

**Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon (eds), *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution: Selected Essays and Historical Documents*, 2010 (Routledge: London and New York)**

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Jackson and Bacon's edited volume is a collection of recent work which provides key contextualisation of African Americans interaction with the Haitian Revolution from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century. These essays and case-studies presented as a collection are so compelling because stylistically mirroring the historical ebb and flow of ideas across 'porous borders', the works in this volume converse with each other. They present a variety of evidence which unarguably attests to the enduring influence which Haiti has and continues to have on the actions and consciousness of African-Americans. From Toussaint inspired soldiers fighting the American Civil War while singing 'La Marseillaise' to the projects and words of Danny Glover contemporary activist and co-founder of *louverture* films.<sup>1</sup>

These chapters span a number of disciplines: From the outset, the editors present, the roots of the 'transtemporal' and transnational nature of the work to follow.<sup>2</sup> These can be found in the expanding scope of African-American studies, and Atlantic approaches. Byman places this in a wider scholarly trend of "considering "bodies of water" as well as "land masses ... as sites of connectivity and mutual influence," through which we can explore "diasporas, mobility, diversity, cultural borrowing, and the porousness of borders."<sup>3</sup>

Fanning and Alexander both consider movement across material borders in the African-American emigration movements to post-revolutionary Haiti. However they present differences of accentuation in looking at the significance of these movements. Alexander explores this phenomenon from the 1820s to its ultimate end in the 1860s as 'phantasms' and escapist fantasies which many who physically partook of returned dissatisfied with the realities of the 'black republic'.<sup>4</sup> Fanning however delves deeper into the 1820s movement but seems unable to reconcile herself with the idea that African-Americans were dissatisfied with physically living in Haiti, she substitutes a less than convincing supposition and misses what I believe is the real power of Haiti in the black Atlantic: Its symbolic significance of black pride, potential and achievement. This provided so strong a pull on the minds of free blacks in America that, at a time when they were despised and frustrated at home, despite the post-revolutionary turmoil in Haiti like a siren it called across the waters: a mirage of a diasporic homeland, successfully drawing in 6000 to 13000 African-American migrants, temporarily.<sup>5</sup>

At times these essays unabashedly and directly present conflicting views, notably over the controversial issue of public commemoration of the Haitian Revolution. A number of chapters casually make reference to the assumed occurrence of such events among African-Americans.<sup>6</sup> Kachun, however, notes that little if any primary evidence has been presented by the scholarship as a whole for these assertions, and he goes on to meticulously observe the accumulation of a "historical mythology" through a "well-intentioned" "scholarly collusion". Kachun's essay is important as it warns against an assumption of repeated though unsubstantiated information in a field of study which has gained notable popularity in recent years. However, in conflict with Kachun labelling this scholarly trajectory as 'counterproductive and downright dangerous', I find this occurrence infinitely interesting and demonstrative of the enduring potency of Haiti's history as a mythology or folktale.<sup>7</sup>

Though this volume is mainly a compilation of works that focus on textual sources, the themes and arguments constructed are nonetheless instrumental to a good understanding of the critical and

enduring impact of the Haitian Revolution, and its heroes (interestingly female archetypes are introduced here through Bacon's chapter<sup>8</sup>) on African-Americans. However Jackson's 'No Man Could Hinder Him: Remembering Toussaint...' which takes a wide-ranging and at times unwieldy approach to twentieth century cultural remembrances of Toussaint and the Revolution considers a broader set of sources beyond the textual.<sup>9</sup>

Particularly Jackson presents a short in-depth consideration of a key visual source: Jacob Lawrence's Toussaint L'Ouverture series.<sup>10</sup> In discussing this work which memorialises the Revolution Jackson reveals some surprising influences on Lawrence, including his attendance at a play on the life of Toussaint by a W. Dubois, which he mistook for the famous African-American political leader and founding member of the NAACP, but was in fact a white southerner: William Du Bois. Jackson also discusses some motivations behind Lawrence's Toussaint series and raises some interesting questions, including to what extent Lawrence as a 21 year old, painting this piece, understood the deeper implications of this dramatic story, though Jackson suggests no clear answer to this.

What is abundantly clear though, through the chronologically wide-ranging array of evidence presented in this volume, is that Haiti's revolution and its aftermath have been undeniably key in African-American's: recognition of their own potential and; galvanising themselves and their community to act in creating both material freedoms and continuing to inspire freedoms of mind. This event continually resonated with African Americans, 'even as changing times gave it new meanings.'<sup>11</sup> African Americans have not only encountered the Haitian Revolution as a historical reality, but socially and culturally have redefined, reshaped and retold it as a defining collective memory, key to the cosmology of African American and indeed black Atlantic consciousness: 'the touchstone of a transatlantic identity'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew J. Clavin, *American Toussaints: Symbol, Subversion, and the Black Atlantic Tradition in the American Civil War*, p.110; Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon, Introduction, p.1

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon, Introduction, p.2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *"The Black Republic": The Influence of the Haitian Revolution on Northern Black Political Consciousness, 1816-1862*, pp.57-80

<sup>5</sup> Sara C. Fanning, *The Roots of Early Black Nationalism: Northern African Americans' Invocation of Haiti in the Early Nineteenth Century*, pp.39-58

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.39

<sup>7</sup> Mitch Kachun, *Antebellum African Americans, Public Commemoration, and the Haitian Revolution: A Problem of Historical Mythmaking*, p.105

<sup>8</sup> Although the disappointing lack of further evidence beyond two female figures: one of which, Madame Christophe, is made famous primarily as the wife of Henri Christophe, and the other; Theresa, is a fictional character, makes this argument feel somewhat forced, this gender angle is interesting and one which has lacked in the historiography up to this point; Jacqueline Bacon: *"A Revolution Unexampled in the History of Man": The Haitian Revolution in Freedom's Journal, 1827-1829*, pp.86-90

<sup>9</sup> This chapter covers the vast ground of: black 20th century political leaders, including some West Indians such as C.L.R. James; African-American engagement with US invasion; a variety of literary responses including McKay; theatrical pieces; dance; anthropology and; jazz music.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Jackson, *No Man Could Hinder Him: Remembering Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution in the History and Culture of the African American People*, p. 150-152

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon, Introduction, p.4

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.