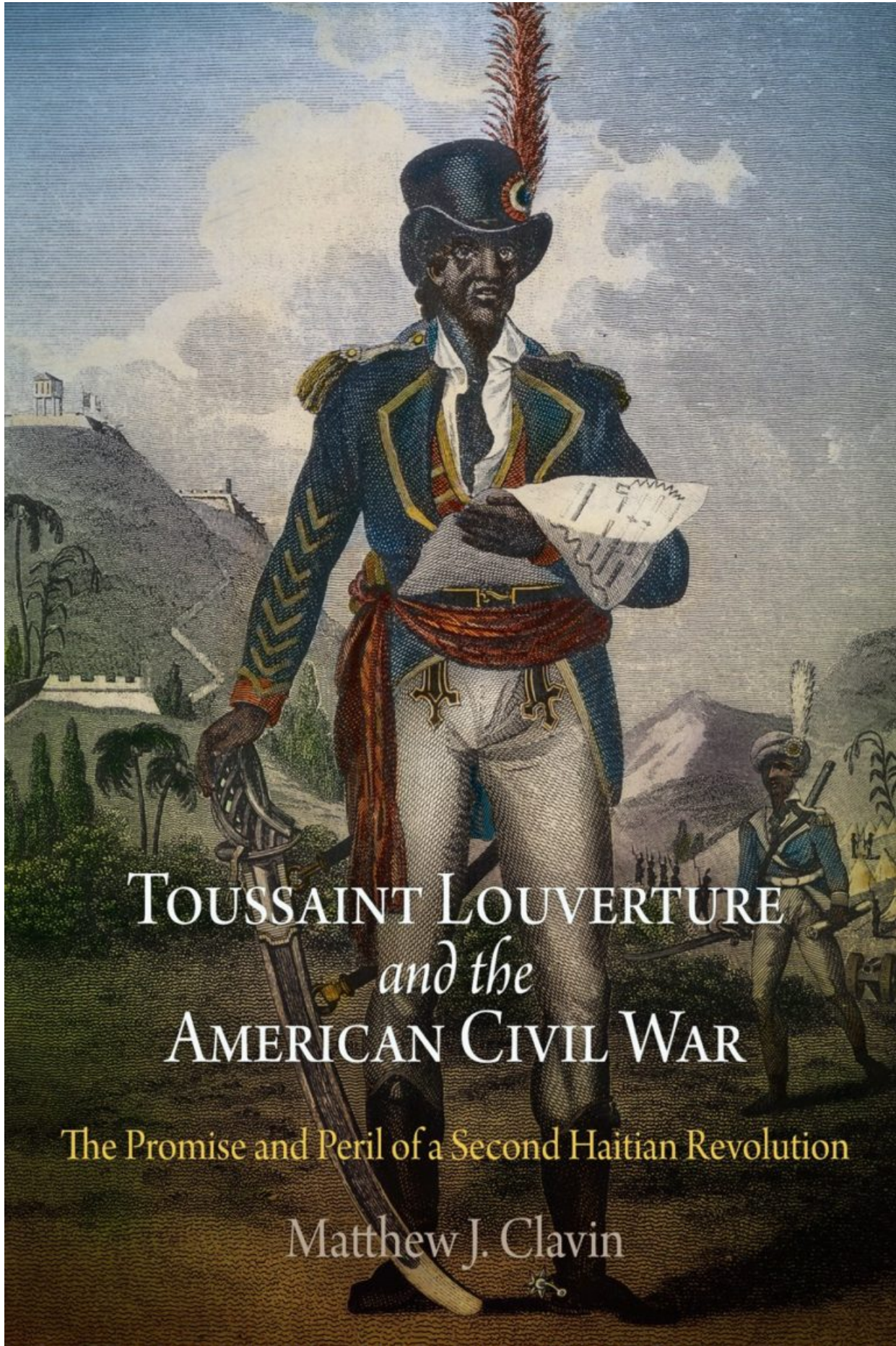


# Atlantic Thermidor



TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE  
*and the*  
AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

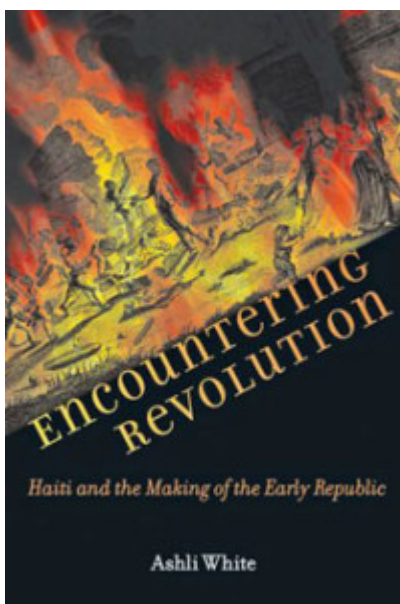
The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution

Matthew J. Clavin



In 1995 anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot made an elegant case for the difficulty of truly understanding important aspects of Western history without considering the presence of Haiti. Or, rather, its absence. The word “history,” Trouillot reminded, encompasses both past events and their telling. Haiti, and the Haitian Revolution, had fallen into the space between the two iterations. In lifting it out, historians would better see the dynamics that made it “unthinkable” to contemporaries and which “silenced” it in histories thereafter, dynamics that similarly stood behind the story of western development and dominance. While the epistemological merits of Trouillot’s challenge have been assessed over the past decade-plus, his call has mostly been answered. A voluminous body of work has collectively recovered events in Revolutionary Saint Domingue within wider contexts. As a result, especially among historians of the Atlantic world over the eighteenth century, it is Haiti’s absence that has become “unthinkable.”

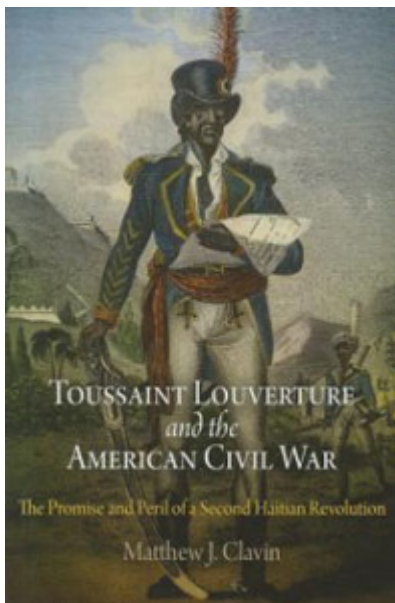
These two books place Ashli White and Matthew Clavin on the crest of this wave as it reaches American historians. White’s focus is the post-Revolutionary republic and Clavin’s the antebellum and Civil War period. In recovering the vibrant presence of Saint Domingue/Haiti in these American moments, both books exemplify the power and promise of adopting an Atlantic lens in telling a national story, a perspective David Armitage has termed “cis-Atlantic.” In pushing against the nation methodologically, each offers a new view onto the familiar landscape of American political development between the Revolution and Reconstruction. While neither work makes a case for a definitive Haitian imprint, both—separately and in tandem—suggest that the Haitian presence shaped the trajectory of developments in the United States in important ways.



Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 280 pp., \$25.

The connective tissue—the *sine qua non* behind Haiti’s capacity in the United

States—is the character of the Haitian Revolution, as observers understood it. To be sure, colonial Saint Domingue produced physical connections as well, but the force of its presence in these works is ideational. White, in treating Saint Domingue’s emanations in the United States as the events of the Revolution were unfolding—events only demarcated as “Haitian” or “revolutionary” later—gives us access to American ideas about their own post-Revolutionary republic. Her accomplishment is to show how American identity was relational and unfixed; the meaning of the American Revolution was made in its aftermath and with the ongoing events in Saint Domingue as context. This is an approach that will resonate with historians of culture and politics in other post-colonial settings. Clavin’s period, by contrast, is one in which “Hayti” was an established fact among Americans. Here too, however, the meaning of “America” was in flux. Though he doesn’t expressly interrogate the notion of the American Civil War as a “second American Revolution,” Clavin’s focus is the ways in which those sorts of debates were strained through the Haitian idiom. Readers won’t be able to leave these books with a sense that the arc of United States history was in any sense set in stone or the product of transcendent ideals moving over time. Neither White nor Clavin is interested in locating or analyzing the essence of the American Revolution or Civil War as foundational moments. Instead, each posits a fluid ideological environment, one in which a wide spectrum of ideas and directions was possible. Taken together, they show how the presence of Saint Domingue/Haiti as a radical alternative mattered.



Matthew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 248 pp., \$39.95.

In *Encountering Revolution*, Ashli White effectively dismantles the modern American proclivity toward viewing Haiti as marginal. Though tacitly allowing the littoral communities that produce most of her evidence to stand in for the nation as a whole, her chapters evoke an Atlantic community in which French

Saint Domingue and contemporary America were interconnected by a web whose filaments were both conceptual and corporeal. As such, events in Saint Domingue accessed Americans' ideas about their position in the world and their relationship to the revolutionary shifts going on around it. In working out the premises behind that relationship, Americans confronted the tension between their connections with these "fellow men" and the potential disruptions produced (at least theoretically) by admitting what could be dangerous Atlantic elements. Different Americans saw different dangers: one person's radical was another's republican; the threat produced by "French Negroes" might inspire the domestic downtrodden; the changing nature of the rebellion in Saint Domingue—whether conceived of as a movement for colonial autonomy, against slavery, for emancipation, against royalist counterrevolutionaries, or, eventually, for independence—determined which particular American fear might be triggered.

White's argument is that, paradoxically, that fear was a source of stability. Events in Saint Domingue offered white Americans opportunities to make public demonstrations. If, as a French colony, Saint Domingue tested the universality of republican bonds, it also presented Americans with an occasion to assert their republic's rectitude. If the complexity and longevity of disruptions in the French colony raised problems that made the seams of that American republican identity emerge, White shows that many issues were disentangled from any explicit position on the increasingly divisive French Revolution and instead treated on "neutral ground" (85) as a question of humanitarian aid, pushing the factors that divided (white) Americans aside. In other spheres, particular facets of developments in Saint Domingue made such elisions more difficult, but White argues that the net effect was the same. She deftly shows how the white refugees from the colony, whose politics were varied, failed to "fit" neatly into the burgeoning Federalist and Democratic Republican divide. While this suggests the complexity involved in charting coherent positions in the revolutionary Atlantic world, White argues that American politicians largely ignored such variances. Here as elsewhere, Americans found what they were looking for in Saint Domingue: Federalists argued that its lesson by the mid-1790s was the need to avoid sweeping changes and fundamentally challenge order; Democratic Republicans saw in the colony's travails a clear message that racial divisions were dangerous and that white solidarity was the best basis for political stability, as well for as expanded liberty.

Among white Americans, Saint Domingue's meaning for slavery was far easier to reconcile with prominent ideas about the institution than their recurrent hysterical evocations of "the horrors of St. Domingo" might suggest. Even as they disagreed over whether antislavery efforts or slavery itself caused the revolt, White shows that white Americans largely joining in a self-congratulatory notion that their presumed solution to the problem of slavery was the right one. Violence being the sign of failure, antislavery activists could hold up the cautious logic driving American gradual emancipation, while those more comfortable with slavery could settle on portrayals of American slavery as relatively benign, or imagine its end only coming with a removal of

the black population altogether. The Haitian Revolution's impact on American slavery, therefore, was to affirm its conceptualization among whites as a feature of domestic politics: white Americans followed their "impulse to particularize the Haitian Revolution in order to stave off its consequences" (138).

The "French Negroes" who embodied those consequences—the refugees of color who were among those waves of immigrants that poured into American port cities, especially after 1793—were the means by which this conceptualization took place. White argues that the fears of "imported" revolutionary resistance against slavery in the United States, while real, functioned within this basic framework of confidence. Hamstrung by their inability to truly consider black actors as political beings, various episodes of furor over seeming "contagion" from Saint Domingue were actually moments in which tensions and fears over American slavery were subsumed beneath an assertion that, if "French" influences were dangerous, the American context provided a safe and successful way for the system to endure.

This utilitarian approach, White explains, stood behind public policy toward Saint Domingue, and then Haiti, as well. Having demonstrated the pallid and almost rhetorical nature of white American fears of "St. Domingo" by the late 1790s, she shows how the Adams administration's willingness to treat with the Louverture government stemmed from economic interests. These were "trumped" (161) by a more basic American racism, however, once Thomas Jefferson became president. Jefferson, too, could be pragmatic: while he presided over a severe curtailing of contact with first the quasi-independent colony and then with the new Haitian nation, his reticence over Napoleon's intentions led him to withdraw his support of the French invasion. This was a significant factor in the ultimate French defeat, which, in turn, led to the American acquisition of the Louisiana Territory. The final irony the book explores is the fact that the American refusal to acknowledge or accept Haitian independence was fundamental to the availability of the lands that would produce Jefferson's "Empire of Liberty."

Of course, shadowing these white reactions and ruminations were the responses of African American communities and leaders to the people, news, and ideas of Saint Domingue/Haiti. In several compelling sections across the book, White describes episodes that reveal alternate understandings of the meaning and function of Haitian Revolutionary developments, ones that tied issues such as emancipation and independence to calls for similar expansions of freedom and liberty at home. In other cases, she describes ways that the simple disruptions produced by events in the Caribbean opened up spaces for personal declarations of independence, through self-assertion and running away. These sorts of possibilities remind us of the radical potential of this moment, an observation that serves to reemphasize White's central argument about the stasis in the United States.

Matthew Clavin's America is one that has inherited this legacy. *Toussaint*

*Louverture and the American Civil War* recovers the unfamiliar among the familiar—the enduring and pervasive presence of Haiti and the figure of Toussaint Louverture among the well-trodden discussions about slavery, abolitionism, secession, African American soldiers, and emancipation that charted the lead up to and conduct of the American Civil War. His accomplishment is to reveal that unfamiliarity to be our own, not his actors'. Clavin brings forth an astonishing array of moments in which Haiti was evoked, claimed, and discussed. Readers of White's book won't be surprised to find this presence in American discourse, but others might. Clavin's task is to show how it was deployed.

Of course, during the period Clavin explores, the actual nation of Haiti existed alongside this figure. His study, therefore, is of America, not of America within an Atlantic landscape. He demonstrates the continuing relevance of the Haitian past to the American present. As such, his findings stand in tension with White's depiction of white American knowledge of Haiti, which she argues is reductive, if active. Clavin's study provides a picture of the enduring problems produced for Americans by the possibilities and challenge that the Haitian Revolution embodied: "St. Domingo" continued to roil American imaginations, producing fears and hopes that ribboned through antebellum American developments. At the same time, however, the fact that Haiti existed—a real place with which Americans continued to do some trade, whose political events continued to be noted in the American press because of its remarkable past, and which stood at the center of a region into which various Americans increasingly imagined expanding the nation's influence—raises the possibility that Clavin's conclusions about "St. Domingo's" role may be part of an even larger story.

The story he does provide, however, is rife with implications. By the antebellum period, Clavin shows, groups of influential Americans were raising "St. Domingo" and Louverture to a host of ends and with a variety of emphases. Almost all of these were historically inaccurate—Louverture was treated synonymously with the Revolution, despite his complicated and incomplete relationship to it—but that is beside the point. The intensive, albeit flawed, public knowledge of (some) events and personalities in Saint Domingue during the 1790s goes to show that Clavin's actors had only a generalized understanding of the Haitian Revolution. For most, it existed as a trope for racial violence.

This was a blunt instrument, one with demonstrated force. Yet Clavin demonstrates the ways it was available to a variety of purposes. In the hands of a certain strain of abolitionists, "St. Domingo" was proof of black humanity, an example of radical resistance to slavery, and a commentary on the slave system's inherent instability. Louverture's figure, which was developed in wildly fanciful accounts and biographies, might serve as an exemplar of black masculinity, rationality, and beneficence. To southern fire-eaters, these same images were shibboleths by which they made the case for secession: abolitionists were modern-day Sonthonaxes, wild-eyed ideologues willing to

tamper with the social order no matter what the cost, fomenting bloodshed on a nightmarish scale. "St. Domingo" was a tale of white extermination.

This approach offers several important conclusions, some of which are tacit in Clavin's chapters, others of which are made explicit. While not overtly addressing the question of the Civil War's origins, Clavin's findings unavoidably make slavery the center of the conflict. In a striking early chapter, he charts connections between militant black antislavery activists' ideas about the Haitian Revolution and American episodes of armed resistance. If slave revolts such as Denmark Vesey's conspiracy and Nat Turner's rebellion are difficult (but not impossible) to link to "Haitian" influences, Clavin emphatically shows how John Brown expressly identified his project with the Haitian Revolution and himself with Louverture. This point suggests an underappreciated continuity in American antislavery activity. Strands subsumed in the early republic within, among other things, the white agreements over the meaning of the Haitian Revolution that White discusses, are here found to be bursting forth in the 1840s and 1850s among white immediatists such as Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison, who turned to the Haitian Revolution to advocate for armed battle in the name of universal rights. These same images empowered and enlivened proslavery secessionists, who saw a revolutionary threat in the Lincoln administration and who used the common images of Haitian violence to spell out, in horrific detail, the threat to white society its agenda would mean.

By this reading, the Civil War is a clash of irreconcilable positions, driven by extremists on both sides. Whether their turn to the Haitian Revolution makes this true, or makes it seem true, is left unstated. Brown's actions had an unmistakable effect, but it isn't clear whether or not the secessionists' words are to be taken as attempts to persuade or reflections of wider Southern sentiment. Undoubtedly they were both, but without an explanation of the ways in which less extreme members of the sections related to these uses, the precise nature of Haiti's role is hard to identify. Some in the South, for example, claimed that the union, properly run, avoided the radical threats that militant abolitionists and fire-eaters agreed emanated from the French and Haitian examples. Some in the North rejected the connection between the radicals' agenda and their cause.

Clavin's point—and it is an important one—is that the availability of ideas about Haiti allowed the sides to harden and the conflict to flare. These questions endure, however, in the book's chapters treating the war itself. Here Clavin treats the unmistakably revolutionary changes that took place during the conflict. He finds Haiti and Louverture in the public eye repeatedly amid discussions around the decision to incorporate African Americans into the Union forces. He cites moments in which Haiti surfaced in and around the call for emancipation. In these instances, Haitian figures were malleable in the hands of their handlers. Louverture, now less useful as a militant, was a heroic proof of black humanity. "St. Domingo's" horrors now functioned as proof of the dangers of delay. Clavin convincingly uses these shifts to demonstrate



abolitionists' sway in these debates, but the "cultural work" (92) done by these Haitian images isn't as clear. Was Haiti simply a convenient means of expressing these imperatives, especially given the Union's desperate straits in 1862? If these historical referents were fabricated in this way, what does this tell us about the character of the changes they helped usher in? Clavin's evidence suggests that White's Atlantic web continued to exist in the nineteenth century, but the nature of its strands, once they are mostly figurative, isn't discussed.

To be fair, this isn't Clavin's intent. After recovering this presence and establishing its resonance, Clavin offers the payoff over his final three chapters in which he leaves political developments to treat questions of identity. Writ large, his argument is that images of the "horrors" of "St. Domingo" operated across the sections, ultimately contributing to a white identity that would be the basis of reconciliation when the War was over. Among African Americans, meanwhile, Haiti, and especially the figure of Louverture, served as a "touchstone" (122) that vitalized a "black" identity. Here, Clavin's earlier claims for the "subversive" (78) nature of such references are made more fully clear. By identifying with and through Haiti, African Americans of various stations were able to push the war in radical directions. These efforts collectively refuted the intellectual bases of white supremacy and articulated a black consciousness that was neither simply pan-African nor assimilationist. Instead, their turn to Haiti demonstrated a sense of intra-Atlantic connections, one born by their act of relating temporally distant groups of slaves and people of color standing in opposition to the system of oppression that faced them both.

These are excellent points, and are sustained by numerous and effective examples. For one thing, these chapters bolster the idea that the various elisions, errors, and confusions over the Haitian past are immaterial. It is the very presence of the (constructed) idea of Haiti, Clavin argues, that served to emphasize certain possibilities, goals, and intentions among black activists and thinkers. At the same time, the generalized Haitian threat established whiteness as the centerpiece of an American nationalism, a feature that allowed it to withstand the challenges to that conceptualization. Clavin suggests that, ironically, it was American emancipation that "silenced" the Haitian Revolution. Following David Blight, he notes that, once the problem of slavery was "solved" it could be removed from the narrative of American history and sanitized in the memory of American formation. The Haitian Revolution, which all Americans agreed was about slavery, had lost its relevance, at least among whites.

Haiti, however, endured. The radicalism of the forces involved in its creation—the potential and processes conceptualized by Trouillot's call—were seminal components of the flux that characterized the portion of the period that historians discuss as an "Age of Revolution." White's and Clavin's projects show its presence and witness its functional obfuscation. Their books recognize what all contemporaries knew, but couldn't understand: that the

events in Saint Domingue were central to this "Age"; they brought it together as a site, as a logical culmination of its most radical ideas, as a motor of some of its key developments, and as a mirror by which to see the dynamics of its unfolding. The success of these books in evoking these qualities suggests possibilities for further analysis.

To understand these possibilities, it is helpful to return to Trouillot's notion of "silencing," especially that which went on within Haiti itself. Even the Saint Domingue/Haiti that contemporary Americans experienced was incomplete and inchoate. To be sure, the principled rejection of the social order inherent to the actions of the initial insurrectionaries was beyond contemporaries' ken, but historians of Haiti have argued that that radical challenge endured, prompting resistance by various leaders whose efforts were active and conscious, not merely the result of their limited notions of liberty, equality and fraternity. This suggests a spectrum of radicalism operating in Saint Domingue, the most fundamental iteration of which was embodied in the efforts of ex-slaves to resist attempts to coopt, or constrain, their freedom of action—attempts made in many cases by the Revolutionary leadership itself. Scholars such as Carolyn Fick and Laurent Dubois have shown that these sorts of struggles shaped the course and meaning of Saint Domingue's "revolutionary" moment. The "Haiti" that Clavin's Americans discussed had thus been doubly silenced, in part by the "Louverture" they equated with it. White's actors can be forgiven for not understanding the full nature of the challenge they were confronting, but their responses can be explored as part of its effacement.

To examine the Haitian Revolution in these terms is to evaluate it as a process, rather than as a single entity, and to expand that process forward outside the temporal boundaries by which historians like to measure "Revolutions." It is also to reorder and re-conceptualize the "Age" of which these revolutionary moments were a part. Such an "Age" is defined less by its ideological coherence than by the broad forces (capitalism, imperialism, slavery) that formed it. That formation was made up of struggles that revealed the tensions between elements of those forces: between the emerging capitalist order and older notions of corporatist community, say, or involving competing inflections of ideas about humanity, universal rights, and personal liberty. It is an "Age" that is not easily schematized. Its politics are widened to the point where all strata of society are admissible as actors, and historical trends can hinge on contingencies and chance to a degree previously unacceptable to historians looking to demonstrate the playing out of particular ideas or interests over time. In placing the Haitian Revolution into this landscape, historians have differed over the nature of the break it represents—whether it was of a piece with other sorts of changes or *sui generis*. White's analysis helps remind us that the question itself was being answered by contemporaries, people with their own conceptions of which acts and trends were "revolutionary" and what using that concept meant. This consciousness emphasizes the fact that "revolution" involved an act of ascription, one in which certain elements could be placed beyond the pale.

By dint of their cis-Atlantic perspectives, neither White nor Clavin engage with this issue directly. White's image of a web introduces the notion that revolutionary moments around the Atlantic could be interconnected, but her interest in demonstrating the absence of a Haitian impact in America directs the force behind the "making" in her subtitle towards explaining the space between the two places, rather than their interrelation. Paradoxically, it seems that this stance derives from her focus on the refugees, figures who transcended that space. This emphasis usefully establishes the web: the refugees are physical emanations of it and their movements display its tugs. In her hands, these people and the issues they raise serve as analytic mirrors—they reveal American realities.

This conceptualization provokes further questions having to do with the extent to which the web's strands extended *through* these physical bodies into the stuff of American political and racial identity. How did particular moments of radical change in Saint Domingue affect American radicalism? How far could ideas about universal citizenship, human rights, and transnational republicanism go in the United States of the 1790s? How were the moments of American pragmatism related to like shifts among those in power in the colony? White has established Saint Domingue/Haiti as a vital presence; the particular effect of that presence is not her quarry. Still, the evidence she supplies suggests that both the Haitian and American Revolutions were being "made" in her period. Trouillot's formulation helps us see the ways the relative power of different portions of the web ultimately reduced "St. Domingo" to a shibboleth for violence and anarchy. Adopting a trans-Atlantic perspective on the "Age" as a whole raises the possibility that the American republic remained fluid in some ways, even as ideas about the American Revolution ossified. This, in turn, begs questions about the relationship between the American reaction to the Haitian Revolution writ large and a more generalized Atlantic Thermidor.

Because of the period it treats and the innovative tack it takes, Clavin's project implicitly asks these questions. This quality makes the absence of an express treatment of the specific terms by which the "second" revolutions were delineated and discussed problematic to his overall thesis. Clavin convincingly demonstrates that his actors accessed the tortured ground White has set out. The particular emphases they excavated, however, could just as easily come from their ideas about British abolition, other slave uprisings, or separate episodes when armed subalterns fragmented a factionalized society. At a broad level, this leaves the particularly "Haitian" features of this discourse unspecified. The possibility exists, for example, that referencing Rigaud or Dessalines instead of Louverture was not simply laziness, but a particular inflection with intent. This sort of possibility, in turn, raises questions about the uses of "St. Domingo" as an expression of reality or rhetoric. Does the fluidity of Louverture's image, for example, drive a change in ideas about the meaning of the Civil War (or about black humanity, or slavery), or does it register that such a change had occurred? Clavin amply proves the power of its deployment, but his examples leave us wanting to know more about the specific ways this history was used.

Taken together, these books offer definitive proof of the power of the silencing that Michel-Rolph Trouillot decried. The spectacular reduction of Saint Domingue, one of the most “successful” sites of the forces and peoples that constituted the Atlantic world, and its replacement with Haiti, a profoundly different but no less logical assemblage of those ingredients, was widely noticed and noted as an American phenomenon. White and Clavin have demonstrated this development, successfully producing an internationalized history of portions of the American

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James Alexander Dun is an assistant professor of history at Princeton University.