans from natural rights discourse to economic and racist fears of competition over land and corruption of the purity of white blood.11 The essays collected by Dillon and Drexler contribute to this conversation in a variety of ways, including Cristobal Silva’s exploration of the way white American doctors conflated national identity and susceptibility to yellow fever; O’Brien’s work on the importance—and denial—of land grants to free people of color; Peter P. Reed’s essay on the revolution’s impact on early American performance culture; and Siân Silyn Roberts’s exploration of cosmopolitanism in Leonora Sansay’s Secret History.12 Taken together, the essays show how scholars have incorporated the Haitian Revolution into a long nineteenth century history

12 [Leonora Sansay], Secret History; or, the Horrors of St. Domingo. . . . (Philadelphia, 1808).
of emancipation—demonstrating that the questions of Reconstruction regarding the distribution of land, legal changes to forced labor, political representation, and obligations and opportunities for Black artists were prevalent well before 1865.

Similarly, Latin American historians have long been interested in Haiti because of its salience for questions regarding race and citizenship and, more recently, state formation, making new works on early national Haiti critical contributions to their field. Nessler’s study is part of a new wave of works in English on eastern Hispaniola in the nineteenth century, indicating the potential this scholarship has to link events across the island with broader theories about slavery, civilization, and belonging and with the conceptual problems of reenslavement.13 Nessler’s effort to reconceptualize the Haitian revolutionary era “as ending in 1809, not 1804” (192) is less convincing; 1809 was both several years after the declaration of independence and well before French recognition of Haiti, and the reassertion of Spanish sovereignty in Santo Domingo that year did not end the threat to the new nation. Gaffield’s edited collection nicely complements the geographic, thematic, and personal connections Nessler draws between the Haitian Revolution and the Hispanophone Caribbean, as its essays cumulatively demonstrate that Haiti belongs alongside Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, and other Latin American polities in the state formation debates concerning oligarchies, military rule, “peasant” land ethics, and the state’s role in religion.

Detailing these political debates is a key part of undoing the silencing of the Haitian Revolution first described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot.14 Not all these works take up his call to see the revolution through the eyes of the enslaved as a complex, nuanced political movement. Cheney, for example, preserves the narrative perspective of the plantation manager attempting to turn a profit on a sugar plantation despite the chronic absenteeism of the enslaved (and later the free). The manager’s letters include great detail about the difficult choices people made concerning where to go during times of turmoil, war, and food insecurity. Cheney’s analytic focus, however, remains on the white manager’s desire for a return of the “respect” (189) he felt the free owed him and on the Ferronnays’ struggle to assemble the paperwork to claim compensation for their financial losses. The manager recognized the revolution’s complexity but did not accept the critique of colonialism that was at the heart of the revolution and presented the events as

14 For an overview of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s statement and responses, see Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, “Still Unthinkable? The Haitian Revolution and the Reception of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s Silencing the Past,” Journal of Haitian Studies 19, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 75–103. See also Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston, 1995).
unfortunate disorder, and Cheney’s analysis follows this lead. Dun, by contrast, makes the “flatten[ing]” (3) that simplified Black political action the locus of his analysis, as the subjects of his study do not accept the complexity of the revolution or its leaders. Federalist authors, he shows, viewed Louverture as key to containing the “contagion” (164) of revolution, profiting from Saint Domingue, and constraining French ambition; Republicans developed a colorist schema for foreign revolutionaries, describing Louverture as too barbaric and too susceptible to “corruption” (177) by unscrupulous advisers. The political commentators of Philadelphia sought to simplify Louverture and his later administrations—which they either appropriated as tools of U.S. ambition or held up as early harbingers of racist caricatures of “Black rule,” rather than trying to comprehend their political agency. Dun effectively shows how such actions silenced the revolution.

Several of these works do strive to achieve Trouillot’s vision by examining the political ideologies and strategies—and not just perspectives—of participants. Nessler builds on Jane G. Landers’s work on the royalism of many of the 1791 rebels, providing details on their political allegiances and their frequent support for local Catholic clergy.\(^{15}\) He also notes that many of the free people of color who needed to prove their free status were slave owners themselves, uncovering another path for better-off émigrés out of revolutionary Saint Domingue and highlighting conflict among the revolutionaries over the question of universal emancipation. Most of the chapters in Dillon and Drexler’s collection focus on the way African Americans responded to events in Haiti, though Dubois intriguingly portrays how Frederick Douglass and Haitian statesman Anténor Firmin attempted to create an ethos of international cooperation despite the power imbalance between their two countries. On the question of Vodou’s political influence, Kieran M. Murphy’s essay provocatively places “mesmerism” (153) within the larger history of transatlantic syncretism and popular religion, though his endorsement of Franz Mesmer’s claim of responsibility for Haiti’s independence is less convincing. The Gaffield volume’s essays include careful analyses of the context and content of the Haitian Declaration of Independence by Malick W. Ghachem, Philippe Girard, Jenson, and Jeremy D. Popkin. Most significant, however, might be Jean Casimir’s chapter, which builds on a long Haitian historiography to examine the development of the “counter-plantation system” (3) and the effort by most Haitians to evade and resist plantation labor even before 1804 and then more strongly

thereafter, as antiplantation ideology pushed many to vote with their feet against continued sugar production. Centering Haitian history once again on Haitians’ provision grounds, “lakou[s]” (192), and hillside coffee farms improves our views of the internal dynamics of the revolutionary years, highlighting the conflict between state and society in the following decades and calling attention to the development of competing land ethics—a common experience in the new American states that merits greater comparative analysis. This new scholarship exemplifies the benefits of treating Black political agency and ideology with nuance and complexity.

As historians and other scholars plumb the archives of colonial, revolutionary, and national Haiti, several lessons become apparent. First, even as we continue to cite Moreau de Saint-Méry’s description of the colony and use the archives he partly formed, we need to be cognizant of how colonists’ perspectives have shaped not only the dominant historiography but also the archives scholars rely upon. To help correct this colonial bias, we can pay attention to the counternarratives produced by Haitians after 1804, as Daut, Zavitz, and others do, and continue to develop our own counternarratives. Secondly, though James Lockhart’s “law of the preservation of energy of historians” guarantees that studies focused on colonists will continue as scholars access the easiest and most abundant archival material, these studies must engage in critical analysis of whiteness. For example, the most significant early treatments of the Haitian Revolution in the French academy were critiques of French colonialism that drew on French archives and devoted the most time to the perspectives and actions of French colonists: Pierre de Vassière wrote his Saint-Domingue in the early twentieth century to rebut rosy prognostications of French imperialism under the Third Republic, while Charles Frostin composed Les révoltes blanches to explore whether France might have been able to decolonize Algeria (and other places) while leaving a colonial white elite in place. Despite the weaknesses

in their work exposed by time, Vassière and Frostin recognized how metropolitan social distinctions collapsed in the colony, a form of the wages of whiteness.20

Third, many historians still impose an artificially stark division between Haiti’s colonial and early national periods, but scholars of Haiti can similarly learn how to better bridge these gaps by also paying more attention to the counternarratives, as some edited volumes have done.21 As all of these works demonstrate, the archives and the literature that would enable continuous histories extending across Saint Domingue, the revolution, and Haiti are scattered, and retrieving the perspectives and experiences of the enslaved is the most difficult task. Relatedly, as Dun, Nessler, and many of the authors discussed here show, scholars must be cognizant of “the power imbalances embedded in document collection” and how we can shift our analytic focus to marginalized individuals.22 Finally, paying close attention to what the sources include and what they omit will enable us to witness and analyze the institutions, technologies, movements, and lives Haitians pursued on their own terms, end the “rhetorically and symbolically incarcerated” state of scholarly and public perceptions of Haiti, and enable a multiplicity of stories of Haiti to continue to emerge from the archives.23 It is the task of historians and other scholars to take the fractured archives of revolution and turn them into the narratives that together present the Haitian Revolution—particularly the Black political agents at its heart—in full.


