

THE IMPACT OF THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION ON THE UNITED STATES: AN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

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“THE Haitian Revolution,” according to the scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened.”¹ While suggesting that white colonials at the end of the eighteenth century were unable to conceive of black freedom, Trouillot contends that Western historians since have ignored and trivialized the Haitian Revolution.² Whether thinkable or not, the revolt of enslaved Africans on the French colonial island of Saint-Domingue was surely an event of world-historical importance. Between 1791 and 1804, on the heels of the American War for Independence and the French Revolution, insurgents in what is now Haiti waged their own anti-colonial struggle, eventually securing the first black state and the second independent republic in the Western Hemisphere. The fact that the struggle in Saint-Domingue was waged under the banner of republican liberty and in close proximity to the thirteen former British colonies in North America begs the question: what impact did the Haitian Revolution have on the United States? Despite the efforts of a few American historians during the late nineteenth century, Haiti’s influence on America received little scholarly attention before the 1960s.³ Recently, however, the topic has garnered considerable interest. This essay argues that scholars in the 1960s and early 1970s revived interest in and legiti-

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 73.

² *Ibid.*, 96.

³ Early treatments include: Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Administration of Thomas Jefferson* (1889; repr., New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986); W. E. B. DuBois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (1896; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1999).

mized the historical significance of the Haitian Revolution, which historians in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s—informed by movements for national independence and contemporary social upheaval in Haiti—used as a prism through which to examine slave rebellion and communication, black resistance in the United States, and the role of race in American society. The insights offered by previous scholars prompted turn-of-the-century historians to explore the revolution's influence on America within the context of the Atlantic World.

While the historiography of the Haitian Revolution's impact on the United States is marked by long stretches of silence before the 1960s, a fundamental turning point came with the English-language publication of C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* in 1963.⁴ Originally written in 1938, James provided an unapologetically polemical account of the Haitian Revolution, arguing that the insurgents on Saint-Domingue played a crucial role in the overthrow of the colonial system of slavery. In sharp prose and with an eye toward contemporary politics, the Trinidadian political activist described the revolution as "a war not so much of armies as of the people. It was . . . a war with racial divisions emphasizing the class struggle."⁵ Such an approach surely spoke to some American academics, particularly in the decades following the civil rights and anti-war movements in the United States.

James made extensive use of archival materials and stimulated renewed scholarly interest in Haiti and the Haitian Revolution. Tellingly, virtually all historians who subsequently dealt with the influence of Haiti on America mention *The Black Jacobins* as a work of central importance to their own. Particularly noteworthy—and perhaps indicative of the attention later paid to the Haitian Revolution by American historians—is the extended commentary James provided on the state of the "colonial system" in 1963, which emphasized the powerful role played by United States in the Caribbean and called for national self determination in Asia, Africa, the West Indies, and parts of South America.⁶ While James's book raised the possibility for future historians to explore American history through the prism of the Haitian Revolution, it took decades for such a historiography to blossom.

A key addition to the emerging historiography of the Haitian Revolution's impact on the United States came in 1973 with the publication of

⁴ C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1963).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 359.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 409.

Thomas O. Ott's *The Haitian Revolution, 1789-1804*.⁷ Ott's book encouraged future studies in two important ways. First, Ott further legitimized the Haitian Revolution as a window through which to view the American past by qualifying James' politicized work, providing a cautious, thoroughly researched account of the revolution to James' caustic and celebratory one. Second, and perhaps most important, Ott discussed the revolution's effects on Americans. "In the United States," he argued, "the Haitian Revolution alarmed proslavery advocates" and prompted white fears of slave revolts in the South.⁸ While emphasizing the role played by refugees from Saint-Domingue in shaping the concerns of Southern planters, Ott also pointed to the Pennsylvania legislature's decision to eliminate slavery in 1792 as evidence that the Haitian Revolution "supported American abolition as well as the defense of slavery."⁹

Ott was much more restrained in his evaluation of the revolution's impact on African Americans. He argued, for example, that southern slaves "must have felt encouraged by the abolition of slavery in Haiti," but qualified his remarks as speculative due to "the lack of conclusive evidence."¹⁰ Yet, intrigued by the timing of southern slave disturbances in relation to events in Saint-Domingue, Ott opened the door for future studies concerned with the revolution's influence on black resistance in America by noting that "there seemed to be a direct connection between growing slave unrest and the Haitian Revolution."¹¹ While Ott tentatively explored what the revolution in Saint-Domingue meant to Americans and how it influenced black resistance and white legislation, his book dealt first and foremost with the events in the Caribbean.

Six years after the appearance of *The Haitian Revolution*, Eugene Genovese published *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of Modern World*.¹² Where Ott had cautiously qualified evidence of the Haitian Revolution's impact on the wider world, Genovese extrapolated from it, placing the insurrection in Saint-Domingue at the center of his Marxist critique of the role of slavery and slave revolts in the "transition from seigneurialism to capitalism."¹³ Genovese argued that when slaves revolted before the Age of Revolution, "prior to the triumph of the capitalist mode of production," they sought

⁷ Thomas O. Ott, *The Haitian Revolution, 1789-1804* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1973).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 195-196.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹² Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts and the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

¹³ *Ibid.*, xviii.

to secure autonomy and escape from colonial society, whereas by the end of the eighteenth century "slave revolts shifted decisively from attempts to secure freedom from slavery to attempts to overthrow slavery as a social system."¹⁴ For Genovese, the key turning point was the Haitian Revolution. "Far from passively accepting the hegemony of the ruling class," Genovese asserted, Toussaint and his fellow revolutionaries "seized and appropriated that hegemony at a transitional moment. Henceforth, slaves increasingly aimed not at secession from the dominant society but at joining it on equal terms."¹⁵

Genovese's argument about the politicization of slave resistance in the Western Hemisphere during the late eighteenth century, as exemplified by the events of the Haitian Revolution, made slave resistance in the United States appear anomalous. "To understand this epoch-making shift," and the apparent American exception, Genovese argued that "the revolts in the United States must be viewed in a hemispheric . . . context."¹⁶ Because slavery in the American South was so radically different from the systems that existed elsewhere in the New World, and was less conducive to armed struggle, slaves took on forms of resistance more appropriate for their survival. The development of paternalism in the South, the "sense of reciprocal rights and duties between masters and slaves," coupled with the increasing concern over and punishment of perceived challenges to white authority, tempered violent slave rebellion and provided "considerable living space within which the slaves could create stable families, develop a rich spiritual community, and attain a measure of physical comfort."¹⁷ Genovese attributed the fact that slave uprisings *did* occasionally occur in the United States to the Haitian Revolution, "which rendered the hopes of a Gabriel Prosser, a Denmark Vesey, or a Nat Turner rational."¹⁸ Moreover, he asserted that the "self liberation of slaves in Saint-Domingue represented the full realization of those ideals of the American Revolution which [slaves in the United States] respected and indeed appealed to."¹⁹ Thus, *From Rebellion to Revolution* placed the Haitian Revolution and American slavery within a systemic political and economic framework, suggesting that black resistance in the American South was informed in important ways by the revolt in Saint-Domingue.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xix, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xix-xx.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

In his PhD dissertation, “The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution,” completed in 1986, Julius Scott largely took Genovese’s argument for granted.²⁰ Rather than examining *if* or *why* the Haitian Revolution had an impact on the United States and the rest of the Atlantic world, Scott focused on *when* and *how* the revolution penetrated the minds of Africans in America. “Studies of commerce and trade,” he asserted, “are integral to the historiography of eighteenth-century America, yet without exception these studies overlook one of the most items of exchange which was constantly changing hands—information.”²¹ Drawing upon commercial records, diplomatic materials, newspaper accounts, and archival materials—and informed by contemporary images of Haitian refugees fleeing the collapse of Jean-Claude Duvalier’s regime—Scott argued that the development of regional networks of communication, facilitated by sailors, vagabonds, and runaway slaves, grew in tandem with networks of trade across the Americas during the eighteenth century. Such networks provided the structures through which news of the insurrection on Saint-Domingue reached black people across the world.

While Scott explored networks of communication throughout the New World, he also paid particular attention to the connections between Saint-Domingue and the United States. He showed how trade between the former British colonies in North America and the future Republic of Haiti indelibly linked the two regions by the outbreak of revolution in the West Indies: “Just as residents of the Caribbean felt the effects of the American Revolution, the black rebellions in the Caribbean at the end of the eighteenth century frightened slaveholders and inspired slaves in the United States as much as in the islands.”²² Indeed, communication between African slaves, the focus of Scott’s study, became the target of American politicians in slaveholding states such as Virginia, which took measures to suppress the discussion of foreign affairs, restrict the meeting of slaves, and overhaul legislation relating to slaves and free blacks during the Haitian Revolution.²³ Scott concluded with an assertion that the revolution in Saint-Domingue continued to “occupy a central place” in contemporary black American culture.²⁴

²⁰ Julius S. Scott, III, “The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1986).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

²² *Ibid.*, 82.

²³ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 308.

In 1988, Alfred Hunt embraced Scott's emphasis on the cultural ramifications of the Haitian Revolution in his book, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean*, by using the Saint-Domingue insurgency as a "tool to get behind both whites' fears and blacks' aspirations in the nineteenth century."²⁵ Hunt employed printed sources such as newspaper articles, legislative records, organizational reports, and contemporary commentaries to flesh out the ways in which black and white abolitionists, as well as proslavery advocates, used the Haitian Revolution to express and justify their respective positions. "No issue," Hunt ventured, "having to do with slavery and the role of blacks in American society was discussed at so many different times, in so many different ways, for so many different reasons as the lessons of the Haitian Revolution."²⁶ Seeing the American South as "the northern extremity of Caribbean culture," Hunt was mainly concerned with the symbolic value Americans came to place on Haiti.²⁷

In Hunt's account, the Haitian Revolution held multiple meanings for Americans. While events in Saint-Domingue caused "slave owners to become increasingly recalcitrant about the abolition of slavery" and forge an ideology that "differed significantly from the humanistic traditions of western civilization" by denying "the ultimate humanity of blacks," they also provided black Americans with "an example of their aptitude for citizenship" and a "primary symbol of black regeneration in the New World."²⁸ White abolitionists, on the other hand, argued that the violence in Saint-Domingue was the natural outcome of slavery, contending that the South was bound to suffer the same consequences if the slave system continued to exist. The emergence of the independent black state of Haiti accompanied the rise of the colonization movement in the United States. While some adherents saw a possible solution to racial strife in the physical removal of black Americans to the West Indies, most—but not all—blacks came to view Haiti "as a symbol for black nationalism" rather than a place to resettle.²⁹ Hunt concluded by bemoaning the American media's representation of Haiti as "untouchable" during the 1980s, arguing that the island was "poverty-stricken . . . in part because it gave much and received little."³⁰

The publication of Hunt's book precipitated a new wave of scholarship in the 1990s concerned with black resistance in America. The

²⁵ Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge, L.A.: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

authors of these works, informed by the independence and civil rights movements of earlier decades and the upheaval and revolt in contemporary Haiti, drew upon previous studies of the Haitian Revolution's impact on America but rooted their discussions of the Saint-Domingue insurrection in the specific struggles of African Americans in the United States. Sylvia Frey's *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* explored the efforts of black southerners to secure freedom and autonomy from white rule between the Revolutionary War and the beginning of the nineteenth century.³¹ Frey paid particular attention to the emergence of Southern Christian paternalism, which both eased white Southerners' fear of violent slave insurrection and provided blacks with an avenue to acquire some semblance of cultural power and independence. According to Frey, the specter of a mass slave uprising like the one that shook Saint-Domingue stimulated white Southerners to create "a new social order in the South, the basis of which was the ideology of paternalism."³²

Frey evoked the Haitian Revolution throughout her narrative, emphasizing, like Hunt had, that it carried different meanings for white and black Southerners. She also made a point to show how Haitians were influenced by events in America as well. "Although the Haitian Revolution coincided with and is generally considered a by-product of the French Revolution," Frey remarked while discussing the role played by black troops from Saint-Domingue during the siege of Savannah, "a number of prominent black leaders of the revolution received their military education in the American Revolution."³³ But most important to Frey's account was the inspiration the revolution provided black Americans, as well as the fear it stimulated in white Southerners. Frey made use of newspaper accounts and nineteenth-century memoirs to argue, for example, that as "interest in developments in Saint-Domingue intensified," blacks appropriated "the proliferating political literature . . . for distribution within the black community."³⁴ Likewise, she drew on the accounts of Southern planters, whose fears of black rebellion stimulated the transformation of the slave system, to illustrate the "direct connection between insurrectionary activities in the South and the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue."³⁵

³¹ Sylvia Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

³² *Ibid.*, 232.

³³ *Ibid.*, 192.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Two years after the publication of Frey's book, Douglas Egerton provided another account of how the Haitian Revolution shaped black resistance in America. In *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802*, Egerton broke with previous historians who made broad claims about the revolution's impact on black consciousness by focusing on two specific examples of black rebellion in Virginia at the beginning of the nineteenth century: the Gabriel and Easter conspiracies of 1800 and 1802.³⁶ The Gabriel Rebellion, spearheaded by a skilled slave described by Egerton as a "black Jacobin," occurred "against the turbulent political background" of turn-of-the-century Virginia.³⁷ A literate blacksmith who frequently hired out his services to artisan Democrats in Richmond, Prosser's Gabriel sought to exploit the partisan divisions between urban Republicans and Federalists in order "to destroy the economic hegemony of the 'merchants,' the only whites he ever identified as his enemies."³⁸ Egerton demonstrated how the events in Saint-Domingue, when viewed in relation to local political contests, helped shape the trajectory of black resistance to white rule.

By no means did Egerton dismiss the importance of the Haitian Revolution's symbolic meaning. On the contrary, he argued that "the struggle for freedom in Saint-Domingue was a source of inspiration" for African Americans, emphasizing that "the island symbol of black victory informed Virginia bondsmen not only that they had a right to govern themselves but also that victory was possible."³⁹ But the immediate lesson that Gabriel and other American slaves took from Toussaint Louverture and the black rebels on Saint-Domingue, who had recently exploited both colonial rivalries in the Atlantic and political rivalries in the colony to secure virtual political autonomy, was "that black liberty could be won and that black liberty could be successful, especially if those on the top were bitterly divided."⁴⁰ Ultimately, Egerton contended, it was Gabriel's misreading of the political situation in Virginia—particularly his failure to grasp the agrarian dimension of the Jeffersonian party—that led to the collapse of his revolutionary scheme, a misperception "further confused by the role that Saint-Domingue played in the unfolding drama."⁴¹ Gabriel and his followers, attuned to Federalist opposition to France and the "cry of universal liberty" increasingly heard from the lips of revolutionaries in Saint-Domingue, mistakenly assumed

³⁶ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 146, 148.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

the firmness of Republican conviction in Virginia, which along with heavy rain and unfortunate timing, ensured the rebellion's failure.⁴² Egerton's focused approach shed light on the specific ways in which the Haitian Revolution informed slave resistance in the United States.

While concerns over agency and black resistance shaped the way historians looked at the Haitian Revolution's influence on America during the 1980s and 1990s, race also emerged as a centerpiece of historical analysis. In his 1993 essay, "The Power of Blackness: Thomas Jefferson and the Revolution in St. Domingue," Michael Zuckerman put race and the Haitian Revolution at the center of his discussion of American politics at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁴³ "Nowhere in the realm of race," Zuckerman contended, "did the Thermidorean impulse appear more compellingly, and compulsively, than in the American response to the rising of people of color in St. Domingue," whose triumph, "even in the very causes they claimed as their own and in which they formed their own distinctive identity, did not inspire Americans to celebration. It filled them with dread."⁴⁴ Zuckerman suggested that "the Federalists clung to the ideological inheritance of the Revolution far more firmly than the Jeffersonians," the "self-styled democrats of the day," as evidenced by John Adams's support—and Thomas Jefferson's condemnation—of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the black rebels in Saint-Domingue.⁴⁵

The differing partisan attitudes toward the Haitian Revolution, Zuckerman asserted, and by extension the apparent relaxation of Jefferson's democratic convictions, could be explained by race: "Race overrode all other considerations for Jefferson whenever it was salient at all, and race was centrally salient in Saint-Domingue."⁴⁶ As "a man intellectually undone by his negrophobia," Zuckerman argued that Jefferson "pursued policies at odds with everything he meant America to mean to the world" and that undermined the United States' national interest.⁴⁷ According to the author, only Jefferson's "antipathy to black autonomy" could explain why he supported France's colonial schemes, risked French occupation of Louisiana, and refused to support the aspirations of republican insurgents in the West Indies.⁴⁸ The over-

⁴² *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴³ Michael Zuckerman, "The Power of Blackness: Thomas Jefferson and the Revolution in Saint-Domingue," in *Almost Chosen People: Oblique Biographies in the American Grain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 176, 182.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 186, 192.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 196, 208.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

whelming irony, Zuckerman pointed out, of Jefferson's hostility toward the new nation of Haiti was that it "was to Toussaint L'Ouverture . . . that he owed the crowning accomplishment of his presidency and the monumental legacy for American freedom that he left America, the Louisiana Purchase."⁴⁹

In an article published in 1995, "Jefferson and Haiti," Tim Matthewson both directly contradicted Zuckerman's account of Jefferson's handling of foreign policy and questioned the explanatory potential of Jefferson's racism, arguing that the "victory of the Haitian rebels and the resulting collapse of French power in the Caribbean—both of which had been encouraged by President Thomas Jefferson—ended the career of France as a major colonial power in the western hemisphere."⁵⁰ In the essay, Matthewson suggested that, in addition to providing insufficient "documentation to support his claims," Zuckerman "overstate[d] the influence of racism on Jefferson's policy and inflate[d] Federalist support for the Haitian rebels."⁵¹ Advancing a more cautious interpretation of the effects of U.S. policy towards the Haitian Revolution, Matthewson argued that Jefferson's efforts ultimately both opened western lands suitable for slave labor to expansion and provoked a reaction against the antislavery ideals of the American Revolution.

Rather than driven solely by his racial prejudices, Matthewson suggested Jefferson was ambivalent about both the Haitian Revolution and French colonialism in the Caribbean and that he attempted to balance republican ideals with his own racial biases, the Southern fear of slave revolt, and the interests of Northern merchants when formulating policy. The author emphasized how Jefferson's shifting position on Haiti went full circle during his administration. Jefferson initially opposed the insurrection as an ideological threat to Southern slavery, changed his mind due to Bonaparte's designs on Louisiana and supported the rebels, and finally severed all ties with Haiti after the death of Toussaint and the rise of Dessalines to power in the former colony.⁵² "After having helped the Haitians achieve independence," Matthewson concluded, "which ultimately opened millions of acres of arable land to southern slave holders and frontiersmen, [Jefferson] abandoned his hopes of emancipation because of the southern reaction to Haitian independence. He adopted a foreign policy toward Haiti that slaveholders insisted would

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵⁰ Tim Matthewson, "Jefferson and Haiti," *The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 2 (May 1995): 209.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 232.

serve their interests, which were mainly racial and ideological.”⁵³ Despite the ways in which it complicated Zuckerman’s argument, Matthewson’s work ultimately confirmed the assertion that race lay at the heart of American perceptions of the Haitian Revolution.

As poststructuralist methodologies gained currency among historians during the last decades of the twentieth century, explorations of the Haitian Revolution’s impact on the United States came to focus on the role of discourse in shaping the cultural and political meaning Americans took from the revolt in Saint-Domingue. The publication of Simon Newman’s article, “American Political Culture and the French and Haitian Revolutions: Nathaniel Cutting and the Jeffersonian Republicans,” in 2001 exemplified this trend.⁵⁴ Newman explored “the ways in which the Republicans sought to continue to project themselves as the party of republican revolution, while yet distancing themselves from foreign social and racial revolutions that threatened the American status quo” through an examination of “the changes in meaning and interpretation that underlay their political culture in conjunction with the writings of Nathaniel Cutting,” a Jeffersonian Democrat who witnessed and wrote about the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions.⁵⁵ Through the writings of Cutting, Newman traced the Republicans’ dwindling enthusiasm for revolutionary politics in France and Saint-Domingue, arguing that the violent revolt of black slaves in Haiti “won the Republicans over to a positively Washingtonian view of the desirability of isolationism and avoidance of entangling alliances.”⁵⁶

Newman explored the impact of the Haitian Revolution on American politics through culture and discourse, a method that differed considerably from the ways earlier historians had approached the subject. But his assertion that behind the Jeffersonian “rhetoric of revolution” lay a fear of revolutionary ideology, particularly when appropriated by black slaves, and that it was “the Haitian Revolution more than anything else” that tempered the Republicans’ enthusiasm for revolutionary politics, largely rehashed the arguments made by previous historians.⁵⁷ More important, perhaps, than the interpretation offered by Newman was the fact that his essay was one of several published in a volume dedicated to examining the revolution’s impact throughout the Atlantic, suggesting that the

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 247–248.

⁵⁴ Simon P. Newman, “American Political Culture and the French and Haitian Revolutions: Nathaniel Cutting and the Jeffersonian Republicans,” in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. David Geggus (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 83, 82.

United States and Haiti were integral parts of a wider world in need of analysis.

In an article introducing the book in which Newman's essay appeared, David Brion Davis briefly traced how the insurrection on Saint-Domingue, in conjunction with the French Revolution, shaped the development of abolitionism both in Britain and the United States, arguing that the Haitian Revolution stimulated the cessation of the slave trade to the United States and influenced Britain's decisions to limit the expansion of slavery in 1797 and 1805.⁵⁸ Mobilizing the words spoken by American abolitionist Frederick Douglass in 1893, Davis emphasized the role of the revolt in Saint-Domingue on black freedom:

We should not forget that the freedom you and I enjoy to-day; that the freedom that eight hundred thousand colored people enjoy the world over, is largely due to the brave stand taken by the black sons of Haiti ninety years ago. When they struck for freedom . . . they struck for the freedom of every man in the world.⁵⁹

Davis, through Douglass, tied the importance of the Haitian Revolution to black people not only in America but also across the globe.

Davis linked the revolution in Saint-Domingue to the struggles of Africans in America and beyond, emphasizing the material and racial conditions that informed the slave-based economy of the Atlantic system in which the United States was thoroughly enmeshed. As Haitian rebels created havoc in the former colony of Saint-Domingue, reinforcing the conviction of many whites that "emancipation in any form would lead to . . . the indiscriminate massacre of white populations," slaveholders in the U.S. clamored for more slaves to make up for the deficit in world sugar and coffee production left in the wake of the revolution, further promoting the expansion of slavery.⁶⁰ Abolitionists, who argued that the system of slavery ensured future rebellions like the one in Saint-Domingue, as well as the continued resistance of enslaved blacks themselves, worked to check the logic of slave expansion while also putting the brakes on manumission. Most importantly, Davis argued, and similar to "the Exodus narrative in the Bible, the Haitian Revolution showed blacks that liberation was a possibility in historical time."⁶¹ But

⁵⁸ David Brion Davis, "Impact of the French and Haitian Revolutions," in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. David Geggus (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

the importance of the Haitian Revolution, Davis concluded, “would long be suppressed or marginalized by white historians.”⁶²

While suffering from “erasure” and “banalization” at the hands of historians during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the “unthinkable” revolution in Saint-Domingue had a profound impact on the United States.⁶³ Indeed, historians since the 1970s have increasingly turned to the revolution in the West Indies to explore aspects of American history. The sheer concentration of historical works produced over the last three decades concerned with the ways the Haitian Revolution shaped the lives of Americans implies a remarkable shift in the historiography. This essay has shown how scholars revived interest in the Haitian Revolution by the early 1970s, stimulating historians in the late 1970s and mid 1980s to explore the revolution and its impact on slave rebellion within a systemic, politico-economic framework of trade and information sharing. During the late 1980s and 1990s, a new crop of historians examined the revolution’s impact on black resistance in the United States and on the role of race in American society and politics. By the turn of the century, historians began to study the influence of the Saint-Domingue insurrection on America within the context of the Atlantic World. Historians are likely to continue to emphasize the regional and global character of interaction and exchange during the Age of Revolution, and the results will almost certainly be fruitful. But there are still insights to be gained from the study of the Saint-Domingue insurrection’s impact on American culture and society. As a window through which to explore the American past, the Haitian Revolution will continue to provide historians a valuable tool.

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⁶² Ibid., 8.

⁶³ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 96.

