

# “The Haitian Turn”: An Appraisal of Recent Literary and Historiographical Works on the Haitian Revolution

by

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## Abstract

The Haitian Revolution is one of the most important revolutions in the Western world, in which a large population of formerly enslaved Africans founded a new nation without slavery, put a permanent ban on colonial slavery in the new republic's first constitution, and declared the undivided human rights of and the absolute equality for all people. After a successful revolution against the inhuman institution of slavery and unflagging striving against the colonial-imperial powers of France, Spain, and Britain, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the general in chief who succeeded Toussaint Louverture, declared the emergence of the new state of Haiti on the first day of the new year in 1804. This essay is a critical evaluation on the most recent literary and historiographical scholarship on the Haitian Revolution. It reflects on the significance of the Revolution as a historic world event as well as a reference point for thinking about freedom, universal human rights, social justice and equality in our postcolonial moment. I argue that there has been an “intellectual shift,” what I call “The Haitian Turn,” in modern scholarship in North America on the Haitian Revolution.<sup>1</sup> I close with some suggestions on the future scholarship on the Haitian Revolution. This is not an exhaustive study on the scholarship of the Haitian Revolution but a critical reflection on the most recent important studies on the topic.

## The Revolution in North American Scholarship

The literature of the Haitian Revolution is substantially rich. The scholarship that does exist focuses on class and race structures, resistance of the enslaved and marronage, economic and political forces, and Toussaint Louverture.<sup>2</sup> The subsequent paragraphs will review and assess pertinent studies directly and indirectly relating to the subject matter, in order to identify various approaches to the issue.

In North American scholarship, Alfred Hunt was the first to publish a full monograph on Haiti's influence on antebellum America. In *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (1988), Hunt explores Haiti's influence on antebellum America with respect to the social, political, and cultural repercussions of the Haitian Revolution and the meaning of the figure Toussaint Louverture to enslaved Africans in the United States. Very recently, in *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (2011), Matthew Clavin provides a judicious analysis of the effects of the revolution on American life on the eve of and during the Civil War. He argues that the Haitian revolutionary leader, Toussaint Louverture, was both a symbol of terror and hope for antislavery and proslavery groups. Clavin's illuminating observation, "The Haitian Revolution proved that whenever slavery existed it was not just black lives that were in jeopardy," (9) should be understood as a call to a higher human ethics of life reverence and preservation. Also, the remark is meant to be a critical engagement with the serious repercussions of slavery as human bondage, including all contemporary forms of human oppressions, abuses, and injustices on a global scale.

Considering Clavin's interpretation of the moral vision of the revolution, it is clear that the illiterate enslaved African of revolutionary Haiti have been among the world's greatest teachers about the danger of slavery and the urgency for human emancipation. In short, Hunt and Clavin, and more recently Ashli White in her richly detailed study *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic (Early America: History, Context, Culture* (2010) have informed us that the Haitian Revolution generated much fear and terror in the American South and contributed to the violent American Civil War as well as contributed to the freedom of Black people in North America.

Julius Scott's unpublished dissertation, "The Common Wind," provides a detailed account in the area of Black resistance in the greater Caribbean during the period of the Haitian Revolution. Scott's work is limited to the nineteenth century, yet it stresses the international climate of the revolution in its own era and its repercussions abroad. Scott stresses the agency of the New World enslaved. The latter are defined not as units of production for profit or disposal as pieces of property but as human beings with significant dignity and value who had carried news of liberation and of the basic equality of man across the transatlantic frontier.<sup>3</sup>

In a long time the English-speaking world has not witnessed a full historical study on Toussaint Louverture. Madison Smartt Bell who had previously published his praised trilogy of novels charting the unfolding events leading to the Haitian independence, *All Soul's Rising, Master of the Crossroads and The Stone That the Builder Refused on the Haitian Revolution*, recently produced a full biography on the Haiti's most important Revolutionary leader, Toussaint Louverture. In *Toussaint Louverture: A Biography* (2007), Bell offers an intrigue account and complex portrait of a multifaceted personality full of contradictions and great ambitions. This work was well received by historians and students of Haitian studies. It is a marvelous contribution to Toussaint studies.

In 1991 Haitian-born anthropologist-historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot published a book on the philosophy of history called *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Trouillot articulates how historians create history and construct the past through a process of selection and erasure of past events. Trouillot insightfully observes that there is a "silencing" in the making of historiographical archives, in the creation of sources, and in the narration of past events. Particularly, he famously argues that the Haitian Revolution appeared as an "unthinkable" event in human striving for universal emancipation, and yet was systematically suppressed in Western historiography during the "Age of Revolution" and subsequent years.<sup>4</sup>

In the past two decades, Trouillot's thesis has challenged Haitianist historians, consequently stimulated new interests in Haiti's revolutionary past. His work is a clarion call to professional historians and academics in the field to locate the Haitian Revolution in its proper place as a central world event, following the footsteps of C. L. R. James in *The Black Jacobins* (1938). Things have changed because historians have listened!

Ten years later, David P. Geggus edited the influential study stressing *The Impact of the Haitian Revolutionary in the Atlantic World* (2001), a book in which noted historians such as David Brion Davis, Seymour Drescher, Robin Blackburn, Laurent Dubois, and David P. Geggus analyzed the Revolution in its various perspectives, promises, and significance. The book has shed considerable light on the Revolution's multifarious repercussions on antislavery movements in the Americas and accentuates its unending legacy in the Atlantic world. This particular study has not only changed the course of contemporary Haitian revolutionary studies but also caused students of history to reevaluate Haiti's most important contribution to universal emancipation and the basic and equal rights of all men and women. Nonetheless, the full significance of the Revolution has yet to be realized both in Haiti and in the world.

Trouillot advances the idea that the Haitian revolution<sup>5</sup> interrupted the institution of slavery in the most "unthinkable" way and challenged its very logic (73). He remarks that most contemporaries in the time of the Revolution "could read the news only with their ready-made categories, and these categories were incompatible with the idea of a slave revolution" (73).

Sibylle Fischer in her well-researched book, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2009), argues that Western historiography disavowed the Haitian Revolution because this disavowal was necessary for the development of a hegemonic concept of Western modernity rooted in an ethics of differentiation and otherness. She contends that the Revolution challenged the notion of European particularism as universal and the idea of Black freedom and equality as unimportant. In this way, Western scholars have belittled the importance of the Revolution in Black struggle toward freedom and self-determination. They have also undermined the problem of race and racial inequality, and the unholy trinity of slavery, imperialism colonialism, and white supremacy the Revolution challenges. Fisher observes that “there was a consensus...that Haiti was not a commendable model of emancipation” (2). Yet, as she remarks, “the silence imposed did not prevent news from traveling. In the harbors and port cities of the Caribbean, sailors, merchants, and slaves passed on the story of the successful slave uprising” (4). As Trouillot concludes, “The Haitian Revolution thus entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened” (73).

While Trouillot’s theory of “silencing” and Fisher’s theory of “disavowal” are adequate, I articulating the idea of “structural dismissal” in regard to the international reception of the Haitian Revolution and the subsequent avoidance of it in Western historiography. The cultural and intellectual habit of deliberately dismiss significant events by Non-European people defines largely the project of a Eurocentric modernity and the untenable argument for a “single European Enlightenment” (Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* 140). Hence the Haitian revolution has suffered the peculiar condition of being “structurally dismissed” as an equally important event in world history, and it has wrongly been “structurally discharged” by western historians in the written word. Perhaps the Haitian experimentation should be called the “forgotten history” of the Revolutionary Atlantic in the age of democratic revolution.

While historians of both sides of the Atlantic have canonized the French Revolution and American Revolution respectively, the Haitian Revolution is still regarded in some circles as an unimportant event not of worthy of remembrance and celebration. This historical practice of “structural exclusion” of non-European whites as agents and active subjects of history has been the complex story of modernity. The practice of “ideological exclusion” is based on certain intellectual predispositions, and sometimes false ontological assumptions about the relationship between Anglo-Saxon people and the “Other.” Its consequences are many. It impoverishes the global appeal for universal brotherhood and human solidarity. Ideological exclusion places some members of the human race in the margins of modernity, history, and human progress.

We should be mindful that the events leading to the Haitian Revolution were the most transformative events in the history of slavery and imperialism colonialism. African revolutionaries turned an enslaved colony into a free republic, enslaved people into a free people, and thus, the formerly enslaved into free citizens.

Laurent Dubois in his brilliant historical work on the Haitian Revolution, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (2005)—a work that surpasses all previous studies and narratives on the story of revolutionary Haiti—observes that “These events represented the most radical political transformation of the Age of Revolution that stretched from the 1770s to the 1830s. They were also the most concrete expression of the idea that the rights proclaimed in France’s 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen were indeed universal” (3). Most recently, Jeremy D. Popkin published the most judicious analysis on the events leading to the phenomenon of 1793 in colonial Saint-Domingue. *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (2010) is a work of profound theoretical and historical breath, insight and sound scholarship. *You Are All Free* was named the 2011 recipient of the American History Association (AHA) J. Russell Major Prize for the best book in early modern French history. The book also received the David Pinkney Prize for best new book in French history from the Society for French Historical Studies and was a finalist for the Cundill Book Prize. Popkin’s controversial work departs from traditional scholarship on the events of 1793. The author argues against the conventional accounts that maintain the unfolding events leading to the catastrophic dilemma—the burning of the city and other major events at Saint-Domingue—in the colonial city of Cap-François (now Cap-Haitien) in 1793 were fundamentally credited to the resistance of the enslaved and French revolutionaries’s principles of human rights and equality. The book challenges what the author calls the “overly determinist narratives of the Haitian Revolution” (10). Popkin contradicts Nick Nesbitt’s sustaining thesis throughout his book, *Universal Emancipation*, a work to be studied in subsequent paragraphs, that insurgents of the enslaved at Saint-Domingue expressed an “equivocal and unwavering commitment to universal emancipation based upon natural human rights” (145). Instead, the author proposes that “specific historical circumstances,” which scholars in the field had ignored, were responsible for the abolition of slavery at Saint-Domingue. He emphasizes “the importance of the role of colonial cities in understanding how the Atlantic economy and the system of Caribbean slavery functioned, and to the important differences between urban and rural slavery” (11). In a provocative tone, he writes:

The individuals who set the events of June 20, 1793 in motion were not black insurgents fighting for freedom, or white colonists defending their privileged positions, but white sailors from outside the island and a white general who thought he was defending the interests of revolutionary France...The historic emancipation proclamations of 1793 in Saint-Domingue and the French national Convention’s decree of 1794 came about, not through the systematic efforts of slave insurgents in Saint-Domingue, nor in response to an organized campaign for abolition in revolutionary France, but as a result of a crisis that had little do with slavery. (20)

For many years to come Haitianist historians and scholars would have to wrestle with Popkin sustaining argument. It is noteworthy to underline here Popkin had previously written an excellent text on the historical memory of the *Revolution entitled Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection* (2008). He recently released *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (2011), a work that “offers students a concise and clearly written overview of the events of the Haitian Revolution, from the slave uprising in the French colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791 to the declaration of Haiti’s independence in 1804.” It presents a chronological and thematic account of the events leading to Haitian Freedom.

To move away from this issue, we shall move forward with our conversation with another aspect of the Revolution. T.G. Steward celebrates the Haitian revolution as “indeed the heritage of all the races, as it exhibits the unfitness of any man for slavery and the capability of all for freedom” (v).<sup>6</sup> The revolution that interrupted the Western economy and global capitalism based on “the peculiar institution”<sup>7</sup> challenged the slaveholding regimes in the New World and was interpreted as white genocide, a bloodthirsty and savage race war, and barbarianism; or to use T. Lothrop Stoddard’s uncritical assessment: “the tragedy of the annihilation of the white population” (viii).<sup>8</sup> Haitians were henceforth perceived as “lazy barbarians who devoted their time to voodooism and child sacrifice” (Davis, *Inhuman Bondage* 157), therefore a people with no civilization and culture. The underlying stereotypes associated with Haiti were culturally constructed and imaginative. Haiti was the space of absolute otherness, negativity, and the land of anxiety and a zone of troubling presence. Alvey A. Adee, a long-time official and United States Assistant Secretary of State (1886-1924), said Haiti was “a public nuisance at our door” (Laudun 227). In a post-revolutionary period, the new Black republic was marked not only as a “tropical dog-kennel and pestiferous jungle,” but also as the zone between “the extremes of idealization and debasement” (Dayan 5). The American military occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) has left an indelible mark upon the national psyche that is memorialized in Haitian thought. Works produced during the period by American writers and artists including travel narratives, novels, memoirs, and plays<sup>9</sup> reiterate the ideas of Haiti’s strangeness, tragedy, vast darkness, and correspondingly the Black republic as a headless figure, an object of experimentation and foreign gaze.<sup>10</sup> J. Michael Dash posits that American literary imagination about Haiti and its revolutionary history was both misguided and misrepresented, and merely the pronouncement of the perennial stereotypes.<sup>11</sup>

As noted above, in the nineteenth-century, Haiti was an invention of the American mind; a calculated Americanist discourse about “the black republic” was spread throughout the Atlantic world. These sets of beliefs and historical misrepresentations of Haiti were similar to the way that the West has evoked exotic and romanticized images and well-crafted narratives about the people of the Middle East and the “Arab” cultures. Edward Said has termed this historical vision *Orientalism* (1978), the West’s ideological construction of the Orient. Michel Foucault has reminded us that discourses have both epistemological contexts and sociohistorical origins; they ultimately constitute patterns of representation that could be equally fixed and unstable.<sup>12</sup>

So far, we have offered critical observations that shed light on the relationship between slavery and freedom, and the problem of race and blackness in Western historiography. The texts examined above explain the ignoble nature of the age of democratic revolution in which progress and human reason drove the world and humanity into a labyrinth of despair. Massive crimes against humanity—including the genocide of the American native population in the New World, the historic terrors and horrors of slavery, and the Nazi’s systematic extermination of Jews in the Holocaust event—were all motivated by a false idea of human progress, reason, and civilization. Prominent historian Seymour Drescher in his work on the Haitian Revolution describes this transatlantic phenomenon as “an age of racial and genocidal conflict” (“The Limits of Example” 13).<sup>13</sup>

## **The Haitian Revolution in Black Atlantic, Postcolonial and Pan-African Studies**

Recent scholarships on Black Internationalism and the Black Atlantic have largely ignored the significance of Haiti in Black Atlantic thought and culture and the Haitian Revolution in the rise of Black internationalism in the twentieth century. Paul Gilroy, whose pioneering study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* focuses chiefly in North American and African American intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright, has not acknowledged the Haitian Revolution in the founding moment of the Black Atlantic. Gilroy has completely dismissed Du Bois’s forceful argument about the Haitian Revolution—as documented in his Harvard doctoral dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (1896)—a pivotal event in the construction of the Black Atlantic world and Black people’s struggle for freedom and self-determination.

Postcolonial theorists Brent Edwards (*Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and The Rise of Black Internationalism*) and Gilroy have produced the most ambitious and recent work on Black internationalism. Edwards focuses on the interplays between writers of the Anglophone and Francophone worlds. He chronicles the rise of the Black Atlantic print culture (1920s and 1930s) in the twentieth century. Edwards basically ignores how Haiti’s national history has shaped the literature of the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude.

He has not considered the possibility of Haitian Revolution on Black internationalists in the first half of the twentieth century. He also undermines possible influences of the Haitian Revolution on the authors and movements he had studied including the Pre-Négritude intellectuals and Négritude founding members (Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas) and the Harlem Renaissance writers (Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, etc.).

Gilroy is chiefly concerned with the intercultural and transnational formation of the peoples of the African Diaspora. While Edwards gives particular attention to relationships, collaborations, and international alliances between Black writers, artists, and intellectuals in the United States and in Paris, Gilroy emphasizes “routes” rather than roots and cross-cultural hybridity. In his careful analysis of the Négritude Movement and the Harlem Renaissance, Edwards does not allude to the possible historical linkages between the two movements by way of the common reference to the Haitian Revolution or Haiti’s national history. Gilroy’s groundbreaking study stresses the North American landscape, but it neglects the francophone Black world. Despite the creativity and the incomparable breadth of knowledge invested in their work, lamentably both writers fail to mention the Revolution as an inaugural event in the foundation of Black internationalism. On the other hand, for Michael West and William Martin, the Haitian Revolution is pivotal to the genesis of Pan-Africanism and several Black transnational revolutionary movements (*From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution*, 2009). They lament that the recent literature of Black internationalism—“which even in its more recent diasporic and Black Atlantic variations displays a consistent Afro-Saxon bias relegates the Haitian Revolution literature to the status of a nonevent” (7).

In the guild of Pan-Africanist scholarship, C. L. R. James’s provocative *A History of Negro Revolt* alludes to the events leading to the Haitian Revolution so as to evaluate a number of international revolts and Black resistance. In another work, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), James advances a compelling argument for the significance of the Haitian Revolution in the universal fight against oppression and for the freedom and self-assertion of the oppressed people in the world. This informative work offers a Marxist reading of the class and economic structures and hierarchy in Saint-Domingue, which for James are critical for grasping the Revolution and its various origins. For example, class tension between the enslaved and masters, *les gens de couleurs* (“people of color”) and free whites—this social class includes the plantation-class owners known as “*grands blancs*” and the working-class whites known as “*petits blancs*”—and freedmen and the various social class segments in the French colony are clearly discussed in the book. He suggests that the French Revolution created both the climax and context for the unfolding and evolutionary events leading to the Haitian Revolution. Yet he argues that the Revolution is not an appendix to the French Revolution, as eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries scholarship maintained. The important work of P. Olanwuche Esebede (*Pan-Africanism*) chronicles beautifully the transnational phenomenon known as Pan-Africanism, including its development and the leading voices.



Finally, Imanuel Geiss's magisterial study, *The Pan-African Movement* provides an intelligent assessment of the movement and its multifarious threads. In passing, Geiss engages the events of 1791-1804 culminating in the Haitian Revolution. As we have noted, with the exception of James, there is no substantial reference to the Revolution as a possible inspiration in the decolonization process of Africa, except James's classic work, *The Haitian Revolution*. It is strongly encouraged future scholarship to focus on this important area of research.

A new book that deserves our attention is Paul Miller's 2011 excellent text, *Elusive Origins: The Enlightenment in the Modern Caribbean Historical Imagination*. Miller explores the aftereffects of the Haitian Revolution on Caribbean writers and Caribbean intellectual history, and particularly he offers a critical examination of two classic works on the Revolution, C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938) and Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* (1953). These celebrated texts stand as starting points and models for Miller's concept of "the Modern Caribbean Historical Imagination." In addition to James and Carpentier, Miller examines how other writers in the Region such as Marie Chauvet, Maryse Condé, Reinaldo Arenas, and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá have contextualized the Enlightenment in the Caribbean context as well as interrogated the paradoxes of modernity, and the idea of reason and historical progress championed by Enlightenment *philosophes*. Equally important is the edited volume by Doris L. Garraway, *Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (2008). This particular text is an interdisciplinary study on the effects of the Haitian Revolution on Atlantic writers and intellectuals and its complex relations to anticolonial and imperial struggles, postcolonialism, critical race theory, and literary theory. These ten writers who contributed to this fine collection argue that the Revolution had inspired across time and space and across national and linguistic boundaries.

## **The "New Intellectual Shift:" Revolutionary Haiti and Enlightened Modernity**

In the subsequent paragraphs, I discuss three important texts that reoriented Haitian revolutionary studies to a higher level. They offer insightful observations for our understanding of the significance of the Haitian Revolution and its relationship to and impact on modern European intellectual history. Hence, I analyze Sibylle Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2004)—which we already mentioned above—Nick Nesbitt's *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (2008), and Susan Buck-Morss's *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009).<sup>14</sup> The epistemological contours of the Haitian Revolution had crossed new territories and disciplines across the seas, continents, and the prestigious halls of the academia. These new works had shifted the geography of reason in modern scholarship and history of ideas. The unprecedented rise in scholarly interest in the Haitian Revolution across disciplines necessitates a serious reappraisal of its cultural legacies, as well as a consideration of its importance for debates in postcolonial, Black Atlantic, Caribbean, and New World Studies.

As Doris Garraway remarks in her fine collection of essays on the Revolution, *Tree of Liberty*, “The ramifications of the Haitian Revolution for theoretical understandings of modern anticolonial movements, postcolonialism, nationalisms, Black transnationalism and diasporic identifications, and the Enlightenment and its associated discourses of freedom, human rights, and universalism” (9). This body of scholarship like *Tree of Liberty* had interrogated the literary, philosophical, socio-cultural, and political discourses that the Revolution had produced in Western intellectual history.

Since its publication, Fischer’s *Modernity Disavowed* had won the following book awards: Caribbean Philosophical Association’s 2005 Frantz Fanon Prize; Latin American Studies Association’s 2006 Bryce Wood Award; Modern Language Association’s 2006 Katherine Singer Award; and Caribbean Studies Association’s 2007 Gordon K. and Sybil Lewis Award. Nesbitt’s “Universal Emancipation” was named a Choice Outstanding Academic Title of 2009. Morss’s text had won The Frantz Fanon Book Award of the Caribbean Philosophical Association in 2011. According to the committee, “This book challenges hegemonic history, discourses of freedom, and presumed universality through raising the contradictions posed by the underside of history, modern subjectivity, and methodological aspirations in the social sciences.”<sup>15</sup>

In a 1989 Sorbonne dissertation, “*Hegel, critique de l’Afrique*,” Pierre Franklin Tavares strikingly argues that the revolution in Saint Domingue and the birth of Haiti—as a double event—were the main historical sources (but not unique) of the famous “figure of consciousness” entitled “Domination and bondage of the Phenomenology of Spirit,” which incorrectly named “the dialectic of master and slave.”<sup>16</sup> Building on Tavares’s thesis, more recently, in an article (“Hegel and Haiti”) published in *Critical Inquiry* in 2000 and later extended in book form as *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* in 2009, Susan Buck-Morss contends that the events of revolutionary Haiti inspired the young Hegel distinctively in his development of the lord-servant dialectic, and substantially provides the concrete experimental resources for theorizing freedom and the process of history. She also insists that the Haitian Revolution has contributed significantly to European critical discourses on subjectivity, freedom, identity, and consciousness. Although the news about the revolution was censored in the French media after 1803, Buck-Morss informs us, “newspapers and journals in Britain (also in the United States and Poland) highlighted the events of the final revolutionary struggle in Saint-Domingue” (43-44).<sup>17</sup> Buck-Morss asserts, “The Haitian Revolution was the crucible, the trial by fire for the ideals of the French Enlightenment. And every European who was part of the bourgeois reading public knew it” (44).

Nesbitt, in his celebrated work *Universal Emancipation* similarly contends that it was Haiti that fulfilled the failed promises of both French and American Revolutions, concerning the unqualified and universal human right to freedom and equality (9-10, 12-15). Accordingly, the Haitian Revolution is the historical fulfillment of central tenets of Enlightenment thought.

The Haitian revolution of 1791-1804, led by Haiti's foremost general, Toussaint Louverture, was the only triumphant revolution of the enslaved in world history, and has become a symbol of anticolonial revolt and universal emancipation. The enslaved at Saint-Domingue, who revolted against their masters in 1791, "invented decolonization," and made Haiti "the first postcolonial state" (Nesbitt 9, 56) in 1804.<sup>18</sup> Substantially, the Haitian revolution stands today as a reminder of formerly enslaved of their commitment to freedom, and the affirmation of their humanity and dignity. Inevitably, the Haitian experience explicitly affirms what was then thought impossible and unpractical—that is, first the advent of freedom from slavery; second, the humanity of African people and the expression of "inner freedom in an unfree world," which can be called the "freedom of active creation" (2). In other words, as both Buck-Morss and Nesbitt affirm, it was at Saint-Domingue that such abstract ideas were tested and came into their full force in an historically concrete form. Nesbitt contends that the ultimate test of the global pretensions of *Les droits de l'homme* (*The Rights of Man*) and the universal principles of liberty and equality affirmed in 1789 by the French *Assemblée nationale constituante* was realized in Haiti through a series of forceful and unstoppable events between the years of 1791 and 1804. Both Nesbitt and Buck-Morss also argue that the so-called Enlightenment was not solely a European phenomenon or property (Nesbitt, 20; Buck-Morss, 137-8).

The Haitian enslaved at Saint-Domingue and their Revolution had not only substantially influenced the intellectual culture of Western Europe and the American society. Fischer chronicles correspondingly the cultural, political, and intellectual legacies of the Revolution in nineteenth-century Cuba and Santo Domingo. She states that Haiti was a threat and the news about its liberating events were ironically represented as "the unspeakable, as trauma, utopia, and elusive dream" (2) in the literature of both slaveholding societies. In the concluding page of her intelligent book, she writes:

Approaching Haiti through the records that have informed Western narratives—the records of Haiti's most immediate neighbors, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, but also the records of European metropolises—allows for the kind of reflection of the operations of suppression and denial that purely structural or empiricist accounts would most likely preclude. It is in light of the intellectual, political, and cultural efforts that were necessary to make the slave revolution of 1791 to 1804 vanish from respectable modernity that we can come to recognize what was really at stake. (273)

Buck-Morss and Tavares have convincingly demonstrated Hegel's philosophy of freedom and philosophy of right (Nesbitt, "Troping Toussaint" 19-33) also were dependent on the Haitian Revolution, a signal event in human narrative of liberty that provided him the empirical data to think through freedom.

## A Compendium of Contemporary Scholarship

In this section, I reflect on the most recent collaborative work and exhaustive collection of essays on the Haitian Revolution titled *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (2009). To commemorate Haiti's bicentennial independence, in 2004 a group of distinguished historians and scholars met for a scholarly conference at the John Carter Brown Library. They discussed and exchanged ideas about the world of the Revolution and its unfolding events, from a wide range of connected and interconnected perspectives and cross-disciplines. Edited by David Geggus and Norman Fiering, *The World of the Haitian Revolution* consists of eighteen seminal essays that discuss the transition from slavery to emancipation—from the general revolt of 1791 to the culmination of the Haitian Revolution in 1804—and the reverberations of these radical events at Saint-Domingue in the Americas. The book offers a revisionary reading of the historiography of the Revolution. It also articulates fresh perspectives on the significance of revolutionary Haiti for our understanding of Western history in particular and transatlantic history in general.

The book is divided in four respective sections; each part gives considerable attention to a particular era of the revolution. Part One provides an overview of “Saint-Domingue on the Eve of Revolution.” In his essay, David Geggus reiterates several claims he made in previous publications: (1) that the indigenous religion (“Vodou”) played a minor role in the success of the Revolution, as many Haitian scholars (i.e. Jean Fouchard, Michel S. Laguerre, Laënnec Hurbon) and other historians (i.e. Laurent Dubois, Carolyn Fick, Jean-Price Mars.) have traditionally maintained, (2) downplays maroon resistance as another indigenous influence on the Revolution, which he finds unhelpful to Haitian independence, (3) notwithstanding the historical and existing connection between *maroonage* and the uprising of the enslaved prior to the 1791 event—which Jean Fouchard has carefully documented in *Les Marrons de la Liberté* (1972)—Geggus maintains that large-scale revolts by the enslaved or conspiracies did not exist prior to the general revolt of 1791 and (4) Geggus rejects the general consensus that the conditions of life for the enslaved did not worsen after 1750. These critical issues remain controversial in Haitian revolutionary studies; further research is strongly encouraged. Jacques Cauna's beautiful visual sketches of colonial landmarks in form of aqueducts, ruined coffee, cotton, sugar, and indigo plantations, drying towers, and animal-powered mills are noteworthy. He also mentions existing colonial architecture in the Northern city of Cap-Haitien. John Garrigus' essay accentuates the special role of free people of color in the achievement of the Revolution. He discusses the efforts of the free man of color Dominique Rogers in the long struggle to socially integrate free people of color in the predominantly white hegemonic colony. Garrigus's interesting thesis that “If we instead define the revolution as the events surrounding Haiti's 1804 declaration of independence, then we find former free men of color playing a far more prominent role” (49) is not, however, without historical ground.

Part Two highlights the “The Unfolding of the Slave Revolution.” The late prominent French historian Yves Benot reexamines old archival materials to answer a familiar question: whether “independence” was the ultimate goal of the August 22/23, 1791 insurrection and its revolutionary leaders? Benot seems to connect the uprising of the enslaved in 1791 with the news of the 1789 revolution in France, yet he is uncertain whether “the slaves could not make up their minds for themselves” (99). Nonetheless, he did affirm at the conclusion that the logic of the general masses’ resistance confirmed “that the aspiration toward independence was present from the beginning” (108). Carolyn E. Fick picks up on the same theme of independence and stresses the overwhelmingly African aspect of and contribution to the revolution, namely the African-born enslaved. Fick advances that African-born enslaved persons provided both the political grassroots leadership and militarism at every stage of the revolution, particularly in the final stage of the War of independence, 1802-1803. Laurent Dubois’s essay reflects on the politics, representation of violence and vengeance in the Haitian Revolution. Dubois states that the colonial order was characterized by terror, coercion and that “the era of revolutionary transformation in Saint Domingue was a profoundly a violent one...That slaves repeatedly brought complaints before local administrators about burning, mutilation, and murder on the plantations” (112). Also, Dubois attempts to clarify some misconceptions about the news of Black barbarism as well as Black atrocities, during the era of the Revolution, as advanced by colonial critics and former slave owners. For instance, he dispels the famous myth that the Black enslaved person killed a white child and hanged his body on a stake and found the phenomenon historically unreliable and that the event was not sourced in eyewitness testimony.

Part Three surveys the “Reverberations” of the Revolution. Jeremy Popkin draws attention of the impact of colonial events on revolutionary France, an important area that is much neglected by historians. Since its inception, the general revolt of 1791 not only questioned imperial France’s promises of liberty and equality as universal rights but also challenged the contradiction between French ideas and practice. Popkin also points out the large-scale economic deficits of the revolution and substantially its impact on politics and laws in the French metropole during the revolutionary era. She is correct by insisting that “the struggles over Saint-Domingue during the 1790s foreshadowed the colonial crises of France’s Fourth Republic a century and a half later” (218). Ashli White comments that, while, the Revolution challenged slavery and racism in “increasingly universal terms” (248), yet it caused white Americans to form new transatlantic racial solidarity and alliances as well as helped define in clearest terms the distinctiveness of the United States.

Part Four focuses on the “Representations of the Revolution.” Léon-François Hoffman surveys the reception of the Haitian Revolution in nineteenth-and twentieth-century French scholarship. He is particularly interested how revolutionary Haiti is represented in French Literature, which he describes as “a conspiracy of silence...and a perplexing at any rate secondary incident” (339-40).

With the exception of the ideological romantic literature of Victor Hugo's novel *Bug-Jargal* (1826) and Alphonse de Lamartine's drama *Toussaint Louverture* (1850), Hoffman notes works produced during the Napoleonic reign dealing with the Haitian revolution "avoided the noble term "revolution" and spoke instead of "revolts," "mutiny," "uprisings," "perfidy," "sedition," and "criminal plots" on the part of "barbarian ingrates" and "ferocious Africans" (341). Carlo Célius's essay includes sixteen magnificent sketches and symbolisms in the expression of neoclassic art that celebrate revolutionary freedom, heroism, civic virtue, the idealized beauty as well as the moments of the revolution (352).

Robin Blackburn, writing the epilogue of *The World the Haitian Revolution*, states that "with this fine volume and several recent studies on the Haitian Revolution...the "silencing" of Haiti's past has ended" (392). A more challenge remains is to see more Haitian historians and scholars contributing to the furtherance of Haiti's revolutionary past as well as the urgency for accurate representation of the Haitian Revolution in U.S. textbooks and Western historiography. As a whole, this body of work has informed us about the interest in the Haitian Revolution in North America and elsewhere.

### **Some Suggestions for Future Scholarship on the Haitian Revolution**

Despite the resurgence in Haitian studies in North America, the need for future studies on some neglected important areas and personalities of the Haitian Revolution is urgent, substantial, and critical. First, to my knowledge there is not a full biography in the English language on Haitian revolutionary leaders and founding fathers Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Louis Félix Mathurin Boisrond-Tonnerre. His 1804 memoir, *Mémoires pour Servir à l'Histoire d'Haïti*, has not been studied by scholars. Future scholarship should also focus on an intellectual history and ideas of Toussaint Louverture. In other words, works on the intellectual foundation or origins of the Haitian Revolution still need to be written. One should explore how African intellectual traditions might have inspired the enslaved community at Saint-Domingue and contributed to their quest for independence and emancipation. The countless letters Toussaint wrote as a Governor of Saint-Domingue has not fully been translated in English, thanks to Nick Nesbitt for taking the initiative in translating some of these letters, *Toussaint Louverture: The Haitian Revolution* (2008).

There is a scholarly void in the contribution of enslaved women to the Haitian freedom. Future scholarship should consider a gender critique of the Revolution or insert gender into the inner workings of the historical imagination of revolutionary Haiti. The need for substantial studies contributing to our understanding of the role of religion in colonial Saint-Domingue and the foundation of postcolonial Haiti is critical. Future research should also investigate the reverberations of the Haitian Revolution on the culture of slavery in Latin America, thanks to Martin Munro for producing *Reinterpreting the Haitian Revolution and its Cultural Aftershocks* (2006), and *Echoes of the Haitian Revolution* (2008).

Also rare are works on the contributions of revolutionary Haiti to Black internationalism and freedom movements in North America, Latin America, and continental Africa. There is not an existing monograph in the English language that takes into consideration the memory and representation of the Haitian Revolution in the oeuvre of the anticolonial poet of freedom, Aimé Fernand David Césaire. The Negritude founder once declared that “Haiti is where Negritude stood for the first time and affirmed its humanity.”

Future scholarship should also sharpen our understanding of the impact of the Haitian Revolution on the culture and creative process of transnational Black intellectuals and the cultural and literary movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude during the twentieth century. It should also shed some light on the interplays and connective forces between freedom and literary movements in the Black Atlantic. The example of Haiti and the Haitian Revolution as a symbolic of reference of freedom and human rights might help us to think more critically beyond traditional concepts of nationhood and nationalism, as our world is becoming more global and our lives more interconnected and interdependent.

Few works in the English language have seriously engaged the ideas and writings of postcolonial Haitian writers in early eighteenth and nineteenth century and how they reflected on the significance of the Revolution for their new life in the new nation as well as Haiti’s complex relationships with the international community in the epochs. Future research should also contribute to a more exact appreciation of Haiti’s place on the spectrum of African and Western intellectual tradition and the Revolution’s constitution to the emergent debates on the issues of history, human emancipation, and identity formation. When Dessalines proclaimed the independence of Haiti on January 1, 1804, arguably he also announced the beginning of a new social order in the Atlantic World, and the end of a long struggle for human life, existence, and meaning. Consequently, this symbolic gesture indicates the beginning of a new freedom story and the creation of the first Black independent republic in 1804 in the human struggle for emancipation. Quite possibly, the Haitian revolution marks the greatest victory in the human history of freedom and the vindication of the rights of humanity. Yet, scholars continue to remind us that the Haitian Revolution is a narrative of liberation that is not yet complete in Haiti’s own territory, and its full promises have not yet fully realized especially for those who still live in the margins of history and suffer different modality of oppressions in our postcolonial moment and neo-colonial era.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For further details on the new resurgence in Haitian studies, see the forthcoming text mentioned above.

<sup>2</sup> The major works treating these various issues referenced in the text are as follows: Geggus, *The World*; Bell, *Toussaint Louverture*; Popkin, *Facing racial revolution*; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*; Dubois, *Avengers*; Fick, *The Making*; Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons*; Ott, *The Haitian Revolution*.

<sup>3</sup> Julius S. Scott's 1986 doctoral dissertation at Duke University, "The Common Wind;" other useful studies include the following: Gaspar and Geggus; Paquette 204-225; Paquette provides important information about the impact of the Revolution in Louisiana and in the Louisiana Purchase.

<sup>4</sup> The most important studies on the Haitian Revolution include the following: Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004); David Patrick Geggus (ed), *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2001); Carol E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from below* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990); C. L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint l'Ouverture & The San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938).

<sup>5</sup> Other major works on the Haitian revolution include the following: Geggus, *Slavery, Haitian Revolutionary Studies*; the classic works on the Revolution in the French language written by nineteenth century Haitian historians include the following: Ardouin, *Etudes*; Madiou, *Histoire*; French historian Yves Benot has also written a seminal study on the Revolution, *La Révolution française*.

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. in Fick, *The Making* 3.

<sup>7</sup> In 1956, Kenneth M. Stamp coined the phrase "the peculiar institution," the same title of his influential work (*The Peculiar Institution*) used to describe slavery in the American South. In his magisterial work *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson observes "The most distinctive attribute of the slave's powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death, usually violent death" (5). He also contends that the New World enslaved experienced what he termed "natal alienation," or "forced alienation" from community belonging or membership. In other words, as an enslaved population, they were genealogical isolate; their past was not a heritage (5); instead, they faced "a loss of native status, of deracination. It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of 'blood' and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master" (7).



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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Fick, *The Making* 3. The United States refused to recognize Haiti as an independent and sovereign state until 1862. For reactions in the North America to the Haitian Revolution, see Hickey; Stoddard; Matthewson; M. Zuckermann. The “Haytian Emigration” movement was well known in the African American community; for African Americans’ response to the Haitian Revolution in the ninetieth century, see Dewey; Holly. The best survey book on the subject is arguably Pamphile’s, *Haitians and African Americans*.

<sup>9</sup> For example, O’Neill, Niles, Seabrook, Franklyn, and Wirkus.

<sup>10</sup> For more details, see Dash (*Haiti and the United States* 1-44).

<sup>11</sup> See Chapters 1 and 2 in Dash, *Haiti and the United States*.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault has addressed these issues brilliantly in *The Order of Things*, and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

<sup>13</sup> In his well-argued work, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, prominent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman examines the issue of the Jewish Holocaust in relation to Western modernity. He argues not only that the Holocaust profoundly explains the nature of modernity and its ambivalence but it was inseparably intrinsic to the idea and meaning of the civilizing process. He asserts, “The bureaucratic culture which prompts us to view society as an object of administration, as a collection of so many ‘problems’ to be solved, as ‘nature’ to be ‘controlled,’ ‘mastered’ and ‘improved’ or ‘remade,’ as a legitimate target for ‘social engineering,’ and in general a garden to be designed and kept in the planned shape by force (the gardening posture divides vegetation into ‘cultures plants to be taken care of, and weeds to be exterminated), was the very atmosphere in which the idea of the Holocaust could be conceived, slowly yet consistently developed, and brought to its conclusion” (13).

<sup>14</sup> See my review of Nick’s work in *Callaloo* 33:4 (2010):1132-1134.

<sup>15</sup> To read online, see [http://www.caribbeanphilosophicalassociation.org/Frantz\\_Fanon\\_Prize.html](http://www.caribbeanphilosophicalassociation.org/Frantz_Fanon_Prize.html).

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<sup>16</sup> “La révolution de Saint-Domingue et la naissance d’Haïti - comme double événement - ont été la principale source historique (mais non unique) de la célèbre « figure de conscience » intitulée Domination et servitude de la Phénoménologie de l’esprit, figure improprement appelée (comme l’a souligné Alexandre Kojève) ‘ la dialectique du maître et de l’esclave’ (“The Revolution at Saint-Domingue and the birth of Haiti—as a double event—were the principal historical source (but not the only one) of the famous “Figure of consciousness” entitled domination and servitude of the *Phenemology of the Spirit*, which is wrongly called—as Alexandre Kojève has pointed out—‘the dialectic of master and slave’” (Tavares, “A propos de Hegel et Haïti); elsewhere, Tavares establishes other intellectual relations and extends his argument: “Hegel et l’abbé Grégoire,” “Hegel et Haïti,” and “Hegel, philosophe anti-esclavagiste.” The latter was a lecture Tavares presented at the *Conférence au Collège de France* in January 1996.

<sup>17</sup> For a survey of literary representation of the Haitian Revolution in France, see Hoffman, “Representations of the Haitian Revolution;” for an in-depth study, see Benot, *La Revolution francaise*; Trouillot observes further: “If some events cannot be accepted even as they occur, how can they be assessed later? In other words, can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world which these narratives take place? How does one write a history of the impossible?” (74).

<sup>18</sup> The meeting between the enslaved—slave-drivers, coachmen, and other members of the “privilege slaves”—which occurred in the forest called Bois-Caiman (Alligator Woods) in the night of August 14, 1791—in a parish called Morne-Rouge in the northern part of Haiti is often viewed by historians as the founding moment of the Haitian Revolution. A large group of drivers of the enslaved (about two hundred of them) sent from various plantations, under the direction of the maroon and religious leader Dutty Boukman, gathered on the Lenormand de Mézy plantation and set forth plans for a large-scale revolt which would immediately begin a week after their August 14 meeting. The enslaved themselves had planned the moment of the insurrection toward freedom for a long time. A enslaved person by the name of François—which we already reference in previous paragraphs—reports that a mulatto read public papers to the assembled enslaved on that night and made the following declaration:

The King and the National Assembly had accorded them three days of freedom per week; that the white planters were opposed to this and that they must await to the arrival of troops who would come to enforce the execution of this decree; that this was the opinion of the majority, but that the slaves from some of the plantations in Acul and Limbé wanted, at any cost, to begin the war against the whites before the arrival of the troops. (Fick, *The Making* 261)

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The statement above clearly highlights the collective determination of the enslaved population to reverse the colonial order, transform a subhuman situation to a dignified life, and become their own agents of liberation. I treat these critical issues elsewhere in Celucien L. Joseph, "The Rhetoric of Prayer: Dutty Boukman, The Discourse of "Freedom from Below," and the Politics of God," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 2:9 (June 2011):1-33, "Memory, the Spirit of the Revolution, and Slave Religion: The Representation of the Haitian Revolution in Langston Hughes's Emperor of Haiti" (forthcoming, *Journal of Postcolonial Theory and Theology*, 2012), and "Prophetic Religion, Violence, and Black Freedom: Reading Makandal's Project of Black Liberation through A Fanonian postcolonial lens of decolonization and theory of revolutionary humanism," (forthcoming, *Black Theology: An International Journal*, 2012).