Karen Salt, *The Unfinished Revolution: Haiti, Black Sovereignty and Power in the 19th-Century Atlantic World*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019. xi + 240pp. (US\$ 49.95)

The past decade has seen the field of Haitian revolutionary studies expand dramatically in Anglophone scholarly circles, as academics in many disciplines placed the Haitian Revolution at the heart of modernity. This proliferation has shed light on the impact of Haiti's politics and culture beyond the Revolution proper and its aftermath as studies notably explored the early years of independence, the influence of Haitian thought around the world, and increasingly detailed accounts of the meanings of Haiti outside its borders. Karen Salt's *The Unfinished Revolution* participates in this wave of new work.

In her lengthy introduction, Salt describes how, as an independent nation, Haiti contradicted racist stereotypes about Black people's ability to self-govern and otherwise be members of the global political sphere. The book endeavors to chronicle the first century of Haiti's "black sovereignty," each chapter focusing on an event, text, or figure. Salt addresses the way a variety of political, economic, artistic and diplomatic figures in and outside the country put forward competing visions of Haiti as a model of Black sovereignty, a protean concept they used in turn as "a tool, a weapon, a commodity and a problem" (p. 207).

Chapter 1 contrasts the utilitarian and condescending portrayals of Haiti in abolitionist James Stephen's 1804 *The Opportunity* and William Woodis Harvey's 1827 *Sketches of Haiti* with the declaration of sovereignty provided in *Haitian Papers* (1816), the miscellany of State documents translated into English and published in London by African American educator Prince Saunders, who was then residing in Great Britain as an envoy of King Henry I. Chapter 2 explores the archival trail of President Jean-Pierre Boyer's 1820s campaign encouraging freeborn African Americans to settle in Haiti. Salt argues that the brand of Black sovereignty that Boyer boasted about to his American audiences simultaneously projected a utopian image of Black citizenship that spoke to the whole diaspora and obfuscated the laboring scheme at the heart of the endeavor. Boyer wanted workers more than citizens, and saw potential African American settlers as tools fungible into economic capital. Chapter 3 juxtaposes Emperor Faustin Soulouque I's efforts at projecting power to public opinion abroad in the 1853 New York Exhibition with the U.S. assault on Haitian sovereignty through the annexation of Navassa Island off the coast of Haiti, for purposes of extracting much sought-after guano. In Chapter 4 Salt details the process by which American and Haitian agents and diplomats arranged for Haiti to obtain a prime pavilion at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exhibition,

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© GRÉGORY PIERROT, 2020 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09403044

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC 4.0 license.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 02:23:32PM
via free access

even as the systematic dismantling of Haiti's economic sovereignty was in the works. Chapter 5 flies from the 1915 U.S. occupation to Haiti's position on the international stage in the twenty-first century. Using the multimedia exhibition and book *État* by Paolo Woods and Arnaud Robert, writings by Dany Laferrière, and an online role-playing simulation, all produced in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, Salt purports to show the current state of conversations around Haiti's "unfinished project of black sovereignty legitimacy" (p. 58).

Salt's corpus is usefully broad and eclectic, examining representations of Haitian power in paintings, daguerreotypes, and photography, and calling on the online "serious game" *Inside the Haitian Earthquake* to demonstrate how, in the wake of the Haitian Revolution, the theme of Black sovereignty became a recurring element in global visual popular culture. But this variety has a drawback. The profusion of items at times constrains Salt's analyses, and, more importantly and somewhat paradoxically, these many sources are sometimes not enough to adequately support her claims. Why, for example, give Prince Saunders's short preface to an English translation of Haitian documents precedence over the writings of Baron de Vastey or Comte de Limonade? As Salt rightly asserts, Soulouque's *Album Impérial* is a fascinating instance of visual performance of sovereignty, but it was hardly new. Visuals of Black sovereignty circulated as soon as the Revolution began and were used to great effect by Haiti's only king, Henry Christophe, who, though cursorily mentioned, is puzzlingly absent from Salt's study. Finally, while the book's chronological jumps can offer insightful windows into current events, they simultaneously draw attention to the gaps.

The Unfinished Revolution is admirably ambitious—perhaps to a fault. Tighter focus and a more contained corpus would have helped highlight Salt's insightful storytelling. This book is very much a mosaic story about Haiti's place in nineteenth-century debates over Black power. One only wishes that, in writing about Haiti's self-fashioning, Salt had accounted for her near-exclusive focus on English-language sources, and made clear the stakes of this choice.

Grégory Pierrot

Department of English, University of Connecticut-Stamford,

Stamford CT, USA

gregory.pierrot@uconn.edu