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The author of *Awakening the Ashes* understood that the journey upon which the book attempts to take its readers would be intellectually taxing. She admits, “Asking nonspecialists who may be newly interested in the history of Haiti to consult nineteenth-century Haitian-produced sources is an inconvenient argument” (p. 27). Yet, that is exactly what Haitian literary scholar Marlene L. Daut asks of her readers in this sweeping, incisive volume on early Haitian literature. In it, nonspecialists—scholars and graduate students—of early Haitian history will encounter rich challenges to their present conceptions of intellectual foundations for Black resistance to slavery, colonialism, and racism. The book intends to disrupt the preference of North Atlantic scholarship for European origins of thought on liberty and equality. In writing about his thoughts on Thomas Paine’s extremely popular pamphlet *Common Sense*, the American revolutionary thinker John Adams suggested, “Indeed this Writer has a better Hand at pulling down than building.”[1] Marlene Daut, on the other hand, has distinguished herself as both a perceptive catalyst for new scholarly thought and an architect for epistemological frameworks. She courageously illustrates the deficit in historical thinking regarding the place of Haiti in Atlantic world intellectual thought. She, likewise, carefully and painstakingly introduces Haitian writers to rearrange ideas and guide readers to satisfying places of fresh understanding.

For some time, this book will reside in a class of its own. *Awakening the Ashes* will make a great companion to intellectual historical works by Sara E. Johnson, Robert Fatton Jr., and Lewis Ampidu Clorméus.[2] Still, to date there is no other book written in English that presents the wide range of Haitian writers accompanied by such a detailed analysis of their impact on modern conceptions of abolition, resistance, and racial justice. For years, Daut has worked to place early Haitian ideas and literature before the eyes of Anglophone readers.
Her first book highlights how North Atlantic scholars tend to understand Haiti’s revolution in primarily racial terms—a vantage point that can lead them to underappreciate the intellectual significance of Haiti and Haitians.[3] A collaborative effort with Grégory Pierrot and Marion C. Rohrleitner produced a one-thousand-page anthology of primary works by Haitian writers, featuring novels, poetry, and plays published between 1787 and 1900.[4] Daut is upfront about the goal of *Awakening the Ashes*: “both to emphasize the methodological innovations found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Haitian thought and to demonstrate the centrality of Haitian revolutionary thought within broader global intellectual currents” (p. xv).

Daut is clear on one primary point: any discussion of “the development of anti-colonial, antislavery, and anti-racist approaches to historical writing” must include early Haitian writers. “They led the way in exploring enduring questions” about race, nationality, and sovereignty (p. xv). The inclusion of Haitian historical writing and political documentation on the Haitian Revolution and Haitian independence can complement the hermeneutical writings of Frederick Douglass (antislavery), Frantz Fanon (anti-colonialism), and Ibram X. Kendi (anti-racism), in addition to those by European authors.[5] It is no longer sufficient, in writing or teaching, to address the Haitian Revolution tangentially as an outgrowth or byproduct of the more popularized American and French Revolutions. In the spirit of the four-decades-old study published in Port-au-Prince by Jacquelin Dolcé, Gérald Dorval, and Jeann Miotel Castthely, Daut’s analysis operates as a potent call to action.[6] *Awakening the Ashes* is not quite “a declaration of war” that Robin D. G. Kelley ascribes to Aime Cesaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950). It can arguably be characterized as a richly researched, well-reasoned, and clearly written “manifesto.”[7] Daut considers the goal for this book to be “in some ways quite simple” (p. xxi). Its basic message: Read Haitian writers! To assist in the mission, “this book offers readers an encounter with a history of the Haitian Revolution and Haitian independence that is shaped by the interpretations and systems of knowledge of Haitian historians and other thinkers” (p. xxi).

Haiti is known as the first Black republic. The Haitian Revolution is considered the first uprising of enslaved African people to violently overthrow a European slave regime and establish an independent nation-state. Yet historical analyses of early Haiti by North Atlantic scholars sometimes overlook important details. Much more of modern understandings of freedom and equality stems from the early Haitian experience than is commonly acknowledged. Jean-Jacques Dessalines—not George Washington or Napoleon Bonaparte—was the first Atlantic world leader to declare the independence of a state that—from its founding—outlawed not only slavery and color prejudice but also imperialism. The Haitian Revolution injected indefatigable vibrancy into the transatlantic abolitionist movement. The existence of independent Haiti gave credence to anti-racist principles. Instead of augmenting academic conversations on the history of slavery and colonialism, Haiti and Haitian writers should be placed at the center. *Awakening the Ashes* introduces readers to what Daut calls “the 1804 Principle,” Haitian revolutionary thought “constructed by Haitian hands” to advance “the destruction of white supremacist colonialism and slavery as the political destiny of all true revolutions” (p. xxi).

The introduction serves, in a way, as a testament to the enduring intellectual importance of one of Haiti’s most famous scholars, Michel-Rolph Trouillot. He is best known by non-Haitian scholars for his 1995 ground-breaking book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. One of the work’s oft-quoted sentences is, “The [Haitian] revolution that was unthinkable became a non-event.” His searing indictment that “the general silence that Western historiography has produced around the Haitian Revolution” relegated
the revolution to “an historical backburner” seemed to act as a jarring revelation to scholars across the humanities and social sciences.[8] But Daut shifts the conversation from the seminal work to introduce readers to Trouillot’s first book, *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti*. Written two decades prior to *Silencing the Past*, *Ti difé boulé*—recently published in English as *Stirring the Pot of Haitian History*—is the first history of the Haitian Revolution and the first work of social science to be published in Haitian Creole.[9] For Daut, “with the publication of *Ti difé boulé*, for the first time Haitians had a history of their country written by a Haitian in the language of the majority of the Haitian people” (p. 2). That major accomplishment of the book doubles as a reason it remains relatively unfamiliar. Many North Atlantic scholars do not speak or read Haitian Creole. Daut advocates a change: “Any scholar interested in tackling the vastness of Haitian history and literature [must] become fluent not only in French but also in Haitian Creole” (p. 27). Her work builds upon Trouillot’s three prominent themes of colonialism, slavery, and racism to put forward Haiti—and its revolutionary history—as an analytical lens through which to explore the intellectual foundations for anti-colonialist, antislavery, and anti-racist thought. Daut challenges readers to push themselves to learn more Haitian-produced historical scholarship than what can be gleaned from a well-thumbed copy of *Silencing the Past*. “To understand the full import of what Trouillot accomplished ... we must go beyond him” (p. 27). With *Awakening the Ashes*, she shows us the way.

The book is divided into three chronologically ordered, thematic parts, covering colonialism, independence, and sovereignty. Across the narrative Daut imparts an invaluable gift to her readers—an accessible exposition of some of the greatest historical and literary works in early Haitian history. Most of the Haitian-authored books in this volume—despite being increasingly digitized—remain accessible only in French. Daut utilizes her knowledge of languages to present and analyze the arguments and methodologies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Haitian writers in the English language. Some of the authors include Julien Raïmond, Jean Louis de Baron de Vastey, Louis-Félix Boisrond-Tonnere, Juste Chanlatte, Hérard Dumesle, Émile Nau, Demesvar Delorme, and Anténor Firmin, as well as revolutionary-military general-government leader writers Toussaint Louverture, André Rigaud, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

The book’s section on Atlantic world colonialism gives no quarter to conversations on the topic that do not include Haiti. The nation’s writers present some of the more pointed critiques of human bondage. Poet and playwright Juste Chanlatte argued that justifying the treatment of Black human beings as commercial products led Europeans to commit all manner of “crimes against humanity” (p. 55). For one of the more insightful statements on the nature of human invention of slavery, Daut turns to Baron de Vastey. His “approach to the history of slavery and colonialism reminds us that one side of the story is repression of enslaved Black people by white European enslavers, but the other side of the story is the near constant opposition that the enslaved individuals engaged in to free themselves, as much to avenge the inhuman system of slavery to which enslavers were subjecting them” (p. 57).

A major intervention that Daut’s latest book makes into the historiography is a sustained discussion about the memory and generational understandings of how the Haitian Revolution informed Haitian thought across a contentious nineteenth century. The poet Hérard Dumesle, in 1824, was the first person to use the phrase “the Haitian Revolution.” In her conception of Haitian independence, Daut situates the declaration of the Haitian nation-state on January 1, 1804, as part of a historical continuum of Black struggle against racist aggression. “Haiti’s was not simply a revolution that happened in Saint-Domingue after the French and American revolutions. It was a three-
centuries-long organized rebellion, which resulted in the overthrow of elite colonial authority and the establishment of an anti-racist, anti-colonial, antislavery state. As such, this event of world-historical significance was far more radical than either the U.S. American or French revolutions” (p. 121).

For Haiti, independence did not indicate a static national existence. Through the use of Haitian newspapers, including the Gazette politique et commerciale and the Gazette royale d’Hayti, the book illustrates the consistent threats to the Black republic's sovereignty from hostile Atlantic powers, including the United States. For Daut, “Haiti’s posture of self-defense was a direct response to continuous foreign aggression. The existence of freedom and independence in Haiti terrified enslavers, colonists, and heads of state throughout the slaving Atlantic world and brought economic punishment to Haiti and repeated threats of war” (p. 265).

There are few books on early Haitian history written this century by North Atlantic scholars that offer readers an optimistic, idealist, happy ending for Haiti and the Haitian people. And neither does Awakening the Ashes. After reading and analyzing some of the more powerful political and literary writings found anywhere in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world, today’s scholars and writers of Haitian history cannot escape the Haiti of our present. We cannot help but imagine what could have been. In the epilogue, Daut dates the end of Haitian romanticism to the beginning of the US occupation of the country in 1915. The American military invasion of a nation it had threatened and bullied for decades effectively meant the sweeping away of Haitian sovereignty. The Atlantic world’s first Black republic—whose very existence and its intelligentsia had bequeathed to the globe radical anti-colonialist, antislavery, and anti-racist ideals since 1804—became subject to the dictates of a racist, white-led, Jim Crow-era American government. Haitians regarded the brutally violent US occupation that lasted twenty years “as a decisive turning point away from the country’s revolutionary principles of freedom and independence” (p. 327). After taking the reader on a splendidly researched, richly enlightening journey of early Haitian poetry, novels, newspapers, and political and historical writings that relocates Haiti at the center of nineteenth-century thought on liberty and equality, Daut presents the last line of her gripping work as a lament: “The Haitian Revolution did not fail the world. The world failed the Haitian Revolution” (p. 330).

Notes


[5]. Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan,


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