




HAITIAN REVOLUTION: CHALLENGES OF AND CHALLENGING REPRESENTATION

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01

Historical Overview

Who, where, when, and how?



The Haitian Revolution Timeline: an educational resource developed by Kona Shen at Brown University.

<https://thehaitianrevolution.com/>



Population:

500,000 African slaves

32,000 Europeans

24,000 Free people of color

Classes:

Grands blancs – slave owners

Petits blancs – small merchants

Gens de couleur – free people of color

Maroons – escaped slaves

Slaves

1789 in Saint-Domingue



“If whites, free colored, and slaves formed the three distinct castes in the French Caribbean colony, these caste divisions overshadowed a complex system of class and corresponding internal class antagonisms, across all sectors of the society.”
(Knight, 2000)



The Haitian revolution

Explore the only example of a successful slave rebellion in the Americas

Sugar, slaves and unrest

The French seized control of the west of the island of Hispaniola from Spain in the 1690s, calling their new colony St Domingue. The colony was an economic success — St Domingue produced more sugar than Jamaica, Brazil and Cuba combined — but it was based on the brutal exploitation of slaves.

In 1789, when revolution broke out in France, unrest quickly spread to St Domingue. Following an aborted uprising among free blacks in 1790, the slaves revolted in August 1791. They sought an improvement in their conditions, such as more free time, rather than full emancipation. The revolt spread and white authorities were soon on the defensive. The French government gave political rights to free blacks in the hope of restoring their control.

British and Spanish invasion

In 1793, Britain and Spain declared war on revolutionary France and saw an opportunity to seize St Domingue. The Spanish allied themselves with rebellious slave leaders such as François Toussaint L'Ouverture. In desperation, the French authorities in the colony declared an end to slavery, an act that encouraged several rebel slave leaders, including Toussaint, to change sides. The invasion was ultimately a disaster due in part to the effect on European troops of tropical diseases such as malaria and yellow fever.

Toussaint and Bonaparte

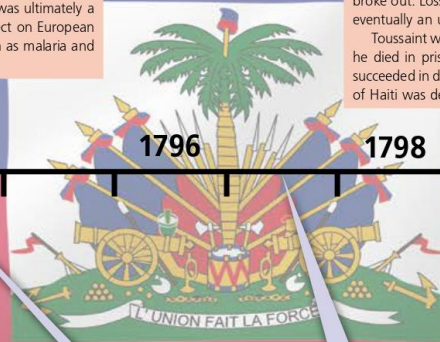
By 1798 Toussaint had emerged as the most powerful general in St Domingue, acting autonomously from the French authorities and attempting to re-start the economy of the island by sending the population back to work on the plantations.

In 1801 a new constitution was issued and, while proclaiming loyalty to France, instituted Toussaint as governor of the colony for life. This alarmed the new French emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte. A large army was sent to reassert French control and war quickly broke out. Losses on both sides were very high and eventually an uneasy peace was agreed.

Toussaint was arrested and sent to France where he died in prison. A new black leader, Dessalines, succeeded in driving out the French and the republic of Haiti was declared on 1 January 1804.



French Haitians massacred by the slaves of St Domingue, c.1971



1790

1792

1794

1796

1798

1800

1802

1804

14 July 1789
French Revolution breaks out in Paris

October–November 1790
Vincent Oge leads short-lived rebellion among free blacks in St Domingue seeking greater civil rights. It is brutally repressed. Oge is executed

21 August 1791
Slaves rise up on northern plantations

21 January 1793
Louis XVI executed in Paris

1793
Spanish and British invasions of St Domingue with support from rebel slaves

August 1793
French authorities in St Domingue free all slaves. Toussaint L'Ouverture changes sides to join French against British and Spanish

4 February 1794
French National Assembly confirms abolition of slavery

1797–98
Toussaint consolidates power in St Domingue. British forces withdraw in 1798

July 1801
New constitution issued in St Domingue confirming loyalty to French empire. Toussaint made governor of the colony for life, with power to appoint his own successor

5 February 1802
French fleet of more than 50 ships and 30,000 troops sent by Napoleon Bonaparte arrives to re-assert French control

May 1802
French control established and truces agreed with leading black generals

20 May 1802
French re-establish slavery in Martinique and Guadeloupe

Late May 1802
Toussaint arrested and deported to France

7 April 1803
Toussaint dies in Fort de Joux prison in France

October–November 1802
Renewed revolt against French troops by black generals Dessalines and Christophe

18 November 1803
French defeated at battle of Vertieres, remaining forces leave

1 January 1804
Haitian independence declared, with Dessalines as governor for life. He later proclaims himself emperor

Tim Lockley is professor of North American history at The University of Warwick.




02

Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History

Michel-Rolph Trouillot: An Unthinkable History

Sepinwall: Still Unthinkable?





“Each filmic or academic utterance must be analyzed not only in terms of **who represents** but also in terms of **who is being represented** for what **purpose**, at which **historical moment**, for which **location**, using which **strategies**, and in what **tone of address**.”

(Ella Shohat, "The Struggle over Representation: Casting, Coalitions, and the Politics of Identification," *Late Imperial Culture*, 173)



“The representation doesn’t occur after the event, **representation is constitutive of the event**. It enters into the constitution of the object we are talking about.”

(Stuart Hall, *Representation and the Media* by Stuart Hall)

THE PRODUCTION OF HISTORY

“The realization that **historical production is itself historical** is the only way out of the false dilemmas posed by positivist empiricism and extreme formalism.”


“The value of a historical product cannot be debated without taking into account both **the context of its production** and **the context of its consumption.**”

“The crux of the matter is the here and now, the relations between the events described and their public representation in a **specific historical context.**

These relations **debunk the myth of The Past as a fixed reality and the related view of knowledge as a fixed content.** They also force us to look at the **purpose of this knowledge.**”




Trouillot, 1995
The Presence in the Past




“If some events cannot be accepted even as they occur, how can they be assessed later? In other words, can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place? How does one write a history of the impossible?”

Trouillot, 1995





An Unthinkable History




“The Negroes are very obedient and always will be. We sleep with doors and windows wide open. Freedom for Negroes is a chimera.” (Trouillot, 1995)

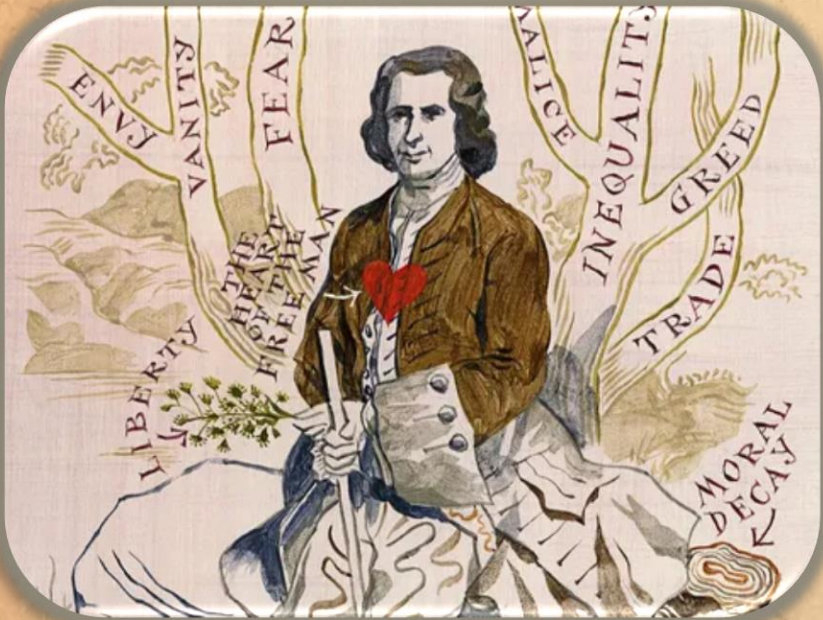
Claims:

1. The Haitian Revolution was **unthinkable** even as it happened.
2. It was unthinkable because of the engrained **racism** in 18th century Europe and Americas.
3. The revolution **remains unthinkable** until today.

Foreign writing about Haiti falls into two categories: **tropes of erasure** and **tropes of banalization**.



The Paradox of Enlightenment Thought



- Enlightenment celebrated the virtues of **universal human rights and equality**, even as systems of **slavery and racial discrimination** continued to exist.
- Rise of **scientific racism**: some groups are more human than others.
- The man is perfectible – but where does a Black slave belong: to the class of **man** or to the **beasts of burden**?

“[...] enslaved Africans and their descendents **could not envision freedom**—let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing such freedom” (Trouillot, 1995)



Archives of the Revolution

Challenges in advancing the English-
language historiography of the Haitian
Revolution

03





The Question of the Archives

“The archives of the revolution are, for the most part, **in the hands of the former colonizers**. By their initial design these archives **amplify the voices of the defeated imperial forces** rather than the arguments of **the silenced victors.**”

(Taber, 2018)


Challenges in advancing historiography of Haitian Revolution

Archives vast and scattered

Silencing Black political agency

Erasure and over-simplification of events





04

The Materiality of the Haitian Revolution

White, 2021: how white observers outside of Saint-Domingue generated representations of the revolution

Daut, 2020: How the visual history of the Haitian Revolution misrepresents Black suffering and death







Violence Made Material

“Throughout Europe and the Americas people read gripping descriptions about the war in newspapers and in published eyewitness accounts, and sailors, refugees, and other travelers from the island circulated stories. These written and oral reports shared **tropes about the nature of this revolutionary war**, often highlighting the alleged **savagery of black actors**, and these versions informed visual and material portrayals.

But reading and hearing about events were experiences qualitatively different from seeing them **represented** and **the translation from text into picture**, or from tale into object, was not straightforward. The **medium, maker, and anticipated audience** shaped what was and what was not depicted from the Haitian Revolution.”

(White, 2021)



Selectivity of representation

“The visual culture [...] of the Haitian Revolution fixates on its temporal bookends: **the battles at Cap Français** (in 1791 and 1793) and **the campaign for independence** in the early 1800s.”

“Whatever maker's particular **agenda**, the Le Cap engravings, as a group, **emphasize the violence that black people enacted on white residents** and their property.”

(White, 2021)



VUE DE L'INCENDIE DE LA VILLE DU CAP FRANÇAIS,
Gravé par Goussier d'après le tableau de Goussier

Incendie du Cap.



Révolte générale des Nègres. Massacre des Blancs.

General revolt of the
Negroes. Massacre of
the whites.

Paris, 1815

A scene from the
1791 slave revolt in
the Haitian port of Le
Cap (Cap François),
now known as Cap
Haïtien.



Frontispiece from
*L'Incendie du Cap, ou
Le règne de Toussaint-
Louverture*, by René
Périn, 1802;
one of the most
recognizable images of
the revolution

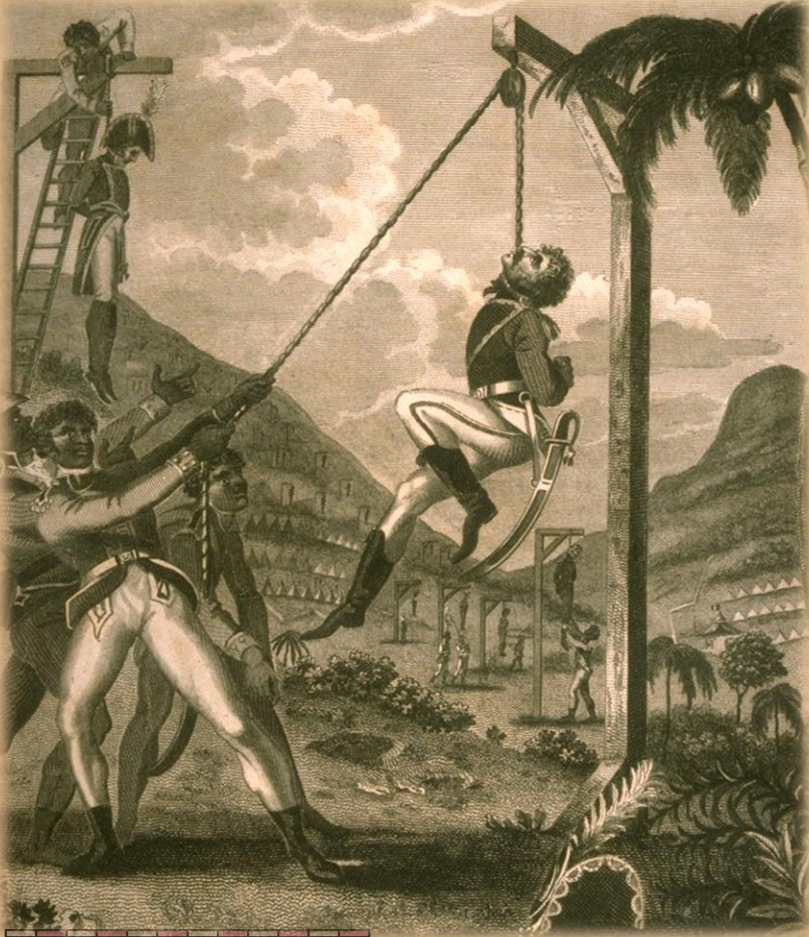
“The Pornography of Pain”

“Historian Karen Halttunen has coined the phrase, “the pornography of pain,” to encapsulate the pleasure audiences took in seeing, hearing, and reading about horrific things, in the guise of sympathizing with one's fellow man or woman.”

(White, 2021)



The Battle of Palm Tree Hill, in a painting by January Suchodolski which depicts a clash between Polish soldiers in the service of France and rebellious slaves freed by Haitian revolutionary soldiers.

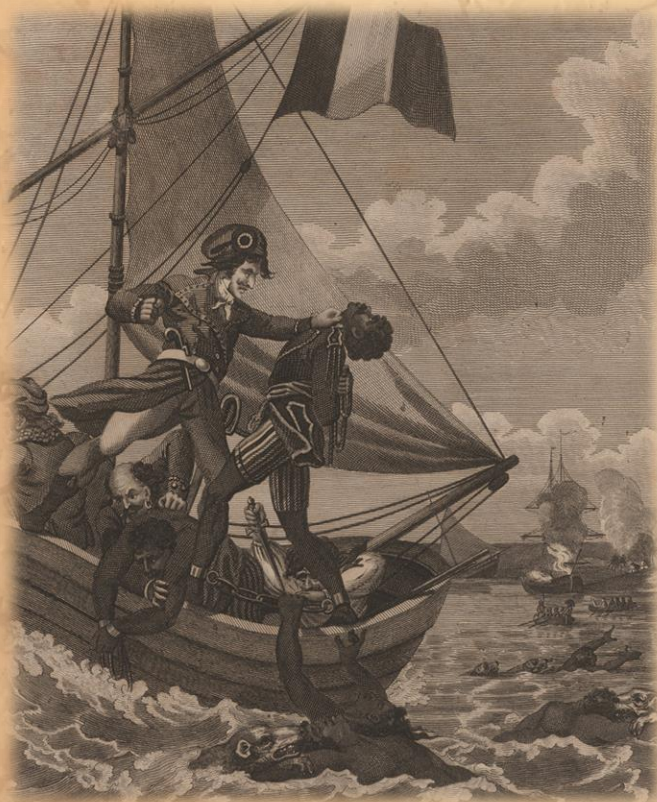


“All the Devils Are Here – How the visual history of the Haitian Revolution misrepresents Black suffering and death”

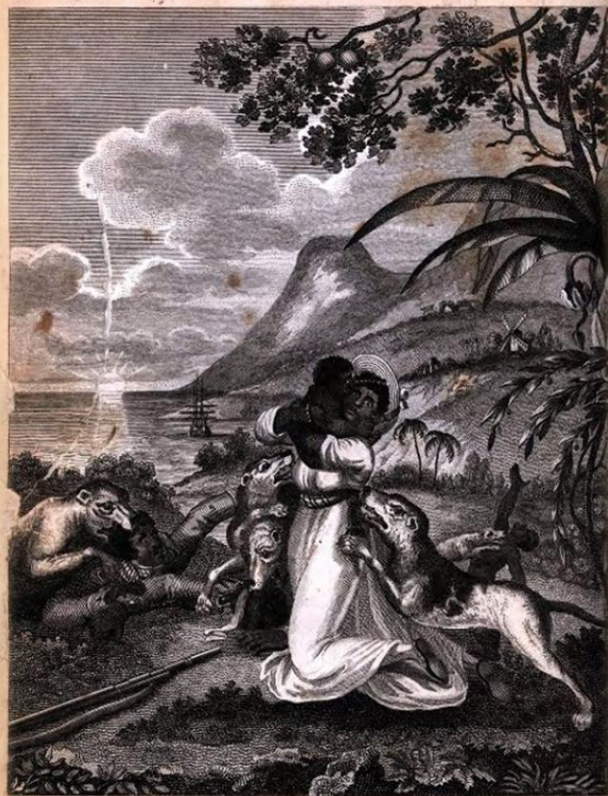
(Marlene L. Daut, 2020)

Black revolutionaries stringing up white soldiers on a hillside – a representative, and often employed, picture from the genre; from the 1805 book *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti*, by Marcus Rainsford.

“This Black-on-white violence is described with the words **“Revenge taken by the black army for the cruelties practiced on them by the French.”**” (Daut, 2020)



The Mode of exterminating the Black Army, as practised by the French



Blood hounds attacking a black family in the woods



“The French guard was tasked with gathering the dead bodies.”



“A U.S. merchant recounted in an 1803 article for the Philadelphia-based Literary Magazine, and American Register that in November 1802 he witnessed **“scenes that bear the deepest tinge of barbarous atrocity.”**”

Seven or eight hundred blacks and men of color were seized upon in the streets, in the public places, in the very houses, and for the moment confined within the walls of a prison. Thence they were hurried on board the national vessels lying in the harbor, from whence they were plunged into eternity.

As a result of all of this “premeditated barbarity,” the merchant concluded, “the billows now washed these unfortunate victims to the shore, **floating with their eyes, as it were, turned toward heaven, they seemed to demand vengeance** on the author of their untimely death.”

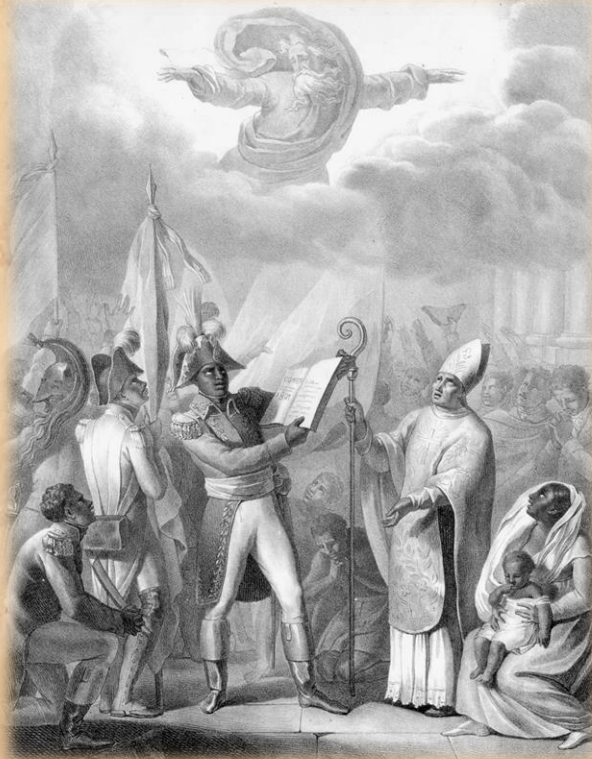
(Daut, 2020)



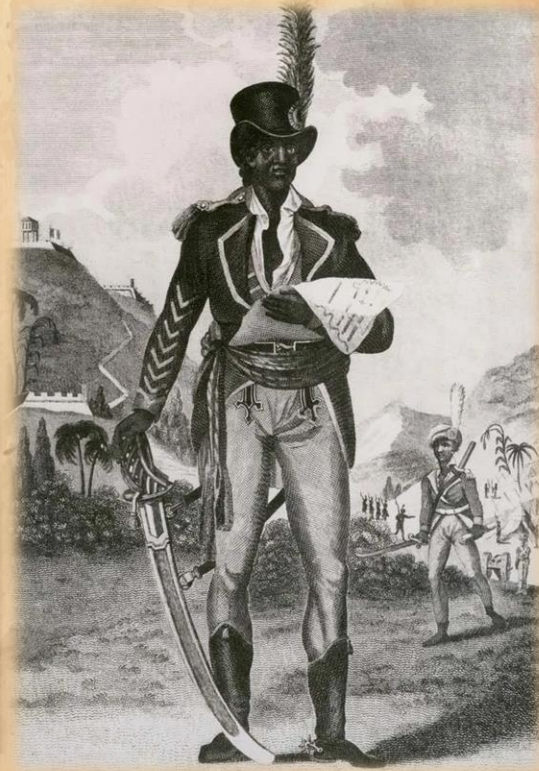


TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE
Chef des Nègres Insurgés de Saint Domingue
A Paris chez M. de la Harpe, Palais National, N° 10.

Toussaint Louverture, Leader of the Black Insurgents of Saint Domingue, cca 1800; made as part of a series of portraits of generals of the French Revolution.



Toussaint Louverture proclaiming the Constitution of the Republic of Haiti, July 1, 1801; nineteenth-century lithograph



1805 engraving of Louverture from the book *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* by Marcus Rainsford






05

Problematic Representation

Violent Barbarians, Black Jacobins, and other troubling
images





Representing in Banalizing Ways



Not a Real Revolution

Refusal of acknowledging that slaves led it or that they had ideas of their own.

Me Free Too

Overemphasis on the French intellectual origins of the Haitian Revolution.

Focus on Violence

Sensationalized tales of the slaves' capacity for violence and portrayal of slaveholders as victims.

The Black Jacobins


Turning the Haitian revolutionaries into derivatives of the French ones.

Savage Slaves

Rendering the leaders of the Revolution as savage and barbaric Africans.

Race vs Class

The question of minimized in favor of class: slave rebels motivated by greed rather than by ideology.



Moi Libre Aussi: French revolutionary images





“Terrified Consciousness”

“The reality of a semi-politically free Saint-Domingue with a free black population ran counter to the grandiose dreams of Napoleon to reestablish a viable French- American empire. It also created what Anthony Maingot has called a **“terrified consciousness”** among the rest of the slave masters in the Americas.”

“The impact of the Haitian Revolution was both immediate and widespread. The **antislavery fighting** immediately spawned **unrest** throughout the region, especially in communities of Maroons in Jamaica, and among slaves in St. Kitts. It sent a wave of immigrants flooding outward to the neighboring islands, and to the United States and Europe.”

(Knight, 2000)





Conclusion

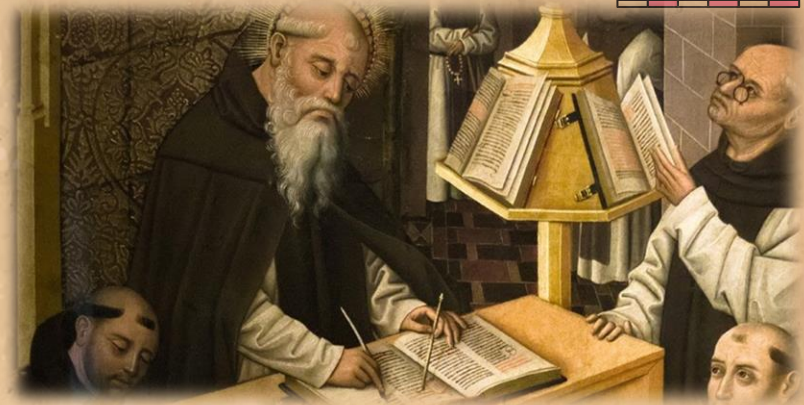
Toward New Narratives of Haiti
and the Revolution

06



“(Re)Writing History”

“[...] we need to be cognizant of **how colonists’ perspectives have shaped not only the dominant historiography but also the archives** scholars rely upon. To help correct this colonial bias, we can **pay attention to the counternarratives** produced by Haitians after 1804.”
(Knight, 2000)



“It is the task of historians and other scholars to take **the fractured archives** of revolution and turn them into the narratives that together **present** the Haitian Revolution—particularly the Black political agents at its heart—**in full.**” (Knight, 2000)

“The solution may be for the two historiographic traditions—that of Haiti and that of the ‘foreign’ specialists—to merge or to generate a **new perspective that encompasses the best of each.**” (Trouillot, 1995)



RESOURCES

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THANK

YOU

