Ronald Angelo Johnson

Diplomacy in Black and White: John Adams, Toussaint Louverture, and their Atlantic World Alliance. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014. xv + 241 pp. (Cloth US\$ 49.95)

The “alliance” referenced here is the arrangement between the United States and Toussaint Louverture’s regime in Saint-Domingue between 1798 and 1801. The core of Ronald Angelo Johnson’s argument concerning this episode, well known among specialists, is that this was a true partnership and reflected the complex and fleeting realities of a particular moment in Atlantic history. The John Adams administration, exhibiting some discomforts over slavery and doubts about black debasement, saw a chance to at once hurt France during the Quasi-War and support Dominguan independence. Louverture, meanwhile, embraced the Americans as “good whites,” given that their support allowed him to consolidate power, sideline the duplicitous British, and further his bid to extend liberty across the colony. This diplomacy, in other words, took place at a moment of Atlantic revolution. Johnson argues that its dynamics, promise, and ultimate failure, are best understood in that context.

The study is strongest when detailing American political maneuvers around the operation of the so-called “Toussaint’s Clause.” Johnson’s point here is to show the purposefulness of the administration’s actions. In particular, he recovers the roles played by Edward Stevens and the nascent U.S. Navy. He emphasizes the near-ministerial status Stevens was given to suggest that the agent’s boosterism was a reflection of the administration’s genuine support of Louverture. Similarly, he highlights the ways in which the American naval squadron stationed off Saint-Domingue served Louverture’s needs and accepted his position, to include moments of official recognition that some readers will find surprising. Fewer original sources inform the Dominguan side of this story, and many of these are part of American records and therefore less reliable as a means to disentangle the complexities on the ground there. Reasonably, Johnson instead relies on secondary sources, but as a result the book tends toward American diplomatic history, albeit one that takes Atlantic currents into account.

Those currents, Johnson argues, produced a diplomacy that blended interests and idealism, a position repeated several times across the text. In the end, however, this conception is more asserted than fully proven. The realism undergirding the relationship is apparent. The Quasi-War and Louverture’s rise provided an environment in which both sides could gain through cooperation. The idealism driving developments is more vaguely defined and at points Johnson strains his evidence in attempting to articulate ideals through actions. He over-

states Louverture's control of events, for example, and understates the repressiveness of the "stability" the general provided; taking Louverture as an agent of "universal emancipation" (p. 159) is problematic. Johnson's John Adams is more complex, though his depiction can be confusing. This may well have been the case—and the point—but the book would have been improved if Johnson had taken it on expressly, making it clear at what points he felt Adams was acting on principle, how those principles changed (or didn't), and the relationship between them and the pragmatics of statecraft. The jargony designation of the Adams (and others) as "cross-cultural interlocutors" (p. 53 *et passim*) instead tends to pass over these sorts of questions.

As a result, the meanings of the ideas that are important to the book's argument—ideas having to do with race and revolution—are left unpacked. Johnson's American political actors are all taken as expressions of a broad postrevolutionary moment; their inconsistencies, for him, are signs of that moment's fluidity. But those inconsistencies were also signs of intense battles over the meaning of that revolutionary past. That ideas about an unfolding revolutionary present in Saint-Domingue were part of those battles makes sense, but to make American ideology fracture simply along sectional lines is to forecast a division over slavery (via Haiti) rather than to explain it. To get at this dynamic, the book might have delved into the relationship between the Adams Federalists (a dying breed in 1799) and those led by Alexander Hamilton. (Jeffersonians are not examined as a discrete category at all.)

Given his Atlantic purview, Johnson also might have pushed beyond high politics. The actions of Adams and Secretary of State Timothy Pickering were certainly important to the course taken by the United States, and Louverture's goals were vital to the ways events played out, but on both sides there were far more radical and cosmopolitan agendas in play as well. Johnson waves at some (black Bostonian Freemason Prince Hall), discounts some others (the African Church movement in Philadelphia, Gabriel's revolt in Richmond, M^oise's rebellion), and leaves some out altogether (the universalism of Painite radicals, the ongoing insurgencies of bands such as Sans-Souci's in Saint-Domingue). Taking this wider perspective into account undercuts Johnson's claims for this moment as one of revolutionary possibility, revealing the course of diplomacy, on both sides, to have served the needs of powerful elites: American business interests and the emergent Dominguan military-agricultural complex.

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