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Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021. vi + 339 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781496833105; \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781496833112.

Review by Cécile Accilien, Kennesaw State University.

The first author to center the Haitian Revolution on screen by exploring films and video games, Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall analyzes the vexed question of why this revolution, one of the most important and impactful in history, is so underrepresented. Across ten chapters, Sepinwall discusses the meaning of this lack of representation and what it says about racism, denial, history, fear, power, and positionality. Representation matters, and film is a powerful medium because visual images of events tend to be so impactful—perhaps more, at least in some cases, than the same events rendered in writing. As the late film critic and historian Roger Ebert noted, films are an “empathy machine.” Thus, film offers a compelling way to consider different perspectives, and this timely book challenges us to think about the famous African proverb, “Until the lion tells the story, the hunter will always be the hero.”

As this work focuses on the Haitian Revolution as a key event in global history, it also highlights the fundamental fact that hemispheric studies are a more relevant lens to interpret Haitian history and culture than simple geography. The fact that modern-day Haiti is part of an island (Hispaniola) may suggest to people on the U.S. mainland that Haiti has not played an important role in the development of “the west,” including the United States; indeed, Haiti is commonly associated with disaster and poverty without any historical context. The reality, as Sepinwall shows, is far more complex.

The introduction considers comedian Chris Rock’s hosting of the eighty-eighth Academy Awards and his interpretation of the #OscarsSoWhite movement, which critiqued the ways in which Hollywood has strategically marginalized people of color. This sets the stage for one of the book’s main foci, which is the deliberate erasure of Haitian history. Rock’s 2014 film *Top Five* serves as a great example of this erasure. It is a film about a Black actor/director, André Allen, played by Rock, who wants to make a film about slave revolts, especially the Haitian Revolution, and the lack of support he receives from the white characters who are uncomfortable with and hostile about a film that depicts “Black violence against whites” (p. 3).

The difficulties in making a major motion picture about the Haitian Revolution to which Rock’s film alludes are not due to a lack of information, since the Haitian Revolution is one of the most studied events in Haitian history; and when I did a Google search on the Haitian Revolution, I

got over ten million hits. In fact, Sepinwall underscores the necessity of going beyond the official archives in order to depict at once the absence and the presence of the Haitian Revolution in culture. Her non-traditional archives include tweets, game code, YouTube videos, personal interviews with independent filmmakers, and digital films.

The first section of the book, “Foreign Views of the Revolution,” is composed of five chapters. Chapter one, “An Unthinkable Plot? The Haitian Revolution in US and European Feature Films,” argues that one of the main reasons why there has not been a true epic representation of the Haitian Revolution is due to the fact that powerful filmmakers, whether in the United States or Europe, deny the reality of the Revolution. Sepinwall brings forth Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s idea of the Haitian Revolution as being “unthinkable” as one of the reasons why so many people continue to ignore it.[1] By framing the Revolution as “unthinkable,” to borrow a term from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Trouillot argues that archives ignored the event and whites refused to acknowledge it. This attempt “to silence the past” is directly related to power and racism. A concrete example of this refusal is the fact that the U.S. did not recognize Haiti’s independence until 1862.

Through analyses of works such as the 1933 film *The Emperor Jones* and *Toussaint Louverture* (2012), a French two-part mini-series, Sepinwall argues that the various representations of the Revolution fall into “discourses of banalization” that “have struggled to conceive of the Haitian Revolution as an autonomous movement in which enslaved Africans masterminded their own struggle while profiting from infighting among the French...and do not portray African culture positively” (p. 25). For instance, while *The Emperor Jones* had a Black protagonist, it still represents people of African descent in stereotypical and dehumanizing ways. Similarly, the Haitian Revolution drama *Royal Bonbon* (2002) depicts a resident of Cap-Haïtien who is obsessed with King Henri Christophe; the producers attempt “authenticity” by setting the film in Haiti and having characters speak in Haitian Creole, but it still falls into the same trap. *Toussaint Louverture* continues the mindset of “unthinkability” via the problematic and racist ways in which it portrays the Revolution. Sepinwall notes, “Though it had some positive features...[it] distorted slavery and the Revolution...[by] implicitly shift[ing] blame away from the French whites and toward people of mixed race, the Spanish, and even Black themselves” (p. 37).

Many regions in the Caribbean acknowledge the importance of the Haitian Revolution and its impact. Chapter two, “Invoking the Revolution in Caribbean Feature Films,” considers representations of the Haitian Revolution from Cuba and Curaçao. Again, however, the representations these films contain may be problematic. For instance, *The Last Supper* (1976), set on an eighteenth-century Cuban sugar plantation, is a film about Cuban slavery in which the Haitian Revolution is a warning rather than an inspiration. Likewise, *El siglo de las luces/Le siècle des lumières* (1992), a Cuban French co-production, does not provide a positive description of the enslaved. It centers the perspective of the colonizers and not the voices of the enslaved. Two films from the Dutch Caribbean focus on the importance of the Haitian Revolution in the greater Caribbean. *Almacita de Desolato* (1986) by Felix De Rooy (1986) is the story of an enslaved person from “San Christophe,” a place that is believed by some scholars to be Saint-Domingue.[2] *Tula: The Revolt* (2013), directed by Jeroen Leinders, presents the story of a slave revolt in Curaçao in 1795 led by an enslaved person known as Tula. This film formed part of the Netherlands’ 150<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the Dutch abolition of slavery and depicts how the enslaved people inspired by the Haitian Revolution went on strike. It is also noteworthy that well-known actor Danny Glover has a role in the film.

Chapter three, “Handling Haiti in HUAC-Era Hollywood: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox’s *Lydia Bailey*” describes *Lydia Bailey*, a 1952 film set in Saint-Domingue in 1802 during the Leclerc Expedition. In examining this film, Sepinwall brings forth issues including the lack of creative input from African Americans and Haitians, as well as the disturbing representations of the “voodoo” religion it contains. When *Lydia Bailey* was released in Haiti, top U.S. journalists flew there along with 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox executives and the film’s stars. On May 4, President Magloire even “proclaimed Lydia Bailey Day” (p. 76) with fireworks, a parade, and a special event to show the film. Magloire thought this event would open doors to greater partnership with the US. The chapter also revisits the film’s legacy in Haiti under Magloire and the partnership of the Haitian government with Hollywood to make another film, *The Golden Mistress* (1954), in the hope that film would strengthen tourism in Haiti. The famous dance group *Troupe folklorique nationale* was part of the cast. But as in *Lydia Bailey*, the main characters in this film were white. The Vodou religion was portrayed very negatively and Haitians were represented as “villains [and] savages,” leading the film to be banned in Haiti under Magloire’s government (p. 86).

As Sepinwall describes in Chapter four, “No White Hero, No Funding? Unmade Revolution Epics,” actor and director Danny Glover had high ambitions of making a film about Toussaint Louverture; he wrote a screenplay and even had a company titled Louverture Films. But in trying to make the film he was asked, “Where are the white heroes?” (p. 99). In this chapter, Sepinwall dives deep into the issue of funding and the fact that Hollywood is reluctant if not downright hostile regarding complex representations of Black people in general. The refusal to fund a film on the Haitian Revolution is just an example of this hostility. Martinican director Euzhan Palcy, who made the award-winning film *Sugar Cane Alley* (1984), has also said that she is interested in making a film about Toussaint Louverture (p. 99). These two are among several directors of color who would like to see a film about the Haitian Revolution. Even though the Revolution was the first documented Black Lives Matter movement, the lack of white heroes still prevents such an epic story from being told because it would challenge the single narrative of Haiti that Hollywood continues to tell, one that centers around poverty, disaster, and a failed state.

Chapter five, “Black Lives Mattered in the Haitian Revolution: Hollywood and Slavery in Chris Rock’s *Top Five*” examines the challenges of a Black director trying to represent Black history, specifically the Haitian Revolution. The film exposes white people’s discomfort with Black representation and a story that does not center whiteness and focus on the binary of white as good and benevolent and Black as bad and savage.

In Chapter six, “Remembering Haiti’s Revolution in France and North America: Documentaries, Dramatic Shorts, and Animation,” Sepinwall considers various genres of film that represent the Revolution, especially documentaries and animations such as *Toussaint Louverture: Haïti et la France* (2004), *Bonaparte, côté noir* (2016), *Égalité for All* (2009), *1804: The Hidden History of Haiti* (2017), *Aiyiti* (2017), and *Black Dawn* (1978). These works center Toussaint Louverture primarily and ignore Dessalines. There is a constant myth that Dessalines was a murderer who wanted to kill all whites, while Toussaint is represented as a more gentle leader. The reality is that Dessalines was a lieutenant under Toussaint Louverture and he rebelled in 1803 when Napoleon attempted to reinstate slavery. Many of these stories of the Revolution also marginalize the voices of women, even though there were women leaders such as Catherine Flon, Gran Toya, and Marie-Jeanne Lamartinière, a soldier who fought at the Battle of Vertières on November 18, 1803, the most decisive battle of the Revolution leading to independence.

Part Two, “Haitian Cinematic Perspectives,” contains two chapters that describe the Haitian Revolution as seen through Haitian lenses. Chapter seven, “From the Duvalier Years through the 2004 Bicentennial: Haitian Reflections on the Revolution’s Legacy,” examines lesser-known films that represent the Haitian Revolution. Sepinwall notes, “Where foreigners tend to read Haiti’s revolution symbolically, as a story of slave revolt in a far-off land, the Revolution is more personal for Haitians. Haitian artists do not just read about the Revolution in books; they live its legacy each day” (p. 135). The Revolution is part of Haitians’ collective memory. Although Haiti is plagued by repeated occupations; systemic and structural violence; and political, economic, and environmental crises, a return to the Revolution is a reminder that women and men fought for freedom to create a better life for future generations.

Chapter eight, “The Rising Generation, Toussaint Louverture, and the Problem of Funding,” portrays films that are rooted in the present but make commentaries on the Revolution. These include *Marchons unis* (2017), *L’arbre de la liberté* (2004), *Toussaint Louverture, par devoir de mémoire* (2003), and *Toussaint Louverture: Miroir d’une société* (2016). Another interesting film is *Moloch Tropical* (2009) by Raoul Peck, a parody of the political career of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide set on the eve of Haiti’s bicentennial. These works present compelling overviews of the Revolution from a contemporary perspective, representing ways in which those attempting to solve modern-day problems can find answers in and inspiration from the past.

The final section, Part Three, “Video Games on Slavery and the Haitian Revolution,” contains two chapters. Chapter nine, “North American and European Games: From MECC’s *Freedom!* to *Assassin’s Creed: Freedom Cry*” focuses on games made in Europe and North America, while Chapter ten, “French Caribbean Games: Honoring Rebel Ancestors in *Méwilo* and *Freedom: Rebels in the Darkness*” highlights games created in the Caribbean. Sepinwall also analyzes problematic elements in depictions of history in video games, especially the ways in which games such as *Playing History 2—Slave Trade* (2013) represent slavery, where “players ‘win’ by being obedient slave children” (p. 188). Sepinwall demonstrates the ways in which in the late 1980s, Caribbean writer Patrick Chamoiseau and game designer Muriel Travis, one of the first Black women to succeed in that field, created games that acknowledged how enslaved people resisted slavery (p. 209). The Haitian hero Makandal is one of the characters in these games, either as an avatar or cameo. Sepinwall thinks that these games were probably the first to depict Atlantic slavery. They present a complex history of the Caribbean, including the ways in which the sugar plantation that enriched the French destroyed the lives of Caribbean people.

In her conclusion, Sepinwall affirms the importance of centering Black stories and Black heroes. She suggests several avenues (including works from the 1930s and 1940s) and the recent novel by Évelyne Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie* (2013), through which filmmakers could powerfully depict the Haitian Revolution and center the stories of heroines such as Marie-Jeanne Lamartinière, Catherine Flon, Zabeth, and Cécile Fatiman, and heroes such as Dessalines to move beyond Toussaint Louverture. This is important because moving beyond Toussaint will create space for newer and more complex narratives around the Haitian Revolution.

This book is an important contribution to the emerging subfield of representations of slavery in popular culture. It will also contribute to Haitian studies, Caribbean studies, Latin American and Caribbean studies, history, and film studies. Sepinwall is taking on the challenge that Gina Athena Ulysses set forth in 2010 when she stated that “Haiti needs new narratives.”<sup>[3]</sup> She is also centering narratives that Haitian filmmakers are telling about their own history. Moreover,

she reminds us that Haitians have been telling stories for over 500 years and these stories are best told in the spirit of *konbit*, a Haitian Creole word that means communal and cooperative labor and symbolizes community and equality.[4] Sepinwall's work proposes some tangible ways to respectfully and collectively depict the Haitian Revolution. There should not be mainly an American or European perspective determining how Haiti is depicted in popular culture. Rather, Haitians should continue to be at the center of their own history and decide who should be invited to work with them to tell these stories.

The failure to have an epic on the Haitian Revolution even in the times of Black Lives Matter is a refusal to acknowledge the humanity of enslaved people who were brave enough to fight their enslavers. Given that Haiti had to pay France 150 million francs (equivalent to about twenty-one billion dollars today) to retain its independence, there should be an argument that France should give back a fraction of that money so that Haitians can make an epic about the Revolution. Then we can start having a conversation about reparations.

## NOTES

[1] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-event," in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), pp. 70-107.

[2] For more information, see Wim Klooster and Geert Oostindie, eds., *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions, 1795-1800* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011); Hendrik Henrichs, "Review Essay: A Children's Book and a Soap Opera as Public History? Two Dutch Films on Slavery, *Tula, the Revolt, The Price of Sugar (Hoe duur was de suiker)*," *The Public Historian*, 36.2 (2014): 117-121.

[3] Gina Athena Ulysse, *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: A Post-Quake Chronicle* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015).

[4] The idea of *konbit* referred to a cooperative labor system that farmers relied on to harvest. But this system of solidarity in the Haitian context has come to mean people coming together and working together in a collaborative manner. For more information, see "Creole Word of the Week: Konbit" accessed March 9, 2022. <https://www.creolesolutions.com/creole-word-of-the-week-konbit/> and a novel by Jacques Roumain, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (Les éditeurs français réunis, 1946).

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