

Review of *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*

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“In overthrowing me, you have cut down in Saint-Domingue only the trunk of the tree of the liberty of the blacks; it will grow back from the roots, because they are deep and numerous” (278). Laurent Dubois’ *Avengers of the New World* is a thorough account of the events that led to the Haitian Revolution, the rebellion itself, and how it affected contemporary world powers. The author shows that the enslaved persons of Saint Domingue had all the elements necessary to incite a revolution and that they made adequate use of them. However, by exploring the recurring themes of leadership and freedom, the author also exposes both weaknesses and strengths of the Haitian regime. Ultimately, the strengths of Saint Domingue as a colony were a combination powerful enough to transform it into the country of Haiti.

The theme of leadership in this book begins with the nation of France and its relationship with the colony of Saint Domingue. In the eighteenth century, France was engaged in a revolutionary war against the monarchy by constantly citing colony members’ rights as humans. This was counterintuitive to the system of slavery, a fact which was acknowledged by the slaves as well as by abolitionists in Saint Domingue. The war in France created division in the colonies and resulted in two groups being continually at odds: that of the abolitionists and the staunchly pro-slave planters. This dissension was recognized by slaves and gave them an ally. Whites from the island divided themselves into two governing bodies with competing ideologies – France gave them control over domestic policy, and as a result there was confusion and stratification in Saint Domingue.

From this book, the reviewer got the sense that there was no single leader that could be held directly responsible for the rebellion in its entirety. Leaders came and went during the revolution, but this did not have a negative effect on the progress of slaves. Boukman, Jean-Francois, and Biassou were among a few notable insurgent leaders. After his death, Boukman was seen as a martyr by rebels, while the surviving leaders dealt in the formalities with White planters. The story laid out by Dubois does not depict the rebels as needing a large amount of military guidance. The men fighting this war had recently come from Africa and were experienced in battle. For example, a large number of slaves were from the war-torn country of the Congo and were accustomed to fighting tactics; thus, they knew to hide in the trees and jump out to attack White planters.

In contrast, upon gaining the people their freedom, the indisputable leader of Saint Domingue was Toussaint Louverture. The description the author gives of the way Louverture went about consolidating power and crushing anyone who stood in his way reads as a critique of post-war leadership in Haiti. He mobilized a large army of former slaves and continued goading Black non-workers into going back to plantations and farming, but this time for pay. As the enslaved Blacks of Saint Domingue began to pull themselves up and out of their current situation in the unproductive war-torn state, Toussaint Louverture made connections with other countries, such as the United States, and became increasingly paranoid of other leaders. For example, he engaged in civil war with his former ally, André Rigaud, who was the only other leader of

significance in Saint Domingue at the time. He framed Rigaud as anti-Black (which in this case refers to those insurgents distinctly African), and moreover said that Free Coloreds in general were against the colony.

In addition to his paranoia, Louverture became a dictator over all of the former slaves and Free Coloreds. He believed that laziness was evil and made laws saying that anyone who was not in the military or working would be severely punished. Louverture was becoming like the planter class they had fought to free themselves from – why would a self-proclaimed Black leader put his people in a position to feel like slaves again? This could have been due to the fact that the concept of leadership was not only based on how the people of Saint Domingue viewed the head of the nation, but also how the nation was perceived by other world powers. The people had to work in order to maintain the colony's sought after sugar production as well as other goods for export. Furthermore, to facilitate trade, the nation had to be appealing enough for countries to go against France. Dubois discusses the United States making a trade agreement with the former colony, which they kept from France as long as they could.

The theme of freedom is also a large part of the story of the Haitian revolution, and presumably the reason why there was a revolution in the first place. Yet, how was freedom being defined? Was it static or changing over time, did it have a different meaning for every person? Before the full scale revolt occurred, there were attempts by small groups and individuals to gain better conditions for enslaved persons. For example, Julien Raimond was well known in the colonies for his fight against racial discrimination and prejudice. Others wanted to improve the condition of slaves, coinciding with Enlightenment rhetoric, through the gradual abolition of slavery (72). Those who advocated for the outright abolition of slavery were included in the *Société des Amis des Noires*.

It seemed that the French Revolution was at large what caused demands to escalate. The people of France were fighting for their human rights. They referenced the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* in their battle as well, which spread to Saint Domingue. This was motivation for slaves to seek out their own rights as human beings, because they were able to see how flawed it was that the people of France would own slaves while fighting for rights. Freedom was certainly not a static idea, but one that was changing over time. The concept was responsive to what was going on in France and adapted to what was going on in Saint Domingue.

The author also demonstrates how the definition of freedom conformed to different groups of people. The White, Free Colored, and Black definitions of freedom were completely different. Whites were already free and were downright resistant to any attempts to extend rights to any other groups. Abolitionists in the colonies argued for political representation for Free Coloreds: “how, they demanded, could the National Assembly allow one group of France's citizens to so flagrantly oppress another group in this way?” (83). However, certain colonial representatives in the National Assembly, such as Moreau de St. Méry, argued that masters were kind to Free Coloreds and created the class in the first place.

Freedom for the Colored class was also seen as a vehicle for political representation and their interests aligned more so with that of abolitionists. One leader of a Free Colored uprising, Ogé, compared the rights they were asking for to those of the Third Estate in France. And while these protests went ignored for the most part in the colony, the French government made attempts to placate the lower classes. The National Assembly made a decree that anyone over the age of twenty-five who owned property could vote in elections. However, the terms were pointedly ambiguous, which led to Free Coloreds having to petition and fight for this right to apply to them.

The author shows that Black slaves had a more radical idea of freedom that escalated over time. Initially, slaves wanted an improved quality of life, which included: masters not whipping them and three free days a week. However, because these improvements were not a reality, slaves began organize uprisings. Once these uprisings grew and more slaves became involved, leaders attempted to negotiate for freedom with white planters. Yet the Whites did not want to negotiate – they only wanted slaves back on their plantations. These revolts changed the balance of power, and so White planters reluctantly offered freedom to many slave rebellion leaders and organized insurgents into policing groups. Slaves fought for quality of life issues because they heard that there was a decree granting them rights that had gone unenforced. And they knew that this was their plight alone, not that of Free Coloreds and certainly not that of Whites. After the uprisings began, slaves were not only fighting for an improvement in their quality of life but ultimately for their freedom. The descriptions Dubois provides demonstrate that the idea of freedom developed out of certain concessions made by Whites up until the end of the system of slavery.

Although this is a historical text, the author ended each chapter on a clever note or a cliffhanger, which induced the reader to turn page after page. He was also able to make use of different literary techniques such as puns and other plays on words to retain the reader's interest. For the most part, the organization of this book was coherent, however, at certain points the chronology was a bit unclear. Possibly this was due to way the events unfolded in history. These events occurred in such quick succession that perhaps the author chose to write in that manner as well. The use of images was beneficial to help the reader keep in mind the actors involved in the book. While certainly a text worth reading, the book was somewhat lengthy for the reviewer's taste, and there were several gory details that could have been eliminated without sacrificing any historical information. Lastly, in the reviewer's opinion, Dubois used a plethora of sources, however there were a great many from Paris. It is possible that the records in France may contain biased information considering Saint Domingue removed itself from the power of the mother country. Dubois utilized a multitude of sources, both biased and unbiased, in order to provide a detailed account of the Haitian Revolution and acknowledge those who played an instrumental role in its success.

Freedom and leadership were among the most important themes in this book. They were the motivation and the direction, respectively, for the Haitian revolution. Throughout its history, Haiti has consistently been scorned by other world powers. Not to mention all of the tragedy that has befallen the country over the years, such as the AIDs epidemic of the mid 1970s and the earthquake that devastated millions of Haitians in March of 2010, to name a few notable events. This book allowed me to gain a better understanding of the title that everyone so proudly proclaims for the island – the first free Black nation! Haiti made sacrifices for its well-deserved liberty, yet I wonder if any other colony might have engaged the numerous oppressors of enslaved persons. Lastly, I admire the “all or nothing” approach the Haitians took with the revolt, and it is to that mentality I would attribute the majority of their success.

Reference

Dubois, Laurent. 2004. *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.