James Forde, *The Early Haitian State and the Question of Political Legitimacy: American and British Representations of Haiti, 1804–1824*. Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. ix + 218 pp. (Cloth US\$109.99)

The Early Haitian State and the Question of Political Legitimacy joins a rich body of recent scholarship demonstrating the complexity and pervasiveness of Haiti's global influence, both during and after its revolution. Much of this literature locates Haiti squarely in the context of slavery, abolition, race, and imperialism. James Forde, by contrast, argues that Haiti's impact cannot be relegated to these issues. Instead, he brings postindependence Haitian leaders into the history of nineteenth-century political thought, not as participants in a larger transatlantic dialogue, but rather as symbols of good and bad governance. Specifically, he argues that Haitian leaders served as important reference points in American and British debates about political legitimacy.

The book opens with Haitian independence and ends with Haiti's diplomatic recognition by France. Forde's focus, however, is the ideological battle being waged between competing political factions in the United States and Britain, as revealed in print. Americans debated just how republican their young republic would be, balancing a desire to distance themselves from monarchy without veering into the excesses associated with radicalism. Meanwhile, Britons sought to reassert their nation's international authority, so damaged by the American Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, while navigating demands for reform at home. Forde's analysis relies primarily on American and British newspapers as well as periodicals, books, and theater pieces. News from Haiti provided authors in both places an alternative terrain on which to wrangle over national politics and assert the strength and superiority of their own nation's government.

Forde structures his chapters around the reigns of particular leaders: Emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1804–1806); Henri-Christophe, first as president (1807–11) and then king (1811–20), with a separate chapter devoted to his death; and President Jean-Pierre Boyer (1820–43). Conspicuously absent is Alexandre Petion, who ruled the southern half of Haiti as a republic from 1807 to 1820; according to Forde, Petion was “peripheral” in “American and British discussions of Haiti” (p. 7). Each chapter is divided into separate sections addressing American and British coverage of Haitian events, allowing Forde to compare depictions of Dessalines, Christophe, and Boyer within each nation.

What emerges is a remarkably consistent treatment of Haitian leaders by American and British authors, as symbols of the best and worst qualities of presidents and kings. The book leaves no doubt that such depictions worked to sharpen distinctions between competing political movements. Republican-

leaning newspapers in the United States mocked King Henri-Christophe for his apparent love of pomp while demonizing him as a cruel oppressor and the “epitome of monarchical tyranny” (p. 103). Some Federalist newspapers, by contrast, lauded Christophe’s social reforms as they sought to improve trade relations with Haiti. Yet they contrasted the stability of his reign with the social unrest in the old monarchies of Britain and France (pp. 103–5). In Britain, loyalists initially denounced Christophe and compared him to that other self-proclaimed monarch, Napoleon, in an effort to discredit them both. Changing contexts, however, called for a reinterpretation: Napoleon’s defeat in 1815, combined with radical mobilization at home, prompted loyalists to change course and instead use Christophe to assert the “merits of constitutional monarchies” (p. 115). Moderate conservatives and Whigs, by contrast, praised Christophe’s enlightened policies, especially his founding of schools, which they compared to those of George III. In the process, they drew on both leaders to illustrate the “paternal care” that constitutional monarchs could provide (p. 118). As Forde explains regarding Christophe, these depictions “often had less to do with any real concerns for the progress of the Haitian kingdom itself and more to do with [their] value in supporting American and British political ideologies and modes of governance” (p. 94).

Forde notes that racism often influenced these depictions, yet he has chosen to excise the histories of race, slavery, and empire from his analysis of political thought and national identity. To what extent, however, would early-nineteenth-century Americans and Britons have been able to separate those questions? Slavery had long been central to understandings of monarchical despotism and political liberty in Europe and North America. Republicanism could only coexist with chattel slavery thanks to the ideological crutch of racism. Haiti’s independence posed a threat to slavery and imperialism, both of which were central to the economies and national imaginaries of Britain and the United States. Other scholars have shown how Haitian independence and Haitian policies reconfigured political thought throughout the Atlantic world. While *The Early Haitian State* succeeds in spotlighting the central, symbolic role of Haiti’s leaders in British and American political debates, it ultimately misses an opportunity to explore the complexity of that influence.

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