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Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004. viii + 357. Maps, figures, notes, index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-674-01304-2.

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2004 was a year of tragedy in Haiti. After eagerly awaiting the celebration of two hundred years of independence, Haitians instead experienced the deadly violence of a coup and the humiliation of a third American invasion. Ironically, the island's troubles came at the same time as a blossoming of Haitian-related scholarship, as scholars around the Atlantic had already planned exhibitions, conferences, and volumes commemorating the bicentennial, and thereby making the long-neglected history of this nation better known.[1]

Laurent Dubois's *Avengers of the New World* is part of this wave of Bicentennial-related scholarship on Haiti. The author published a separate monograph in 2004 on Guadeloupe during the French Revolution, growing out of his doctoral dissertation and based on original research [2]. This work, in contrast, is aimed at a more general audience and is based primarily on secondary sources. Though it offers an account that will not be surprising to readers of other leading works on the Haitian Revolution, it nevertheless makes an important contribution to the field with its synthetic breadth.

Dubois's prologue argues for the centrality of the Haitian Revolution in world history. "By creating a society in which all people, of all colors, were granted freedom and citizenship," he writes, "the Haitian Revolution forever transformed the world" (p. 7). Dubois also lays out the central themes of his narrative. First, independence from France was not originally the goal of the insurgents, but became one in the early nineteenth century (pp. 3-4). Second, the violence of the Haitian Revolution has often been misrepresented: "The Haitian Revolution deserves a reading that places the violence in context, acknowledges its complexity, and does not use it as a way to avoid confronting the ideological and political significance of the ideals and ideas it generated" (p. 5). Finally, scholars need to be cautious in using racial labels to explain the Revolution: "[R]acial identification was a crucial part of the revolution and, along with economic, social and cultural factors, influenced how individuals and groups acted and responded to one another. At the same time, complicated ideological and political forces often divided groups that we might be tempted to see as unified by 'race'" (p. 6).

The book's thirteen chapters are organized chronologically, by and large. Chapter one, "Specters of Saint-Domingue," presents the colony's history from European settlement until the 1780s. Dubois examines the centrality of sugar in the economy as well as debates between metropolitan and Creole whites about governing the colony. Chapter two, "Fermentation," chronicles slave life and early efforts at resistance, from *marronage* to intermittent uprisings.

Chapter three, "Inheritance," is broad in scope. It begins with the petitions of the *gens de couleur libres*, or free-coloreds, to the National Assembly in 1791, and looks back at their status under the Old Regime. Dubois traces the rise of racist law in the colony, and attributes it to economic tensions between whites and free-coloreds (p. 64). He nevertheless explores the contradictions of the racial hierarchy, and the way whites and free-coloreds could have complicated social and economic relationships (p. 70). He also traces the beginnings of French abolitionism and the early debates about the colonies during the French Revolution, focusing on the civic status of the free-coloreds. Dubois argues that the debates between the

planters (who generally opposed any law which would extend citizenship to non-whites) and their opponents were “a war over the meaning of the Revolution itself” (p. 77). Finally, he looks at the frustrations of poor colonial whites, who were inclined to support the French Revolution because of their grievances against the planters, even as they opposed the parallel aspirations of the *gens de couleur*. The earliest violence in revolutionary Saint-Domingue, he notes, was by members of these two groups, rather than by slaves.

Chapter four, “Fire in the Cane,” chronicles the start of slave revolts in northern Haiti in August 1791. Dubois attributes their success to their being led by elite slaves (such as overseers and house slaves), who had both leadership skills and the trust of their masters. He argues that slaves drew upon a multitude of ideals in launching their revolt, not only those of the French Revolution. While sometimes putting forward their demands in “the language of Republican rights” (a term he uses even in talking about 1791), they more commonly invoked the King against colonial whites (pp. 105–106). Dubois acknowledges that violence soon became a central part of the insurrection, but that destruction and killing “were the only ways [of pursuing liberty] available to most of the slaves” (p. 113).

Chapter five, “New World,” examines the widening of the slave insurrection in 1791–2. The author notes that it took whites by surprise, and their anxiety led some of them to ally with the free-coloreds for help in defeating the slaves. The chapter discusses rival slave leaders, the arrival of civil commissioners from Paris, and the ongoing debates in the metropole about the island and the status of the *gens de couleur*. In April 1792, with the Brissotins ascendant in the Legislative Assembly, the free-coloreds finally received full legal equality. Chapter six, “Defiance,” carries this story into 1792 and early 1793. Dubois argues that while the slave revolt had previously been confined to the North, whites and free-coloreds unwittingly caused its spread: “It was groups of whites and free-coloreds—many of them plantation owners—who laid the foundation for this expansion of slave revolution by arming slaves to fight alongside them in their violent battles against one another” (p. 134). This chapter also analyzes the central role of Léger Félicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel, the new commissioners who came from Paris in September 1792 to enforce the April decrees, and of their tensions with the colony’s whites.

Chapter seven, “Liberty’s Land,” covers early 1793–1794, and decisions by whites, free-coloreds and slaves about whether to support Sonthonax and the Republic or turn to the British and Spanish, each of whom were attempting to gain control of the island. Dubois also sees 1793 as the pivotal year in both the Haitian and French Revolutions, as Sonthonax decreed the abolition of slavery in the colony to quell the insurrection (a decree ratified the next year by the Convention). He argues that “The promise of 1793—transracial citizenship in which ex-slaves and ex-masters would live together as political equals—was a great step forward” (p. 166), “the most dramatic [change] of the many inaugurated by the French Revolution” (p. 170).

Chapter eight, “The Opening,” focuses on Toussaint Louverture, who came to control the colony in the wake of emancipation. Dubois gives a largely sympathetic reading of the dilemmas faced by Louverture as he sought to rebuild the plantation economy by compelling ex-slaves to return to work: “Though his ultimate inability to construct a multiracial, egalitarian, and democratic society in Saint-Domingue might strike us as particularly tragic, given his origins, this was a failure he shared with the leaders of every other post-emancipation society in the Atlantic world” (p. 174). Chapter nine, “Power,” examines the years 1795–7 and the return of racist discourse in France. It also looks at the continuing power struggle in the colony between Louverture and Sonthonax, with the latter forced out in August 1797. Chapter ten, “Enemies of Liberty,” describes Louverture’s efforts to keep Saint-Domingue nominally part of the French empire even while making secret agreements with the British and Americans.

Chapter eleven, "Territory," covers 1798–1801, and the burgeoning rivalry between Louverture and André Rigaud. Though this is sometimes seen as a racial conflict between black *nouveaux libres* and people of mixed-race who had been free before the Revolution, Dubois argues that there was "quite a bit of diversity on both sides" (p. 232). This chapter also gives a less sympathetic reading of Louverture, who was becoming more repressive and dictatorial, and examines the rivalries among Louverture's generals. Chapter twelve, "Tree of Liberty," chronicles Napoleon's expedition to regain control of the island, led by Charles Victor Emmanuel Leclerc. Though Louverture battled fiercely against Leclerc, he was ultimately betrayed and captured. Chapter thirteen, "Those Who Die," shows the reversal of fortune of Leclerc's men, and how their initial victories turned to defeat in the face of yellow fever and bitter resistance. While the French evacuation and the ascension of Jean-Jacques Dessalines were accompanied by renewed violence and a massacre of whites, Dubois points out that French treatment of slaves and insurgents had been no less brutal. An Epilogue looks at the enduring legacy of the Revolution, both in Haiti and abroad.

In all, Dubois's study is an impressive and useful synthesis. Its narrative is a model of lively writing, likely to attract a wide general audience interested in Haiti. Because of its scope, it will be of particular use to students and to scholars in other fields not already familiar with the literature on the Haitian Revolution. The book's literary qualities are also noteworthy; Dubois is particularly adept at mixing grand narrative with anecdotes bringing the Revolution to human scale. Furthermore, he does a first-rate job of laying out the complexities of the Haitian Revolution, of its shifting alliances and evolving demands. His sensitive analysis of Toussaint is especially notable. Finally, the book itself is beautiful: from the dust jacket to the red endpapers to the recurring tree watermark (evoking Toussaint's warning about how the tree of liberty would continue to grow even without him, p. 276), Harvard University Press gave the volume a packaging equal to the quality of its writing. It also contains a wonderful collection of maps and illustrations.

While the book is therefore a worthy addition to Haitian historiography, it does not replace recent scholarship by Anglophone authors such as David Geggus, Carolyn Fick, John Garrigus, and Stewart King.^[3] First, it is based primarily on secondary sources, supplemented by some well-known printed primary sources and archival collections. Second, most of the arguments will not strike specialists in Franco-Caribbean history as novel, though Dubois's point about race not being the final determinant in alliances (echoing C. L. R. James) is a valuable reminder. Dubois might have called greater attention to where he was building on the work of others and where he aimed to depart from them. Though he honors C. L. R. James and Aimé Césaire in the prologue, the work of other leading authors is not mentioned in the narrative, but only in the acknowledgements (gracious as they are) and endnotes.^[4] Readers unfamiliar with the field (and unwilling to flip constantly to the endnotes) may thus mistakenly conclude that they are reading Dubois's own findings when he is summarizing the arguments of others. In addition, even readers willing to read the text and notes simultaneously may be left confused by the author's tendency to drop signal phrases and by the way the notes are structured. As an example, on p. 205, Dubois explains that "The renting of abandoned plantations therefore incited the 'transfer of colonial property' and began a 'radical social revolution.'" The sentence itself does not name the author of the quoted phrases; the right page in the notes (p. 325 n. 29) does not make clear whether the argument comes from Robert Louis Stein or Pierre Pluchon. These issues are compounded by the book's lack of a bibliography. While this is likely not the author's fault but rather stems from pressure by the publisher regarding page count, this omission is particularly regrettable in a synthetic work like this, since it makes it difficult for non-specialist readers to identify the major works and sources in the field.

In addition, the author's discussion of the revolution in the metropole could be improved, particularly because he is attempting a new explanation of the relationship between the two revolutions. Chapter one suggests that the French Revolution erupted because of a bourgeoisie newly rich with Caribbean sugar money who became frustrated with their status under the monarchy (p. 21). This interpretation of

the Revolution will seem outdated to many French historians; Dubois draws it in fact from the nineteenth-century writer Jean Jaurès, the only major historian of the Revolution cited in the book. Other arguments would benefit from greater contextualization. Dubois writes of the revolutionaries' denying citizenship to the free-colored: "For many thinkers influenced by Enlightenment universalism and revolutionary egalitarianism, the 'aristocracy of the skin' that the planters were defending was a clear violation of everything the Revolution stood for" (p. 82). It is not in fact clear that "the Revolution stood for" universalism in 1789, as recent scholarship on the Declaration of the Rights of Man by Marcel Gauchet and others has shown how many of that document's implications were unintended.^[5] Moreover, the author could have better situated his arguments about race and revolutionary universalism by comparing them with scholarship on women and the Revolution. His reference to "a society in which all people, of all colors, were granted freedom and citizenship" (p. 7) certainly elides the issue of gender. Dubois might have considered especially Joan Scott's argument that ideas about the fixed nature of gender differences were precisely what enabled the National Convention to decree racial equality.^[6]

Nonetheless, because of its engaging writing and its appearance at such a timely moment, *Avengers of the World* is likely to attract a large audience. They will find it a superb read and a useful introduction to Haitian revolutionary history—a topic, as Dubois argues, that deserves to emerge from the shadows of memory.

NOTES

[1] Scholarly collections published to coincide with the bicentennial include Claude Moïse, ed., *Dictionnaire historique de la Révolution haïtienne (1789–1804)* (Montréal: Éditions Images/Cidihca, 2003); Yves Benot and Marcel Dorigny, eds., *Rétablissement de l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises, 1802: aux origines d'Haïti* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2003); Marcel Dorigny, ed., *Haïti: première république noire* (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 2003); and Jacques de Cauna, ed., *Toussaint Louverture et l'indépendance d'Haïti* (Paris: Karthala, 2004). Conferences on the Bicentennial were held in 2002–2004 in places such as Port-au-Prince, Paris, Limoges, Trinidad, Rio de Janeiro, Fort-de-France, Montreal, Ithaca, Providence, and New York. On amnesia about Haitian history, see especially Yves Benot, *La révolution française et la fin des colonies* (Paris: La Découverte, 1987), ch. 10; and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995).

[2] Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[3] See Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); David P. Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); articles by John Garrigus such as "Sons of the Same Father': Gender, Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue, 1760 - 1792," in Christine Adams, Jack R. Censer, and Lisa Jane Graham, eds., *Visions and Revisions of Eighteenth-Century France* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 137 – 153; and Stewart R. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001). See also new scholarship in French such as Dominique Rogers, "Les libres de couleur dans la capitale de Saint-Domingue: fortune, mentalités, et intégrations à la fin de l'ancien régime (1776-1789)" (Thèse, Université Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux III, 1999). While much of Geggus's work is intended for specialists, the introduction to *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (which gives a brilliant and lucid overview

of the Revolution in twenty-four pages) is an example of Geggus's own talent for synthetic writing. Fick's work, accessibly written and exhaustively researched, also remains an optimal choice for use with students, particularly if one is seeking a "history from below" approach.

[4] C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938) and Aimé Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture: la Revolution française et le problème colonial* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1961).

[5] See for example Marcel Gauchet, "Rights of Man," in François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), 818–828; and the other scholarship discussed in my *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 90–91, 268.

[6] Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 8–9. Dubois mentions the failure to give citizenship to women on p. 82, but lumps it together with the exclusion of servants and the poor, saying it was only because they were seen as financially dependent and therefore incapable of political independence.

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