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200 YEARS OF FORGETTING Hushing up the Haitian Revolution

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For many years, the island of Hispaniola served as a prototype for the European conquest of the New World. It also gave home to the world's first Black Republic. Between 1791 and 1804, an army of former slaves successfully overthrew the colonial regime. This event, however (despite its enormous effect on future developments in the Western hemisphere), is almost forgotten in the West today. This article explores the reasons for the deletion of the Haitian Revolution from the West's historical map.

Keywords: *Haitian Revolution; Toussaint Louverture; historical discourse; memory politics*

A hermeneutic tradition maintains that to understand means to understand differently.¹ Although originally intended to describe our understanding of texts, the premise proves especially true in the realm of history. Historiography is necessarily selective. And it is never free of twists and distortions. *If* an event is remembered (and *how* it is remembered) is not up to its actors and witnesses. For those who have to live it, history is a mess. It is only future generations that—in a complex interplay of memorizing and forgetting—give the past a meaningful and well ordered appearance.²

It is not surprising, therefore, that contemporaries of the revolution, which took place from 1791 to 1804 in the French colony of Saint Domingue on the very island where Columbus had built the first European settlement in the New World, failed to recognize the

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enormous effect that revolution would have on future developments in the Western hemisphere.

And enormous indeed it was: It not only resulted in the creation of the independent state of Haiti—a nation led by Blacks, the second republic in the Americas, and the first modern state to abolish slavery—but without the Haitian Revolution, the United States today quite likely would be little more than a small strip of land on the eastern coast of North America. That is, if there were a country called the United States of America at all.³

Prospects for the 16⁴ states in the Union didn't look too good during the first years of the 19th century. The British had anything but given up their plans to reconquer their former colonies, and with Napoleonic France, a new powerful enemy had entered the stage.

Napoleon's objectives were as clear as they were ambitious: Having acquired the vast Louisiana Territory from Spain in 1800, he aimed at nothing less than an empire stretching from the Rocky Mountains to India, from northern Russia to the Sahara. And with Europe's most powerful army at his disposal, who should stop him? Certainly not the United States, with their "pathetic 3,000-man regular army" (Fleming, 2001, p. 144).

Napoleon decided, however, to let his troops make a small detour to end a tiresome little slave revolt in one of the French colonies in the Caribbean, Saint Domingue. Nothing serious. Six weeks, by his estimate, certainly should be more than enough to end the insurrection, restore French rule, and move on to North America (Fleming, 2001, p. 141).

Or so he thought. Two years and almost 60,000 dead French troops later, a disillusioned Napoleon, fed up with reports about losses and defeats in the colony, abandoned his plans for a transatlantic France.

The U.S. emissaries Monroe and Livingston, sent to Paris in a desperate attempt of the Jefferson administration to at least sign an agreement that allowed U.S. citizens to navigate the Mississippi and store their export goods in New Orleans,⁵ must have been quite surprised when they were offered to buy the whole Louisiana terri-

tory instead. And for a ridiculously small amount of money. A real bargain⁶ that in one stroke doubled the size of the United States.

Eight months later, on January 1, 1804, the former colony of Saint Domingue under its new leader Jacques Dessalines became independent and took on the ancient Amerindian name Haiti.⁷ What nobody would have anticipated could no longer be denied: A motley crowd of former slaves had somehow defeated “la grande armée”—the great army that in the preceding years had marched almost effortlessly through the whole of Europe.

There is no controversy about these facts. And no matter which standards we apply, the Haitian Revolution doubtlessly should rate among the major historical events of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The fact may have gone unnoticed by its contemporaries, but it should on no account have escaped future historians.

Yet, somehow it did. It did in the United States, and it did even more so in Europe. When I started working on this article, I was a real pain in the neck for everybody I happened to meet. I have asked people sitting on a park bench next to me, cashiers in stores, waiters and teachers, as well as janitors and students if they knew anything about the Haitian Revolution and its leaders. Many of them did—on one condition: They had to be Black. Blacks in the United States, it seems, have always kept the memory of the revolution alive.⁸ They did in speeches and pamphlets, in books and festivals. Thus, the anniversary of Haiti’s independence was commemorated throughout the first quarter of the 19th century as an alternative to the 4th of July that offered little to celebrate for the Black portion of the nation (Bethel, 1997, p. 6).

With White Americans and Europeans, however, the picture was different. Even if folks didn’t confuse Haiti with Tahiti for a start, the names Toussaint Louverture or Jacques Dessalines usually didn’t ring a bell. “Wait a minute,” people kept asking me, “you’re telling me they really had a revolution down there? Interesting.”

Interesting, indeed. Now please don’t get me wrong. I don’t want to blame anybody for his ignorance. It was only last year that I myself first heard about the Haitian Revolution.⁹ If someone is to be blamed, it is Western historiography.

Just open an average history textbook dealing with the “revolutionary period.” What are you likely to find? Pages and pages dedicated to the Boston Tea Party and the storming of the Bastille. But if you check the index for Haiti—nothing. Toussaint Louverture, Jacques Dessalines, André Rigaud, or Henri Christophe? Dead loss. As if there had never been such a thing as a revolution in Haiti. Its leaders buried in the depths of historical insignificance. Its economic, political, and social effects in the Caribbean and abroad hushed up, hidden under multiple layers of silence. The question of course is, why is this so?

True, the political situation on the island was extremely complicated. But does this really entitle historiography to say, “Oh, that topic is just too difficult. We better skip it.”¹⁰ Of course not. History always tends to be complicated. And it is historiography’s task to understand it nevertheless. Or at least to try.

One might further argue that history is written by the winners. If you lose (and France, England, and Spain definitely lost in Haiti), you won’t make a big fuss over it. That too, however, can’t explain the joint silence of almost all Western historiography. The United States, without any doubt, had profited from the revolution. Yet, they not only actively tried to prevent the spreading of news about it by prohibiting all trade with Haiti; they wouldn’t even acknowledge the very existence of the independent republic until well into the Civil War.¹¹

And what’s more, even if it made some sense for slave owners to hush up the revolution, why should the United States continue to do so, once slavery was abolished? It would be easy to just blame it on the malevolence of racist historians. I think, however, that there is more to it than just malice. I believe that there were (and are) structural features of Western historical discourse that can (and must) be held responsible for it.

To be more precise, I shall argue that the main difference between the Haitian and the French and American revolutions is that the former was utterly incomprehensible for its White contemporaries. And by incomprehensible I don’t just mean that they didn’t understand its details—what I want to say is that there

was no way they could possibly have understood it. Not only because history is such a mess for those who live it, but because the very fact of a Black revolution was in itself unthinkable (Trouillot, 1995, p. 73) at the time it happened and for many years to come.

Why is that? Knowledge (be it scientific or philosophical) doesn't evolve in steady progression. It doesn't follow a straight path from past to future. It takes detours, makes wrong turns, gets stuck in dead ends, and starts over again. At any moment in history, there are ideas that can be thought and others that simply can't. Well, of course they can. But they won't make any sense in the opinion of most contemporaries. To think them, one has to break with the very foundations of contemporary knowledge. An earth orbiting the sun? That's not just an astronomical statement. It shatters fundamental truths of theology and philosophy as well. If you happen to live in, say, 16th-century Europe, it is definitely not a thought that you would come up with easily.

The confines of reasonable thinking are defined by discourse. One might call these discursive limits *worldviews*. Others call them *paradigms* or *common sense*. But whatever name tag we give them, it is they that determine what is right and wrong, true and false, thinkable and unthinkable.¹² They determine what is and what is not, what can be and what can't. And for Western historiography in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a revolution by Blacks definitely was something that could not be.

Slaves could run away, alright. They could kill their overseers (not nice, but it had happened before). They could even gang up against their masters and burn down whole plantations and cities (very unpleasant but possible). But they were certainly not capable of organizing themselves and combating (let alone successfully) a well-trained European army.

Yet, they did. Here was the West, equipped with a whole ontology based on the notion that Blacks are inferior to Whites, unable to take care of themselves, naturally designed for slavery, the bottom rung of the ladder of human evolution—and these Blacks kept winning battle after battle. They defeated the French, they defeated the British, they defeated the Spanish. This simply could not be. Impossible.

Quite obviously, the West had a problem. Something had gone terribly wrong in Saint Domingue. But what? It sure looked like there were Blacks fighting for their freedom. But that didn't make any sense. Those Africans didn't even have a word for freedom in their languages!¹³ Why would they die in thousands in its pursuit?

At this critical moment, the West had two options: modify its ontology and admit that Blacks are not inferior to Whites, or trivialize the facts. Historiography quite successfully opted for the latter, either by ignoring the revolution completely or by downplaying its significance and at the same time overemphasizing aspects that fit into Western ontology.

To be sure, if any revolution ever deserved to be called *revolution*, it was Haiti's. The Latin verb *revolvere* literally means "roll over." And in Haiti, for once in a way, we don't just see the replacement of one ruler through another—a king through a president, a monarchy through a republic, capitalism through socialism, or the like. It's been a transformation at all levels. A slave-holding society became a society of free Blacks. Peasantry was substituted for plantation economy, Kreyole for French, religious syncretisms for Catholicism. If this isn't a revolution, what is?

Yet, White contemporaries, historians, scholars, and novelists have all too often hesitated to apply the term. They speak of an insurrection instead (Henty, n.d.), a rebellion, an uprising, a revolt, ruthless murders, disturbances, riots, a madness (Dew, 1849, p. 4), outbursts of the Negro's violent character (Maurer, 1950, p. 69), or simply the time "when the blacks killed the whites" (Kleist, 1811, p. 1).¹⁴ Ironically, it seems that the one major exception from this rule was precisely the South of the United States. Here, slaveholders were well aware of what happened to their French colleagues in Saint Domingue. Here too, however, the revolution was not to become an issue of extensive debate. Rather, it served as a public spectre, a warning example of what the consequences of emancipation would doubtlessly be (Hunt, 1988, p. 124ff).

It is astonishing that in the two centuries since the revolution, the pattern of ignoring or belittling facts never really came to a complete stop. Even today, in most publications, one can easily spot the two major tropes that serve the purpose of silencing the disturbing

voices that try to reach us from the Caribbean (Trouillot, 1995, p. 96ff). The first class may be labeled “erasing tropes.” By denying the very fact of the revolution, these tropes are usually employed by textbook authors. The simplest way to apply erasing tropes is to just shut the hell up. If you can avoid it, don’t write about it. The second class of rhetorical strategies is more complex. They silence by burying the events under layers of background noise. One may term them “trivializing tropes.”¹⁵ They can roughly be divided into three subcategories.

First, many texts concentrate on isolated persons or events and empty them of their revolutionary content. Whatever they are talking about thus becomes a trivial detail in a trivial chain of events. Typical examples for this strategy are the numerous biographies of Toussaint Louverture. His life and (perhaps even more) his sad and lonely death in a cold dungeon of the Château de Joux, close to the city of Pontarlier in the French Jura mountains, served as an ideal screen for romanticizing tales of chivalry and treason.¹⁶ Ironically, it’s exactly the practice of presenting Toussaint as so outstanding a Black person that obliterates the fact that he was Black. In most biographies, he acts *like* a European and succeeds *as* a European.¹⁷

Second, in most texts published on the Haitian Revolution, one finds a strong tendency toward biophysical explanations and conspiracy theories. The revolution is explained as an overreaction to individually suffered atrocities, combined with a thorough misunderstanding of French revolutionary theory that somehow just got out of hand. Its success is put down to the interference of other European forces in the conflict and further explained by overemphasizing European losses through yellow fever and tropical climate.¹⁸ True, these authors concede, the European armies were defeated—not by a superior Black army, however, but by an unhappy coincidence of bad weather, mean bugs, and competing European powers. Within this line of thinking, even one of the strangest details of the French campaign suddenly seems to make sense: When, in November 1803, the leader of the French army, General Rochambeau, finally gave up fighting, he negotiated a 10-day armistice with Dessalines and then surrendered to a British fleet cruising offshore.¹⁹ At this time, Rochambeau had been fight-

ing against a Black army for about 2 years. One might think that this should have been time enough to somehow realize that his enemies had neither White faces nor were they fighting under the Union Jack. But having been beaten by Blacks, very obviously, was not something that he considered a possibility.

Finally and third, the events are judged from an exclusively Western vantage point. This, too, was a powerful silencer. According to Western standards, the revolution had been a failure. It had been a failure on the economic level, and it had been a failure on the political and social levels. No matter how much damage 13 years of civil war and the subsequent embargoes by France, Britain, and the United States had done to the local economy, the fact is that although French Saint Domingue once was the richest colony the world had ever seen, the independent state of Haiti soon was to become the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. And freedom? Sure, the country was now ruled by Black dictators. But does the absence of a White ruling class already qualify as freedom?

Dealing with the Haitian Revolution, the critical question for historiography usually was, Did it improve the living conditions of the people according to Western standards? And the verdict was almost unanimous: No, it didn't. Things changed, but they changed for the worse. This assessment is certainly true for large parts of the 20th century. The situation was, however, less clear in the years immediately following the revolution. The enormous death toll among the slaves, which required constant importation of Africans to keep the labor force at least to some extent stable, dropped down to a level that could be evened out by births. And compared to the living conditions of working class people in Europe, the Haitians were probably rather better off than many of their Western contemporaries (not to mention the slaves in the southern United States).

The underlying principle of the latter argument makes no attempt to disguise its teleological nature. It is deeply rooted in an understanding of history as evolution. *Revolution*, in this worldview, is seen as nothing more than a shortcut of *evolution*—a great leap toward a bright future instead of many small steps. And this bright future, of course, is one according to Western standards. It leaves no space for alternative value systems or lifestyles.

Accordingly, when historians dealt with the Haitian Revolution, they usually described it as *devolution*—as a reversion to African barbarism in the absence of White control.²⁰ It took more than 130 years after the revolution for the first couple of books breaking with this view to reach a larger audience in the West.²¹ Since then, at least some scholars have changed their perception of the events in Haiti, even though the wide public still remains largely unaffected by this new approach.

There is, however, at least some hope that things might change in the future. Last April, it was 200 years since Toussaint Louverture was found dead in his chair at the Château de Joux. The anniversary did not go unnoticed. In Pontarlier, it was commemorated with a calendar, prestamped envelopes and postcards, exhibitions, theater productions, concerts, a Haitian film festival, and numerous talks and speeches. None of them tried to deny the atrocities France committed during its colonial period and the Haitian war of independence, none of them tried to belittle the role of Blacks in the revolution, none of them fell into the trap of equating revolution with evolution or devolution, and there were quite a number of Haitian artists involved in the planning and realization of the events.

It is probably correct to say that Europe has started appropriating the Haitian Revolution by making it part of her own history. I think, however, that this is a good move. It signals the long-needed break with the Eurocentric assumption that everything of historical importance must have been done by Whites. And it might eventually open the path to a less-biased view of history. It is only a small step, but one in the right direction. It is hoped that it is a beginning—the beginning of substituting Eurocentricity for Eurocentrism.

NOTES

1. The idea is generally ascribed to Schleiermacher, who defined the goal of hermeneutics as “to understand an author better than he understood himself.” This better understanding, of course, does not refer to the object of the text but to the text itself, not to the referent of the text but to the text as referent (Gadamer, 1990, p. 195f).

2. As Napoleon is said to have put it, "History is the myth men choose to believe," cited in Robinson (2000, p. 33).

3. For this estimate, see De Witt Talmage in *Christian Herald*, November 28, 1906 (quoted in Du Bois, 1915, p. 103). See also Du Bois (1939, p. 176) and Egerton (1993, p. 170).

4. By the time of the Haitian Revolution, the original 13 states had been joined by Vermont (1791), Kentucky (1792), and Tennessee (1796). Depending on the year in consideration, one might further add Ohio (1803). I didn't include it here because it only joined the Union at about the time when Napoleon had already decided to give up his plans for a transatlantic empire.

5. This was one of the minimal aims of their mission. The main intention was to buy New Orleans and Florida. Should Napoleon neglect to sell Florida, then Livingston and Monroe should settle for the purchase of New Orleans. And if that failed too, they should acquire the navigation and storage rights mentioned in the text. In case they failed to accomplish this, the emissaries should move on to London to build a coalition with Britain against France (Blumberg, 1998, p. 87).

6. The price in 1803 was US \$15 million for roughly 868,000 square miles (or an approximate of 4 cents per acre). The equivalents in today's money would be US \$750 million (or US \$2 per acre). The figures are projected from Fleming (2001, pp. 134, 141).

7. This choice of name is quite surprising. One might have expected Dessalines to come up with something a little more "African." However, almost all of the leaders of the revolution had in fact been locally born. Geggus (2002, p. 35) points out that this includes figures often identified as Africans, such as Biassou, Moïse, Dessalines, and (very probably) Boukman. Many of them had been fighting in the war of independence of the United States (Aptheker, 1940; Bullock, n.d.; Kaplan, 1973). The thesis that the Haitian revolutionaries didn't think of themselves as Africans is further supported by Dessalines's proclamation of April 28, 1804. In it, he didn't say anything like, "Justice has been done to Africa." Instead, he boasted, "j'ai vengé l'Amérique" [I have avenged America] (Baskett, 1818, p. 308; Madiou, 1922, p. 128; Rainsford, 1805, p. 448).

Taking into account that more than half of the island's population was actually born in Africa, Dessalines's anchoring of the revolution in an Amerindian past still has to be analyzed. He certainly chose the name Haiti to mark a break with Europe. Still, the question is legitimate, if he might have wanted to mark an equally decisive break with Africa, too, adopting the skeptical view on the continent's present that had been typical for African American authors throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Reinhardt, 2002).

8. Despite the attempts to prevent the news about the revolution from spreading, African American slaves were only too aware of what had happened only 600 miles south of the United States. Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey were only two leaders of slave insurrections said to have been inspired by the deeds of Louverture, Dessalines, Rigaud, and Christophe (Du Bois, 1903/1997, p. 636; Egerton, 1993, p. 46; Robertson, 1999, p. 118).

Among the more influential texts dealing with the Haitian Revolution were Holly (1857) and Smith (1841). For further evidence for the vivid image of the revolution in the memory of Black America, see Foner (1975). Apart from nonfictional texts dealing with Haiti, the revolution has found its way into numerous novels and dramas (e.g., Shange, 1977): "TOUSSAINT/my first blk man/ . . . TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE/waz the biginnin uv reality for me" (p. 26). See also Gillespie (1998).

9. Actually, I *had* read about it before. There are some faint echoes of the revolution in German literature (e.g., Buch, 1986; Kleist, 1811). These echoes, however, did little to make

me believe that anything important had happened in Saint Domingue after 1791. My history books did even less. It was only when I started to study African American authors of the 19th and early 20th centuries that I started to understand the significance of the events.

10. And complicated it was indeed. Not just two parties or three but multiple: enslaved Africans and locally born slaves, free Blacks and Mulattos (or anciens libres), French plantation owners and merchants (the grands blancs or big Whites) and their overseers, peasants and artisans (the petits blancs or little Whites), Royalists and Jacobins, the British, the Spanish, and the United States. Each of these groups fighting the others in varying coalitions and with varying political agendas. And complications didn't stop here. It seems hardly possible to only fit the major leaders of the revolution into handy categories. They certainly were not just a bunch of "gilded Africans," a contemptuous Napoleon once called them, swearing that he would not rest until he had torn the epaulettes from their shoulders (Parkinson, 1978, p. 155). But who were they?

The best known of the leaders, without any doubt, is Toussaint Louverture. His parents were brought from Africa (his grandfather generally is believed to have been king among the Arada). Toussaint was born into slavery as François Dominique Toussaint Bréda. Sometime around the year 1773, he was set free or bought his freedom. He acquired a small coffee plantation and became himself a slave owner—at least for some time (see Debien, Fouchard, & Menier, 1977; Geggus, 2002, p. 37; Pluchon, 1989, p. 57). The parish of Borgnes mentions Toussaint 1776 as "Toussaint Bréda, nègre libre," adding that he had set one of his slaves free (Lambalot, 1989, p. 9).

Whether or not at this time Toussaint had a view on slavery as morally wrong is open to speculation. However, when the revolution started in 1791, he committed himself to the fight for abolition. Not the most natural thing in the world to do for a free Black in Saint Domingue. Quite on the contrary, most of Toussaint's fellow anciens libres were fighting to preserve their privileges as slave owners. Yet, determined as he was to end slavery in Saint Domingue, when the French and mulattoes tried to foment a slave rebellion in Jamaica to weaken the British, he betrayed the plot to the Jamaican administration (Geggus, 2002, p. 24).

In fact, Toussaint seems to have done everything in his power to prevent the revolution from spreading to the neighboring islands and the North American continent. So, whatever his interests in Black liberation may have been, when it came to the condition of Blacks outside of Haiti, he practiced a realpolitik that allowed him to keep on good terms with his neighbors to preserve his autonomy—not independence, but a certain autonomy as French colony.

Toussaint's case is interesting on yet another level: When he acquired his freedom, he became, although of "purely African stock," nominally a mulatto. Originally, of course, the term designated a person of mixed ancestry. In the French colonies, however, over the years the expression became synonymous with "free person of color" (nègre libre), whereas *Black* (noir) basically meant "slave" (Buch, 1976, p. 39; Geggus, 2002, p. 6; Saint-Méry, 1797/1985).

11. When, in 1825, President John Quincy Adams only vaguely and hesitantly suggested taking up diplomatic relations with Haiti, the capitol rang with Southern cries of indignation. One Senator Benton from Missouri declared categorically, "We receive no mulatto consuls, or black ambassadors from [Haiti]. Because the peace of eleven states [that is, the slaveholding states of the Union] will not permit the fruits of a successful negro insurrection to be exhibited among them. It will not permit black ambassadors and consuls to . . . give their fellow blacks in the United States proof in the hand of the honors that await them for a like successful effort on their part. It will not permit the fact to be seen and told, that for the murder of their masters and mistresses, they are to find friends among the white people of these United

States” (Senator Thomas Hart Benton, 1825, *Register of Debates in Congress*, cited in Montague, 1940, p. 53). Senator Robert Y. Hayne of South Carolina chimed in: “Our policy with regard to Hayti is plain. We never can acknowledge her independence . . . which the peace and safety of a large portion of our Union forbids us to even discuss” (Benton, 1825, cited in Montague, 1940, pp. 47, 53).

When the U.S. Senate finally decided to acknowledge the existence of its southern neighbor, the seats from which over the past six decades Southern planters had pronounced their vetoes were mostly vacant, due to the secession of the confederate states preceding the civil war. The Senate passed a bill recognizing Haiti on April 4, 1862, by a decisive vote of 32 to 7. The House of Representatives voted 86 to 37, and the president gave his assent on the 5th of June (*Congressional Globe*, cited in Montague, 1940, p. 86).

European governments were a little faster. France, England, and a number of other states formally acknowledged Haiti’s independence in 1825. A final satisfactory settlement (that is, satisfactory for France) was eventually reached in 1838, when the Haitian government agreed to pay reparations to France, thus de facto buying its independence very much as a slave might have bought his freedom before (Montague, 1940, pp. 13-14, 52-53).

12. The literature on paradigm changes is abundant. Among the most important thinkers that (independently) developed the concept are Kuhn (1962), Bourdieu (1980), and Foucault (1968).

13. In the absence of a word for *freedom* in most non-Western languages, see Patterson (1982, p. 27), Miers and Kopytoff (1977, pp. 17, 54), and Geggus (2002, pp. 42, 232).

14. There are few exceptions to this rule, notably Rainsford (1805), Lundy (1847), Buch (1976, 1986), and Geggus (2001, 2002).

15. Both terms are borrowed from Trouillot (1995, p. 96). Although I think that Trouillot is too pessimistic in his conclusions, he is certainly correct in identifying the rhetorical elements in the strategies of silencing.

16. The earliest example of this theme is L’ouverture (1804). Since then, however, it has been adopted by almost everybody writing on Haiti (e.g., Barskett, 1818; Parkinson, 1978; Phillips, 1954, to name only three). A very skeptical view of Toussaint’s character and actions is first elaborated in Carruthers (1985).

17. Perhaps the most striking example for the “Europeanization” of Toussaint can be found in a quite successful youth novel, published in England in the last decade of the 19th century. In it, we encounter a Toussaint L’ouverture making the following remarkable statement: “We [the Blacks] have had no training for self-government. We shall have destroyed the civilization that reigned here, and shall have nothing to take its place, and I dread that instead of progressing we may retrograde until we sink back into the condition in which we lived in Africa. . . . When I say equal rights I do not mean that they [the Blacks] shall have votes. We are at present absolutely unfit to have votes or to exercise political power. I only mean that the law shall be the same for us as for the whites” (Henty, n.d., p. 313).

18. Fleming (2001), for example, succeeds in putting down the outcome of the revolution completely to the work of a tiny insect, *Aedes aegypti*, that decimated the French troops by infecting them with yellow fever. True, his essay is a piece of “counterfactual history,” trying to determine what could have been. Still, it is astonishing how (at the beginning of the 21st century) Fleming manages to present the Black leaders of the revolution—without exception—as mere playthings of the (White) actors in the Haitian drama.

19. *Aurora General Advertiser*, January 14, 1804. Rochambeau’s negotiations with Dessalines and the commander of the British fleet, a Captain Loring, are well documented in

Rainsford (1805, pp. 431-438), Barskett (1824, pp. 170-171), and Madiou (1922, pp. 83-92). An alternative eyewitness account of the capitulation can be found in Laujon (1805, p. 224).

20. This view was first expressed by Brown (1837): "The population [of Haiti] is . . . not many removes from the tribes upon the Niger in point of civilization. The fact is indisputable, that as a nation the blacks of St. Domingo are in a *retrograde movement* as regards intellectual improvement, and no obstacle seems to exist to prevent this *descent to barbarism*" (pp. 288-289, italics added; it might further be noted that 33 years after Haiti's declaration of independence, Brown still writes about "St. Domingo").

It has been further popularized by Spencer St. John (1880), former British minister at Port-au-Prince, in his book *Hayti, or the Black Republic*, first published in 1880. As an example for its adoption in popular discourse, see Henty (n.d.) or Maurer (1950).

21. It was not until 1937 that this view was distorted by the publication of Mellville Herskovitz's *Life in a Haitian Valley*. Herskovitz showed that the Haitian hinterland was indeed predominantly "African" but that it was by no means degenerate. In the field of historiography, it was C.L.R. James's (1938) classic, *Black Jacobins*, 1 year later that broke with the dominant approach.

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