Marlene L. Daut

Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789–1865. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015. xii + 692 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

Tropics of Haiti is a richly documented, thoroughly researched, and deeply insightful study of nineteenth-century transatlantic print culture surrounding the Haitian Revolution. At once literary history, historiography, and compendium, the book offers a detailed analysis of what Marlene Daut argues is the racialized mischaracterization of the Revolution as a “mulatto/a’ vengeance narrative”—an Œdipal struggle between “colored” children and their “white” fathers—rather than a political revolt led by the enslaved. Not only, she contends, did pseudoscientific narratives based on “racial” taxonomy circulate widely throughout the years leading up to, during, and following the Revolution, but these narratives have made their way, largely unchallenged, into the foundations of present-day scholarship.

Daut examines a vast and diverse archive of historical texts, personal memoirs, political tracts, and prose fiction works authored by U.S., European, and Caribbean writers between 1789 and 1865. Many of these texts have, she maintains, remained unexamined by scholars. Thus, her project, though not one of rehabilitation, explores their importance for current understandings of Haitians and their history. Daut’s aim is threefold: to show how popular and vernacular tropes become integrated into official legal and political discourse in the nineteenth century; to question “the effects of ‘racial’ thinking” (p. 17) on the individual subjectivities of so-called “mixed-race” Haitians during the para-revolutionary moment; and to expose the extent to which racialized discourse from this period has informed academic writing ever since. She argues that the Revolution “has been (mis)read as a ‘racial’ revolution” (p. 461) and convincingly shows how the unquestioned circulation of certain realities of the Haitian past have detrimentally impacted Haiti’s present.

In Part One, Daut looks at configurations of “mulatto/a/s” as degenerate hybrids, unstable in their allegiance and ontologically violent. Analyzing the “racialized vocabulary of revolution” (p. 56) in works by Julien Raimond, Harriet Martineau, Baron de Vastey, Victor Hugo, and others, she demonstrates how “those who created eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ‘racial’ terminologies ... helped to produce a biology of being ‘negro,’ ‘mulatto,’ or ‘white’” (p. 16), citing the singular influence of Moreau de Saint-Méry’s 1797 *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’isle Saint-Domingue* on nineteenth-century Atlantic writing about the Revolution. Part Two examines stereotypical depictions of “mixed race” women

as dangerously hypersexual beings in travel writing about Saint-Domingue. Daut also looks at the counterrepresentational strategies employed by such women. In addition to representations of the “tropical temptress,” she considers writings that posit the “female revolutionary, the benevolent resister, and the anti-slavery muse” (p. 218). Asking how historiographies of women depart from conventional, male-authored representations of womanhood, she points to the limits of certain historiographical perspectives as regards female challenges to dominant ideologies and to male authority on the whole.

Part Three delves into the “family romance” narrative, which presented “interraciality” as tragic for “mulatto/a/s” in nineteenth-century revolutionary narratives. Looking at documented family relationships, at fictional and non-fictional accounts of Toussaint Louverture’s family history, and at fiction works like Victor Séjour’s “Le Mulâtre” and Émeric Bergeaud’s *Stella*, Daut dismantles sedimented misreadings of these texts and reveals how their portrayals of revolution mean to undergird a global humanist project. Finally, Part Four examines the supposed conflict between “Mulattoes” and “Blacks” in nineteenth-century abolitionist writing. Daut argues that British abolitionist John Beard’s *The Life of Toussaint Louverture* (1853) initiated the distorted trope of the “colored” historian whose narrative of the Revolution sought merely to justify the post-revolutionary political and social privilege of the “mulatto class.” She shows how certain pernicious “colonial epistemologies” (p. 42) have been picked up and concretized, crucially, by twentieth-century historian David Nicholls, tacitly legitimizing divisive longstanding “race-” and color-based narratives. Daut argues that Nicholls’s refashioning of nineteenth-century “historiographical ‘raciology’” (p. 463) led him to produce a “mulatto legend” and “*noiriste* legend” narrative that neglects the humanist impulse of historians, such as Pierre Faubert, and that continues to support misconceptions of Haiti’s sociopolitical realities.

In sustained dialogue with scholars of literature and history, past and present, *Tropics of Haiti* shines a bright light on the way nineteenth-century thinking about “race” as biology-cum-ontology has crept into present-day understandings of “race.” Daut illuminates how “race” as metaphor and “race” as pseudoscientific category function in tandem to determine the writing of Haitian revolutionary history. What, she asks, are the dangers of viewing “race” as “mere” construct in the present without recognizing the specificity of its ontological purchase and lived impact in the past? What gatekeeping do we scholars do as we build the archive of texts worth engaging? Rigorous and exacting, Daut insists that we confront our own racializing tendencies—that we put our scholarly praxis where our mouth is. Insofar as we embrace the notion that Haiti needs new narratives, we must applaud researchers like Marlene

Daut who offer substantive means with which to rethink and rewrite our stories of the Haitian past.

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