

Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution. By LAURENT DUBOIS. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004. 384 pages. \$29.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

A Colony of Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804. By LAURENT DUBOIS. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. 466 pages. \$55.00 (cloth), \$22.50 (paper).

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Students cannot find it on a map. Too many historians—even those who specialize in the early national era—confuse the French colony of Saint Domingue with Spanish Saint Domingo. One celebrated biographer of John Adams refers to the colony as “San Domingo” and misspells the name of Toussaint-Louverture. Residents of the 1790s knew better, of course. On the August night in 1791 when slaves set fire to the cane, Saint Domingue was the most prosperous colony in the Americas, and its subsequent saga was recounted daily in mainland newspapers. During the next decade, the strange fortunes of the Haitian Revolution inspired blacks and alarmed whites throughout the Atlantic world.

In the first comprehensive account since Thomas O. Ott’s slim 1973 survey, Laurent Dubois’s *Avengers of the New World* recounts the Haitian saga from the eve of the revolution to independence on New Year’s Day, 1804.¹ (Like Ott, Dubois includes a brief introductory chapter on early Haitian history and concludes with a short epilogue on the legacy of the revolt.) In a second volume intended more for specialists, *A Colony of Citizens*, the author broadens the story to cover the larger course of abolition and reenslavement in the French empire, this time with the focus on Guadeloupe. Elegantly written and meticulously researched, both will be regarded as the standard accounts for some time to come.

Designed for students and academics alike, *Avengers of the New World* sets the record straight on a number of issues, yet Dubois does so without breaking his narrative stride. On the question of whether Boukman, the initial rebel leader, held a religious ceremony in the woods near Bois-Caïman—Léon-François Hoffman famously denounced it as mythical in 1993—Dubois not only sides with David P. Geggus and Carolyn E. Fick in believing that it took place but also demonstrates that by moving the generally accepted date to Sunday, August 14, the isolated plantation offered a convenient gathering place for slaves on their way back from the town’s markets.² Stripping away its legendary trappings, Dubois shows how the ceremony indicates the central place that religion played in the initial revolt. All popular revolutions require leaders and careful planning. But once “the insurrection began,” Dubois observes, “religion helped inspire insurgents, and solidified the power of certain leaders” (101). French soldiers reported that rebels marched toward battle singing African songs, music broken only by the religious incantations of insurgent leaders. As in other parts of the Americas, Africans armed themselves with *ouanga* (fetishes) as protection against white military might.

Altogether different from Boukman and his invocation of spiritual inspiration was the man who ultimately came to guide the revolution. Given the absence of a modern biography of Toussaint-Louverture, Dubois’s lengthy chapter in *Avengers of the New World* supplies the best

¹ Thomas O. Ott, *The Haitian Revolution, 1789–1804* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1973).

² Léon-François Hoffman, “Un mythe national: le cérémonie du Bois-Caïman,” in *La République Haïtienne: État des lieux et perspectives*, ed. Gérard Barthélemy and Christian Girault (Paris, 1993), 434–45; David P. Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington, Ind., 2002), 81–92; Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1990), 260–66.

account yet in print of the black general's early life. Building on the research of Geggus and Stewart King, Dubois reveals that Toussaint, a Creole born on the Bréda plantation, had been free since the late 1770s.³ Set to work as a coachman and a tender of livestock, he was raised Catholic, was literate in French, and knew some Latin. Though Dubois acknowledges that it is nearly impossible to separate fact from fiction regarding Toussaint's early life, he appears to accept the probably fanciful notion advanced by Isaac Louverture, Toussaint's son and earliest biographer, that Toussaint's father was an African prince. Regardless, as an educated Christian who had been both a master and a slave, Toussaint was the perfect man to lead the revolt following Boukman's death. By the time he issued his 1793 proclamation under the adoptive surname Louverture, the freedman had positioned himself as the ultimate defender of liberty in Saint Domingue. (Curiously, Dubois's editors at the Omohundro Institute insisted on the traditional spelling of Toussaint's chosen surname, "L'Ouverture," in *A Colony of Citizens*, whereas Harvard allowed for "Louverture" in *Avengers of the New World*, which is how the surviving archival documents indicate he signed his name.)

As word of the revolt spread, white authorities on both sides of the Atlantic struggled to contain the damage to their plantation economies, a tale recounted most fully in *A Colony of Citizens*. Though a number of deputies in the (French) National Convention supported immediate abolition, conservatives embraced black freedom only when it became clear that Haitians would liberate themselves regardless, or in hopes that former slaves might take up arms against the British. When former commissioner Léger Félicité Sonthonax was called on to explain his actions in Saint Domingue, he retorted that faced with reactionary whites and ambitious mulattoes, the "blacks are the true sans-culottes of the colonies" and the only people "capable of defending the country" (167) against its many enemies. By demonstrating that the question of the Caribbean forced the French Convention to confront the issue of who was a citizen under the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, Dubois reveals the absurdity of traditional accounts of the age of revolution that focus only on continental affairs.

Less easy to document is the effect the Saint Domingue revolt had on slaves around the Atlantic basin. The white magistrates who sat in judgment on black rebels rarely asked about the sources of their inspiration, but within a few months of the night of fire, masters from Virginia to Cuba were complaining of the aggressive insolence their bondmen suddenly displayed. In Rio de Janeiro, black soldiers donned medallions bearing the portrait of Jean-Jacque Dessalines, though rumors abounded in the Cuban fields that Haitians would land to fight for their freedom. As Dubois points out in *Avengers of the New World*, whereas the insurrectionary leader Gabriel hoped to forge the same sort of slave and white radical alliance in Richmond that helped to destroy slavery in Saint Domingue, black abolitionist Denmark Vesey actually planned a mass exodus out of Charleston into Haitian harbors. "Though Haiti's rulers never openly supported revolts elsewhere," Dubois writes, "some did invite any who escaped slavery to take refuge in their land" (305).

Ironically, white masters on the American mainland had less to fear than they thought, at least during the late 1790s. Louverture understood that permanent black liberty depended on restoring order and prosperity. Continued devastation and the death of more whites, he recognized, would erode any support the freedmen enjoyed among Paris radicals and supply the Executive Directory with incentive to invade. The general's October and November 1800 proclamations regarding cultivation have earned him the disdain of writers such as Maryse Condé, whose play, *In the Time of the Revolution*, depicts Louverture as a power-hungry tyrant.⁴ If one ignores the dangerous geopolitical threats that Louverture faced, his edicts returning former slaves to the land, together

³ Stewart King, "Toussaint L'Ouverture before 1791: Free Planter and Slave-Holder," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 3-4 (1997-98): 66-71.

⁴ Maryse Condé, *In the Time of the Revolution*, performed at the University of Georgia, October 1997.

with his denunciation of “idleness,” “disorder,” and “banditry,” appear to support such an interpretation. On this question Dubois is closer to Condé than to Ott, who contextualized Louverture’s decrees against the background of his need to rebuild the colony’s shattered economy and emphasized the general’s banning of the whip and demands for shared wealth. Whether one agrees with Dubois’s characterization (in *Avengers of the New World*) of Louverture as a dictator, it is undoubtedly true that when French ships at last arrived to reinstate slavery, more than a few liberal officers and laborers “were unwilling to fight to save him” (250).

To the extent that the cagey Louverture was a clever enough politician to never reveal his hand, his shifting alliances and closeness with returning white planters will mystify many readers. Dubois is particularly adept, however, in disentangling Louverture’s complicated détente with the conservative regimes of William (the Younger) Pitt and John Adams. Though Louverture evidently believed that the current Executive Directory intended no return to slavery, he recognized the lack of consistency in Paris, since one director left each year to make room for another. The general wanted a complete British withdrawal from Saint Domingue, yet he recognized the need for English trade to rebuild his economy. More than that, the suspension of commercial relations with the United States at the onset of the Quasi War further damaged his ability to feed and clothe his army. Despite the fact that both governments were at war with revolutionary France, Louverture quietly opened negotiations with British General Thomas Maitland and sent word to President Adams that further assaults on American shipping in his waters would immediately cease. “It was a bold step” (225), Dubois observes in *Avengers of the New World*, since Louverture’s decision to make peace and reopen trade with France’s two greatest enemies was tantamount to declaring independence, a step Louverture surely thought ultimately necessary.

The author, however, is less sympathetic to Louverture’s refusal to allow the Executive Directory to stage invasions of British sugar islands from Saint Domingue. The general understood that the price of trade and noninterference on his half of the island required noninterference with rival European powers in the Caribbean. France briefly considered launching invasions into the American South and British Jamaica under Gabriel Marie Théodore-Joseph d’Hédouville, the infamous “pacifier of the Vendée” (217). Though the Executive Directory’s motivation was to weaken the ability of Britain and the United States to make war, if successful, those invasions also would have resulted in black liberation. In the name of preserving the freedoms achieved in Saint Domingue, however, Louverture “betrayed a conspiracy to incite a slave uprising in Jamaica” (225). Underemphasized here is that numerous Paris radicals warned Louverture that the Executive Directory was not opposed to the possibility of Louverture’s black armies being destroyed in suicidal attacks. Louverture recognized that his legions, and not French goodwill, ultimately protected freedom in Saint Domingue, and if he had to turn his back on widespread black liberation around the Atlantic basin in hopes of protecting the hard-won gains of his people, that was a price he was willing to pay.

If Dubois is perhaps too critical of Louverture, Thomas Jefferson emerges from these pages relatively unscathed. Though the third president’s rejection of Adams’s détente with Louverture was also based in part on pragmatic statecraft—he wished to appease Napoleon Bonaparte in hopes of acquiring Louisiana—the fact remains that Jefferson’s tacit endorsement of a French invasion of the colony helped to crush black liberty in other parts of the French Caribbean. It is curious that the Virginian merits not even a cameo in *A Colony of Citizens*. In *Avengers of the New World*, Dubois notes that Jefferson favored a policy of containment to limit the influence of black rebelliousness on his plantation world. Even so Dubois only hints at the racism that informed Jefferson’s diplomacy and quite nearly sabotaged his own attempts to purchase New Orleans. As Michael Zuckerman, Donald R. Hickey, and especially Robert L. Paquette have observed, had Bonaparte succeeded in conquering

Saint Domingue and reenslaving the Haitian people, he would never have sold the Louisiana breadbasket to the United States.⁵

These, of course, are all matters of interpretation about which historians will continue to quibble. Dubois has done a marvelous job with these volumes. Recapturing the complicated stories of Haiti's revolution, Caribbean abolition, and the European political context in which both were embedded requires skills in numerous languages and a knowledge of African culture and religion, together with an understanding of French, British, Spanish, and American political and military strategies. It is hard to imagine that another scholar could do a finer job, and whether another could pull them off simultaneously.

⁵ Michael Zuckerman, *Almost Chosen People: Oblique Biographies in the American Grain* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993); Donald R. Hickey, "America's Response to the Slave Revolt in Haiti, 1791–1806," *Journal of the Early Republic* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 361–79; Robert L. Paquette, "Revolutionary Saint Domingue in the Making of Territorial Louisiana," in *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and David P. Geggus (Bloomington, Ind., 1997) 204–25.