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# Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution

Laurent Dubois

Duke University, [laurent.dubois@duke.edu](mailto:laurent.dubois@duke.edu)

Erica Johnson

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## H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Laurent Dubois. *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005. 384 pp., \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01304-9; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-01826-6.



Reviewed for H-LatAm by Erica Johnson

### *The Avenging Revolution*

Laurent Dubois eloquently tells the story of the Haitian Revolution, from the Old Regime to Haitian independence in 1804. The Haitian Revolution is important to world history in many ways. It was the first independent Latin American nation and the second independent country in the Western Hemisphere, after the United States. More significantly, it serves as a strong indication of the radicalism of the eighteenth century. The Haitian Revolution turned the world as known at that time upside down, as former slaves came to govern a former European colony in the Caribbean. Although this significant event has been a long-neglected topic, Dubois does contribute to and moves beyond a limited existing historiography, including the works of such authors as C. L. R. James (*The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* [1938]), Thomas Ott (*The Haitian Revolution, 1789-1804* [1973]), and Carolyn Fick (*The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* [1990]). *Avengers of the New World* coincided with the bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution in 2004, and potentially reaches a broader audience through its readability, style, and sentiment.

Dubois stresses that the revolution did not spontaneously occur one fateful day; during the centuries leading up to the revolution, many factors contributed to the future of the colony. Various tensions existed among the population of Saint-Domingue, which fermented over time. Dubois explains this background in the first three cleverly titled chapters, "Specters of Saint-Domingue," "Fermentation," and "Inheritance." The specters that haunted Saint-Domingue included the indigenous Tainos, privateers, Christopher Columbus and his

expeditions, previous uprisings, white colonists taken by disease, and slaves defeated by the institution of slavery. Absentee owners demanded production from the overseers within the colonies, resulting in resentment and abuse of power and slaves. Although the colony operated under different conditions than the metropole, Paris dictated the laws for Saint-Domingue. White colonists began to crave autonomy. The dependency on slave drivers by the overseers created a hierarchy among the slaves, most of who were African-born. Development of cultural unity through Creole language and religion, coupled with the concentrations of Africans from particular geographic regions, allowed for organization. Free people of color, particularly those of mixed European and African ancestry, inherited great wealth, limited autonomy, and slavery -- many free people of color owned plantations and slaves. Yet they did not inherit French citizenship and equal rights to the white colonists.

Despite popular beliefs, the Haitian Revolution was not just a slave uprising. It was a "transcultural movement" (p. 5). There were three overlapping revolutions within what is collectively titled the Haitian Revolution: a challenge to imperial authority by white colonists, the fight for racial equality by free people of color, and an end to slavery through the mass slave revolt. After the eruption of the French Revolution in 1789, white colonists recognized an opportunity to revise the administration of the colony, some even calling for secession from France. Free people of color attempted to obtain new rights through the revolution. Dubois implicates these free people of color as similar to the Third Estate in France--perhaps even an equivalent. The most significant element of the revolution was the slave uprising in August 1791, to which Dubois devotes the bulk of the text. Whites fled the revolt; therefore, France sent commissioners to return peace to the colony, eventually resulting in universal emancipation in 1794. However, this did not end the revolution. The surviving black leaders on the island continued to battle for power. In 1800, Toussaint Louverture took control of the island, including Santo Domingo to the East, which the Spanish had ceded to France in 1795. In 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte sent General Charles Leclerc to remove Louverture from power through a three-stage plan. The French army successfully removed Louverture, but the ex-slaves, fearing the reinstatement of slavery, willingly fought to the death to maintain their freedom. In 1804, Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared Haitian independence.

Inspired by the words of early historian and philosopher Louis Sebastien Mercier, who predicted a slave uprising (1771), and revolutionary leader Dessalines (1804), Dubois symbolically titled his book "Avengers of the New World". In many ways, this book avenges Haiti's history by resituating the revolution within greater contexts, including Atlantic history. Dubois highlights

the enlightened, not barbaric, culture in Saint-Domingue leading up to the revolution. He describes the multivolume history of the island undertaken by M d ric-Louis-Elie Moreau de St. M ry as a "classic Enlightenment project" (p. 10). He also notes the scientific exploration in Saint-Domingue by the Cercle de Philadelphes, a colonial learned society founded in 1785, and the ascension of the first balloon over the Americas in 1784, only one year after France had done so across the Atlantic. One of his primary sources is a colonial newspaper founded in 1791, the *Moniteur G n ral de la Partie Fran aise de Saint-Domingue*. In addition to the Enlightenment activities in the colony, Dubois explains how the Haitian Revolution was not a response to the French Revolution, but a vital part of the larger "Age of Revolution." Dubois asserts, "The slaves of Saint-Domingue who had helped lay the foundation for the French Revolution would ultimately make it their own, and even surpass it, in their own struggle for liberty" (p. 21). Despite the necessary use of racial terminology within the book, such as "gens de couleur" and "petits blancs," Dubois cautions against the employment of race to generalize or simplify the complexities of the revolution, because "complicated ideological and political forces often divided groups that we might be tempted to see as unified by 'race'" (p. 6).

Although not based on archival research, Dubois's detail and analysis of printed primary and secondary sources successfully challenge some long-accepted myths within European and North American historiography regarding the Haitian Revolution. One such myth is of the religious ceremony at Bois-Caïman, where slaves planned the initial slave uprising of the Haitian Revolution. Only one written account of the event exists, but it is from the negative perspective of a white surgeon, Antoine Dalmas, who fled to the United States. Yet many historians have attempted to study the ceremony, from arguing for its veracity (James in his "Black Jacobins") to doubting its existence (David Patrick Geggus in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* [2002]).<sup>[1]</sup> Through an analysis of Dalmas's account and a synthesis of the existing secondary literature, Dubois explains the importance of Bois-Caïman as a symbol in Haitian revolutionary history. He writes, "Thus Bois-Caïman remains a symbol of the achievement of the slave insurgents of Saint-Domingue, a symbol not of a specific event whose details we can pin down, but rather of the creative spiritual and political epic that both prompted and emerged from the 1791 insurrection" (p. 102). Like Dalmas's account, the other sources used by Dubois are available in published form. His primary sources range from an official report recorded by Jean-Philippe Garran-Coulon to the *Philadelphia General Advertiser*. Perhaps an archival source-based study could add to the informative efforts of Dubois.

Dubois includes a thoughtful epilogue, "Out of the Ashes," which explains the ramifications of the revolution for Haiti and the world around it." "After independence, Haiti scarcely experienced peace, because some of the promises of the revolution remained unfulfilled. For slaves, free blacks, and abolitionists throughout the Atlantic, the Haitian Revolution was inspirational. Some of these people left record of their inspired efforts, such as Frederick Douglass and Victor Schoelcher. Dubois writes, "Through such writings, through conversations, through rumors and nightmares and dreams, those who died for and lived through the Haitian Revolution became part of every society in the Atlantic world. They continue to speak to us, as founders in a long struggle for dignity and freedom that remains incomplete" (p. 306).

*Note*

[1]. See also, for example, Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Robin Law, "La Cérémonie du Bois-Caïman et le 'pacte de sang' dahoméen," in "L'Insurrection des esclaves de Saint-Domingue" (22-23 août 1791): "actes de la table ronde internationale de Port-au-Prince, 8 au 10 décembre 1997," ed. Laennec Hurbon (Paris: Karthala, 2000), 131-147; and Léon-François Hoffman, "Un Mythe national: La cérémonie du Bois-Caïman," in "La République haïenne: Etat des lieux et perspectives," ed. Gérard Barthélemy and Christian Girault (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 434-448.

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