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AHR Forum

From Revolution to Recognition: Haiti's Place in the Post-1804 Atlantic World

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WHEN IN 1959 R. R. PALMER PUBLISHED the first volume of his foundational work *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, references to the Haitian Revolution within its pages were few and far between.[1] In a text overwhelmingly dominated by the American and French Revolutions, the slave rebellion-turned-unforeseen revolution, which shook the foundations of the Western Hemisphere's status quo, was referred to merely a handful of times. Its impact upon other Atlantic and world events of the time went largely unnoticed, and the vital struggle for independence and international recognition that followed it was disregarded. Fast-forward six decades, and the situation could hardly be more different.

Although it took some time, Haiti and the Haitian Revolution are today at the core of studies on both the Age of Revolution and the Atlantic World. Every year, dozens of new articles and books examining this exceptional event are written and published in various languages.[2] More to the point, the study of the Haitian Revolution has now moved beyond a

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[1] R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800—The Challenge* (Princeton, N.J., 1959).

[2] See, among many others, David Patrick Geggus, *Slavery, War and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793–1798* (Oxford, 1982); Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Nashville, Tenn., 1990); Oruno D. Lara, "L'influence de la Révolution haitïenne dans son environnement caraïbe," *Présence africaine*, no. 169 (2004): 89–103; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (London, 2006); and Léon-François Hoffmann,

period of genealogical navel-gazing, during which justifying its very existence seemed to be necessary, and has blossomed into a field peppered with wonderful and innovative research.[3] Whereas the period immediately before the 1791 uprising in Bois Caïman, the revolutionary phase, and the actual independence in 1804 have been at the epicenter of this new scholarship, the post-independence years have received less attention from Haitian Revolution scholars, in part due to the allure of the events that signaled the preceding decade and a half, but perhaps also because of the quantity, quality, and availability of primary sources for the post-1804 period.

The articles by Julia Gaffield and Mary Lewis featured in this forum constitute fruitful attempts to remedy this imbalance. More generally, they fit within a wider and novel body of scholarship that looks at human trajectories and events during the Age of Revolution, across oceans and nation-state borders.[4] Both articles immerse the reader in the post-independence era, while exposing the limitations of Haiti's links and connections with the wider world. Equally, they both see the establishment of the new state and the revolution that led to its foundation as hemispheric events that influenced and shaped Western states' strategies, often exposing their underlying racist ideologies and deceitful policies.

In spite of their different focuses, these two pieces complement each other quite well, challenging traditional narratives that have emphasized, and perhaps unintentionally

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Frauke Gewecke, and Ulrich Fleischmann, eds., *Haïti 1804: Lumières et ténèbres—Impact et résonances d'une revolution* (Frankfurt, 2008).

[3] This has also been the case when it comes to teaching the Haitian Revolution. Numerous courses are now dedicated to this event, and reading lists with key bibliographical references have appeared and been kept up to date on various websites. See, for example, the blog *Age of Revolutions*, https://ageofrevolutions.com.

[4] See, for example, Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014).

exaggerated, the relative isolation to which Haiti was subjected during its first few decades of existence. In fact, they both demonstrate that in those years, both the nascent republic and, for a while, the northern kingdom under the rule of Henri Christophe were far from removed from the transatlantic trading, political, and religious networks they had belonged to before the revolution broke out in 1791.

Long gone are the lack of theoretical sophistication and the problems with recycling secondary sources associated with the Haitian Revolution that Philippe Girard pointed out in 2013.[5] Moreover, neither of the articles here falls into the trend of studies on the main personalities/heroes that formerly prevailed—and to a certain extent still do—among scholars of the Haitian Revolution. Instead, Gaffield and Lewis have chosen to turn their attention to issues that go beyond the remit of most of the existing scholarship to date. In doing so, they have rewarded us with two incisive and profound studies that explore issues that were central to the birth and early years of Haiti, and to its place among the rest of the Atlantic nations at the time.

THE LACK OF INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION of Haiti after independence looms large in both articles. Gaffield, in particular, questions the reasons behind this absence of official acceptance—or "classification"—among the family of civilized and independent states. Gaffield's methodology is rigorous. She expressly chose the rocky relationship between the Holy See and Haiti in the post-independence years to demonstrate that the popes of the period regarded Haiti with contempt and with a sense of superiority that was intimately related to the Western constructs of civilization and whiteness. She continuously reminds us that there was an inherently racist undercurrent in Western approaches to Haiti during this period. The

[5] Philippe R. Girard, "The Haitian Revolution, History's New Frontier: State of the Scholarship and Archival Sources," *Slavery and Abolition* 34, no. 3 (2013): 485–507.

newly formed republic was very much an obstacle for the evolving discourses of Western civilization, which were intrinsically linked to Christianity and to the supremacy of the white race. In spite of its declared Catholicism, and the fact that Haitian leaders repeatedly received and engaged in negotiations with the Holy See and other states during these years, the country was nothing short of an anomaly.

This anomaly was particularly problematic as it contested the foundations of international law, which associated civilization and Christianity with European and American nations, whose leaders were white. This exclusionary take on civilization, as Gaffield expertly remarks, "shaped the globalizing forces of empire and trade in the nineteenth century." Civilization, too, gave Western nations the needed excuse to eliminate such an obnoxious obstacle. In France, dreams of recolonizing the former Caribbean colony were aired in public and justified by the supposed inability of black Haitians to govern themselves.[6] In the meantime, the United States, Great Britain, and the Holy See, each on the basis of its own reasons and needs, played a long game that included talking and trading with Haiti while steadfastly refusing to grant the country official recognition.

Lewis also engages with the lack of international acceptance that Haiti experienced during this period. By zeroing in on the case of a slave voyage undertaken by French merchants on the ship *Le Marcelin* from Bordeaux, Lewis opens a window into a world of

[6] Similar retrograde discursive practices continue to appear today. Only three years ago, American academic Bruce Gilley echoed this posture in his article "The Case for Colonialism," when he proposed to recolonize parts of the world due to the fact that former colonial subjects were incapable of governing themselves in a civilized manner. The article was published online in *Third World Quarterly* in September 2017, but after a number of obvious shortcomings were pointed out by other scholars, it was withdrawn at the request of the academic journal editor and in agreement with the author of the essay. An online version can still be found at https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037.

smuggling that was a direct and necessary result of this absence of official recognition. Her probing examination of the story behind this voyage offers several revealing conclusions. Perhaps the most obvious is, in her words, that it "illustrates the extent to which deception, opportunism, and chance were essential to the slave trade, and by extension to the modern globalized economy." In order to show the role that Haiti played in this illegal trade—at times almost certainly unwillingly—Lewis traces *Le Marcelin*'s every move, inspecting the contents of its cargo, its days and routes of navigation, and the dealings of its captain with Atlantic actors in France, Africa, and various Caribbean spots.

Unfazed by the methodological problems presented to her by this world of illegality, Lewis has unearthed a number of truly revealing primary sources, which she has complemented by enlisting some of the most important scholarly contributions to the history of the illegal slave trade in the nineteenth century. In referring to this illegal period, she has coined a new term, the "second slave trade," which is largely inspired by Dale Tomich's concept of the "second slavery."[7] These illegal years, marked by novel strategies of deception, by the adoption of new technological innovations, and by new levels of corruption on both sides of the Atlantic, allowed for the survival and proliferation of transatlantic slave-trading expeditions in the face of abolition efforts led by Britain and followed by others.[8]

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[7] Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, Md., 2003).

[8] The recent literature on the post-1807 illicit slave trade is almost as extensive as the literature on the Haitian Revolution. See, for example, David Head, "Slave Smuggling by Foreign Privateers: The Illegal Slave Trade and the Geopolitics of the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 33, no. 3 (2013): 433–462; Michael Zeuske, *Amistad: A Hidden Network of Slavers and Merchants* (Princeton, N.J., 2014); Gustau Nerin, *Traficants d'ànimes: Els negrers espanyols a l'Àfrica* (Barcelona, 2015); Leonardo Marques, *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas, 1776–1867* (New Haven, Conn., 2016); and Manuel Barcia and Effie Kesidou, "Innovation and Entrepreneurship as

Like Gaffield, Lewis also explores the dreams of recolonization of Haiti exposed in their former metropolis, but unlike Gaffield, she then turns to the "colonial privilege," a tool that reduced customs duties on Haitian goods, allowing French merchants to trade with this as yet unrecognized state. The case of *Le Marcelin*, a vessel that had obviously carried human cargo from Africa to Cuba before heading for Port-au-Prince, is deeply illuminating with regard to how trade—be it of human beings, coffee, or mahogany—and its associated profits trumped any other consideration in the minds of French authorities and businessmen in this period.

RACISM, TOO, FIGURES PROMINENTLY in both articles. In Gaffield's analysis, references to civilization—that is, white Western or European civilization—are plentiful. The positions adopted by the various Western nations discussed in her essay give the lie to the notion that Haiti may have been treated in the same way that other newly independent nations were. For example, while the Holy See struggled to recognize the Latin American republics that emerged from their own wars of independence in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, there is little evidence to reveal the use of the same sort of racist undertones employed by every one of their envoys to Haiti during these years.[9] In particular, the words of one of those envoys, Bishop Giovanni England, were framed by clear racist arguments. His hope of

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Strategies for Success among Cuban-Based Firms in the Late Years of the Transatlantic Slave Trade," *Business History* 60, no. 4 (2018): 542–561.

[9] See, among others, Miranda Lida, "Fragmentación política y fragmentación eclesiástica: La revolución de independencia y las iglesias rioplatenses (1810–1830)," *Revista de Indias* 64, no. 231 (2004): 383–404; Alberto de la Hera, "La Iglesia y la independencia de América Latina: Introducción," *Anuario de historia de la Iglesia* 17 (2008): 27–30; Luis Javier Ortiz Mesa, "La Iglesia católica y la formación del Estado-nación en América Latina en el siglo XIX: El caso colombiano." *Almanack* (Guarulhos), no. 6 (2013): 5–25; and Carlos Salinas Araneda, "Los concordatos celebrados entre la Santa Sede y los países latinoamericanos durante el siglo XIX," *Revista de estudios histórico-jurídicos*, no. 35 (2013): 215–254.

"uplifting the African race" and the fact that he considered Africans to be barbarians reveal not only his own prejudices, but also those of the office that he represented, which supported and endorsed his visits to Haiti and his negotiations with Jean-Pierre Boyer.

Gaffield also does a good job of bringing up the pressure that the British so condescendingly applied to the Haitian state in the late 1830s, aimed at forcing Boyer's government to sign a bilateral anti–slave trade treaty. Once again in this opportunity, Haiti's civilization was questioned by a white European minister, for failing to commit to abolishing human trafficking. This was, one must observe, in spite of the fact that Haiti had abolished slavery decades before, and that it had been pursuing slavers in Caribbean waters just as the British had committed to policing Atlantic waters for the same purpose. A quick look at the Slave Voyages database reveals that between 1811 and 1820, Haitian privateers captured at least four slave vessels, liberating hundreds of Africans in the process.[10]

Lewis, whose focus is the post-1804 slave trade and its relation to Haiti, also raises some appropriate questions that have much to do with the racial filaments embedded in this Western- and European-centric vision of an enlightened world, where taking advantage of the inhabitants of a former colony considered inferior in civilizational terms was perfectly acceptable. When in 1818 *Le Marcelin* undertook the voyage that lies at the center of Lewis's study, Britain's commitment to abolishing the slave trade had taken a new shape and had led to more dynamic approaches. Already at the Congress of Vienna in 1814, the British had tried to force other European nations to implement abolitionist policies. When their efforts yielded no results, they turned to a strategy of bilateral treaties by which various governments were compelled to commit not only to abolishing and persecuting slavers, but also to allowing British Navy ships to search any of their vessels suspected of being involved in the

[10] Voyages nos. 34720, 40735, 46920, and 46921, Slave Voyages, https://www.slavevoyages.org.

transatlantic traffic of human beings.[11] By 1820, Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands had signed bilateral treaties, and in the following years and decades, almost every Atlantic state followed suit. Because France did not sign until 1831, the French were able to lend their ports and flag, and their long-established contacts along the West African shoreline, to Spanish and Portuguese slave traders, so that they could expand their human-trafficking activities. Ports like Bordeaux (the point of departure for *Le Marcelin*'s 1818 voyage), Nantes, and Bayonne became hubs for this trade.[12]

Lewis's meticulous examination of the *modus operandi* of *Le Marcelin* and of its itinerary and cargo suggests that the ship's owner and captain had no qualms about using a Haitian port as a stopover on their return route to France. More to the point, other cases discussed in Lewis's article point to Haiti stopovers as a frequently used scheme, concocted with the intention of maximizing profits. Simply put, *Le Marcelin*'s owners and the majority of French traders of the period saw nothing evil about forcing their hand and cheating their way around any type of regulation as they saw fit. In the process, they had no reservations in lying about pirate attacks, inauspicious accidents, or inclement weather, or in putting forward any other falsehood that could benefit their trading enterprises.

ONE FINAL PROMINENT ASPECT that these two articles have in common is their placement of Haiti within the wider Atlantic World, with the support of a truly exceptional crop of primary

[11] See, for example, David Eltis, "Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation," *American Historical Review* 98, no. 5 (December 1993): 1399–1423; and Leslie Bethell, "The Mixed Commissions for the Suppression of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History* 7, no. 1 (1966): 79–93.

[12] Alan Forrest, *The Death of the French Atlantic: Trade, War, and Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford, 2020).

sources. Both Gaffield (who found herself at the center of a news story years ago after discovering the only copy of the Declaration of Independence of Haiti in the United Kingdom's National Archives) and Lewis have successfully challenged a longstanding narrative about the scarcity of sources for the period that followed the independence of Haiti in 1804.[13] By following different heuristic paths, they have demonstrated that Haiti's story can be told not only by relying almost exclusively on centralized French colonial archives, but also by exploring repositories and libraries belonging to the many nations that engaged with Haiti after 1804, whether because of their fears of a possible revolutionary contagion among their enslaved populations, or for less apparent reasons. While Lewis has explored French regional archives as well as the national archives of Great Britain, Senegal, and Haiti, Gaffield has mined British and Vatican City historical archives. In doing so, they have adopted a truly Atlantic comparative outlook that sets their studies apart as fresh paradigms of the most recent scholarship on the Haitian Revolution.

Gaffield has been a leader in this field for years, but she has hardly been alone.[14] For example, works by Matt D. Childs, Ada Ferrer, and Alejandro Gómez on the Haitian Revolution's impact on Spanish American territories like Cuba and Venezuela have placed the then newly independent state at the core of today's Atlantic history.[15] Even Julius S.

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[13] Girard, "The Haitian Revolution, History's New Frontier." For news reports of Gaffield's discovery, see Damien Cave, "Haiti's Founding Document Found in London," *New York Times*, April 1, 2010; and "Haiti Declaration of Independence Found in UK Archives," CNN, April 2, 2010, http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/04/02/uk.haiti.independence.declaration/index.html.

[14] Julia Gaffield, *Haitian Connections: Recognition after Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2015).

[15] Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age*

Scott's legendary Ph.D. dissertation from 1986 has recently been published by Verso, after, in the words of Vincent Brown, "inspiring an entire generation to create a new fields of knowledge about the past."[16] Equally, Lewis's contribution here cannot be stressed enough. Not only has she identified a singular type of *modus operandi* within the second slave trade, but she has also been able to link it to the wider themes and crucibles of empire and emancipation during this period.

Ultimately, by engaging with issues that go beyond Haiti and its transformative revolution, both Gaffield and Lewis offer persuasive arguments pertaining to some relevant aspects of international trade and politics in the first half of the nineteenth century. Lewis, for example, has mapped and documented previous voyages carried out by the slave traders of *Le Marcelin* in order to illustrate the multiple stratagems developed by human traffickers in the second slave trade. By training the proverbial magnifying glass on aspects that at first glance might seem insignificant, such as their small cargo of gum arabic, an essentially African product that could be found only onboard trading vessels that had visited the African coast, Lewis demonstrates the level of craftiness that these men developed in order to continue to trade in Africans. Although she does not devote much time to their pretexts to carry on such

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of Revolution (Cambridge, 2014); Alejandro E. Gómez, *Le spectre de la Révolution noire: L'impact de la Révolution haïtienne dans le monde atlantique, 1790–1886* (Rennes, 2013). For its impact on other parts of the Americas, see, among others, David P. Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia, S.C., 2001); Doris L. Garraway, ed., *Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Richmond, Va., 2008); and James Alexander Dun, *Dangerous Neighbors: Making the Haitian Revolution in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2016).

[16] Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London, 2018); "Yale Announces 2019 Frederick Douglass Book Prize Winner," Yale Macmillan Center, November 12, 2019, https://macmillan.yale.edu/news/yale-announces-2019-frederick-douglass-book-prize-winner.

an inhumane trade—perhaps because they needed no justification—it is apparent from her insights that African human lives meant little to them. Perhaps the main question arising from this wonderful study, then, is whether Haitian authorities were aware of the slave-trading connections of merchants such as those of *Le Marcelin*. Is there any way of ascertaining the extent to which Haiti may have, perhaps because of its desperate trading situation, knowingly accepted trading with slave dealers during these years?

Gaffield, on the other hand, does a superb job of linking Haiti's struggle for sovereignty and recognition within the family of nations to the transnational racist discourses and practices that justified its exclusion for decades. The repeated use of a civilized-barbarian dichotomy that reflected deep racist prejudices among their potential Western partners leads inevitably to discussions around Western terminology to refer to non-European peoples.[17] In this context, one cannot but wonder how Haitians themselves perceived these Westerners in whose hands lay their potential international acceptance. Were they seen as the superior beings they projected themselves to be? Or were they, especially considering their records of massacres during the revolutionary struggle, considered to be savages, too? It is well known that in other places around the world, for instance Qing China, British soldiers and merchants were frequently referred to as "barbarians."[18] Was this ever the case in Haiti? More to the

[17] Particularly relevant for this case is Elizabeth A. Blood, "'Barbares Européens': Colonial Oppression and Liberal Discourse in Barbault-Royer's *Craon et les trois opprimés*," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 26, no. 3 (2000): 447–469.

[18] British Navy surgeon Edward H. Cree, who spent time in China during the First Opium War in the early 1840s, made numerous references to how the Chinese described their European counterparts as barbarians. See Michael Levien, ed., *The Cree Journals: The Voyages of Edward H. Cree, Surgeon R.N., as Related in His Private Journals, 1837–1856* (Exeter, 1981).

point, did the Haitian leadership and Haiti's population have the same outlook regarding civilization, Christianity, and the like as their white Western counterparts?

All in all, while both Gaffield and Lewis make robust contributions to the history of the Haitian Revolution, and more broadly to the history of the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolution, the measure of their success is also denoted by the potential new paths for research upon which they have shed light. Their emphasis on the post-1804 issues surrounding the international recognition of the newly independent state, and the poignant stories they tell, remind us that in spite of the many studies published in recent decades on this crucial event, there is much still to be researched, written, and learned about the years that followed the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Haiti in January 1804. These are terrific articles that can be viewed as signposts, indicating where the future historiography of the Haitian Revolution is headed.

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