

# Revolutionary Neighbors



Fifteen years after the United States declared its independence from Great Britain, enslaved men and women in the French Caribbean sugar colony of St. Domingue rose up against their captors in an intense struggle that, after more than a decade of brutal warfare, ended with the creation of the free and independent nation of Haiti. This Haitian Revolution rocked the Atlantic world and ended Napoleon's dreams of an American empire. And, as a wealth of recent scholarship has revealed, the Haitian Revolution and subsequent presence of a free black nation in the Caribbean dramatically affected the shape and outlook of the nascent United States.



Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Michael J. Drexler, eds., *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States: Histories, Textualities, Geographies*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 432 pp., \$55.

*The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States: Histories, Textualities, Geographies*, edited by Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Michael J. Drexler, is at once a tribute to roughly a decade's worth of work establishing such connections and a showcase for exciting new work in the field. In their introduction, Dillon and Drexler declare that "It should no longer be possible to write a history of the early republic of the United States without mentioning Haiti, or St. Domingue, the French colonial name of the colony known as the 'pearl of the Antilles' and the site of a world historical anticolonial, antislavery revolution that occurred between 1789 and 1804" (1). Indeed, recent monographs such as Matthew Clavin's *Toussaint and the Civil War* (2010), Ronald Johnson's *Diplomacy in Black and White* (2014), and Marlene Daut's *Tropics of Haiti* (2015)—a sampling that is by no means exhaustive—have decisively demonstrated the impact of the Haitian Revolution on the United States in the late eighteenth century and beyond. Such work builds upon not only C.L.R. James's foundational history of the Haitian Revolution, *Black Jacobins* (1938), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's crucial theorization of the Revolution's reception in *Silencing the Past* (1997), but also a resurgence of scholarship on the Haitian Revolution from historians such as Carolyn Fick, David Geggus, and Laurent Dubois. To their great credit, Dillon and Drexler do not claim to have discovered well-explored territory, but rather signal their indebtedness to this body of work by including Fick, Geggus, Dubois, and Daut as contributors.

But in addition to acknowledging what has come before, *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States* makes a striking and important claim about the precise nature of the relationship between the New World's two revolutionary nations. As Dillon and Drexler argue in their introduction, the scholarship on this relationship has tended to focus either on an early period of potential alliance (exemplified by the cooperation between the governments of Toussaint

Louverture and John Adams and elegantly described in Carolyn Fick's essay in the volume) or on an era of antagonism and disassociation inaugurated by Thomas Jefferson's 1806 embargo on the island. The quick jump from the former to the latter, contend Dillon and Drexler, produces "a story that begins with revolutionary Haiti as the double of the revolutionary United States but shifts suddenly to a nineteenth-century Haiti literally written off the map of the continental United States, and ultimately to a contemporary Haiti seen as a poor and obscure space antithetical to 'America' as we know it—a nation whose flickering encroachments on U.S. consciousness appear in the form of refugees, disease, and disaster" (13-14). There is, though, an "un-narrated story of Haiti and the United States," one in which the interrelationship between the two nations continues long after the 1806 embargo, but is "reconstructed in terms that construe the United States and Haiti as opposites" (14). "This is not," Dillon and Drexler conclude, "a non-relation but a relation of obscured interdependence" (14). Many of the essays in *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States* focus on incidents of "obscured interdependence," moments when the United States's very attempts to distance itself from Haiti reveal the presence of a deep and abiding, if disavowed, relationship between the revolutionary neighbors.

*The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States* consists of seventeen essays, including the introduction and epilogue, from contributors working primarily in English and History, organized into three sections: Histories, Geographies, and Textualities. Rather than attempt an inevitably oversimplified summary of these diverse and wide-ranging contributions, I would like to focus on a single essay from each of the book's three sections, which together exemplify the volume's overall focus on a relationship between the United States and Haiti characterized by "obscured interdependence." Duncan Faherty's "'The Mischief That Awaits Us': Revolution, Rumor, and Serial Unrest in the Early Republic," appears in the volume's Histories section and focuses on the largely un-narrated story of three French frigates that, loaded with imprisoned black revolutionaries from the West Indies, anchored in New York harbor for two months in the summer of 1802. Consulting a trove of primary documents, including newspaper reports and private correspondence between government officials, Faherty traces the panic that the presence of these ships inspired in U.S. Americans from Maine to South Carolina, many of whom feared that the foreign black revolutionaries imprisoned offshore would inevitably reach U.S. soil (either through escape or as part of a planned invasion). White Americans from a variety of backgrounds—northern and southern, Federalist and Democratic Republican—came together in their belief that these "French Negroes" threatened the security of the United States, and this "universal insistence on preventing any of the prisoners from disembarking onto U.S. soil reveals a domestic ethnoscape intent on securing futurity by keeping unwelcome foreigners and their revolutionary intrigues in abeyance" (60). For Faherty, then, this 1802 episode reveals "how a fragile sense of national cohesion was formed by a widespread practice of negation," as the threat of the Haitian Revolution helped produce an American national identity constituted in large part by what it was not (59).

While Faherty offers a compelling account of engagement through negotiation, Cristobal Silva provides an exciting model for uncovering and analyzing additional, and at times surprising, pathways through which Haiti and the early United States shaped one another. In his "Republic of Medicine: Immunology and National Identity in the Age of Revolution," in the volume's Geographies section, Silva explores a relationship between Haiti and the United States grounded in the overlapping concepts of disease and immunity, focusing in particular on the yellow fever pandemic that dramatically affected the course of the Haitian Revolution and ravaged Philadelphia from 1793 to 1794. Reading the revolution and the pandemic together, Silva contends, "repositions the relationship between place and nation by introducing health and illness as a matrix for defining the terms of citizenship in the revolutionary era" (131). By considering the seemingly distinct geographies of Philadelphia and St. Domingue as "loci of pandemic," Silva unhinges "the concept of national identity from territorial integrity," as "the very definition of a pandemic obviates the political and geographical boundaries of nationhood in favor of disease, vectors, migrations, and transmission routes" (131-132). Faced with a disease that cared little for the borders (physical and ideological) that U.S. Americans attempted to erect between their nation and the revolutionary Caribbean, Atlantic world physicians attempting to limit the spread of yellow fever relocated "the bonds of communal and national identity in relation to shared immunities and susceptibilities" rather than geography (132). By focusing on the role that St. Domingue refugees played in Philadelphia's yellow fever outbreak, and providing a series of convincing readings of medical treatises grappling with that pandemic, Silva shows how communal identities that appeared to be anchored in specific spaces (like the United States or St. Domingue) were broken down and reconfigured "in relation to shared immunities and susceptibilities" (132).

The volume's final section, Textualities, concludes with Marlene L. Daut's "The 'Alpha and Omega' of Haitian Literature: Baron de Vastey and the U.S. Audience of Haitian Political Writing, 1807-1825," an exploration of the writings of the Haitian author Baron de Vastey and their circulation and reception in the United States. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Vastey wrote at least eleven works and was widely read and commented upon by U.S. Americans. These texts took up a variety of topics but were "most importantly," writes Daut, dedicated to "narrating the history of Haiti from a Haitian point of view" (288). And the largely positive reviews of Vastey's work in northern U.S. newspapers complicate "the idea that Haiti suffered a unilateral 'bad press' in the nineteenth century that has influenced and overdetermined its relationship to the United States up until the present time" (290-291). By foregrounding the ways in which Vastey in particular, and Haitian writers in general, used the U.S. press to help shape American attitudes toward Haiti, Daut offers a crucial intervention. As she notes, much of the work surrounding the United States and the Haitian Revolution continues to focus on "U.S. reactions to and readings of the Haitian Revolution" instead of "analyzing the Haitian reaction to U.S. nonrecognition, on the one hand, and Haitian reactions and contributions to U.S. readings of their revolution, on the other" (292).

Daut concludes with a call for more work that corrects this silencing, since “by not reading the very Haitian authors who addressed and described in the nineteenth century their understanding of Haiti’s relationship with the United States, we tend to unwittingly propagate not only the fable of nonrecognition, but the fiction of Haiti’s essential lack of importance” (313). Her essay provides a powerful example of how such efforts might proceed.

A volume focused on the relationship between the United States and the Haitian Revolution could quite easily participate in the silencing that Daut argues against, and many of the contributions to *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States* do remain centered upon U.S. American reactions to their revolutionary neighbor. But the presence of work such as Daut’s essay, Edlie Wong’s chapter on Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer’s efforts to recruit African American settlers, and Michael Drexler and Ed White’s reading of Toussaint’s Constitution as an origin of African American literature, testifies to the editors’ efforts to address this critique. Some scholars may also find that the volume’s focus on the “United States,” while offering a degree of clarity, privileges particular sites of analysis at the expense of others. For example, the city of Philadelphia appears in numerous essays while New Orleans, a city that was home to black and white francophone communities and a primary destination for refugees from St. Domingue, but beyond the boundaries of the U.S. until after the Haitian Revolution, receives scant attention. Rather than diminishing the value and power of this volume, such an absence provides even more evidence of the incredible amount of work that remains to be done teasing out not only how, but also where, Haiti and the United States engaged with and shaped one another. *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States* makes no pretensions to be the first or last word on this subject, but is rather an absolutely indispensable guide to where we have been, where we are going, and how to get there.

This article originally appeared in issue 17.2 (Winter, 2017).

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Benjamin Fagan is assistant professor of English at Auburn University. He is a specialist in early African American literature and print culture, and the author of *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* (2016).