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H-France Salon

Volume 13, Issue 19, #5

## **Liberté, Égalité, Indigénéité? Some Thoughts on Native Studies and the French Revolution**

**Christian Crouch**  
**Bard College**

*Editor's note: Christian Crouch's piece here should be read in conjunction with her essay, "The French Revolution in Indian Country: Reconsidering the Reach and Place of Atlantic Upheaval" which should be permanently available open-access at <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110619775-005>; Megan Maruschke and Manuel Covo saw that article as closely connected to their forum.*

The recent *French Historical Studies* forum edited by Megan Maruschke and Manuel Covo offers a wonderful point of entry to take stock of the changing conversations around the French Revolution. The excellent essays of this special forum make a strong case for interpreting the French Revolution as an imperial revolution and explore the possibilities offered by this lens of analysis. For nearly a century, scholars operating in an Atlantic context, especially scholars and writers hailing from the Caribbean, have argued forcefully for the importance of the Haitian Revolution in studies of the French Revolution. C.L.R. James' classic text, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), remains powerfully relevant today, nearly a century after its publication, for its demonstration of the entangled intimacies of empire, slavery, and political innovation that mutually constituted France and revolutionary Saint-Domingue (later Haiti). And yet, France's celebration of Napoleon Bonaparte's birth bicentenary this year, (well critiqued by Marlene Daut in a *New York Times* essay on March 18, 2021), demonstrates limited engagement with critiques of the colonial past offered Scholars. There remain powerful historiographic traditions in France, and also in the study of French history in the Anglo-Atlantic world, that elect to ignore the influence of a broader world on early modern French history.<sup>1</sup> While the case study of Haiti may seem well-trodden ground, what I want to illuminate here are the challenges that persist in centering a Haitian perspective in considerations of the French Revolution, the Directory, and the Napoleonic era. Although Haitian history is archivally rich (literally thousands of documents) and historiographically dynamic, scholars are still fighting to raise awareness of and, engagement with it in order to yield truly complex considerations of French political history and memory. These conversations, taking place both in the Hexagon and in former French imperial territories, show how much work still is to be done in regards to what was recognized imperial space. What we need to aim for now is a "both/and" to the imperial turn previously underrepresented voices. Historians, among others, need to both continue the unfinished project of grappling with the Haitian Revolution *and* actively encourage an expansive historical practice that dives into

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<sup>1</sup> Marlene Daut, "Napoleon Isn't a Hero to Celebrate" *New York Times* 18 March 2021.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/opinion/france-year-of-napoleon.html>

material and narratives beyond the best-known part of the first French empire.<sup>2</sup> Let us meditate, briefly, on the selection of the name *Ayiti*, or “mountainous land” in the original Taino language, upon Haitian independence in 1804 and how this decision in and of itself offers a potential avenue of approach. As numerous scholars have noted, the choice of *Ayiti* was a conscious acknowledgment on the part of Haiti’s leadership of the Indigenous roots of this new Black republic. Language here becomes an invitation to contemporary scholars to consider the relationships of Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean with peoples of African descent, forcibly brought to this space as well as born in the region. Someone in each community made sure that the name *Ayiti* survived, by sharing and preserving this knowledge. Taking seriously the *imperial* context of the Haitian and French Revolutions, as the authors in the *French Historical Studies* forum grapple with in their case studies from Africa, India, Ireland, and Haiti, should encourage historians of France undertaking a global turn to engage seriously with Indigenous perspectives, just as actors in the moment did. The individuals selecting the name Haiti in 1804 clearly understood the relevance of Indigeneity in the Americas in this revolutionary era – it is literally ensconced in the name they chose. We ought to take inspiration from their example.

France’s incursions in the Atlantic world from early forays in the late medieval period in the eastern Atlantic to the establishment of settler colonial sites in Tupinamba and Timucuan territory (currently Brazil and Florida, respectively) in the sixteenth century, and then the vast expansion in the seventeenth and eighteenth century into the lands of Haudenosaunee, Wendat, Potowatomi, Natchez (in the Northeast, Great Lakes region, and Mississippi delta) and many other Native homelands necessarily ought to be a part of any imperial reading of the French Revolution. There is no question that Native peoples played a critical role in the articulation and limitation of the French empire. Imperial approaches to the French Revolution – or for that matter to French history in the long eighteenth century – ought to include, or at least consider, these voices. In the *ancien régime* as well as in the era during and after the French Revolution, French imperial ambition led to a wealth of exchanges with many different Native populations in North America alone. However, most histories of France in this period, to say nothing of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era, pay scant or no attention to Native presence or significance. Some historians have justified this erasure in studies of *ancien régime* France by arguing that Native peoples had few, if any, properties in Europe, that Native American physical presence in France remained minimal (despite documented diplomatic delegations), and that the distance of an ocean and geography necessarily rendered American affairs peripheral. Anglo-American scholarship positing an “abandoned” French Atlantic empire after 1763 aided and abetted this spectrum that ran from benign neglect through outright refusal to consider a richer, more inclusive history. Decades of scholarship also defined eastern North American continental history post-1783 as either “US history” or “Canadian history,” a deadly combination that further encouraged Native voices to be almost entirely ignored. These narratives and choices to refrain

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<sup>2</sup> Although the gap is beginning to narrow in scholarship bridging the French Atlantic empire and French imperial ventures of the later nineteenth and twentieth century, significant divisions remain. The bifurcations continue to privilege the research and publication around a (needed) French imperial history overwhelmingly focused on French ventures in the Maghreb, West Africa, and Southeast Asia rather than on Atlantic antecedents (or Eastern Mediterranean and East African ambitions) dating back to the fifteenth century.

from reflecting on the presence or significance of First Nations/Native individuals at all in the era of empire, when we know connections existed, shaped the elision of Native actors and perspectives from scholarship considering the French Revolution.

The wealth of Native archival documentation and material culture extant in France that began in the era of Atlantic empire and *to this day* remains in France should alone force a reconsideration of this optic. We need to ask, repeatedly, “how – and for what purpose – did all vocabularies of Native languages end up in the Bibliothèque Nationale? Why are there so many *plans* of Native communities, like Kahnawake, in the Centre d’Archives d’Outre Mer? How did eighteenth-century Anishinaabe beadwork and woodwork get to the Musée Quai Branly?” Scholars working in Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) have invited their colleagues to see how centering the worldview of Native actors and engaging with NAIS methodology adds depth and richness to our understanding of the colonial Atlantic world and related fields.<sup>3</sup> Engaging with this work, or even developing collaborations with NAIS researchers, will allow access to new layers of meaning regarding Native perspectives on France and on French ideas circulating in this era. We have seen how the recovery of the presence and importance of people of African descent in continental Europe, long overlooked (by European and Euro-American scholars), has opened dynamic new questions for scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Considering a Red Atlantic, and leaning in to what might exist as a construct beyond or instead of a Red Atlantic, ought to be an exciting prospect.

Whether we choose to approach these questions as tracing Native individuals or decide instead to consider the metaphoric roles First Nations in the Hexagon, there is a great deal of space to reassess the French empire, the French Revolution, and colonialism by using NAIS as a guide. One place to start is by drawing inspiration from the methods of Black Atlantic scholarship, particularly Haiti, and extending the relevance of the French Revolution well beyond its boundaries in a “French” imperial world as a necessary act of spatial and political reimagination. This is something I reflected on in my essay “The French Revolution in Indian Country,” where I probed what French Revolutionary ideology circulating in Native space and among a new generation of Indigenous leaders in the era of Nativism meant. I also took seriously the analogies drawn by Euro-American observers between Tecumseh and Napoleon, to base these in actual context rather than mere metaphor.<sup>5</sup> Now I think that we need to take up the opportunities to

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<sup>3</sup> Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, Kelly Wisecup, and Caroline Wiggington, “Materials and Methods in Native American and Indigenous Studies: Completing the Turn” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 75, 2 (2018), 207-236.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Olivette Otele, *African Europeans: An Untold History* (Basic Books 2021) or Lorelle Semley, *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France’s Atlantic Empire* (Cambridge 2017) Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth Century France* (Georgia 2020) for continental European French examples, or the work of Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archive, 1500-1677* (Ashgate 2008) or David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (Macmillan 2016) for comparative British examples.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Ayne Crouch, “The French Revolution in Indian Country: Reconsidering the Reach and Place of Atlantic Upheaval,” in Megan Maruschke and Mattias Middell, eds., *The French Revolution as a Moment of Respatialization* (De Gruyter 2019), 85-107.

push the boundaries of such thought experiments even further. Recent work in NAIS questions the very location of where our perspectives come from and has suggested the virtues of embracing western hemispheric, central continental, and/or deeply local approaches to counter the dominance of east-to-west narratives.<sup>6</sup> These works challenge us to reconsider a French empire or French Revolution that has Versailles or Paris as its core and instead to think of France, from the optics of Osage or *Petite Nations* homelands as the periphery. Did Native peoples matter for the French Revolution? Yes. That this has to be stated still suggests the necessity and the urgency of expanding our frames of reference. But bounding the question in these terms retains an optic that continues to radiate from France. What we also need to ask is “did the French Revolution matter for Native peoples?” Maybe. Native individuals and polities were and are savvy global consumers of intellectual currents and material culture and were and are creative political and social theorists. Proving the relevance of the French Revolution to Native peoples matters less than taking the invitation, provided both by early Atlantic NAIS scholars and also by the *FHS* forum, to come at imperial approaches to the French Revolution from new perspectives. What different questions, concerns, and sources are available to us if we are willing to engage the idea that maybe the French Revolution, imperial or not, is not center or the fulcrum? It can be the space we pass through and we can acknowledge its importance, but if it remains the frame, then how much else will we miss out on seeing that lies just beyond its bounds?

Lastly, as we consider how an imperial history of the French Revolution can continue to grow, we need to move beyond traditional approaches to archives that we rely on to narrate and parse these pasts. How many historians of Atlantic revolution, particularly those interested in the French and American Revolutions, actually learn Indigenous languages and see this as an essential part of reconstructing a fully nuanced history? Part of what made the revisions in Haitian Studies so powerful, as in Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s transformative *Silencing the Past* (1995), was the call to take seriously the interpretation of revolutionary rhetoric *by* enslaved and free people of African descent and to reject the application of European terms wholesale onto other populations. A truly “global” turn, even an imperial turn, must take into account methodologies and interpretative frameworks that are not simply informed by nation-state and then neoliberal frameworks.

Christian Crouch  
Bard College

*H-France Salon*

ISSN 2150-4873

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indigenous Prosperity and American Conquest: Indian Women of the Ohio River Valley, 1690-1792* (UNC 2019) or Elizabeth N. Ellis, “The Natchez War Revisited: Violence, Multinational Settlements, and Indigenous Diplomacy in the Lower Mississippi Valley,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 77, 3 (2020), 441-472.