

## Forum

*Awakening the Ashes: An Intellectual History of the Haitian Revolution.* By MARLENE L. DAUT. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023. 440 pages. LCCN 2023029867. \$99 hardback, \$34.95 paperback.

There are two books struggling to emerge in Marlene Daut's *Awakening the Ashes*. One is a serious examination of the ways in which nineteenth-century Haitian authors used the legacy of the Haitian Revolution to challenge the racist and imperialist ideas of the white world, while the other is a polemic that perpetuates simplistic notions about the Haitian Revolution and its impact. In Daut's previous publications, she convincingly demonstrated both that a number of Haitian authors wrote works that were widely read outside the country and that Haiti was a major presence in nineteenth-century American, British, and French literature.<sup>1</sup> In her latest book, as she ventures more into the domain of history than that of literature, the results are less persuasive.

Daut's argument is that the leaders of the Haitian Revolution and the writers who celebrated their achievements in the nineteenth century made essential contributions to the struggles against colonialism, slavery, and racial prejudice and to the development of modern notions of democracy. Three initial chapters grouped under the heading of "Colonialism" deal with nineteenth-century authors' treatments of the fate of Haiti's original Indigenous population, pre-revolutionary slavery, and racial prejudice. A second section on "Independence" includes chapters on "revolution," "abolition," and "freedom," and the book's third section, "Sovereignty," treats post-revolutionary contributions to anti-colonialism, antislavery, and anti-racism.

Daut's case for the importance of nineteenth-century Haitian writers is certainly justified, but the way in which she presents it is often exaggerated and confusing. The book's focus shifts back and forth from Daut's announced subject—the representation of the Haitian Revolution in the works of post-revolutionary writers—to the nature of the events themselves. When she turns to the historical record, she ignores much of the recent historical scholarship in the field, such as John Garrigus's research on the Makandal affair, Sudhir Hazareesingh's biography of Toussaint Louverture, Johnhenry Gonzales's exploration of peasant resistance to forced labor, and Chelsea Stieber's study of post-revolutionary Haitian political thought, as well as older works directly relevant to her argument, such as Claude Moïse's analysis of the Haitian constitutional tradition.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Daut's earlier publications include *Tropics of History: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789–1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), *Baron de Vastey and the Origins of Black Atlantic Humanism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), and *Haitian Revolutionary Fictions: An Anthology*, co-edited with Grégory Pierrot and Marion C. Rohrleitner (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> John D. Garrigus, *A Secret among the Blacks: Slave Resistance before the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic*

She also mischaracterizes several key historical documents. Toussaint Louverture's "proclamation of Turel" in 1793, with the well-known line, "You have perhaps heard of my name," was actually a letter that may not even have reached its addressees; it was certainly not a "famous speech" (141). Louverture's purported dialogue with his white rival Sonthonax in 1797, which Daut cites repeatedly, was, as Louverture biographer Sudhir Hazareesingh has written, "a magnificent piece of creative fiction" composed to discredit a political rival, not a "word for word" (138) transcription of an actual conversation. The notorious Napoleonic racial rant she quotes was not an official "consular address" and was not made in 1799 (168-69). It is purportedly from a private conversation in 1801, recorded in a Napoleonic official's memoir published years later.<sup>3</sup>

In her zeal to present the Haitian Revolution as an event more significant than the American or French movements, Daut makes several dubious claims. Her assertion that "it was the Haitian Revolution and Haitian independence that forced anti-colonial, antislavery and anti-racist ideas into the modern political grammar" (xviii) ignores the extensive abolitionist literature published in Britain, America, and France prior to the Haitian uprising. Much of the rhetoric of documents such as the Haitian declaration of independence closely echoes earlier French writings, such as the famous passage from Raynal's *History of the Two Indies* predicting that "the fields of America will be intoxicated by the blood that they have awaited for so long" that has striking parallels with the language of Dessalines's proclamations. Daut repeatedly credits Haiti with initiating a worldwide movement against colonialism, on the grounds that the country's early constitutions promised that it would never seek to acquire territory outside of its home island. However, these promises all explicitly stated that Haiti would not try to destabilize the European powers' slave colonies in the Caribbean.

Daut repeatedly condemns the French Revolution as "incoherent" (76, 87, 169, 178) because of the contradiction between its proclamation of inalienable rights and its hesitations about abolishing slavery. She makes no distinction between the republican regime of 1794-1799, which did grant freedom and citizenship to the Blacks in most of its colonies, and Napoleon's dictatorship, which repealed those laws. Although she acknowledges the contradictions in some aspects of the Haitian movement, such as Louverture's and Dessalines's efforts to

*Life of Toussaint Louverture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti* (New Haven: Yale University 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); Claude Moïse, *Constitutions et luttes de pouvoir en Haïti, 1804-1987*, 2 vols. (Montréal: Editions du CIDIHCA, 1988), and *Le Projet national de Toussaint Louverture et la constitution de 1801* (Port-au-Prince: Editions Mémoire, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Antoine-Clair Thibaudeau, *Mémoires sur le Consulat, de 1799 à 1804, par un ancien conseiller d'État* (Paris: Chez Ponthieu, 1827), 120.

impose forced labor on the rural population, she brushes over the dictatorial nature of the two Haitian leaders' regimes. She dismisses the killings of white French civilians and prisoners of war in 1804 as "so-called massacres" (214), ignoring both the extensive documentation about these events and the explicit condemnations of them by the nineteenth-century Haitian historians Madiou and Ardouin, whom she elsewhere rightfully praises for their "contributions to historical thought" (xvii).<sup>4</sup> *Awakening the Ashes* would be more persuasive if its author had acknowledged, as Madiou and Ardouin did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and as present-day Haitian studies scholars such as Robert Fatton and Alex Dupuy have done more recently, that the Haitian Revolution, like the American and French movements, had both positive and negative aspects, reflecting, for better and for worse, the common humanity of their participants.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On the 1804 massacres, see Jeremy D. Popkin, "Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Norbert Thoret, and the Violent Aftermath of the Haitian Declaration of Independence," in *The Haitian Declaration of Independence: Creation, Context, and Legacy*, ed. Julia Gaffield (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 115-35.

<sup>5</sup> See Robert Fatton, Jr., *The Roots of Haitian Despotism* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007) and Alex Dupuy, *Rethinking the Haitian Revolution: Slavery, Independence, and the Struggle for Recognition* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).