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Chelsea Stieber, *Haiti's Paper War: Post-Independence Writing, Civil War, and the Making of the Republic, 1804-1954*. New York: New York University Press, 2021. xi + 380 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$89.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781479802135; \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781479802159.

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Chelsea Stieber's *Haiti's Paper War* is a formidable study of Haiti's political and literary evolution over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Interrogating what she pithily describes as our 1804 desires, Stieber examines and critiques scholarly tendencies to read Haiti's anticolonial triumph as a direct opening onto liberal republicanism. She insists on the distinction between Haiti's 1804 declaration of national sovereignty and the creation of a republic in 1806, diving into this hiatus with thoroughness and precision. In doing so, Stieber reveals the stakes of Haiti's protracted discursive civil war, wherein writing functioned as a political weapon and became absolutely central to state formation. This anchoring of her project in the local space of Haiti pushes against what she rightfully identifies as critical tendencies to cast the Caribbean as a unitary region composed of "capital port cities" that exist primarily in opposition to metropolitan centers (p. 18).

Stieber engages rigorously throughout *Haiti's Paper War* with "locally produced Haitian texts," and her elegant analyses yield finely tuned narratives of Haiti's revolutionary past (p. 17). She argues convincingly that a republican teleology has come to dominate historiographic understandings of Haiti's post-revolutionary period, failing to fully appreciate the "political fault lines" and "constant internal tension" that were threats equal to those posed by the "inhospitable, external Atlantic sphere" (p. 23). Stieber announces at the outset that getting the history right—excavating, that is, the tensions behind the profound disunity of the post-revolutionary moment—requires investment in close reading. She notes provocatively, for example, that the words *revolution* and *republic* were pointedly avoided in the nation's founding documents, and not in fact utilized officially until 1810, after which the word *revolution* held a different value depending on which side of the paper war it was being deployed.

Indeed, throughout her study, Stieber reveals how certain words signified differently—even contradictorily—in early nineteenth-century Haiti, and she makes plain the attendant stakes of such conceptual variance. Stieber identifies the incongruent understanding of the notion of liberty itself as the crux of a post-1804 political schism that would undermine national unity in Haiti for more than a century. Looking closely at the deployment of the word in the writings of radical nationalists versus its discursive value to republican universalists, she homes in on the

fraught distinction between anticolonial freedom, on the one hand, and individual freedom, on the other. She establishes this conflict as the basis not only of Haiti's post-revolutionary civil war, but also of the opposing ideological platforms that have informed Haitian politics through to the twentieth century. *Haiti's Paper War* is thus a work of both literary and political theory that asserts the inextricability of the two. Stieber convincingly argues that the question of national literature in Haiti has always been a question of the relationship between "the pen and the sword."

The conflict over what Haiti's national literature should be, Stieber argues, became a battleground whose violence mirrored that of the actual fields of military conflict that followed Haiti's seizing of independence. As such, the very notion of the literary was a contested term in a broader socio-political struggle that marked the new nation. Insistent on the political import of the written word in the post-revolutionary public sphere, Stieber creates space for reading both the explicitly liberal literary production of Haiti's bourgeois republican print culture, marked by "individual reason" (p. 16), "private subjectivity" (p. 12), and "communicative rationality" (p. 12), and the Dessalinean mode, invested in collective textual production, Dessalinean authority, and giving voice to such non-elite figures as "insurgent slaves, illiterate or uneducated free men of color, and even the dead" (p. 14). Haiti's political road forked radically after 1804, Stieber insists, with bourgeois republican universalism and Dessalinean antiliberal imperialism informing discursive practices in the South and North, respectively. Writings from the southern republic borrowed heavily from French texts in their articulations of freedom, committing to Enlightenment liberalism and positioning the republic unmistakably in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789. Such a vision of statehood was irreconcilable with Dessalinean political formations and, as such, Haiti's North and South would remain fractured until 1820, at which point the nation actually became a unified republic. Until that time, however, a civil war of words would keep the country divided into bitter factions.

Stieber resists what she reveals to be the overwhelming proclivity of contemporary scholars for attributing greater value to the written work produced by southern republican writers than to the performance- and symbol-based print culture of the North. She shows how such judgments ultimately remain wedded to Enlightenment moral and aesthetic principles that were in fact deeply inimical to radical Black freedom. She commits to reading early nineteenth-century texts in their time, insisting on the material (and social and political) context at the moment of their creation. This methodological approach allows her to take seriously lesser-read, lesser-considered nationalist Haitian writings of the period, vigilant to presentist hierarchies.

Chronological in its framing, *Haiti's Paper War* begins with insurgent-general-cum-emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines. In the book's first chapter, "Dessalines's Empire of Liberty," Stieber attends studiously to the "alternative epistemologies and ontologies" at the core of Dessalines's political philosophy (p. 266, n. 8). She makes the crucial point that, inasmuch as the very fact of a Black republic issued a challenge to the slaveholding nations of the nineteenth century, Dessalines's anti-Enlightenment imperialism made its own contextual sense.

Northern statehood required the sort of Fanonian violence and annihilation that would produce an anticolonial and decolonial "empire of liberty" (p. 21) --"from revolution to legislation, from violence to order" (p. 47), as Stieber describes it. Dessalineanism relied upon "a military government with a single powerful executive, committed to order, discipline, and duty as the only way to ensure lasting independence from French colonial rule" (p. 24); it was a veritable alternate ontology, wherein blood and vengeance were civilizational values. Stieber depicts

official writings from Dessalines's North as a practice of anticolonial poetic marronage, so many undoings of the fundamental hypocrisies of French colonial discourse. Stieber's careful readings reveal the spiritual tone and Vodou underpinnings of much Dessalinean writing--the channeling of ancestral voices and of those of the enslaved and Amerindians. If much of northern writing was decidedly antiliberal, it was also a pointed refusal of a European episteme and its false universalism. Indeed, Stieber asks, how could Dessalines have possibly embraced a political philosophy that could abide the enslavement of Black peoples? Paying particular attention in this chapter to the specific terminology employed by Dessalines's scribes, Stieber draws attention to and challenges what she convincingly argues are contemporary critical misreadings of these texts--misreadings that undo the radically subversive practices of Dessalinean writing.

"Civil War, *Guerre de Plume*," the book's second chapter, looks carefully at the range of materials produced by Juste Chanlatte and Jean Louis Baron de Vastey in service to King Henri Christophe's regime and in pointed opposition to the southern republic, headed by President Alexandre Pétion. Chanlatte and Vastey's writings pointed to the persistence of French colonialist epistemologies in republican writings, denouncing them as dangerous to the nascent Haitian state. Crucially in this and in the following chapter, "Southern Republic of Letters," Stieber establishes the relational nature of Haitian writing during the civil war--how the polemical, performative style of the Christophean press and the literariness of republican textual production emerged in tension with and in response to one another. Attuned to the fact that style itself functioned as a vehicle of political intent, Stieber makes clear that writings from the two Haitian states were very much co-constitutive. She offers particularly fine readings of the refutation pamphlets of the North, instances of "collective textual production" largely designed for oral presentation, as antithetical to the hermeneutics of individualist rationality that marked bourgeois writings of the South (p. 12).

Stieber also notes that the content of official writings on either side of the North-South divide revealed very different approaches to Haiti's future within a global frame. Whereas the southern republic, with its Francocentric writing style, proposed concessions to the French that it saw as necessary to maintaining Haitian sovereignty, Christophe's monarchy produced texts that declared his kingdom's absolute refusal to negotiate its freedom. The anticolonial and antislavery pamphlets of the North were countered by southern literary and political journals that expressed the "individual reason" (p. 16) of the "autonomous author and the liberal mind" (p. 91), Stieber explains, as well as that of a broader "republican diaspora" (p. 96) that in the years 1815 and 1816 had returned to Haiti. Intent on participating in a project of universal freedom grounded in antislavery but otherwise aligned with the ideology of the European Enlightenment, that diaspora sought primarily to project its republican vision outward toward other "lettered" (p. 105) spaces of the Atlantic world, so much proof of Haiti's "civilization and progress" (p. 105). These claims did not go uncontested by Vastey and others in the North, who challenged southern literary production as lacking both transparency and commitment to Haitian independence from colonial rule. Stieber argues convincingly that the North-South disputes around nativeness and authenticity that came to the fore in writings from this particular moment of Haiti's civil war would continue to resonate through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In chapter four, "The Myth of the Haitian Universal Republic," Stieber identifies the point at which the *guerre de plume* was won by the South--the point, that is, when the project of founding both a Haitian nation and a national literary canon was determined to be exclusively and foundationally republican. Stieber traces how state writings of the period under Jean-Pierre

Boyer, president of the newly unified nation, were devoted entirely to establishing a political and ideological unity that sought to completely erase Dessalinean and Christophean models of statehood from national history and consciousness. In addition to her meticulous reading of Beaubrun Ardouin's 1832 geography of the island, Stieber examines the editorials, essays, historical studies, prose fiction writings, and poetry published in newspapers of the period. The chapter delves into the persistent "Dessalines problem" (p. 182) facing Boyer's aspirational republic and the popular texts--songs, proverbs, Vodou practices--that undermined any claims to national unity.

Moving on to the imperial regime of Faustin Soulouque in her fifth chapter, "The Second Empire of Haiti and the Exiled Republic," Stieber again illustrates the dialogic nature of the evolution of Haitian political writing in a detailed account of the empire's anti-republican challenge to the notions of civilization and culture that had been put forward under Boyer. Soulouque's privileging of inward-facing popular cultural expression explicitly countered the outward-facing concerns of Boyer's republic, Stieber explains, as did his emphasis on painting and visual culture. In a subchapter she cheekily titles "Trolling Napoleon," Stieber insists that despite Soulouque's forceful refutations of Napoleonic desires to reconquer France's lost colony, the non-literariness of his regime has led to the empire's veritable silencing within Haitian historiography. Once more, Stieber calls out the ways that present-day scholarship of Haiti reinforces certain of the prejudices that divided independent Haiti from the nation's beginnings. She identifies the traps scholars have fallen into in misreading the famously "illiterate" (p. 14) and much-ridiculed Soulouque--misreadings, here, that echo the emperor's disparaging treatment on the international stage in his time.

In her subsequent chapter, "Nationals and Liberals, 1904/1906," Stieber follows the pendulum swing back to the definitive rise of republicanism in the wake of Soulouque's 1858 abdication and exile and relates the concomitant shift from geography to ideology in Haitian political formations. She traces the new division between National and Liberal forms of republican statehood, and refutes scholarly misrepresentations of those divides as a simple matter of color-based politics. Stieber's careful reading of Louis Joseph Janvier's polemical Nationalist writings--both his political essays and his resuscitation of the traditional storytelling form of the *lodyans* in his fiction--highlights at once their contiguity with Dessalinean modes of literary production and their adamant projection of an idiosyncratically Haitian identity outward to the cosmopolitan Atlantic world of letters. Stieber argues that Liberal republican rhetoric ultimately claimed primacy and that, for a time, the work of Anténor Firmin seemed to present alternatives to the divisions that had marked Haitian politics and literary production during the hundred years since independence. Though Firmin was unsuccessful in achieving the desired unification under the auspices of Liberalism, Stieber notes, he certainly paved the way for the relatively less-considered Massillon Coicou and L. C. Lhérisson, writers who were convinced that national reconciliation would only be possible through a return to the scene of the originary crime of Dessalines's assassination, a reckoning with the emperor's subsequent denigration, and an embracing of Dessalines's radical epistemological interventions as cornerstone of the sovereign republic.

In the book's final chapter, Stieber focuses on northern literary magazine *Stella* and, to a lesser extent, its better-known southern counterpart, *La Revue indigène*. She notes the ideological similarities of the two publications as well as the distinct public spheres they sought to engage. Once again, Stieber affirms, the matter of inward-facing nationalist (*Stella*) versus outward-facing cosmopolitan (*Revue indigène*) intentions is crucial; and again, scholars of Haiti have tended to

favor study of the latter publication, largely dismissing the former as so much anti-worldly, far-right nationalism, unworthy of intellectual consideration. Consistent with the whole of her project, Stieber takes seriously the content and the impact of a strand of Haitian political writing that would have had significant import in its time. Her reading of multiple contributions to *Stella* reveals the hauntings of the immediate post-revolutionary moment more than a century later—up to and through the cultural nationalism that followed the US occupation and set the stage for Duvalier's fascist, ethno-nationalist perversion of Dessalinean antiliberal critique.

Haiti's Paper War makes plain Chelsea Stieber's deep and expansive understanding of Haiti in its local and regional specificity as well as within a global historical frame. The book purposefully places Haiti within an anti-presentist interpretive frame that implicates local realities and considers Haiti very literally on its own terms. In the process, Stieber opens the door to multiple historiographical possibilities that might reveal deeper truths about Haiti's immediate post-revolutionary reality—truths that set the stage for more rigorous understandings of the whole of the nineteenth century, and much of the twentieth. Stieber's exceptional attention to detail avoids superficial cataloguing and engages robust critical comparison and multivalent analysis throughout. It offers a meticulous unpacking of the language and history of a fraught and complex moment in time that has been in many respects obscured by the anxieties of those who, as much in the past as in the present day, have transformed Haiti's revolution into narrative and silenced those parts deemed incommensurable with contemporary political desires. Stieber shows how Haiti's vast archive pushes back against such silencing, speaking volumes to those, like herself, who are careful to listen to it on its own terms.

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