

An Unthinkable History

The
Haitian
Revolution
as a
Non-event



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The young woman stood up in the middle of my lecture. "Mr. Trouillot, you make us read all those white scholars. What can they know about slavery? Where were they when we were jumping off the boats? When we chose death over misery and killed our own children to spare them from a life of rape?"

I was scared and she was wrong. She was not reading white authors only and she never jumped from a slave ship. I was dumbfounded and she was angry; but how does one reason with anger? I was on my way to a Ph.D., and my teaching this course was barely a stopover, a way of paying the dues of guilt in this lily-white institution. She had taken my class as a mental break on her way to med school, or Harvard law, or some lily-white corporation.

I had entitled the course "The Black Experience in the Americas." I should have known better: it attracted the few black students around—plus a few courageous whites—and they were all expecting too much, much more than I could deliver. They wanted a life that no narrative could provide, even the best fiction. They wanted a life that only they could build right now, right here in the United States—except that they did not know this: they were too close to the unfolding story. Yet already I could see in their eyes that part of my lesson registered. I wanted them to know that slavery did not happen

only in Georgia and Mississippi. I wanted them to learn that the African connection was more complex and tortuous than they had ever imagined, that the U.S. monopoly on both blackness and racism was itself a racist plot. And she had broken the spell on her way to Harvard law. I was a novice and so was she, each of us struggling with the history we chose, each of us also fighting an imposed oblivion.

Ten years later, I was visiting another institution with a less prestigious clientele and more modest dreams when another young black woman, the same age but much more timid, caught me again by surprise. "I am tired," she said, "to hear about this slavery stuff. Can we hear the story of the black millionaires?" Had times changed so fast, or were their different takes on slavery reflections of class differences?

I flashed back to the first woman clinging so tightly to that slave boat. I understood better why she wanted to jump, even once, on her way to Harvard law, med school, or wherever. Custodian of the future for an imprisoned race whose young males do not live long enough to have a past, she needed this narrative of resistance. Nietzsche was wrong: this was no extra baggage, but a necessity for the journey, and who was I to say that it was no better a past than a bunch of fake millionaires, or a medal of St. Henry and the crumbling walls of a decrepit palace?

I wish I could shuffle the years and put both young women in the same room. We would have shared stories not yet in the archives. We would have read Ntozake Shange's tale of a colored girl dreaming of Toussaint Louverture and the revolution that the world forgot. Then we would have returned to the planters' journals, to econometric history and its industry of statistics, and none of us would be afraid of the numbers. Hard facts are no more frightening than darkness. You can play with them if you are with friends. They are scary only if you read them alone.

We all need histories that no history book can tell, but they are not in the classroom—not the history classrooms, anyway. They are in the lessons we learn at home, in poetry and childhood games, in what

is left of history when we close the history books with their verifiable facts. Otherwise, why would a black woman born and raised in the richest country of the late twentieth century be more afraid to talk about slavery than a white planter in colonial Saint-Domingue just days before rebellious slaves knocked on his door?

This is a story for young black Americans who are still afraid of the dark. Although they are not alone, it may tell them why they feel they are.

Unthinking a Chimera

In 1790, just a few months before the beginning of the insurrection that shook Saint-Domingue and brought about the revolutionary birth of independent Haiti, French colonist La Barre reassured his metropolitan wife of the peaceful state of life in the tropics. He wrote: "There is no movement among our Negroes. . . . They don't even think of it. They are very tranquil and obedient. A revolt among them is impossible." And again: "We have nothing to fear on the part of the Negroes; they are tranquil and obedient." And again: "The Negroes are very obedient and always will be. We sleep with doors and windows wide open. Freedom for Negroes is a chimera."¹

Historian Roger Dorsinville, who cites these words, notes that a few months later the most important slave insurrection in recorded history had reduced to insignificance such abstract arguments about Negro obedience. I am not so sure. When reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs, human beings tend to phrase interpretations that force reality within the scope of these beliefs. They devise formulas to repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse.

La Barre's views were by no means unique. Witness this manager who constantly reassured his patrons in almost similar words: "I

live tranquilly in the midst of them without a single thought of their uprising unless that was fomented by the whites themselves."² There were doubts at times. But the planters' practical precautions aimed at stemming individual actions or, at worst, a sudden riot. No one in Saint-Domingue or elsewhere worked out a plan of response to a general insurrection.

Indeed, the contention that enslaved Africans and their descendants could not envision freedom—let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing such freedom—was based not so much on empirical evidence as on an ontology, an implicit organization of the world and its inhabitants. Although by no means monolithic, this worldview was widely shared by whites in Europe and the Americas and by many non-white plantation owners as well. Although it left room for variations, none of these variations included the possibility of a revolutionary uprising in the slave plantations, let alone a successful one leading to the creation of an independent state.

The Haitian Revolution thus entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened. Official debates and publications of the times, including the long list of pamphlets on Saint-Domingue published in France from 1790 to 1804, reveal the incapacity of most contemporaries to understand the ongoing revolution on its own terms.³ They could read the news only with their ready-made categories, and these categories were incompatible with the idea of a slave revolution.

The discursive context within which news from Saint-Domingue was discussed as it happened has important consequences for the historiography of Saint-Domingue/Haiti. If some events cannot be accepted even as they occur, how can they be assessed later? In other words, can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place? How does one write a history of the impossible?

The key issue is not ideological. Ideological treatments are now more current in Haiti itself (in the epic or bluntly political interpretations of the revolution favored by some Haitian writers) than in the more rigorous handling of the evidence by professionals in Europe or in North America. The international scholarship on the Haitian Revolution has been rather sound by modern standards of evidence since at least the 1940s. The issue is rather epistemological and, by inference, methodological in the broadest sense. Standards of evidence notwithstanding, to what extent has modern historiography of the Haitian Revolution—as part of a continuous Western discourse on slavery, race, and colonization—broken the iron bonds of the philosophical milieu in which it was born?

A Certain Idea of Man

The West was created somewhere at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the midst of a global wave of material and symbolic transformations. The definitive expulsion of the Muslims from Europe, the so-called voyages of exploration, the first developments of merchant colonialism, and the maturation of the absolutist state set the stage for the rulers and merchants of Western Christendom to conquer Europe and the rest of the world. This historical itinerary was political, as evidenced by the now well-known names that it evokes—Columbus, Magellan, Charles V, the Hapsburgs, and the turning moments that set its pace—the reconquest of Castile and of Aragon, the laws of Burgos, the transmission of papal power from the Borgias to the Medicis.

These political developments paralleled the emergence of a new symbolic order. The invention of the Americas (with Waldseemüller, Vespucci, and Balboa), the simultaneous invention of Europe, the division of the Mediterranean by an imaginary line going from the south of Cadiz to the north of Constantinople,

the westernization of Christianity, and the invention of a Greco-Roman past to Western Europe were all part of the process through which Europe became the West.⁴ What we call the Renaissance, much more an invention in its own right than a rebirth, ushered in a number of philosophical questions to which politicians, theologians, artists, and soldiers provided both concrete and abstract answers. What is Beauty? What is Order? What is the State? But also and above all: What is Man?

Philosophers who discussed that last issue could not escape the fact that colonization was going on as they spoke. Men (Europeans) were conquering, killing, dominating, and enslaving other beings thought to be equally human, if only by some. The contest between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda at Valladolid on the nature and fate of the Indians in 1550–1551 was only one instance of this continuous encounter between the symbolic and the practical. Whence, the very ambiguities of the early Las Casas who believed both in colonization and in the humanity of the Indians and found it impossible to reconcile the two. But despite Las Casas and others, the Renaissance did not—could not—settle the question of the ontological nature of conquered peoples. As we well know, Las Casas himself offered a poor and ambiguous compromise that he was to regret later: freedom for the savages (the Indians), slavery for the barbarians (the Africans). Colonization won the day.

The seventeenth century saw the increased involvement of England, France, and the Netherlands in the Americas and in the slave trade. The eighteenth century followed the same path with a touch of perversity: the more European merchants and mercenaries bought and conquered other men and women, the more European philosophers wrote and talked about Man. Viewed from outside the West, with its extraordinary increase in both philosophical musings and concrete attention to colonial practice, the century of the Enlightenment was also a century of con-

fusion. There is no single view of blacks—or of any non-white group, for that matter—even within discrete European populations. Rather, non-European groups were forced to enter into various philosophical, ideological, and practical schemes. Most important for our purposes is that all these schemes recognized degrees of humanity. Whether these connecting ladders ranked chunks of humanity on ontological, ethical, political, scientific, cultural, or simply pragmatic grounds, the fact is that all assumed and reasserted that, ultimately, some humans were more so than others.

For indeed, in the horizon of the West at the end of the century, Man (with a capital M) was primarily European and male. On this single point everyone who mattered agreed. Men were also, to a lesser degree, females of European origins, like the French “citoyennes,” or ambiguous whites, such as European Jews. Further down were peoples tied to strong state structures: Chinese, Persians, Egyptians, who exerted a different fascination on some Europeans for being at the same time more “advanced” and yet potentially more evil than other Westerners. On reflection, and only for a timid minority, Man could also be westernized man, the complacent colonized. The benefit of doubt did not extend very far: westernized (or more properly, “westernizable”) humans, natives of Africa or of the Americas, were at the lowest level of this nomenclature.⁵

Negative connotations linked to skin colors increasingly regrouped as “black” had first spread in Christendom in the late Middle Ages. They were reinforced by the fanciful descriptions of medieval geographers and travellers. Thus, the word “nègre” entered French dictionaries and glossaries with negative undertones increasingly precise from its first appearances in the 1670s to the universal dictionaries that augured the Encyclopedia.⁶ By the middle of the eighteenth century, “black” was almost univer-

sally bad. What had happened in the meantime, was the expansion of African-American slavery.

Indeed, the rather abstract nomenclature inherited from the Renaissance was altogether reproduced, reinforced, and challenged by colonial practice and the philosophical literature. That is, eighteenth-century colonial practice brought to the fore both the certitudes and the ambiguities of the ontological order that paralleled the rise of the West.

Colonization provided the most potent impetus for the transformation of European ethnocentrism into scientific racism. In the early 1700s, the ideological rationalization of Afro-American slavery relied increasingly on explicit formulations of the ontological order inherited from the Renaissance. But in so doing, it also transformed the Renaissance worldview by bringing its purported inequalities much closer to the very practices that confirmed them. Blacks were inferior and therefore enslaved; black slaves behaved badly and were therefore inferior. In short, the practice of slavery in the Americas secured the blacks’ position at the bottom of the human world.

With the place of blacks now guaranteed at the bottom of the Western nomenclature, anti-black racism soon became the central element of planter ideology in the Caribbean. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the arguments justifying slavery in the Antilles and North America relocated in Europe where they blended with the racist strain inherent in eighteenth-century rationalist thought. The literature in French is telling, though by no means unique. Buffon fervently supported a monogenist viewpoint: blacks were not, in his view, of a different species. Still, they were different enough to be destined to slavery. Voltaire disagreed, but only in part. Negroes belonged to a different species, one culturally destined to be slaves. That the material well-being of many of these thinkers was often indirectly and, some-

times, quite directly linked to the exploitation of African slave labor may not have been irrelevant to their learned opinions. By the time of the American Revolution, scientific racism, whose rise many historians wrongly attribute to the nineteenth century, was already a feature of the ideological landscape of the Enlightenment on both sides of the Atlantic.⁷

Thus the Enlightenment exacerbated the fundamental ambiguity that dominated the encounter between ontological discourse and colonial practice. If the philosophers did reformulate some of the answers inherited from the Renaissance, the question "What is Man?" kept stumbling against the practices of domination and of merchant accumulation. The gap between abstraction and practice grew or, better said, the handling of the contradictions between the two became much more sophisticated, in part because philosophy provided as many answers as colonial practice itself. The Age of the Enlightenment was an age in which the slave drivers of Nantes bought titles of nobility to better parade with philosophers, an age in which a freedom fighter such as Thomas Jefferson owned slaves without bursting under the weight of his intellectual and moral contradictions.

In the name of freedom and democracy also, in July 1789, just a few days before the storming of the Bastille, a few planters from Saint-Domingue met in Paris to petition the newly formed French Assembly to accept in its midst twenty representatives from the Caribbean. The planters had derived this number from the population of the islands, using roughly the mathematics used in France to proportion metropolitan representatives in the Assembly. But they had quite advertently counted the black slaves and the *gens de couleur* as part of the population of the islands whereas, of course, they were claiming no rights of suffrage for these non-whites. Honoré Gabriel Riquetti, Count of Mirabeau, took the stand to denounce the planters' skewed mathematics. Mirabeau told the Assembly:

Are the colonies placing their Negroes and their *gens de couleur* in the class of men or in that of the beasts of burden?

If the Colonists want the Negroes and *gens de couleur* to count as men, let them enfranchise the first; that all may be electors, that all may be elected. If not, we beg them to observe that in proportioning the number of deputies to the population of France, we have taken into consideration neither the number of our horses nor that of our mules.⁸

Mirabeau wanted the French Assembly to reconcile the philosophical positions explicit in the Declaration of Rights of Man and its political stance on the colonies. But the declaration spoke of "the Rights of Man and Citizen," a title which denotes, as Tzvetan Todorov reminds us, the germ of a contradiction.⁹ In this case the citizen won over the man—at least over the non-white man. The National Assembly granted only six deputies to the sugar colonies of the Caribbean, a few more than they deserved if only the whites had been counted but many less than if the Assembly had recognized the full political rights of the blacks and the *gens de couleur*. In the mathematics of realpolitik, the half-million slaves of Saint Domingue-Haiti and the few hundred thousands of the other colonies were apparently worth three deputies—white ones at that.

The ease with which the Assembly bypassed its own contradictions, an echo of the mechanisms by which black slaves came to account for three-fifths of a person in the United States, permeated the practices of the Enlightenment. Jacques Thibau doubts that contemporaries found a dichotomy between the France of the slavers and that of the philosophers. "Was not the Western, maritime France, an integral part of France of the Enlightenment?"¹⁰ Louis Sala-Molins further suggests that we distinguish

between the advocacy of slavery and the racism of the time: one could oppose the first (on practical grounds) and not the other (on philosophical ones). Voltaire, notably, was racist, but often opposed slavery on practical rather than moral grounds. So did David Hume, not because he believed in the equality of blacks, but because, like Adam Smith, he considered the whole business too expensive. Indeed, in France as in England, the arguments for or against slavery in formal political arenas were more often than not couched in pragmatic terms, notwithstanding the mass appeal of British abolitionism and its religious connotations.

The Enlightenment, nevertheless, brought a change of perspective. The idea of progress, now confirmed, suggested that men were perfectible. Therefore, subhumans could be, theoretically at least, perfectible. More important, the slave trade was running its course, and the economics of slavery would be questioned increasingly as the century neared its end. Perfectibility became an argument in the practical debate: the westernized other looked increasingly more profitable to the West, especially if he could become a free laborer. A French memoir of 1790 summarized the issue: "It is perhaps not impossible to civilize the Negro, to bring him to principles and *make a man out of him*: there would be more to gain than to buy and sell him." Finally, we should not underestimate the loud anti-colonialist stance of a small, elitist but vocal group of philosophers and politicians.¹¹

The reservations expressed in the metropolis had little impact within the Caribbean or in Africa. Indeed, the slave trade increased in the years 1789–1791 while French politicians and philosophers were debating more vehemently than ever on the rights of humanity. Further, few politicians or philosophers attacked racism, colonialism, and slavery in a single blow and with equal vehemence. In France as in England colonialism, pro-slavery rhetoric, and racism intermingled and supported one another

without ever becoming totally confused. So did their opposites. That allowed much room for multiple positions.¹²

Such multiplicity notwithstanding, there was no doubt about Western superiority, only about its proper use and effect. *L'Histoire des deux Indes*, signed by Abbé Raynal with philosopher and encyclopedist Denis Diderot acting as ghost—and, some would say, premier—contributor to the anti-colonialist passages, was perhaps the most radical critique of colonialism from the France of the Enlightenment.¹³ Yet the book never fully questioned the ontological principles behind the colonialist enterprise, namely that the differences between forms of humanity were not only of degree but of kind, not historical but primordial. The polyphony of the book further limited its anti-slavery impact.¹⁴ Bonnet rightly points that the *Histoire* is a book that reveres at once the immobile vision of the noble savage and the benefits of industry and human activity.¹⁵

Behind the radicalism of Diderot and Raynal stood, ultimately, a project of colonial management. It did indeed include the abolition of slavery, but only in the long term, and as part of a process that aimed at the better control of the colonies.¹⁶ Access to human status did not lead *ipso facto* to self-determination. In short, here again, as in Condorcet, as in Mirabeau, as in Jefferson, when all is said and done, there are degrees of humanity.

The vocabulary of the times reveals that gradation. When one talked of the biological product of black and of white intercourse, one spoke of "man of color" as if the two terms do not necessarily go together: unmarked humanity is white. The captain of a slave boat bluntly emphasized this implicit opposition between white "Men" and the rest of humankind. After French supporters of the free coloreds in Paris created the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, the pro-slavery captain proudly labelled himself "l'Ami des Hommes." The Friends of the Blacks were not necessarily Friends

of Man.¹⁷ The lexical opposition Man-versus-Native (or Man-versus-Negro) tinted the European literature on the Americas from 1492 to the Haitian Revolution and beyond. Even the radical duo Diderot-Raynal did not escape it. Recounting an early Spanish exploration, they write: "Was not this handful of *men* surrounded by an innumerable multitude of *natives* . . . seized with alarm and terror, well or ill founded?"¹⁸

One will not castigate long-dead writers for using the words of their time or for not sharing ideological views that we now take for granted. Lest accusations of political correctness trivialize the issue, let me emphasize that I am not suggesting that eighteenth-century men and women *should* have thought about the fundamental equality of humankind in the same way some of us do today. On the contrary, I am arguing that they *could not* have done so. But I am also drawing a lesson from the understanding of this historical impossibility. The Haitian Revolution did challenge the ontological and political assumptions of the most radical writers of the Enlightenment. *The events that shook up Saint-Domingue from 1791 to 1804 constituted a sequence for which not even the extreme political left in France or in England had a conceptual frame of reference.* They were "unthinkable" facts in the framework of Western thought.

Pierre Bourdieu defines the unthinkable as that for which one has no adequate instruments to conceptualize. He writes: "In the unthinkable of an epoch, there is all that one cannot think for want of ethical or political inclinations that predispose to take it in account or in consideration, but also that which one cannot think for want of instruments of thought such as problematics, concepts, methods, techniques."¹⁹ The unthinkable is that which one cannot conceive within the range of possible alternatives, that which perverts all answers because it defies the terms under which the questions were phrased. In that sense, the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable in its time: it challenged the very frame-

work within which proponents and opponents had examined race, colonialism, and slavery in the Americas.

Prelude to the News: The Failure of Categories

Between the first slave shipments of the early 1500s and the 1791 insurrection of northern Saint-Domingue, most Western observers had treated manifestations of slave resistance and defiance with the ambivalence characteristic of their overall treatment of colonization and slavery. On the one hand, resistance and defiance did not exist, since to acknowledge them was to acknowledge the humanity of the enslaved.²⁰ On the other hand, since resistance occurred, it was dealt with quite severely, within or around the plantations. Thus, next to a discourse that claimed the contentment of slaves, a plethora of laws, advice, and measures, both legal and illegal, were set up to curb the very resistance denied in theory.

Publications by and for planters, as well as plantation journals and correspondence, often mixed both attitudes. Close as some were to the real world, planters and managers could not fully deny resistance, but they tried to provide reassuring certitudes by trivializing all its manifestations. Resistance did not exist as a global phenomenon. Rather, each case of unmistakable defiance, each possible instance of resistance was treated separately and drained of its political content. Slave A ran away because he was particularly mistreated by his master. Slave B was missing because he was not properly fed. Slave X killed herself in a fatal tantrum. Slave Y poisoned her mistress because she was jealous. The runaway emerges from this literature—which still has its disciples—as an animal driven by biological constraints, at best as a pathological case. The rebellious slave in turn is a maladjusted Negro, a mutinous adolescent who eats dirt until he dies, an infanticidal mother, a deviant. To the extent that sins of humanity

are acknowledged they are acknowledged only as evidence of a pathology.

In retrospect, this argument is not very convincing to anyone aware of the infinite spectrum of human reactions to forms of domination. It is at best an anemic caricature of methodological individualism. Would each single explanation be true, the sum of all of them would say little of the causes and effects of the repetition of such cases.

In fact, this argument didn't convince the planters themselves. They held on to it because it was the only scheme that allowed them not to deal with the issue as a mass phenomenon. That latter interpretation was inconceivable. Built into any system of domination is the tendency to proclaim its own normalcy. To acknowledge resistance as a mass phenomenon is to acknowledge the possibility that something is wrong with the system. Caribbean planters, much as their counterparts in Brazil and in the United States, systematically rejected that ideological concession, and their arguments in defense of slavery were central to the development of scientific racism.

Yet, as time went on, the succession of plantation revolts, and especially the consolidation—in Jamaica, and in the Guianas—of large colonies of runaways with whom colonial governments had to negotiate, gradually undermined the image of submission and the complementary argument of pathological misadaptation. However much some observers wanted to see in these massive departures a sign of the force that nature exerted on the animal-slave, the possibility of mass resistance penetrated Western discourse.

The penetration was nevertheless circumspect. When Louis-Sébastien Mercier announced an avenger of the New World in 1771, it was in a novel of anticipation, a utopia.²¹ The goal was to warn Europeans of the fatalities that awaited them if they did not change their ways. Similarly, when the duo Raynal-

Diderot spoke of a black Spartacus, it was not a clear prediction of a Louverture-type character, as some would want with hindsight.²² In the pages of the *Histoire des deux Indes* where the passage appears, the threat of a black Spartacus is couched as a warning. The reference is not to Saint-Domingue but to Jamaica and to Guyana where “there are two established colonies of fugitive negroes. . . . These flashes of lightning announce the thunder, and the negroes lack only a chief courageous enough to drive them to *revenge and to carnage*. Where is he, this great man whom nature owes *perhaps* to the honor of the human species? Where is this new Spartacus? . . .”²³

In this version of the famous passage, modified in successive editions of the *Histoire*, the most radical stance is in the unmistakable reference to a single human species. But just as with Las Casas, just as with Buffon or the left of the French Assembly, the practical conclusions from what looks like a revolutionary philosophy are ambiguous. In Diderot-Raynal, as in the few other times it appears in writing, the evocation of a slave rebellion was primarily a rhetorical device. The concrete possibility of such a rebellion flourishing into a revolution and a modern black state was still part of the unthinkable.

Indeed, the political appeal—if appeal there was—is murky. To start with, Diderot's interlocutors are not the enslaved masses nor even the Spartacus who may or may not rise in an uncertain future. Diderot here is the voice of the enlightened West admonishing its colonialist counterpart.²⁴

Second and more important, “slavery” was at that time an easy metaphor, accessible to a large public who knew that the word stood for a number of evils except perhaps the evil of itself. Slavery in the parlance of the philosophers could be whatever was wrong with European rule in Europe and elsewhere. To wit, the same Diderot applauded U.S. revolutionaries for having “burned their chains,” for having “refused slavery.” Never mind that some

of them owned slaves. The *Marseillaise* was also a cry against "slavery."²⁵ Mulatto *slave owners* from the Caribbean told the French Assembly that their status as second-class free men was equivalent to slavery.²⁶ This metaphorical usage permeated the discourse of various nascent disciplines from philosophy to political economy up to Marx and beyond. References to slave resistance must thus be regarded in light of these rhetorical clichés. For if today we can read the successive "Declarations of the Rights of Man" or the U.S. Bill of Rights as naturally including every single human being, it is far from certain that this revisionist reading was the favored interpretation of the "men" of 1789 and 1791.²⁷

Third, here as in the rarer texts that speak clearly of the right to insurrection, the possibility of a successful rebellion by slaves or colonized peoples is in a very distant future, still a specter of what might happen if the system remains unchanged.²⁸ The implication is, of course, that improvement within the system, or at any rate, starting from the system, could prevent carnage, surely not the philosophers' favorite outcome.

Fourth and finally, this was an age of change and inconsistency. Few thinkers had the politics of their philosophy. Radical action on the issue of slavery often came from unsuspected corners, notably in England or in the United States.²⁹ After examining the contradictions of the *Histoire*, Michèle Duchet concludes that the book is politically reformist and philosophically revolutionary. But even the philosophical revolution is not as neat as it first appears, and Duchet admits elsewhere that for Raynal to civilize is to colonize.³⁰

Contradictions were plentiful, within philosophy, within politics, and between the two, even within the radical left. They are clearly displayed in the tactics of the pro-mulatto lobby, the Société des Amis des Noirs. The Société's philosophical point of departure was, of course, the full equality of humankind: some of

its founding members participated in drafting the Declaration of Rights of Man. But here again were degrees of humanity. The sole sustained campaign of the self-proclaimed Friends of the Blacks was their effort to guarantee the civil and political rights of free mulatto owners. This emphasis was not simply a tactical maneuver. Many members on the left side of the Assembly went way beyond the call of duty to emphasize that not all blacks were equally worth defending. On December 11, 1791, Grégoire, for instance, denounced the danger of suggesting political rights for black slaves. "To give political rights to men who do not know their duties would be perhaps like placing a sword in the hands of a madman."³¹

Contradictions were no less obvious elsewhere. Under a pseudonym evoking both Judaism and blackness, Condorcet demonstrated all the evils of slavery but then called for *gradual* abolition.³² Abolitionist Diderot hailed the American Revolution that had retained slavery. Jean-Pierre Brissot asked his friend Jefferson, whose stance on slavery was not questioned in France, to join the Ami des Noirs!³³ Marat and—to a much lesser extent—Robespierre aside, few leading French revolutionaries recognized the right of white Frenchmen to revolt against colonialism, the same right whose application they admired in British North America.

To sum up, in spite of the philosophical debates, in spite of the rise of abolitionism, the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable in the West not only because it challenged slavery and racism but because of the way it did so. When the insurrection first broke in northern Saint-Domingue, a number of radical writers in Europe and very few in the Americas had been willing to acknowledge, with varying reservations—both practical and philosophical—the humanity of the enslaved. Almost none drew from this acknowledgment the necessity to abolish slavery immediately. Similarly, a handful of writers had evoked intermittently and, most

often, metaphorically the possibility of mass resistance among the slaves. Almost none had actually conceded that the slaves could—let alone should—indeed revolt.³⁴ Louis Sala-Molins claims that slavery was the ultimate test of the Enlightenment. We can go one step further: The Haitian Revolution was the ultimate test to the universalist pretensions of both the French and the American revolutions. And they both failed. *In 1791, there is no public debate on the record, in France, in England, or in the United States on the right of black slaves to achieve self-determination, and the right to do so by way of armed resistance.*

Not only was the Revolution unthinkable and, therefore, unannounced in the West, it was also—to a large extent—unspoken among the slaves themselves. By this I mean that the Revolution was not preceded or even accompanied by an explicit intellectual discourse.³⁵ One reason is that most slaves were illiterate and the printed word was not a realistic means of propaganda in the context of a slave colony. But another reason is that the claims of the revolution were indeed too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds. Victorious practice could assert them only after the fact. In that sense, the revolution was indeed at the limits of the thinkable, even in Saint-Domingue, even among the slaves, even among its own leaders.

We need to recall that the key tenets of the political philosophy that became explicit in Saint-Domingue/Haiti between 1791 and 1804 were not accepted by world public opinion until after World War II. When the Haitian Revolution broke out, only five percent of a world population estimated at nearly 800 million would have been considered “free” by modern standards. The British campaign for abolition of the slave trade was in its infancy; the abolition of slavery was even further behind. Claims about the fundamental uniqueness of humankind, claims about the ethical irrelevance of racial categories or of geographical situ-

ation to matters of governance and, certainly, claims about the right of *all* peoples to self-determination went against received wisdom in the Atlantic world and beyond. Each could reveal itself in Saint-Domingue only through practice. By necessity, the Haitian Revolution thought itself out politically and philosophically as it was taking place. Its project, increasingly radicalized throughout thirteen years of combat, was revealed in successive spurts. Between and within its unforeseen stages, discourse always lagged behind practice.

The Haitian Revolution expressed itself mainly through its deeds, and it is through political practice that it challenged Western philosophy and colonialism. It did produce a few texts whose philosophical import is explicit, from Louverture's declaration of Camp Turel to the Haitian Act of Independence and the Constitution of 1805. But its intellectual and ideological newness appeared most clearly with each and every political threshold crossed, from the mass insurrection (1791) to the crumbling of the colonial apparatus (1793), from general liberty (1794) to the conquest of the state machinery (1797–98), from Louverture's taming of that machinery (1801) to the proclamation of Haitian independence with Dessalines (1804). Each and every one of these steps—leading up to and culminating in the emergence of a modern “black state,” still largely part of the unthinkable until the twentieth century—challenged further the ontological order of the West and the global order of colonialism.

This also meant that the Haitian revolutionaries were not overly restricted by previous ideological limits set by professional intellectuals in the colony or elsewhere, that they could break new ground—and, indeed, they did so repeatedly. But it further meant that philosophical and political debate in the West, when it occurred, could only be reactive. It dealt with the impossible only after that impossible had become fact; and even then, the facts were not always accepted as such.



Battle in Saint-Domingue, a contemporary engraving

Dealing with the Unthinkable: The Failures of Narration

When the news of the massive uprising of August 1791 first hit France, the most common reaction among interested parties was disbelief: the facts were too unlikely; the news had to be false. Only the most vocal representatives of the planter party took them seriously, in part because they were the first to be informed via their British contacts, in part because they had the most to lose if indeed the news was verified. Others, including colored plantation owners then in France and most of the left wing of the French assembly, just could not reconcile their perception of blacks with the idea of a large-scale black rebellion.³⁶ In an impassioned speech delivered to the French assembly on 30 October 1791, delegate Jean-Pierre Brissot, a founding member of the *Amis des Noirs* and moderate anti-colonialist, outlined the reasons

why the news had to be false: a) anyone who knew the blacks had to realize that it was simply impossible for fifty thousand of them to get together so fast and act in concert; b) slaves could not conceive of rebellion on their own, and mulattoes and whites were not so insane as to incite them to full-scale violence; c) even if the slaves had rebelled in such huge numbers, the superior French troops would have defeated them. Brissot went on:

What are 50,000 men, badly armed, undisciplined and used to fear when faced with 1,800 Frenchmen used to fearlessness? What! In 1751, Dupleix and a few hundred Frenchmen could break the siege of Pondichéri and beat a well-equipped army of 100,000 Indians, and M. de Blanchelande with French troops and cannons would fear a much inferior troop of blacks barely armed?³⁷

With such statements from a “Friend,” the revolution did not need enemies. Yet so went majority opinion from left to center-right within the Assembly until the news was confirmed beyond doubt. Confirmation did not change the dominant views. When detailed news reached France, many observers were frightened not by the revolt itself but by the fact that the colonists had appealed to the English.³⁸ A serious long-term danger coming from the blacks was still unthinkable. Slowly though, the size of the uprising sank in. Yet even then, in France as in Saint-Domingue, as indeed in Jamaica, Cuba, and the United States before, planters, administrators, politicians, or ideologues found explanations that forced the rebellion back within their worldview, shoving the facts into the proper order of discourse. Since blacks could not have generated such a massive endeavor, the insurrection became an unfortunate repercussion of planters’ miscalculations. It did not aim at revolutionary change, given its royalist influences. It was not supported by a majority of the slave population. It was

due to outside agitators. It was the unforeseen consequence of various conspiracies connived by non-slaves. Every party chose its favorite enemy as the most likely conspirator behind the slave uprising. Royalist, British, mulatto, or Republican conspirators were seen or heard everywhere by dubious and interested witnesses. Conservative colonialists and anti-slavery republicans accused each other of being the brains behind the revolt. Inferences were drawn from writings that could not have possibly reached or moved the slaves of Saint-Domingue even if they knew how to read. In a revealing speech, deputy Blangilly urged his colleagues to consider the possibility that the rebellion was due, at least in part, to the slaves' natural desire for freedom—a possibility that most rejected then and later. Blangilly then proceeded to suggest what was in his view the most logical conclusion: a law for the amelioration of slavery.³⁹ Legitimate as it was, the slaves' natural desire for freedom could not be satisfied, lest it threaten France's interests.

For thirteen years at least, Western public opinion pursued this game of hide-and-seek with the news coming out of Saint-Domingue. With every new threshold, the discourse accommodated some of the irrefutable data, questioned others, and provided reassuring explanations for the new package so created. By the spring of 1792, for instance, even the most distant observer could no longer deny the extent of the rebellion, the extraordinary number of slaves and plantations involved, the magnitude of the colonists' material losses. But then, many even in Saint-Domingue argued that the disaster was temporary, that everything would return to order. Thus, an eyewitness commented: "If the whites and the free mulattoes knew what was good for them, and kept tightly together, it is quite possible that things would return to normal, *considering the ascendancy that the white has always had over the negroes.*"⁴⁰ Note the doubt (the witness is tempted to believe his eyes); but note also that the nomenclature

has not moved. Worldview wins over the facts: white hegemony is natural and taken for granted; any alternative is still in the domain of the unthinkable. Yet this passage was written in December 1792. At that time, behind the political chaos and the many battles between various armed factions, Toussaint Louverture and his closest followers were building up the avant-garde that would push the revolution to the point of no return. Indeed, six months later, civil commissar Léger Félicité Sonthonax was forced to declare free all slaves willing to fight under the French republican flag. A few weeks after Sonthonax's proclamation, in August 1793, Toussaint Louverture raised the stakes with his proclamation from Camp Turel: immediate unconditional freedom and equality for all.

By then, the old conspiracy theories should have become irrelevant. Clearly, the Louverture party was not willing to take orders from colonists, French Jacobins, or agents of foreign powers. What was going on in Saint-Domingue was, by all definitions, the most important slave rebellion ever witnessed and it had developed its own dynamics. Surprisingly, conspiracy theories survived long enough to justify the trials of a few Frenchmen accused to have fomented or helped the rebellion, from Blanchelande, the old royalist governor of 1791, to republican governor Lavaux, to Félicité Sonthonax, the Jacobin.⁴¹

As the power of Louverture grew, every other party struggled to convince itself and its counterparts that the achievements of the black leadership would ultimately benefit someone else. The new black elite had to be, willingly or not, the pawn of a "major" international power. Or else, the colony would fall apart and a legitimate international state would pick up the pieces. Theories assuming chaos under black leadership continued even after Louverture and his closest lieutenants fully secured the military, political, and civil apparatus of the colony. If some foreign governments—notably the United States—were willing to maintain

a guarded collaboration with the Louverture regime, it was in part because they “knew” that an independent state led by former slaves was an impossibility. Toussaint himself may have not believed in the possibility of independence whereas, for all practical purposes, he was ruling Saint-Domingue as if it were independent.

Opinion in Saint-Domingue, in North America, and in Europe constantly dragged after the facts. Predictions, when they were made, revealed themselves useless. Once the French expedition of reconquest was launched in 1802, pundits were easily convinced that France would win the war. In England, the *Cobbet Political Register* doubted that Toussaint would even oppose a resistance: he was likely to flee the country.⁴² Leclerc himself, the commander of the French forces, predicted in early February that the war would be over in two weeks. He was wrong by two years, give or take two months. Yet planters in Saint-Domingue apparently shared his optimism. Leclerc reported to the Minister of the Marine that French residents were already enjoying the smell of victory. Newspapers in Europe and North and Latin America translated and commented on these dispatches: restoration was near.

By mid-1802, the debacle of Louverture’s army seemed to verify that prophecy. The rejection of the truce by a significant minority of armed rebels—among whom was Sans Souci—and the full-scale resumption of military operations when the war within the war forced the colonial high brass to rejoin the revolution in the fall of 1802 did little to change the dominant views. Despite the alliance between the forces of Dessalines, Pétion, and Christophe and the repeated victories of the new revolutionary army, few outside of Saint-Domingue could foresee the outcome of this Negro rebellion. As late as the fall of 1803, a complete victory by the former slaves and the creation of an independent state was still unthinkable in Europe and North America. Only long after

the 1804 declaration of independence would the *fait accompli* be ungraciously accepted.

Ungraciously, indeed. The international recognition of Haitian independence was even more difficult to gain than military victory over the forces of Napoleon. It took more time and more resources, more than a half century of diplomatic struggles. France imposed a heavy indemnity on the Haitian state in order to formally acknowledge its own defeat. The United States and the Vatican, notably, recognized Haitian independence only in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Diplomatic rejection was only one symptom of an underlying denial. The very deeds of the revolution were incompatible with major tenets of dominant Western ideologies. They remained so until at least the first quarter of this century. Between the Haitian independence and World War I, in spite of the successive abolitions of slavery, little changed within the various ladders that ranked humankind in the minds of the majorities in Europe and the Americas. In fact, some views deteriorated.⁴³ The nineteenth century was, in many respects, a century of retreat from some of the debates of the Enlightenment. Scientific racism, a growing but debated strain of Enlightenment thought, gained a much wider audience, further legitimizing the ontological nomenclature inherited from the Renaissance. The carving up of Asia and above all of Africa reinforced both colonial practice and ideology. Thus in most places outside of Haiti, more than a century after it happened, the revolution was still largely unthinkable history.

Erasure and Trivialization: Silences in World History

I have fleshed out two major points so far. First, the chain of events that constitute the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable before these events happened. Second, as they happened, the successive events within that chain were systematically recast by

many participants and observers to fit a world of possibilities. That is, they were made to enter into narratives that made sense to a majority of Western observers and readers. I will now show how the revolution that was thought impossible by its contemporaries has also been silenced by historians. Amazing in this story is the extent to which historians have treated the events of Saint-Domingue in ways quite similar to the reactions of its Western contemporaries. That is, the narratives they build around these facts are strikingly similar to the narratives produced by individuals who thought that such a revolution was impossible.

The treatment of the Haitian Revolution in written history outside of Haiti reveals two families of tropes that are identical, in formal (rhetorical) terms, to figures of discourse of the late eighteenth century. The first kind of tropes are formulas that tend to erase directly the fact of a revolution. I call them, for short, formulas of erasure. The second kind tends to empty a number of singular events of their revolutionary content so that the entire string of facts, gnawed from all sides, becomes trivialized. I call them formulas of banalization. The first kind of tropes characterizes mainly the generalists and the popularizers—textbook authors, for example. The second are the favorite tropes of the specialists. The first type recalls the general silence on resistance in eighteenth-century Europe and North America. The second recalls the explanations of the specialists of the times, overseers and administrators in Saint-Domingue, or politicians in Paris. Both are formulas of silence.

The literature on slavery in the Americas and on the Holocaust suggests that there may be structural similarities in global silences or, at the very least, that erasure and banalization are not unique to the Haitian Revolution. At the level of generalities, some narratives cancel what happened through direct erasure of facts or their relevance. "It" did not *really* happen; it was not that bad, or that important. Frontal challenges to the fact of the Holocaust

or to the relevance of Afro-American slavery belong to this type: The Germans did not really build gas chambers; slavery also happened to non-blacks. On a seemingly different plane, other narratives sweeten the horror or banalize the uniqueness of a situation by focusing on details: each convoy to Auschwitz can be explained on its own terms; some U.S. slaves were better fed than British workers; some Jews did survive. The joint effect of these two types of formulas is a powerful silencing: whatever has not been cancelled out in the generalities dies in the cumulative irrelevance of a heap of details. This is certainly the case for the Haitian Revolution.⁴⁴

The general silence that Western historiography has produced around the Haitian Revolution originally stemmed from the incapacity to express the unthinkable, but it was ironically reinforced by the significance of the revolution for its contemporaries and for the generation immediately following. From 1791–1804 to the middle of the century, many Europeans and North Americans came to see that revolution as a litmus test for the black race, certainly for the capacities of all Afro-Americans. As Vastey's pronouncements on Sans Souci clearly show, Haitians did likewise.⁴⁵ Christophe's forts and palaces, the military efficiency of the former slaves, the impact of yellow fever on the French troops, and the relative weight of external factors on revolutionary dynamics figured highly in these debates. But if the revolution was significant for Haitians—and especially for the emerging Haitian elites as its self-proclaimed inheritors—to most foreigners it was primarily a lucky argument in a larger issue. Thus apologists and detractors alike, abolitionists and avowed racists, liberal intellectuals, economists, and slave owners used the events of Saint-Domingue to make their case, without regard to Haitian history as such. Haiti mattered to all of them, but only as pretext to talk about something else.⁴⁶

With time, the silencing of the revolution was strengthened by

[the fate of Haiti itself. Ostracized for the better part of the nineteenth century, the country deteriorated both economically and politically—in part as a result of this ostracism.⁴⁷ As Haiti declined, the reality of the revolution seemed increasingly distant, an improbability which took place in an awkward past and for which no one had a rational explanation. The revolution that was unthinkable became a non-event.

Finally, the silencing of the Haitian Revolution also fit the relegation to an historical backburner of the three themes to which it was linked: racism, slavery, and colonialism. In spite of their importance in the formation of what we now call the West, in spite of sudden outbursts of interest as in the United States in the early 1970s, none of these themes has ever become a central concern of the historiographic tradition in a Western country. In fact, each of them, in turn, experienced repeated periods of silence of unequal duration and intensity in Spain, France, Britain, Portugal, The Netherlands, and the United States. The less colonialism and racism seem important in world history, the less important also the Haitian Revolution.

Thus not surprisingly, as Western historiographies remain heavily guided by national—if not always nationalist—interests, the silencing of Saint-Domingue/Haiti continues in historical writings otherwise considered as models of the genre. The silence is also reproduced in the textbooks and popular writings that are the prime sources on global history for the literate masses in Europe, in the Americas, and in large chunks of the Third World. This corpus has taught generations of readers that the period from 1776 to 1843 should properly be called “The Age of Revolutions.” At the very same time, this corpus has remained silent on the most radical political revolution of that age.

In the United States, for example, with the notable exceptions of Henry Adams and W. E. B. Du Bois, few major writers con-

ceded any significance to the Haitian Revolution in their historical writings up to the 1970s. Very few textbooks even mentioned it. When they did, they made of it a “revolt,” a “rebellion.” The ongoing silence of most Latin-American textbooks is still more tragic. Likewise, historians of Poland have paid little attention to the five thousand Poles involved in the Saint-Domingue campaigns. The silence also persists in England in spite of the fact that the British lost upward of sixty thousand men in eight years in an anti-French Caribbean campaign of which Saint-Domingue was the most coveted prize. The Haitian Revolution appears obliquely as part of *medical* history. The victor is disease, not the Haitians. The Penguin *Dictionary of Modern History*, a mass circulation pocket encyclopedia that covers the period from 1789 to 1945, has neither Saint-Domingue nor Haiti in its entries. Likewise, historian Eric Hobsbawm, one of the best analysts of this era, managed to write a book entitled *The Age of Revolutions, 1789–1843*, in which the Haitian Revolution scarcely appears. That Hobsbawm and the editors of the *Dictionary* would probably locate themselves quite differently within England’s political spectrum is one indication that historical silences do not simply reproduce the overt political positions of the historians involved. What we are observing here is archival power at its strongest, the power to define what is and what is not a serious object of research and, therefore, of mention.⁴⁸

The secondary role of conscious ideology and the power of the historical guild to decide relevance become obvious when we consider the case of France. France was the Western country most directly involved in the Haitian Revolution. France fought hard to keep Saint-Domingue and paid a heavy price for it. Napoleon lost nineteen French generals in Saint-Domingue, including his brother-in-law. France lost more men in Saint-Domingue than at Waterloo—as did England.⁴⁹ And although France recovered

• silencing
• unthinkability

economically from the loss of Saint-Domingue, it had indeed surrendered the control of its most valuable colony to a black army and that loss had ended the dream of a French empire on the American mainland. The Haitian Revolution prompted the Louisiana Purchase. One would expect such “facts,” none of which is controversial, to generate a chain of mentions, even if negative. Yet a perusal of French historical writings reveals multiple layers of silences.

The silencing starts with revolutionary France itself and is linked to a more general silencing of French colonialism. Although by the 1780s France was less involved than Britain in the slave trade, both slavery and colonialism were crucial to the French economy in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁵⁰ Historians debate only the extent—rather than the fact—of France’s dependence on its Caribbean slave territories. All concur that Saint-Domingue was, at the time of its Revolution, the most valuable colony of the Western world and France’s most important possession.⁵¹ Many contemporaries would have agreed. Whenever the colonial issue was evoked, for instance in the assemblies, it was almost always mingled with Afro-American slavery and both were presented—most often, but not only, by the colonists—as a matter of vital importance for the future of France.⁵²

Even if one leaves room, as one should, for rhetorical hyperbole, the fact that such rhetoric could be deployed is itself telling. But then, we discover a paradox. Every time the revolutionary assemblies, the polemicists, journalists, and politicians that helped decide the fate of France between the outbreak of the French Revolution and the independence of Haiti evoked racism, slavery, and colonialism, they explicitly presented these issues as some of the most important questions that France faced, either on moral or on economic grounds. Yet the number of times they debated those same issues was strikingly limited. Considering both the

weight of the colonies in French economic life and the heat of the rhetoric involved, the public debate was of short range. The number of individuals involved, the fact that most came from the elites, the limited amount of time that most participants devoted to these issues do not reflect the central place of colonialism in France’s objective existence. They certainly do not reflect either the colonists’ claim that the economic future of the country, or the *Amis des Noirs*’ claim that the moral present of the nation was at stake. Recent research, including two important books by Yves Benot on colonialism and the French Revolution, has not challenged Daniel Resnick’s earlier judgment that slavery was, even for France’s libertarians, “a derivative concern.”⁵³

Still, revolutionary France left a trail of records on these subjects. Colonial management and both private and public communications between France and the Americas also left their paper trail. In short, the inaccessibility of sources is only relative. It cannot explain the massive disregard that French historiography shows for the colonial question and, by extension, for the Haitian Revolution. In fact, French historians continue to neglect the colonial question, slavery, resistance, and racism more than the revolutionary assemblies ever did. Most historians ignored or simply skipped whatever record there was. A few took the time for short and often derogatory passages on the Haitian revolutionaries before moving, as it were, to more important subjects.

The list of writers guilty of this silencing includes names attached to various eras, historical schools, and ideological positions, from Mme. de Staël, Alexis de Tocqueville, Adolphe Thiers, Alphonse de Lamartine, Jules Michelet, Albert Mathiez, and André Guérin, to Albert Soboul. Besides minor—and debatable—exceptions in the writings of Ernest Lavisse and, most especially Jean Jaurès, the silencing continues.⁵⁴ Larousse’s glossy compilation of *The Great Events of World History*, meant to duplicate—and, one supposes, fashion—“the memory of hu-

mankind” produces a more polished silence than the Penguin pocket dictionary. [It not only skips the Haitian Revolution; it attributes very little space to either slavery or colonialism.]⁵⁵ Even the centennial celebrations of French slave emancipation in the 1948 did not stimulate a substantial literature on the subject. More surprising, neither the translation in French of C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins* nor the publication of Aimé Césaire’s *Toussaint Louverture*, which both place colonialism and the Haitian Revolution as a central question of the French Revolution, activated French scholarship.⁵⁶

The public celebrations and the flood of publications that accompanied the Bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989–1991 actively renewed the silence. Massive compilations of five hundred to a thousand pages on revolutionary France, published in the 1980s and directed by France’s most prominent historians, show near total neglect both for colonial issues and the colonial revolution that forcibly brought them to the French estates. Sala-Molins describes and decries the near total erasure of Haiti, slavery, and colonization by French officials and the general public during ceremonies surrounding the Bicentennial.⁵⁷

As this general silencing goes on, increased specialization within the historical guild leads to a second trend. Saint-Domingue/Haiti emerges at the intersection of various interests: colonial history, Caribbean or Afro-American history, the history of slavery, the history of New World peasantries. In any one of these subfields, it has now become impossible to silence the fact that a revolution took place. Indeed, the revolution itself, or even series of facts within it, have become legitimate topics for serious research within any of these subfields.

How interesting then, that many of the rhetorical figures used to interpret the mass of evidence accumulated by modern historians recall tropes honed by planters, politicians, and administrators both before and during the revolutionary struggle. Examples

are plentiful, and I will only cite a few. Many analyses of marro-nage (“desertion” some still would say) come quite close to the biophysiological explanations preferred by plantation managers.⁵⁸ I have already sketched the pattern: slave A escaped because she was hungry, slave B because she was mistreated. . . . Similarly, conspiracy theories still provide many historians with a deus ex machina for the events of 1791 and beyond, just as in the rhetoric of the assemblymen of the times. The uprising must have been “prompted,” “provoked,” or “suggested” by some higher being than the slaves themselves: royalists, mulattoes, or other external agents.⁵⁹

The search for external influences on the Haitian Revolution provides a fascinating example of archival power at work, not because such influences are impossible but because of the way the same historians treat contrary evidence that displays the internal dynamics of the revolution. Thus, many historians are more willing to accept the idea that slaves could have been influenced by whites or free mulattoes, with whom we know they had limited contacts, than they are willing to accept the idea that slaves could have convinced other slaves that they had the right to revolt. The existence of extended communication networks among slaves, of which we have only a glimpse, has not been a “serious” subject of historical research.⁶⁰

Similarly, historians otherwise eager to find evidence of “external” participation in the 1791 uprising skip the unmistakable evidence that the rebellious slaves had their own program. In one of their earliest negotiations with representatives of the French government, the leaders of the rebellion did not ask for an abstractly couched “freedom.” Rather, their most sweeping demands included three days a week to work on their own gardens and the elimination of the whip. These were not Jacobinist demands adapted to the tropics, nor royalist claims twice creolized. These were slave demands with the strong peasant touch that would

characterize independent Haiti. But such evidence of an internal drive, although known to most historians, is not debated—not even to be rejected or interpreted otherwise. It is simply ignored, and this ignorance produces a silence of trivialization.

In that same vein, historian Robert Stein places most of the credit for the 1793 liberation of the slaves on Sonthonax. The commissar was a zealous Jacobin, a revolutionary in his own right, indeed perhaps the only white man to have evoked concretely and with sympathy the possibility of an armed insurrection among Caribbean slaves both *before the fact* and in a public forum.⁶¹ We have no way to estimate the probable course of the Revolution without his invaluable contribution to the cause of freedom. But the point is not empirical. The point is that Stein's rhetoric echoes the very rhetoric first laid out in Sonthonax's trial. Implicit in that rhetoric is the assumption that the French connection is both sufficient and necessary to the Haitian Revolution. That assumption trivializes the slaves' independent sense of their right to freedom and the right to achieve this freedom by force of arms. Other writers tend to stay prudently away from the word "revolution," more often using such words as "insurgents," "rebels," "bands," and "insurrection." Behind this terminological fuzziness, these empirical blanks and these preferences in interpretation is the lingering impossibility, which goes back to the eighteenth century, of considering the former slaves as the main actors in the chain of events described.⁶²

Yet since at least the first publication of C. L. R. James's classic, *The Black Jacobins* (but note the title), the demonstration has been well made to the guild that the Haitian Revolution is indeed a "revolution" in its own right by any definition of the word, and not an appendix of Bastille Day. But only with the popular reedition of James's book in 1962 and the civil rights movement in the United States did an international counter-discourse emerge, which fed on the historiography produced in Haiti since the

nineteenth century. That counter-discourse was revitalized in the 1980s with the contributions of historians whose specialty was neither Haiti nor the Caribbean. Then, Eugene Genovese and—later—Robin Blackburn, echoing Henry Adams and W. E. B. Du Bois, insisted on the central role of the Haitian Revolution in the collapse of the entire system of slavery.⁶³ The impact of this counter-discourse remains limited, however, especially since Haitian researchers are increasingly distant from these international debates.

Thus, the historiography of the Haitian Revolution now finds itself marred by two unfortunate tendencies. On the one hand, most of the literature produced in Haiti remains respectful—too respectful, I would say—of the revolutionary leaders who led the masses of former slaves to freedom and independence. Since the early nineteenth century, the Haitian elites have chosen to respond to racist denigration with an epic discourse lauding *their* revolution. The epic of 1791–1804 nurtures among them a positive image of blackness quite useful in a white-dominated world. But the epic is equally useful on the home front. It is one of the rare historical alibis of these elites, an indispensable reference to their claims to power.

The empirical value of this epic tradition has steadily declined after its spectacular launching by such nineteenth-century giants as Thomas Madiou and Beaubrun Ardouin, and in spite of individual achievements of the early twentieth century. Unequal access to archives—products and symbols of neo-colonial domination—and the secondary role of empirical precision in this epic discourse continue to handicap Haitian researchers. They excel at putting facts into perspective, but their facts are weak, sometimes wrong, especially since the Duvalier regime explicitly politicized historical discourse.⁶⁴

On the other hand, the history produced outside of Haiti is increasingly sophisticated and rich empirically. Yet its vocabulary

and often its entire discursive framework recall frighteningly those of the eighteenth century. Papers and monographs take the tone of plantation records. Analyses of the revolution recall the letters of a La Barre, the pamphlets of French politicians, the messages of Leclerc to Bonaparte or, at best, the speech of Blangilly. I am quite willing to concede that the conscious political motives are not the same. Indeed again, that is part of my point. Effective silencing does not require a conspiracy, not even a political consensus. Its roots are structural. Beyond a stated—and most often sincere—political generosity, best described in U.S. parlance within a liberal continuum, the narrative structures of Western historiography have not broken with the ontological order of the Renaissance. This exercise of power is much more important than the alleged conservative or liberal adherence of the historians involved.

The solution may be for the two historiographic traditions—that of Haiti and that of the “foreign” specialists—to merge or to generate a new perspective that encompasses the best of each. There are indications of a move in this direction and some recent works suggest that it may become possible, sometime in the future, to write the history of the revolution that was, for long, unthinkable.⁶⁵

But what I have said of the guild’s reception of *The Black Jacobins*, of colonial history in France, and of slavery in U.S. history suggests also that neither a single great book nor even a substantial increase in slave resistance studies will fully uncover the silence that surrounds the Haitian Revolution. For the silencing of that revolution has less to do with Haiti or slavery than it has to do with the West.

Here again, what is at stake is the interplay between historicity 1 and historicity 2, between what happened and that which is said to have happened. What happened in Haiti between 1791 and 1804 contradicted much of what happened elsewhere in the

world before and since. That fact itself is not surprising: the historical process is always messy, often enough contradictory. But what happened in Haiti also contradicted most of what the West has told both itself and others about itself. The world of the West basks in what François Furet calls the second illusion of truth: what happened is what must have happened. How many of us can think of any non-European population without the background of a global domination that now looks preordained? And how can Haiti, or slavery, or racism be more than distracting footnotes within that narrative order?

The silencing of the Haitian Revolution is only a chapter within a narrative of global domination. It is part of the history of the West and it is likely to persist, even in attenuated form, as long as the history of the West is not retold in ways that bring forward the perspective of the world. Unfortunately, we are not even close to such fundamental rewriting of world history, in spite of a few spectacular achievements.⁶⁶ The next chapter goes more directly, albeit from a quite unique angle, into this narrative of global domination which starts in Spain—or is it Portugal?—at the end of the fifteenth century.