

Reception and Antiquation in the Haitian Revolution

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From theatrical performances and popular celebrations to parliamentary speeches and diplomatic correspondence, references to classical Greco-Roman (hereafter “classical”) antiquity suffused the Haitian Revolution. The leaders of the revolutionary struggle, the elites who supported and opposed them, and the broad public on both sides of the Atlantic; all seemed to invoke classical antiquity or be immersed in it through other people’s private and public utterances. But what exactly did these utterances mean, and what was at stake with the way in which classical reception was practiced—or not—in the most radical revolutionary struggle of the modern world?

This article provides a new conceptual framework to encapsulate a hegemonic discourse about classical antiquity that pervaded the Haitian Revolutionary struggle: planter reception. Mobilized by colonial planters and sustained throughout the Revolution, planter reception legitimized modern slavery through strategic appropriations of classical antiquity. The article embeds planter reception within a broader historical and historiographical conversation about the role of classical antiquity in the Haitian Revolution. It considers examples of resisting, deconstructing, silencing, or suppressing planter reception by black and white antislavery advocates, especially through a type of counter-hegemonic discourse: antiquation. These various engagements with classical reception led to the emergence of a particular concept of *transatlantic antiquity*, which through an inclusive set of conversations and practices inserted Haiti and the Black Atlantic in the universalist legacy of Roman republicanism.¹

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¹ On the Black Atlantic tradition, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Beatriz G. Mamigonian and Karen Racine, eds., *The Human Tradition in the Black Atlantic, 1500–2000* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); Laurent Dubois and Julius S. Scott, eds., *Origins of the Black Atlantic* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Marlene L. Daut, *Baron de Vastey and the Origins of Black Atlantic Humanism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Ian Moyer, Adam Lecznar, and Heidi Morse, eds., *Classicisms in the Black Atlantic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Scholars of the Haitian Revolution have long recognized classical reception as one of the chief discourses in the unfolding revolutionary struggle. Such prominent researchers as C. L. R. James, David Nicholls, Michel Rolph-Trouillot, Ashli White, Alfred Hunt, Ada Ferrer, Malick Ghachem, Sue Peabody, Charles Forsdick, Laurent Dubois, Bernard Camier, Julia Prest, David Scott, David Geggus, Sibylle Fischer, Deborah Jenson, Chelsea Stieber, Rachel Douglas, Sara Johnson, Sudhir Hazareesingh, and Grégory Pierrot have examined the ways in which reception of the classical past informed the strategies, representational choices, ideological outlooks, cultural parameters, and commemorative practices of the Haitian Revolutionary struggle. By and large, these works have emphasized classical reception as a strategy in an Atlantic struggle for modernity, placing it in the framework of those ideological currents—liberalism, Marxism, nationalism, capitalism—that make the Haitian Revolution an intrinsic part of the birth of the modern world.²

² See C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938); Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour, and National Independence in Haiti*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Sue Peabody, "There Are No Slaves in France": *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Bernard Camier and Laurent Dubois, "Voltaire et Zaïre, ou le théâtre des Lumières dans l'aire atlantique française," *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine* 54, no. 4 (2007): 39-69; Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Deborah Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative: Politics, Sex, and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011); Malick W. Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Rachel Douglas, "Theory versus Practice: On the Postcolonial Marginalization of Haitian Literature," *Small Axe* 16, no. 3 (2012): 188-198; Sara E. Johnson, *The Fear of French Negroes: Transcolonial Collaboration in the Revolutionary Americas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg, *Toussaint Louverture: A Black Jacobin in the Age of Revolutions* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Grégory Pierrot, *The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019); Chelsea Stieber, *Haiti's Paper War: Post-Independence Writing, Civil War, and the Making of the Republic, 1804-1954* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Moyer, Lecznar, and Morse, *Classicisms in the Black Atlantic*; Julia Prest, "Neoclassical Theater in the Colonial Context: The Public Theater of Saint-Domingue, 1764-1791," in *Teaching French Neoclassical Tragedy*, eds. Hélène E. Bilis and Ellen McClure (New York: Modern Language Association, 2021), 189-200.

This work has been crucial for countering persistent notions of Haitian exceptionalism and for according Haiti a prominent place in the global history of liberal democracy.³ But a careful examination of classical reception accentuates that the stakes of politicizing classical antiquity were much greater and more complex than those that render the Haitian Revolutionary struggle of lofty importance to the modern world. The imperative of embedding, and centering, Haiti in a global capitalist modernity, this article argues, has obscured the recognition of a truly remarkable aspect of the Haitian Revolution: namely, that it contested the monopolization of classical antiquity by European slaveholding elites, thereby depriving them of a chief element of their ideological foundation.⁴

What made the Haitian Revolution a revolution in more than just the commonly accepted use of the term, and quintessentially more revolutionary than the French Revolution itself, was that Haiti dismantled a ubiquitous proslavery ideology, an ideology that had claimed classical antiquity as a strategic resource in its justification of *racial* slavery as a civilizational landmark of the Enlightenment. Planters had managed to racialize classical antiquity in ways that injected Aristotelian ideas of “natural” slavery directly into the pages of modern media.⁵ Had Aristotle and the printing press remained separate, the latter, especially while monopolized by a planter elite and underpinned by state censorship, would have been unlikely to conjure up a coherent proslavery ideology that mobilized wide

³ On Haitian exceptionalism, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean, and the World,” *Cimarrón: New Perspectives on the Caribbean* 2, no. 3 (1990): 3-12; Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, Kaiama L. Glover, Mark Schuller, and Jhon Picard Byron, eds., *The Haiti Exception: Anthropology and the Predicament of Narrative* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016); Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Michael Drexler, eds., *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States: Histories, Textualities, Geographies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 1-16.

⁴ On the significance of ancient slavery to the construction of a colonial/Creole planter class, see David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 23-32, 111-116; Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 12; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholder's Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On the difference between current emancipatory expectations and the past struggles for freedom in slaveholding societies, see Gerard Aching, *Freedom from Liberation: Slavery, Sentiment, and Literature in Cuba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

⁵ Aristotle, *A Treatise on Government*, trans. William Ellis (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1888), 16-24. On the influence of the Aristotelian notion of “natural” slavery, see Thomas Wiedemann, *Greek & Roman Slavery* (London: Routledge, 1981), 1-12; Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3, 33-34, 41, 54-56, 62, 179.

groups of an educated elite to support or at least indulge in the barbarity of modern plantation slavery.⁶

The printing press enabled even the remote planters of Saint Domingue to participate in the Enlightenment project by identifying themselves as admirers and emulators of the classical Greeks and Romans. A far cry from the classically-trained elites in Western Europe, the plantocrats of Saint Domingue nevertheless saw great utility in receiving and promoting the cultural heritage of Rome as both an assertion of their own belonging to the vaunted—if distant—civilized circles of Europe, and as a means of strengthening their power over the masses of Africans they enslaved. The popular outlet for French colonists to imagine themselves as the heirs of ancient Rome was the colonial newspaper *Les Affiches Américaines*, in publication from 1766 to the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution. From its first to its last year in print, *Les Affiches Américaines* invented a Roman past that made the violence necessary for the sustainment of the brutal colonial regime seem like a tribute to western civilization. “African faith and infidelity were, in the judgment of the Romans, two synonymous words,” the newspaper claimed in 1766. “The proceedings of modern Africans,” it concluded, “give the same idea as that of their ancestors.”⁷

In this piece and others, the newspaper depicted Africans as racially inferior Others whose loyalty to their white owners was always wavering. Living up to its reputation as the organ of the insular slaveocracy, *Les Affiches Américaines* maintained a section on “Fugitive Slaves,” which frequently announced the escapes of an Alexander, Ulysses, Hercules, or Bacchus—not the Greek and Roman figures whom enslavers were seeking to emulate, but African slaves bearing a mark upon their skin in accordance with the black code policing their everyday experiences of enslavement on the island.⁸ The naming of slaves after ancient Greeks and Romans was both an articulation of the collective identity of a patrician master class and a humiliating practice which imposed a new and derogatory name upon African captives as a marker of their subordination. By owning a Cato, Pompey, or Caesar, colonial planters turned the names of Roman consuls into another marker of their control over ancient meaning in the modern world of plantation work and global markets. They applied the same “classicizing” trick

⁶ On the press in the French Revolutionary period, see Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789-1799* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); Robert Darnton, “An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (2000): 1–35.

⁷ *Les Affiches Américaines*, July 16, 1766.

⁸ *Les Affiches Américaines*, August 7, 1784. See Jonas Ross Kjærgård, “What Are Robespierre and Télémaque Doing in Saint-Domingue? Humanness, Revolutionary Legitimacy, and Political Order in Charles Pigault-Lebrun’s *Le blanc et le noir* (1795),” *Orbis Litterarum* 73, no. 2 (2018): 186–212.

to erase places of refuge for Creole speakers and replace them with references to Roman antiquity, “thereby,” in the words of the leading planter intellectual of the Enlightenment, “procur[ing] a new conquest for the Romans over the Africans.”⁹

From its inception, *Les Affiches Américaines* acted as the mouthpiece of the colonial planters, but the newspaper became even more invested in Roman reception with the conclusion of the American Revolution and the passing of several new laws in 1784, which opened French colonial ports to foreign trade while also seeking to hem in the worst excesses of colonial slavery.¹⁰ In response to these changing circumstances, *Les Affiches Américaines* launched a new series with a lengthy editorial which reinforced its investment in Roman reception.

In a programmatic statement immediately following the stories of Alexander, Ulysses, Hercules, and Bacchus, the editors explained the utility of appraising their readers of novel developments by drawing on the history of past civilizations. “Each nation,” the editors opined, “has its distinct character: one seems to have been created and endowed by nature rather to be an agriculturalist than a merchant.” The Phoenicians and Carthaginians had let commerce flourish while the Romans had disdained this occupation. Pisa, Genoa, and Venice had been the predominant mercantile nations before England and Holland rose to dominate global commerce. “[N]owadays,” the newspaper concluded, “all the nations share [worldwide commerce] with them; the Powers even, whose position on the globe would seem to dissuade from these views, want to play a role on this brilliant scene.” In particular, the newspaper editors were interested in attracting foreign consuls to Saint Domingue, a novelty in a period when such agents were expressly prohibited from entering foreign colonial jurisdictions.¹¹ And yet, by linking the ancient and the precociously modern—Cato’s Rome with Bourbon

⁹ This is how the proslavery ideologue, Médéric Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, described the naming of a Saint Domingue bay, first as a place of refuge for runaway slaves who had called it “Couri-don” (“Run, then!”), and which was later, as Moreau de Saint-Méry observed, ingeniously renamed “Corydon” in homage to a classical pastoral character popularized by Virgil. Regardless of whether the story Moreau de Saint-Méry recounted was correct, his simple narrative suggests that his audience would have had no difficulty believing it; and his use of the phrase “new conquest” suggests that such a “classicizing” trick was likely not uncommon. See [Médéric Louis Elie] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’isle Saint-Domingue...*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: [M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry], 1797-1798), 2: 84.

¹⁰ See Jeremy D. Popkin, *A New World Begins: The History of the French Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 73.

¹¹ *Les Affiches Américaines*, August 7, 1784. See Simeon A. Simeonov, “The consular Caribbean: consuls as agents of colonialism and decolonisation in the revolutionary Caribbean (1795-1848),” in *Memory, Migration and (De)Colonisation in the Caribbean and Beyond*, eds. Jack Webb, Roderick Westmaas, Maria del Pilar Kaladeen, and William Tantam (London: University of London Press, 2020), 117-132.

Saint Domingue—planters expressed how important the claim to classical antiquity was to justifying their slaveholding regime and diminishing their spatial and temporal distance from the metropole. Their wish of attracting foreign consuls, strangely enough, would not be realized under the Bourbon monarchy, but instead under the rule of a formerly enslaved republican leader by the name of Toussaint Louverture.¹²

This kind of selective and distorted proslavery “emulation” of the ancient Romans was not the only way in which French elites, the self-professed carriers of the Enlightenment, thought about classical antiquity. To individuals like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, and Count de Montesquieu, to name but few of the leading Enlightenment philosophes, ancient Rome was the main reference point in arguments about republicanism, the freest of all forms of government.¹³ Slavery was a common concept that these authors used in their formulation of the virtues of Roman republicanism, a political structure of popular resistance against tyrannical government that had originated among parts of the Roman elite, the patricians.¹⁴ And yet, for all their plentiful references to slavery, none of the leading philosophes made an integrated argument about how these insights from the ancient Roman republic applied to the conditions of black enslavement in the French colonies.¹⁵ This was a curious disjuncture, for the leading French philosophers of the time expressed their critical opinions of colonial slavery, even under the threat of censorship and persecution.¹⁶ If Rome was such an exemplar of a free republican constitutional order, then what were the consequences of Roman reception (and emulation) for the French Antilles? And why did the philosophes, interested in both Roman reception and colonial slavery, not devise an intersectional analysis? The answer which most scholars have suggested thus far—racism—only partially accounts for this peculiar omission, for the racist

¹² See Ronald Angelo Johnson, *Diplomacy in Black and White: John Adams, Toussaint Louverture, and Their Atlantic World Alliance* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

¹³ Judith Shklar, “Rousseau and the Republican Project,” *French Politics and Society* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 42–49; Richard Myers, “Montesquieu on the Causes of Roman Greatness,” *History of Political Thought* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 37–47; Keith Michael Baker, “Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 1 (March 2001): 32–53; Ana J. Samuel, “The Design of Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws*: The Triumph of Freedom over Determinism,” *American Political Science Review* 103, no. 2 (May 2009): 305–321, esp. 313.

¹⁴ Claudine Hunting, “The Philosophes and Black Slavery: 1748–1765,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, no. 3 (1978): 405–418.

¹⁵ Andreas Eckert, “Aufklärung, Sklaverei und Abolition,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 23 (2010): 243–262.

¹⁶ Hunting, “Philosophes and Black Slavery,” 405–418.

attitudes of leading philosophes did little to contain the anti-slave-trade agenda of the *Encyclopédie* or similar outlets of French Enlightenment thought.¹⁷

It was this dearth of critical engagement with the implications (and applications) of Roman republicanism in the colonies on the part of the philosophes that accorded abundant discursive space for the surge of white planter reception in the late eighteenth century.¹⁸ However, even at the peak of its power, planter reception was far from hegemonic. Metropolitan Frenchmen in particular rarely conceived of the plantation—or the colonies generally—as the most common denominator between the Roman republic and French civilization. In his influential *Considérations sur l'état présent de la colonie française de Saint-Domingue* (1776), for example, Michel René Hilliard d'Auberteuil, a French-born lawyer who spent extensive time in Saint Domingue, implored his readers to “compare the Filibusterers [who founded Saint Domingue] to the small number of brigands who founded the famous Roman Empire; the first were guided by the furies of rapacity, and the latter by the desire to create a homeland.”¹⁹ This difference was further accentuated by the political organization of ancient Rome and colonial Saint Domingue: while the Romans had instituted a chief, the filibusterers had not had one. “One [could] push this parallel further,” Hilliard d'Auberteuil continued, for “the Romans had a single cause, while each of the Filibusterers saw in the universe only his particular interest.” Somewhat optimistically, he claimed that, undoubtedly, “once they had been better informed and convinced, that they [could] not find their personal advantage elsewhere than in the general interest of the society to which they [were] attached, [the filibusterers] would make very great progress in America.”²⁰

Such generally hostile attitudes toward Saint Domingue colonists suffused metropolitan French deployments of classical reception, even if those deployments did not explicitly engage with the type of reception practiced by colonial planters. The topic of slavery was (perhaps surprisingly) absent from some of the most influential eighteenth-century parallels between Saint Domingue and ancient Rome published in Europe, including the prominent account of Alexandre

¹⁷ Pace Eckert, “Aufklärung, Sklaverei und Abolition.” On this point, see Hunting, “Philosophes and Black Slavery.”

¹⁸ Though this article mostly focuses on France and Saint Domingue, the strong influence of the French Enlightenment in Britain and the United States also conditioned the development of planter reception in the Anglophone Atlantic world. See Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Mind of the Master Class*; White, *Encountering Revolution*.

¹⁹ [Michel René Hilliard d'Auberteuil], *Considérations sur l'état présent de la colonie française de Saint-Domingue...* (Paris: Grangé, 1776), 27. On d'Auberteuil's political views, see Gene E. Ogle, “‘The Eternal Power of Reason’ and ‘The Superiority of Whites’: Hilliard d'Auberteuil's Colonial Enlightenment,” *French Colonial History* 3 (2003): 35–50.

²⁰ Hilliard d'Auberteuil, *Considérations sur l'état présent*, 27.

Stanislas (Baron) de Wimpffen.²¹ Nevertheless, the popularity of these classical receptionist tropes manifests that eighteenth-century authors came to regard such a parallel as not merely peripheral or illustrative, but as integral to their interpretation of Saint Domingue colonization. Over the eighteenth century, it was not only possible but quite common for French authors to imagine Saint Domingue colonists as latter-day Roman founders, and to do so without any explicit reference to slavery. This reveals that Haiti's relationship to ancient Rome was complex and varied even before the Revolution—and that planter proslavery hegemony was deeply contested throughout the colonial period.

If many Frenchmen were therefore either uninterested in or uncomfortable with confronting the racialization of ancient Roman history in service of the plantation economy, others adopted the racialized politics of planter reception to subvert this very economy. The most famous among the pre-revolutionary French antislavery receptionists was Abbé Raynal, the celebrated author of the highly influential *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770), who turned to ancient authors as a source of inspiration for his antislavery rhetoric. For this author of immense erudition in the classics, what seemed “unimaginable” to most of his contemporaries—a successful slave uprising—was utterly predictable if one cast a discerning look at Roman history, particularly the first century BC, when imperial conquest, mass enslavement, and aristocratic consolidation of power led to the uprising commanded by the Thracian slave Spartacus.²²

In Raynal's rendition, the excesses of the self-aggrandizing, and self-Romanizing, white colonial elites would end at the hands of a Black Spartacus. “[A]nd the negroes only want a chief, sufficiently courageous, to lead them to vengeance and slaughter. Where is this great man to be found, whom nature, perhaps, owes to the honour of the human species? Where is this new Spartacus, who will not find a Crassus? Then will the *black code* be no more; and the *white code* will be dreadful, if the conqueror only regards the right of reprisals.”²³ While scholars have admired Raynal's premonition for its censure of the colonial planters, they

²¹ See Baron de Wimpffen, *Voyage a Saint-Domingue pendant les années 1788, 1789 et 1790*, 2 vols. (Paris: Cocheris, 1797), 1: 108. Wimpffen's account of Haiti strikingly resembled Hilliard d'Auberteuil's, but its direct source was another eighteenth-century text, Robert Challe, *Journal d'un voyage fait aux Indes Orientales*, 3 vols. (Rouen: Jean Baptiste Machuel le Jeune, 1721), esp. 3: 371.

²² The authorship of the *Histoire philosophique et politique*... is contested. Michèle Duchet, *Diderot et l'Histoire des deux Indes ou L'écriture fragmentaire* (Paris: Nizet, 1978) has suggested that Denis Diderot might have been the author of these passages. See also Pierrot, *Black Avenger*, Ch. 3.

²³ Abbé Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, trans. John Justamond, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (London: T. Cadell, 1776), 3: 173. See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

have not fully probed into the wider context of classical reception in the racialized setting of eighteenth-century Saint Domingue.²⁴ How, if not through this reference to the ancient Thracian, could Raynal have more effectively captured the modern western imagination in opposition to slavery? If Spartacus had made the end of slavery imaginable to ancient Romans, how “unimaginable” could a successful slave uprising be to the much weaker French colonial regime?²⁵ Raynal’s imagery captivated both Toussaint Louverture and Napoleon Bonaparte, though what conclusions each of them derived from his *History of the Two Indies* is open to interpretation.

What is less open to interpretation, however, is that the Haitian Revolution catalyzed an antislavery tradition that had been reinvigorated, paradoxically, by the same inquisitive spirit of the Enlightenment that led planters to seek to apply Cato the Elder, Cicero, and Varro to the modern plantation machine. Reading the classical authors with fresh eyes, Enlightened literati could not help but think: where was the naturalness of racial discrimination actually grounded, historically, intellectually, or ideologically? Where were the Biblical justifications for *black* slavery, or the Aristotelian justifications of *black* inferiority that would have helped drafters of black codes legitimize their projects as products of “western civilization?”

An even more pernicious thought might appear from some of those inquisitive explorations of the classical authors: if slavery was as natural as skin color, then wasn’t the most natural consequence of this that white people should be slaves too?²⁶ But if there was nothing more unnatural than racializing Aristotle, then slaveholders—and scholars—misjudged the type of hegemony that their proslavery reception of antiquity had actually set in place. Planter reception, though representing itself as a monolithic entity, was rife with contradictions that

²⁴ See, for example, Pierrot, *Black Avenger*, Ch. 2, 3.

²⁵ For a similar critique, see Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*. In the passage just preceding these oft-quoted remarks, Raynal pointed to two examples of successful maroon uprisings in the Caribbean.

²⁶ As I suggest later, similar questions germinated with some consistency in black thinkers’ work of reception in the wake of the Haitian Revolution. However, due to the imperative of persuading a white audience uncomfortable with cross-racial parallels vis-à-vis slavery, black literati were greatly disincentivized to pursue such themes. Nevertheless, this early nineteenth-century work of reception made it possible for later critics of slavery to openly state that black resistance against slavery would also further white emancipation. For example, an article in the *Gazeta Oficial* 19:1161 (Bogotá, October 13, 1850), entitled “On the African race and its descendants,” emphasized the significance of Africa and its people to the creation of European civilization from the rise of Egypt through the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade, asking: “Who can be sure that the situation of the Africans today will not be that of the Caucasian race tomorrow?”

became all too apparent in an age marked by the primacy of rational inquiry and empirical evidence.

It is important in this regard to stress that the Haitian Revolution brought a certain liberation of western thought in its treatment of antiquity. During the heated discussions surrounding the Saint Domingue uprising (as it was called in the metropole), the deputies in the newly constituted French republican bodies invoked the legacy of Rome consistently as they articulated diverging opinions on republicanism, slavery, and citizenship. One of the most lucid representations came from a delegate from Saint Domingue, Claude Pierre Joseph Leborgne de Boigne, who addressed the other members of the Council of Five Hundred on October 18, 1797, regarding the situation of the colony. As one of the closest allies of the emancipating commissioners Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel, Leborgne found himself under attack by Saint Domingue émigré planters for alleged crimes of assassination and embezzlement.²⁷

Despite abolitionists' best efforts, the energetic and resourceful anti-abolitionist rhetoric of French émigrés—"traitors, partisans of the throne, men profoundly hypocritical and fierce"—in Leborgne's words, made it difficult to "dissipate the alarms and concerns" that metropolitan citizens had conceived about the "imperishable" liberty of Saint Domingue.²⁸ Accordingly, Leborgne began his address to a Council recovering from a coup orchestrated by a group of anti-abolitionist, crypto-monarchist Clichyens with strong allusions to classical antiquity. This was an advantageous strategy that struck at one of the core legitimating elements of the leading Clichyens—Louis Thomas Villaret-Joyeuse, Vincent-Marie Viénot de Vaublanc, and François Louis Bourdon—who had conspired to overthrow the Directory. Leborgne described the leading Clichyens as a "colonial triumvirate" whose goal was "to reproduce with certainty the ancient system of slavery" in Saint Domingue.²⁹ Though the Club Clichy encompassed much wider support than Leborgne's polemical foes, his allusion to a "triumvirate" amply demonstrated the extent to which ancient Rome conditioned public debate in the nascent French Republic, where imagined and actual triumvirates succeeded each other in a dizzying progression—until the most powerful member of one such body ultimately became emperor and put an end to the revolutionary process itself.

Unless opposed by the abolitionist remnants of the Jacobins, Leborgne cautioned, the reactionary policy of the "colonial triumvirate" seemed poised to

²⁷ Gabriel Jean-Baptiste Larchevesque-Thibaud et. al., *Les calommateurs: Leborgne, Polverel, Sonthonax [sic] et complices, appelés au Tribunal révolutionnaire* (Paris: Laurens, 1794).

²⁸ Claude Pierre Joseph Leborgne de Boigne, *Compte rendu par Leborgne, sur la situation actuelle de la colonie de Saint-Domingue* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1797), 2.

²⁹ Leborgne, *Compte rendu*, 4.

destroy all that the Revolution stood for. Reminding his audience of a landmark achievement of the Constitution of the Year III, Leborgne stressed that by “dividing the territory of the colonies according to the Constitution,” the Jacobins had “given it the republican form, erasing from that soil all traces of slavery.”³⁰ Praising the election of the first representative of African descent, Jean-Baptiste Belley, to a modern European legislature, Leborgne highlighted the universality of the revolutionary legacy in the language of ancient republicanism:

You have not regarded as a proscription for the title of French citizen, the color which nature has given to one of the two greatest families of mankind. And when a member of African color was admitted to your bosom, this day marked your glory and the triumph of humanity. Did Rome, which you have surpassed in greatness, treat with different respect the citizens of Africa and the citizens of Rome? Has Africa not had her legislators, heroes, and conquerors? Does not Spain owe the dawn of the greatness from which she fell so much, to the Africans who entered her? Was Africa not the cradle of the arts and sciences? Is it not in Africa that the ashes of Cato repose?³¹

³⁰ Leborgne, *Compte rendu*, 5.

³¹ Leborgne, *Compte rendu*, 5. Leborgne referred to Jean-Baptiste Belley, the first representative of African descent in a modern European legislature.



Figure I. Jean-Baptiste Belley, 1746—1805, by Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson (1798).
 Courtesy of the Musée de Château Versailles (N° d'inventaire MV 4616).

Reclaiming the esteemed place of Africa and Africans in Europe's republican heritage was an important component of Leborgne's attempt to reestablish the place of the Jacobins (and their abolitionist organization, the *Society of the Friends of the Blacks*) in the history of the French Revolution.

Far from being singular occurrences, such contestations of ancient Rome filled the discussions of French legislative bodies in the 1790s. Jean-Baptiste Belley, in whose recognition and defense Leborgne referred to the importance of Africa and Africans in the making of Europe's primordial republic, actively contributed to such contestations in his activism as a Saint Domingue deputy at the National Convention and the Council of Five Hundred. In response to Belley's impassioned republican critique of the proslavery Club Massiac, the chief white planter lobby in France, a white planter of the Île-de-France (Mauritius) by the name of Benoît Gouly objected to the frequent invocations of ancient Rome, especially in the case of a common analogy depicting the clash between France

and England as a repetition of the Punic Wars. “The difference of the times, places, and customs rarely permits that the politics of the ancient age enlightens that of the modern centuries,” opined Gouly, an opponent to both antislavery activists and the Club Massiac. To this colonial planter-turned-republican deputy, the representatives’ obsession with ancient Rome blinded them to a very practical modern solution to the colonial crisis.³²

If they wished to avert a complete catastrophe in the colonies, Gouly believed, French representatives needed to think in modern, rational terms, and give free people of color full equality while merely ameliorating the condition of the enslaved population. Gouly’s defensiveness against Belley’s use of classical history demonstrates that already by late 1794, planter reception was no longer the sole rhetorical bulwark of the white planter lobby. The contestations by free men of color in the French capital had by then transformed classical reception, hitherto a major source of legitimacy for colonial slavery, into a militant source of radical republican activism.³³ Gouly’s insistence on the antiquated character of Rome highlighted his message that, at least when it came to the colonies, France should eschew its republican ideals and pursue a modern policy that cynically promoted the rationale of exchanging the recognition of free blacks’ citizenship for the perpetuation of colonial slavery.³⁴

References to the exemplar of ancient Rome as an inspirational, universal republic worthy of emulation were not confined to the metropole alone. The Haitian Revolution provided the space for Haitians of all colors to locate Africans within the European and Atlantic tradition of classical republicanism. Haitian works of Roman reception abounded in all conceivable genres, yet perhaps the most illustrative among them in terms of their broad public appeal and explicit references to classical Rome are examples from the performative and literary arts.³⁵

Like its flourishing French counterpart, Haitian theater provided a platform for articulating a new national culture apart from the pamphlets, novels,

³² See Benoît Gouly, *Vues générales: sur l'importance du commerce des colonies...* (Paris: Rubat, 1795), 81.

³³ For more examples of internal disagreements among planters vis-à-vis Roman reception in this period, see Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue, depuis le commencement des troubles...* (Paris: Mame frères, 1814), 134 (alluding to discussions in the early stage of the revolution of whether to adopt the Roman practice of dictatorship and suspend the colonial assembly by concentrating powers in the hands of a single magistrate in a time of crisis).

³⁴ See Gouly, *Vues générales*, 81.

³⁵ See Pierrot, *Black Avenger*, Ch. 3.

newspaper articles, and treatises of the Francophone revolutionary tradition.³⁶ No sooner had Haitians cast off the French yoke than they began expressing what this new republican theater looked like.³⁷ It was, unsurprisingly, a theater full of allusions to classical antiquity, much like the contemporary theater in Paris and other French cities transformed by the doctrines of civic republicanism. In Saint Domingue, performances of plays such as Voltaire's *La mort de César*, a popular drama in the metropole, also attracted Haitian spectators with their emphasis on republican virtue and looming tyrannical power.³⁸ With one important—though somehow, unnoticed and underappreciated—exception: a Black Spartacus was now, and perhaps for the first time in history, rising up to face a Black Caesar.

This was no mean feat, and to read the Black Spartacus and Black Caesar who, in theatrical fulfillment of Raynal's prophecy, literally stepped onto the Haitian stage, as mere emanations of the mulatto elite's desire to be white is to reduce the complexity of Haitian revolutionary dynamics.³⁹ These performances manifested that one did not need to cast away European antiquity altogether to prove one's emancipation from it; nor was there a logical necessity—perceived or implicit—to enact Enlightened expectations in order to deny their veracity. Instead, there *was* a logical link—both perceived and implicit—in the necessity to enact Enlightened expectations in order to subvert or vindicate them; a goal that seemed both more worthy of pursuing and within the grasp of the Haitian revolutionaries.

This much can be gleaned from the Haitian theatrical repertoire at the turn of the nineteenth century. What made plays like Voltaire's *Death of Caesar* popular among both the Haitian elite and the broader populace were their abundant references to the incompatibility between slavery and republicanism.⁴⁰ So plentiful were such allusions in Voltaire's play that one could almost assume it was written

³⁶ See Marcus Rainsford, *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti...* (London: Albion Press, 1805), 222–223; David Geggus, ed., *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014), 156.

³⁷ Classical reception was also important in the composition of Jean-Jacques Dessalines's short-lived imperial regime, which consolidated in the wake of Toussaint Louverture's capture. See Stieber, *Haiti's Paper War*.

³⁸ See Geggus, *Haitian Revolution*, XV–XVI, 39.

³⁹ For a similar trend, see Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, 201–213. For a summary of the argument that the new Haitian state became a hostage to a mulatto elite that distanced itself from the black peasantry, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti, State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990). See also Jean Casimir, *The Haitians: A Decolonial History*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

⁴⁰ On the popularity of Voltaire's *Death of Caesar*, see Jean Fouchard, *Le théâtre à Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1988), 292. See also Pierrot, *Black Avenger*, Ch. 3.

more with nineteenth-century Haitians than with eighteenth-century Parisians in mind, a testament not only to Voltaire's use of classical republicanism but also to the growing significance of slavery in late-eighteenth-century French political life. What made Voltaire unpalatable to Saint Domingue planters was precisely what increased his appeal among those who resisted white plantocrats' power—both in France and Saint Domingue. And what made him dangerous to the Saint Domingue plantocrats was precisely his ability to mobilize the kind of ancient republican imagery—a main staple in the European Enlightenment repertoire—against those who invoked the power of Roman tradition to justify slavery.⁴¹

With its powerful evocations of slavery as the antithesis of liberty, the vaunted ideal of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire's *Death of Caesar* became a favorite of the Haitian audience at a time when it was freeing itself from the chains of subordination to the metropole.⁴² The beginning of the play, featuring Mark Anthony's address to Caesar, introduced the complex tension of a republican public pitted against tyrannical power:

Caesar, you are going to reign; behold the august day
In which the Roman people, always unjust to you,
Changed by your virtues, is going to meet in you
Its conqueror, its support, its avenger, and its king.⁴³

This play resonated strongly with Haitian audiences throughout the early nineteenth century, and its meaning likely shifted dramatically within the five years marking the end of the revolution, from 1800, when Haitians received news of Bonaparte's Consulate, through 1801-1802, when Louverture issued a new Constitution and was captured by the Napoleonic forces, to 1803, when Dessalines rose to claim Louverture's heritage.⁴⁴

Who was Caesar amid these revolutionary tribulations? And equally important, who were Cassius, Brutus, and Anthony? The key to answering these questions lies in Voltaire's depiction of the central figure in the Roman republican drama, the figure of Caesar, the archetype of a leadership style that continued to fascinate Francophone audiences amidst revolutionary transformations. Voltaire depicted Caesar as a divisive and vengeful figure, an embattled republican who wished to vindicate himself by telling his confidante Mark Anthony: "If you

⁴¹ See Dubois and Camier, "Voltaire et Zaïre," 39-69; Pierrot, *Black Avenger*, Ch. 3.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Voltaire, *Death of Caesar*, Act I.

⁴⁴ On the play's continuous popularity in Haiti, see Jean Fouchard, *Théâtre à Saint-Domingue*, 292.

don't know how to conquer, learn to serve."⁴⁵ This Caesarian polarity of conquest and servitude made Voltaire's script especially relevant to Saint Domingue spectators, who witnessed a dizzying array of wars of conquest from 1790 through 1805—against local contenders, British, Spanish, and French invaders, as well as the neighboring colony of Santo Domingo. Given the popularity of Caesar's image in both France and Saint Domingue, it is likely that the parallel that revolutionary Frenchmen often made between Louverture and Bonaparte stemmed not only from the qualities they shared, but also from both leaders' infatuation with Caesar as an embodiment of militant republicanism at the dawn of the Consulate.⁴⁶

Once the Haitian revolutionary wars were at a seeming end in 1804, however, the conquering ethos marshaled in defense of republican liberty seemed not only no longer exigent, but in fact damaging to the republic—a message that Louverture's successors were eager to disseminate among the people. In Voltaire's play, this difficult transition was embodied by Cassius and Brutus, who emerged as the true, if tragic, protectors of republican liberty, evidenced by Brutus's reply to Anthony:

I know all your plans, you are burning to be a slave,
You are a Roman and yet you want a monarch!⁴⁷

Such allusions to Roman liberty increased the play's appeal to a Haitian populace grappling with the capture of Toussaint Louverture and facing the threat of a new dictatorial figure that might take away its hard-earned liberty.⁴⁸ That there was no shortage of such figures in early national Haiti is a testament to both the universality of the republic-turned-monarchy (and vice-versa) script, and to Haitian politicians' ability to make use of Voltaire to reenact different versions of the play—both on and off stage—in the aftermath of independence.

⁴⁵ Voltaire, *Death of Caesar*, Act I.

⁴⁶ See Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus*, Ch. 3, 12.

⁴⁷ Voltaire, *Death of Caesar*, Act II.

⁴⁸ On the classical reception of Toussaint Louverture, see Lydia Langerwerf, "Universal Slave Revolts: C. L. R. James's use of Classical Literature in *The Black Jacobins*," in *Ancient Slavery and Abolition: From Hobbes to Hollywood*, eds. Richard Alston, Edith Hall, and Justine McConnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 353-385. On the classical reception of his adversary, see June K. Burton, *Napoleon and Clio: Historical Writing, Teaching and Thinking During the First Empire* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1979); Jean Tulard, "Les empires napoléoniens," in *Les empires occidentaux, de Rome à Berlin*, ed. Jean Tulard (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 363-382; Valérie Huet, "Napoleon I: a new Augustus?" in *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945*, ed. Catharine Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53-69; Philip G. Dwyer, "Napoleon and the Foundation of the Empire," *Historical Journal* 53, no. 2 (2010): 339-358.

Nonetheless, in the multiple available registers to express this ongoing common struggle for liberty, it is hardly surprising and quite consequential that classical reception provided the common denominator for enacting Haitian liberty on stage. Even though multiple cultural traditions were now available to the Haitian people, it is evident that large parts of the new nation imagined and reconstructed themselves in the universalist image of classical antiquity—or rather reconstituted the image of classical antiquity through the Haitian nation, as the now-closest extant embodiment of the ideals of this tradition.

None of this is to say that all Haitians were willing and enthusiastic actors and/or spectators in the spectacle of Roman reception. Haitians were not “pro-Roman,” and they needn’t be, to recognize that the Roman classical tradition contained vast emancipatory resources that were in no way outweighed by the proslavery resources mobilized by the former colonial planters. A significant part of Haitians’ struggle for freedom and autonomy consisted in dismantling the proslavery repertoire of planter reception. In this endeavor, Haitians found abundant support from white abolitionists who were equally familiar with the work and significance of classical reception.⁴⁹

Though obscured by other revolutionary changes, these struggles over classical reception in fact helped de-racialize Roman history and insert people of

⁴⁹ One of the most remarkable examples of this usage of classical republican imagery by white abolitionists appeared in an article in the prominent *Niles’ Weekly Register* (September 27, 1823): 50–53, which was later reprinted in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 3:7 (November 1823): 76. Simply entitled “Hayti,” this antislavery article cast a parallel between the Jamaican maroons and Haitians, claiming that the first had fallen victim to white treachery and barbarism (e.g., planters’ use of bloodhounds to chase runaways), while the latter, led by “a full proportion of orators and statesmen,” had exhibited “uncommon displays of wisdom and energy.” The newspaper sarcastically castigated white colonists for their barbarous treatment of the Jamaican maroons, stressing: “It is *might* that gives ‘legitimacy’ to conquest. Alexander, ‘the deliverer,’ has his white slaves, and why might not Cudjoe [the leader of the maroons] have white ones or black ones if he *could*—the Maroons being the *nobility* of Jamaica? ‘Corinthian pillars’ of its society? The ‘prop and stay of the throne?’” The rhetorical use of ancient republican imagery enabled the author of the article to highlight one of his main messages: In contrast to Jamaica, Haitian liberty seemed inviolable. The newspaper praised Haitians’ martial and agricultural ethos in a direct (and highly favorable) comparison with the descendants of the ancient Romans. “A spirit of inquiry was imposed by a sense of preservation, and despised negroes have become men and women, who, unless for the reason of their colour, would not be any where rejected on account of their manners (...) The fact is, that persons and property are more safe in Hayti than in many nations of white people. The classic ground of Italy is infested by bands of ferocious robbers, or over-run with swarms of beggars and petty thieves. Hayti has but few of either of these. There is more of either class in the *city* of Naples than in this republic of blacks—more, perhaps, even in the ‘eternal city,’ Rome (...)” In these anti-slavery outlets, Haitians were directly likened to the ancient Romans, an analogy that germinated in the context of early independent Haiti before it became commonplace among white abolitionists.

African descent into the story of European freedom, a universalist insertion that formed a crucial component of the Enlightenment project. Haitians' active mobilization of the classical tradition stressed that the best, most reliable ancient epitomes of Roman history inevitably represented freedom as the telos of Roman civilization. In this way, too, Haitians were reading Roman history much more carefully and intelligently than those who marginalized or minimized Africans' role in its making. In the course of only a few decades, Haitians helped emancipate ancient history from the exclusive, racialized conceits of enslavers and instead reimagined themselves as participants in an inclusive transatlantic antiquity.

Haitians' engagement with classical reception was neither a purely abstract struggle over concepts nor a mere reaction to the hegemonic power of the plantocrats. The consequences of this realization are twofold. First, as various scholars have noted, the classical reception practiced by Haitian elites exhibited properties of hegemonic discourse, including the racial dynamics of nation-making. Second, like any hegemonic discourse (including racism and liberalism), reception could—and did—accommodate counter-, anti-, and trans-hegemonic influences. The reification of classical reception during the Haitian Revolution opened new possibilities for critical inquiry against or beyond the persistent mode of planter reception. One vivid example of how revolutionary Franco-phone voices shifted the very terms of classical reception was antiquation, which here meant the negation of the significance of all things Roman to the Haitian Revolutionary process. Benoît Gouly, the Mauritian planter in the French republican legislature, offered just one instantiation of this style of antiquation, but many more emerged in the subsequent decades, as Haitians tried to square their revolutionary heritage with that of Roman republicanism.

Regardless of the varied political uses of antiquation, what all of its practitioners shared was a heightened sense of how this practice of “forgetting,” or distancing oneself from Rome, complicated the apparent hegemony of planter reception. If the kind of classical reception practiced by Saint Domingue planters and French philosophes occurred in the conscious and deliberate embrace of classical antiquity as conceptually useful, then antiquation entailed the strategies and arguments of deliberately diminishing the applicability of classical antiquity to the problems of “modernity.” No less than reception, antiquation was a profoundly political, and politicizable, project, and as such, illuminating it can help us shed more light on how Haitians and their contemporaries made the politics of antiquation do ideological work in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

Like classical reception, antiquation was a practice deployed by both colonial planters such as Benoît Gouly and by Haitian literati who engaged with the practice not only because it was strategically expedient, but also because it helped them establish their credentials—and those of Haiti itself—as agents of the Enlightenment. If much of the Enlightenment project revolved around the mastery

of classical antiquity, then a forceful exclusion from this project, or the minimization of the project itself, was a sure way to exclude someone from participation in rational public discourse. No wonder that once national deputies, black and white, began to challenge the consistency of planter reception, planters responded by arguing that as “moderns,” Frenchmen needed to cast aside any references to the obsolete Roman republic. It is against this politicized practice of “forgetting” antiquity, or most particularly, of erasing Africans’ role in its making, with all pernicious consequences stemming therefrom, that a number of Haitian literati set themselves to work in the wake of the Haitian Revolution.

Perhaps the most prominent among these Haitian thinkers was Jean Louis Baron de Vastey, a participant in the Haitian Revolution and notable public figure in the post-revolutionary Kingdom of Haiti ruled by Henry Christophe. Challenging the lingering power of planter reception, de Vastey invoked Roman republicanism in his defense of Haitian sovereignty, claiming that Haitians were particularly Roman-like in their predisposition toward an ethos of militaristic agriculturalism. “The people of Hayti are not yet a nation of manufacturers, though industrious and commercial,” he wrote in 1818. “In imitation of the old Romans,” he continued, “we pass from the sword to the plough, and from the plough to the sword. We are merely soldiers and cultivators of the soil.”⁵⁰ Hardly concerned that the state of Haiti did not embark on the seemingly only “imaginable” routes toward “modernity”—liberal democratization or agrarian autarky—de Vastey celebrated an antiquated militaristic agriculturalism as a process bearing a distinctively progressive, civilizing ethos.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Jean Louis Baron de Vastey, *Political Remarks on Some French Works and Newspapers Concerning Hayti* (London, 1818), 51.

⁵¹ On these paths as the “only possible” avenues for post-revolutionary Haiti, see Laurent Dubois, “Frederick Douglass, Anténor Firmin, and the Making of U.S.-Haitian Relations,” in *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*, eds. Dillon and Drexler, 98-99.



Figure II. Coin of King Henry Christophe, 1820. HENRICUS DEI GRATIA HAITI REX. Courtesy of the Bode-Museum, Berlin (Acc. No. 1892/768). CC-BY-SA.

But aware of the pitfalls of associating Haiti with Rome—both in terms of relegating the new kingdom to an antiquated, non-coeval status below that of modern European states and of identifying it as a “modern” Rome—de Vastey carefully distinguished Haitians from Romans.⁵² Strikingly, he accentuated the difference between Haiti and Rome precisely on a point that suggested the maximization of the Roman analogy—the doctrine of conquest. As a militaristic and agrarian society, was Haiti not entitled to sovereignty over its soil once it had driven out the colonial planters? Not necessarily, in de Vastey’s opinion. “The law of nations, in modern times, alike equitable and humane,” he reasoned, “respects the person and property of the vanquished.”⁵³ This could hardly be an instrumental invocation of Roman reception to defend the property of the mulatto elite—for this had already been achieved in the past decade. Instead, its purpose was to establish Haiti’s place among “all civilized nations,” a nation that played by the rules, including that of planter indemnity.

⁵² On the “denial of coevalness,” see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 32; Walter D. Mignolo, “The Enduring Enchantment: (Or the Epistemic Privilege of Modernity and Where to Go from Here),” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 933-934.

⁵³ Vastey, *Political Remarks on Some French Works and Newspapers Concerning Hayti*, 31.

De Vastey's writings demonstrated that advocacy of international law—a legal tradition partially founded upon Roman law—did not necessarily imply justification of a racist status quo.⁵⁴ In de Vastey's opinion—widely shared by the Haitian elite—a new state needed to carefully navigate between the imperative of national sovereignty and the exigency of international recognition, a pathway more easily navigable by the early-nineteenth-century Atlantic audience than usually assumed. The seemingly unimaginable path forward led through a reconsideration of Haiti's place in the Atlantic world.⁵⁵ “We undoubtedly assent to the laws adopted by all civilized nations,” de Vastey asserted, “but in regard to the ex-colonists the question is widely different. We are an exception to the rule. There is not a similar example to be found in the annals of nations.” Claiming to possess no authority on the subject and deferring to “a more learned pen than our own,” de Vastey claimed to have no answer to this contradiction (Haitians being sovereign while owing indemnity to planters), when in fact he offered the only possible solution: Haitians were an exception to the rule because the planters had broken the laws of war against them, and lost.⁵⁶ Strikingly, he deployed an explicit element of Haitian difference to legitimize Haiti's *Sonderweg* toward a “neo-Roman” militarized agriculture, a safeguard of sovereignty and progress—but not at all costs and within a framework of international law.

To characterize de Vastey's Roman reception as either a metalanguage of race, or as a strategy to achieve the political goal of international recognition, is to foreground those components of his work that make him an integral part of what Marlene Daut has aptly called the Black Atlantic humanist tradition.⁵⁷ But his Roman reception is not fully reducible to these interpretations, for it engaged with the terms of the civilizing discourse of the planter receptionists. As such,

⁵⁴ Cf. Julia Gaffield, “The Racialization of International Law after the Haitian Revolution: The Holy See and National Sovereignty,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 3 (2020): 841–868. On Roman law as a source of international law, see Randall Lesaffer, “Roman law and the intellectual history of international law,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Theory of International Law*, eds. Anne Orford, Florian Hoffmann, and Martin Clark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 38–58. Roman law was particularly relevant to the doctrine of “just war” referenced by de Vastey.

⁵⁵ See also Daut, *Baron de Vastey*, 23–24.

⁵⁶ De Vastey, *Political Remarks*, 31–32. See also John Campbell, “The Seminoles, the ‘Blood-hound War,’ and Abolitionism, 1796–1865,” *Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 2 (2006): 259–302; Philippe R. Girard, “French atrocities during the Haitian War of Independence,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 15, no. 2 (2013): 133–149; Sarah E. Johnson, “‘You Should Give Them Blacks to Eat’: Waging Inter-American Wars of Torture and Terror,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (March 2009): 65–92; Tyson Reeder, “Liberty with the Sword: Jamaican Maroons, Haitian Revolutionaries, and American Liberty,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 81–115.

⁵⁷ See Daut, *Baron de Vastey*.

the roots of the Roman tradition reached even further than the strategic goals he espoused, and informed his conceptualization of Haiti's evolving relationship to Africa.⁵⁸ Despite his sympathetic attitude toward Africa—he described himself as “descended from an African stock” and “sufficiently identified with the Africans”—de Vastey advanced the military conquest of Africa for the purpose of its civilization, a kind of imperialistic approach that he associated with the Roman republic.⁵⁹ “Africa (...) can be civilized only by a conquest, of which the object is civilization,” he opined, “and not in imitation of the Spaniards and Portuguese in the two Indies.”⁶⁰

But given his obligation to “identify the Africans with the Negroes; and eventually, perhaps, even to identify these with the Haytiens,” it is important to stress de Vastey's lukewarm, even hostile, attitude toward African colonization, an attitude that strikingly contrasted with his otherwise notable tendency to promote Roman reception. In de Vastey's opinion, the fact that Haitians shared the same racial identity as Africans did not necessarily translate into a programmatic policy of civilization by means of militaristic colonization.

Rather than reduce Haiti's relationship to Africa to a mere product of racial solidarity, therefore, de Vastey refracted it through Roman reception. Haitians' mastery of warfare and agriculture seemed to bestow upon them the necessary qualities for the African colonization projects that were taking place in the early nineteenth century. In this, too, de Vastey referred to the Roman experience, but not without a reflective strategy that turned the Romans into a vehicle for the ancient cultivation of Europe by African predecessors. “Perhaps the Germans, Gauls, and Britons would have been barbarians, if it had not been for the conquests of the Romans. The Romans themselves owed their civilization to the Greeks alone, and the Greeks to the Egyptians.”⁶¹ De Vastey reminded his readers that “Africa was the cradle of the arts and sciences” and offered a history of how the transfer of Egyptian agriculture had helped spark the classical tradition in Europe, arguing that two barbaric events—the Roman conquest of Carthage and the introduction of the slave trade in the wake of the Muslim conquests of North Africa—had been the decisive factors that prevented African civilizations from developing a less violent alternative to human progress.⁶²

⁵⁸ On race as a metalanguage, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 251-274.

⁵⁹ Jean Louis Baron de Vastey, *Reflexions on the Blacks and Whites: Remarks upon a Letter Addressed by M. Mazeres...*, trans. Anonymous (London: F. B. Wright, 1817), 32.

⁶⁰ De Vastey, *Political Remarks*, 75.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² De Vastey, *Reflexions on the Blacks and Whites*, 32-38. On ancient slavery and nineteenth-century notions of human progress, see Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, 24-32, 111-116.

De Vastey's genealogy effectively served to position African colonization as somewhat of an afterthought—he referred to it in a footnote at the very end of his *Political Remarks*. This distancing of Haiti and its people from the colonization project stemmed from de Vastey's advocacy of non-violent approaches to, and appropriations of, Roman history. For all its Roman civility, Haiti was *not* a conquering nation, and de Vastey's approach to Roman reception was especially strategic in drawing this important distinction. But the prominent place Roman reception had in some of his most influential works was not coincidental or supplementary. Two of them, *Reflexions on the Blacks and Whites* and *Political Remarks*, were polemical in nature, addressing a resurgent racist and colonialist lobby that deployed a full-fledged strategy of Roman reception to “prove” that Africa had “always [been] a land of Slaves, that this [had been] the indigenous scourge of this land of malediction.”⁶³ Refuting this selectively forgetful politics premised upon the eternity of enslavement was unthinkable without an effective discussion of historical contingency and a historical argument against the perpetuation of racial difference. Roman reception was central to these argumentative imperatives, even if reception implied strategy, distancing, and partially accepting the terms of the debate.

De Vastey was a nineteenth-century internationalist, and probably more emphatically so than most (if not all) of his white interlocutors and contemporaries—abolitionists included—who had never defended an emancipatory cause such as the Haitian Revolution.⁶⁴ As such, he was not only attempting to bridge a class and racial divide in the Haitian nation-state, or trying to strategically mobilize a modern discourse on sovereignty, nationhood, or race, with the goal of positioning himself and his nation more favorably on the international stage. Though de Vastey deployed Roman reception consciously and strategically enough, it is also the case that Roman reception performed work *on him*—very much in the way in which it imprinted itself on almost every word and action of the French revolutionaries, not at all as a fancy garment, but as a philosophical model, an ethical exemplar, a repository of rhetorical skills, a source of political morals, or an inspiration for anti-imperial critique.⁶⁵ In the absence of contemporaneous models to absorb—for had Haiti not felt deep disappointment by *all* the most vaunted carriers of the modern Enlightenment—what other place but Rome could provide a better reference point for the work of Haitian

⁶³ De Vastey, *Reflexions on the Blacks and Whites*, 38.

⁶⁴ On de Vastey as the progenitor of an international tradition of Black Atlantic humanism, see Daut, *Baron de Vastey*. Contrast de Vastey's condemnation of conquest with the otherwise remarkably similar, if somewhat later, observations of such leading white antislavery outlets as the *Niles' Weekly Register* and the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, cited above, fn. 50.

⁶⁵ *Pace* Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2019 [orig. pub.: 1955]), 205.

reconstruction so vigorously undertaken by de Vastey and his royal patron, King Henry Christophe?

It is precisely because Rome was such a “natural” (yet not trivial) ally in de Vastey’s project of fostering Haitian recognition in the Atlantic world, that Roman reception likely outstripped the intentions of his prose. If there is a certain reluctance to de Vastey’s work of reception, it stems from the prevalence of a rich proslavery tradition and the novelty of his critical approach, which could be misappropriated for opposite goals in the hostile public sphere of post-Napoleonic France. After all, a too narrow focus on his work risks obscuring the fact that he was explicitly responding not only to imperialists like Leborgne, but also to the works of proslavery advocates such as F. Mazères, a former Saint Domingue colonist who advocated the reconquest and re-enslavement of the former colony.⁶⁶ Mazères proposed enlisting the help of the mulatto elites against the northern Kingdom of Henry Christophe, and his writing legitimized an attempt by King Louis XVIII to reconquer Haiti in 1814. And yet, for his intimate familiarity with Saint Domingue—Mazères had owned a plantation in the colony on the eve of revolution—he never mentioned ancient Rome in his copious historical remarks in the proslavery pamphlet *De l’utilité des colonies* (1814), the text that sparked de Vastey’s *Reflexions on the Blacks and Whites*.

In his attempt to sway French public opinion, de Vastey had to work on an ideological ground—for instance, classical reception—that was of great significance to his Francophone interlocutors.⁶⁷ By juxtaposing his own interpretation of classical reception to Mazères’s historical justification of white supremacy, de Vastey showed that the proslavery reading of ancient history that had served as such a monolithic discursive force in colonial Saint Domingue was no longer singularly accessible to a white planter elite reading Cicero and Cato through the forgetful editorial lens of *Les Affiches Américaines*. But de Vastey was not interested in replacing one pigmentocracy with another, and his reference to ancient Africa emphasized the fallacy of dehistoricizing race as well as the *necessity* of employing Roman history for the dual purpose of anti-imperial critique and non-violent reconstruction. Roman conquest was at the root of much of what modern Atlantic slavery was about, and Haitian thinkers such as de Vastey recognized that a reckoning with race necessitated challenging the totality of the Latin imperial project.

Given de Vastey’s penetrating work on reception and antiquation, it may be exigent to revise a contemporary scholar’s description of this early Haitian author

⁶⁶ F. Mazères, *De l’utilité des colonies, des causes intérieures de la perte de Saint-Domingue, et des moyens d’en recouvrer la possession* (Paris: Renard, 1814).

⁶⁷ Tabitha McIntosh and Grégory Pierrot, “Capturing the likeness of Henry I of Haiti (1805–1822),” *Atlantic Studies* 14, no. 2 (2017): 127–151.

as one of many Haitian “*scribes*, writers whose intellectual and creative production cannot be thought apart from the institutional framework within and by means of which it was conceived.”⁶⁸ Instead of berating these authors for their institutional limitations, scholars such as Marlene Daut have suggested recognizing their significance as the progenitors of a Black Atlantic humanist tradition. If writers such as de Vastey were not quite unmoored from the political legacies and institutional frameworks of a post-revolutionary setting, they nonetheless demonstrated the utility and importance of marrying the universalist legacy of revolution with the subjectivist critique that arose from the foundation of Haiti and the painful integration of the Caribbean state into a white supremacist Atlantic world.

In these writers’ humble beginnings, Roman reception provided a key component of their strategic work of integration, in which they sought to find common ground between their racial subjectivities and the cultural heritage of the world in which their literary culture was emerging. If de Vastey would have been unable to entertain a discussion with Fanon, it was perhaps nonetheless important that he spoke the kind of language that Raynal and Grégoire understood. It is important to acknowledge the extent to which his antislavery writings—literary or not—were conversational with these wider discussions of antiquity to a degree that made many of their passages mutually interchangeable. Acknowledging this context by no means strips de Vastey of his originality.

Indeed, the dialogic inter-textuality of this early Haitian antislavery tradition enabled later international audiences to easily adopt its moderating influence in creating a black public sphere in the 1820s and 1830s.⁶⁹ Such African American authors as Prince Saunders, for example, shared de Vastey’s fascination with the royal regime of Henry Christophe, even if they did not necessarily eschew the prospects of colonization. Saunders, disillusioned with the white supremacist “democracy” that smothered black freedom in the United States, became a staunch advocate of black immigration to Haiti under the aegis of an Enlightened monarch. To him and many others, the Enlightenment was an ongoing project, and Haiti was still at its forefront—hardly a delusion if one considers the ongoing enslavement in nearby British Jamaica, or the slew of Negro Seamen Acts, fugitive slave laws, and bloodhound patrols that defined the “progressive” approach of his native country toward its black population. In the context of such

⁶⁸ See Chris Bongie, “Introduction,” in Baron de Vastey, *The Colonial System Unveiled*, trans. Chris Bongie (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 4.

⁶⁹ For more on this process, see Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 220–226; Peter Wörzbacki, “‘The Light of Knowledge Follows the Impulse of Revolutions’: Prince Saunders, Baron de Vastey and the Haitian Influence on Antebellum Black Ideas of Elevation and Education,” *Slavery & Abolition* 36, no. 2 (2015): 275–297.

excessively violent measures to uphold white supremacy by the vaunted “pioneers” of hemispheric liberty, Saunders’s and de Vastey’s modest projects nonetheless established a new dialogic orientation that firmly established people of African descent as not merely capable of civilization but as integral to it.⁷⁰

These first instantiations of a modern Haitian literary culture reverberated through the writings of the African American counter-public, including radical thinkers like James McCune Smith, David Walker, and Frederick Douglass. In continuation of the receptionist tradition that had cast Toussaint Louverture as a modern Caesarian figure, Smith compared the leader to King Leonidas defending “the most beautiful and happy of the Hesperides.”⁷¹ Like de Vastey, Smith depicted Haitians as closer to the vaunted ideals of the Enlightenment than the United States and France, whose settlers had unleashed bloodhounds and committed massacres against women and children in the name of white supremacy.⁷² This simultaneous identification of Haitians with the classical republican tradition and castigation of Europeans and North Americans as modern barbarians unsettled the familiar genealogical chain that planter reception had sought to establish between ancient Rome and the “Enlightened” plantation regime.

Another admirer of Haitian achievements, David Walker, the most radical of antebellum African American writers, likewise indulged in classical reception to expose Thomas Jefferson’s pernicious (and ahistorical) racialization of the Roman past as a way of justifying the enslavement of Africans. In his widely circulated *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson justified the institution of slavery as a “natural” consequence of blacks’ inferiority to whites, and posited that this white supremacist idea had been the invention of Roman republicans.⁷³ Shocked by Jefferson’s lack of erudition, Walker asked his audience: “Do you believe that this assertion is swallowed by millions of the whites?” Reminding his audience of basic Roman history, Walker stated that Roman slavery made no racial

⁷⁰ See Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and ‘Race’ in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 257; Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African-American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Frederick Cooper, “Elevating the Race: The Social Thought of Black Leaders, 1827–50,” *American Quarterly* 24, no. 5 (1972): 606–7; Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829–1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 122–171. On dialogic orientation as a property of discourse, see Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 275–279.

⁷¹ James McCune Smith, “Toussaint L’Ouverture and the Haytian Revolution,” in *Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence: The Best Speeches Delivered by the Negro from the Days of Slavery to the Present Time*, ed. Alice Moore Dunbar (New York: Bookery Publishing, 1914), 19–32, esp. 26–27.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷³ See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: John Stockdale, 1787), 237. For more on Roman reception in the early United States, see Wilfried Nippel, *Ancient and Modern Democracy: Two Concepts of Liberty?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 118–147.

distinctions—an unsettling revelation to some of his white readers, who had indulged in Jefferson’s retrospective racialization of slavery. Furthermore, Walker admonished his readers that “as soon as a slave among the Romans obtained his freedom, he could rise to the greatest eminence in the State, and there was no law instituted to hinder a slave from buying his freedom.” Such liberties were unavailable to African Americans, who were instead unable to obtain or hold public offices. White supremacy was clearly a modern invention, and as such, had nothing to do with the genealogy of classical republicanism. Haiti proffered the best example that planter reception was perniciously misguided. When inserted into the classical republican tradition, Haiti not only accentuated the universality of the republican form of government, but also the unsettling prospect that, unless promptly dismantled, slavery, a pure tyranny justified only by lies and fallacy, might also become a universal way of governing *all men*.⁷⁴

Though Walker emphatically rejected both Greece and Rome, ancient slaveholding polities, as potential models for Enlightened emulation, he nevertheless unmasked the ways in which planter reception mobilized a forgetful vision of history to make modern slavery look like an improvement over its ancient predecessor. Walker’s critique broke an imagined genealogical bond that linked American planters to Roman republican aristocrats, thereby severing a chain that sustained the paternalistic fiction of slaveholding elites. Even to a radical abolitionist like Walker, classical reception was a fruitful discursive area that enabled him to disabuse his audience of its complacent indulgence in white supremacy. There was nothing “natural” or “eternal” to this white supremacist regime, Walker insisted. Realizing its temporality, its contingency, and its amorality was the first step toward dismantling it and bringing about humanity’s salvation.

Roman antiquity also inspired a twelve-year-old Frederick Douglass to find his voice in opposition to slavery. In his best-selling autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), he recounted his first exposure to *The Columbian Orator*, a collection of short speeches, including many of ancient Roman provenance, that inspired him to memorize and craft antislavery arguments.⁷⁵ Published by the abolitionist Caleb Bingham, the tome’s most enduring presence was Cicero, the slaveholding patrician, whose rhetorical craft motivated Douglass to master the art of argumentation to dismantle the foundations of planter reception. Douglass’s intimate familiarity with the style and contents of Cicero’s speeches provided him with the ability to confront proslavery advocates and expose planter reception as a flawed misappropriation of ancient Rome, just

⁷⁴ David Walker, *Appeal...to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (Boston, 1829), 17-19.

⁷⁵ Cf., for example, Caleb Bingham, *The Columbian Orator...*, 7th ed. (Troy: William S. Parker, 1821). See also Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845).

as it experienced a final resurgence on the eve of the Civil War. Having proved instrumental to dismantling planter reception, Douglass later assumed the role of U.S. minister to Haiti, the site of the first radical wave of protest that had sought to reclaim the origins of republican liberty from the unenlightened grip of racist slaveholders.

If not for the need to persuade a white proslavery audience and the limitations of the Enlightenment project itself, one wonders whether these black authors would not have developed a cross-racial critique of western civilization as a series of imperial projects fueled not just by the enslavement of Africans but also of Europeans who had happened to be on the “wrong” side of history. While they exposed the blind spots of planter reception vis-à-vis ancient Rome, these early-nineteenth-century black thinkers accepted some of the premises of their white interlocutors, including an idealized image of the “free” Italian city-states, who operated on a discursive field detached from the Roman exemplar as well as from the slaveholding empires of the early Modern period. Yet those civilizations, too, were predicated on the massive enslavement of human beings from the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean, and wrenched thousands of Africans as well as the white descendants of Spartacus to Mediterranean and Ottoman slave marts.⁷⁶ The ancient routes of this Eastern Mediterranean slave trade were very much alive as de Vastey, Sanders, Walker, Smith, and Douglass cast their sights—in Douglass’s case, literally—upon this region suffused with ancient history in formulating a strategic defense of Haiti.⁷⁷ And though their strategic arguments served to dismantle the white supremacist regime that legitimized American slavery, the broad geographic and temporal scope of their reception helped transform the enslavement of all human beings in the course of “western civilization” into a foundation of a universal call for immediate, irreversible abolition.

⁷⁶ Cf. Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, 30-32.

⁷⁷ Ironically, Douglass reminisced that during his trip to “Genoa, the birthplace of Christopher Columbus,” he had recollected a particularly memorable speech by Wendell Phillips against the African slave trade. Phillips had condemned the slave trade, but neither he nor the reminiscing Douglass explicitly reflected on Columbus’s connection to the Atlantic slave trade—or to Genoa’s connection to the Mediterranean slave trade. Phillips’s and Douglass’s cryptic intertextual association of Genoa with the slave trade might represent a strategy of suppression meant to appease their multiracial audience. See Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass...*, rev. ed. (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 690-691.