
Over the past two decades, there has been an explosion of academic interest in the Haitian Revolution and Haitian independence. In particular, a significant amount of research has centered on the “aftershocks” (to adopt Laurent Dubois’s term) of these events in Western politics and society. Most recently, the gaze of historians has been focusing increasingly on Anglophone discussions of Haitian leaders and society from the mid to late nineteenth century, in the process demonstrating the multiple ways in which the world’s first post-slavery independent Black state continued to challenge the Atlantic world’s political power. Their publications have been essential in ensuring that contemporary Anglophone perceptions of the history of Haiti do not start and end with its successful revolution.

*Haiti in the British Imagination: Imperial Worlds, 1847–1915* is a significant contribution to this vibrant field. Jack Webb’s research centers on the cultural relations and dialogues that emerged between Britain and Haiti from the mid-nineteenth century to the early 1900s. He uses an impressive range of sources, from newspapers to illustrations to political correspondence, successfully demonstrating that British and Haitian relations in this period cannot be reduced to a simplified binary of “(British) imperial aggression and (Haitian) resistance from below” (p. 3). Webb is also keen to emphasize that the purpose of this book is not simply to showcase the ways in which Haitian representations were formed and consumed in Britain at this time. Rather, the cultural history on display frames these depictions “within a dynamic of exchange between Haitians and Victorian Britons,” thereby highlighting Haitians’ attempts to enforce their agency according to the ways in which Haitian leaders and Haitian society as a whole were perceived in Britain and beyond. By focusing on the influence of Haitians on the writings of Britons in this period, a fascinating and nuanced picture emerges of competing social and political agendas played out via several cultural mediums.

Chapter 1 focuses on representations that emerged in the British press from the start of Faustin Soulouque’s reign in 1847. Webb demonstrates how British ideals regarding respectability, particularly within governance and leadership, were a key driver in British denunciations of Soulouque’s standing as a political leader. More interesting, however, is the detailing of Soulouque’s attempts to resist these negative depictions and to (unsuccessfully) reframe perceptions of him. In the second chapter, Webb explores the “strategic and symbolic relevance” (p. 89) that Haiti held for Britain’s Caribbean colonies in the 1860s. During this time, Haitians were portrayed as equivalents to Britain’s colonial
subjects in Jamaica, thereby justifying (in the eyes of British imperial officers and observers) British authority over Haitians, extending in some cases to the punishment of Haitian citizens. Chapter 3 is an insightful look at Spenser St. John's *Hayti, or the Black Republic* (1886), a book that became a central reference point for Western writers and thinkers from the late nineteenth century until well into the twentieth century. Rather than simply analyzing the book and its receptions, Webb tracks the counterarguments and depictions that emerged as a result of St. John's writing as observers sought to assert Haitian sovereignty. The final chapter is an interesting and well considered finishing point for the book by focusing on the centenary celebrations of Haitian independence and the way Haitians used memories of the successful revolution to assert forcefully their nationhood and sense of belonging on the world's political stage. British diplomats countered such assertions by arguing that Haiti's perceived failings since its independence were proof of its inability to self-govern, an echo of arguments that persisted in contemporary Anglophone cultural texts throughout the twentieth century (and perhaps to this day).

A number of chapters are centered on discussions of the perceived legitimacy of Haitian leaders (and Haitian attempts to assert such legitimacy), but the book would have benefitted by delving into this a little more extensively. Perceptions of legitimate governance are complex and often dependent on the immediate sociopolitical contexts in which they are formed. And some of the book's wider arguments would have been furthered by more detailed discussions of the possible drivers behind British denunciations of Haitian governance. Overall, this book is not just an important read for scholars of Haitian and British history; it also contributes significantly to studies of the way dialogues between imperial and (post)colonial powers were formed and manipulated to suit competing agendas.

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