



The Haitian Declaration of Independence in an Atlantic Context

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Introduction:
“We must live independent or die”:
The Haitian Declaration of Independence in Atlantic Context
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For the New-York Historical Society’s *Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn* exhibit in 2011-2012, curators Richard Rabinowitz and Lynda B. Kaplan commissioned a miniature sculpture of the Palace of Versailles from artists Martín Avila and Benita Rodriguez Alvarez of Guanajuato, Mexico. The artists created a desktop-sized palace constructed entirely of sugar tinged with vegetable dyes. Their message was crystal clear; as Rabinowitz explained, the sculpture emphasized that the French Empire “was in some ways a kingdom based on sugar.”¹ Indeed, an estimated 30% of France’s wealth in the 18th century came from its colonies, especially Saint-Domingue, the Atlantic World’s most wealth-producing colony and one of the richest spots on the face of the earth.

This modern sugar sculpture echoed another that had been created just over two hundred years earlier to mark the second anniversary of Haitian independence on January 1, 1806. At Cap Haïtien, the independence celebrations had comprised a military review, a reading of the Declaration of Independence, and a high mass; in Gonaïves later that day, Jean-Jacques Dessalines laid on a commemorative feast attended by the leading officers, military and civil, of the infant state. A horrified American visitor reported that, “after dinner, a piece of confectionary in imitation of the *skeleton of a white man*, was served upon the table. The object in view... was no doubt, upon that day of national jubilee, to excite and cherish in the minds of the chiefs, their hatred of the French, by exhibiting to their sight such expressive symbols as could not fail to call

[†] Forthcoming in Julia Gaffield, ed., *The Haitian Declaration of Independence* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

¹ New-York Historical Society Museum and Library, *Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn*, <http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/revolution-the-atlantic-world-reborn>; <http://behindthescenes.nyhistory.org/a-kingdom-built-on-sugar/>; see also the catalog for the exhibit: Thomas Bender, Laurent Dubois, and Richard Rabinowitz, eds., *Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn* (New York: D. Giles Ltd, 2011).

to their recollection, the remembrance of their past deeds.”² What better way to remind the victors of their triumph than this macabre effigy of their former masters? And what more appropriate material for its construction than the sugar that had once been grown with their sweat and blood?

To mirror that historic confection, Avila and Alvarez might have tinted their modern sculpture with blood instead of vegetable extract—such a morbid touch would have reminded viewers that France’s palatial opulence was shot through with untold suffering and death. Haiti was often called the “pearl of the Antilles,” but that whitewashed metaphor ignored the massive human price that millions of enslaved men and women paid to slave traders, plantation owners, merchants, and government agents to enable their wealth. The colonial and slave systems in the Caribbean characteristically worked the slaves to death; it was more cost-effective to replace them.

Saint-Domingue achieved its status as the Atlantic’s richest colony because slave traders and plantation owners purchased and imported people from west and west-central Africa and forced them to work as slaves on sugar and coffee plantations. The colony produced other goods such as indigo, cacao, and mahogany, but coffee and sugar were the real moneymakers. Pre-revolutionary Saint-Domingue fostered a life-crushing labor system but at the same time provided unique opportunities for the development of an economically and socially rich class of *gens de couleurs*. Free people of color also lived in other American colonies, but their political and social strength and number made the situation in Saint-Domingue unique.³ The overwhelming majority of the population, however, was enslaved and an estimated two thirds of

² “Memoirs of Hayti. Letter XVIII” (February 1806), *The Port-Folio*, 5, 3 (March 1811): 246; Erin Zavitz, “Performing Revolution: Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Haitian Independence Day, 1804-1904,” p. 000 below.

³ John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

the enslaved population on the eve of the Haitian Revolution was African-born.⁴ Jean Casimir calls these people “captives” to better describe the process through which they were violently removed from their homelands.⁵ Of the estimated 500,000 slaves in Saint-Domingue in 1791, nearly 240,000 had been imported to the colony since 1780. The high mortality rate spurred the continued importation of increasing numbers of African captives: 40,000 captives alone were imported in 1791. The result was that, on the eve of the Haitian Revolution, it is possible that as many as 180,000 enslaved men and women had arrived in the previous five years, and half of them may have only been in the colony for a very short time. Most of these African captives came from the regions east of the Kingdom of Congo and south of the Congo River.⁶ And, while most came from the same region in central Africa, they were linguistically and culturally diverse. This diversity was layered onto racial, legal, and regional differences within Saint-Domingue. The population that would eventually become Haitian citizens, therefore, was heterogeneous, often in conflict, and with distinct and disparate goals in the context of the unfolding Revolution.

The first attack on the immensely profitable colonial system came in 1789 when free people of color began to agitate for equal rights as free men. This battle for full French citizenship sometimes turned violent since the established colonial state did not welcome this challenge to the discriminatory social-racial hierarchy that kept whites in power. Events in Europe, however, and especially the publication of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, made it increasingly difficult for the colonial elite to justify the subversion of about half the free population in the colony.

⁴ John K. Thornton, “African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution,” *The Journal of Caribbean History*, 25, 1 (1991): 59, citing David Geggus, “Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue and the Shaping of the Slave Labor Force,” in Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Work Process and the Shaping of Afro-American Culture in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); Thornton, “I Am the Subject of the King of Congo’: African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 4, 2 (1993): 181-214.

⁵ Jean Casimir, *Pa Bliye 1804/Souviens-Toi de 1804* (Port-au-Prince: Fondation Connaissance et Liberté, 2004).

⁶ Christina Mobley, “‘Kongo, Kongo, help me cry’: Central Africans in Saint Domingue,” presented at *Les résistances à l’esclavage dans le monde atlantique français à l’ère des révolutions (1750-1850)*, French Atlantic History Group, Montreal, May 3-4, 2013.

The spark of discontent soon exploded in Saint-Domingue when enslaved people in the northern part of the colony rose up, setting fire to the cane fields and killing their brutal masters. The plan for the uprising was hashed out at a religious ceremony in Bois Caïman in August 1791 under the leadership of an enslaved man named Boukman.⁷ Despite the dubious odds for success, the coordinated uprising across the northern plains initiated the world's only successful slave revolution. The initial goals of the rebels appear to have been reforms to the institution of slavery, mainly three days per week to cultivate their own subsistence crops—a goal inspired by a rumor circulating in the colony that the King of France had in fact granted them this concession but that the colonists were preventing its implementation.⁸ The small plots of land cultivated by the enslaved would, as Jean Casimir and Laurent Dubois discuss in their chapters, form the basis for land-tenure and social organization in the independence period as the former slaves developed a “counter-plantation” system.⁹

The rebels achieved some early victories but were not able to attain their desired goal. They received aid, however, from the international war raging throughout the Atlantic. The British and Spanish saw the slave rebellion as an opportunity to acquire another Caribbean colony. They vied for control and often enlisted insurgent armies to help their cause. The Haitian Revolution, therefore, was a series of overlapping wars involving enslaved people, free people of color, and French, British, and Spanish colonists in armies composed of a mixture of these groups. Indeed, the many different groups were not always internally united and the alliances between them changed as each considered how to best achieve their own unique goals. British

⁷ Recent scholarship has emphasized the mythical aspects of the Bois Caïman ceremony and highlight our inability uncover the actual events involved in the planning of the initial uprising in 1791. Léon-François Hoffman, “Mythe et Idéologie: La Cérémonie du Bois-Caïman,” *Études créoles*, (1990) 13(1): 9-34; David Geggus, “Le soulèvement d’août 1791 et ses liens avec le Vaudou et le marronage,” in *La révolution française en Haïti: Filiations, ruptures, nouvelles dimensions, Vol. 1*, edited by Michel Hector, (Port-au-Prince: Société haïtienne d’histoire et de géographie, Editions H. Deschamps, 1995), 60-70.

⁸ Jeremy Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 48.

⁹ On the “counter-plantation system,” see Jean Casimir, *La Culture Opprimée* (Delmas, Haïti: Imprimerie Lakay, 2001); Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2011).

forces from Jamaica occupied the South and West of Saint-Domingue from 1794-1798 and the French secured ownership of the eastern part of the island in 1795 under the Treaty of Basel.

This international warfare provided openings for the rebellious slaves. Different armies were willing to offer rewards for allegiance. In an extraordinary move, two French commissioners, Léger Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel, offered freedom and citizenship to those who would fight for the French Republic. These new soldier-citizens pressured the commissioners to expand the scope of their offer of freedom and the commissioners complied because they desperately needed their loyalty. In August of 1793, Sonthonax and Polverel abolished slavery in the colony of Saint-Domingue. A multi-racial delegation of elected representatives carried the document to France to have it ratified in the National Convention. The Convention went one-step further and abolished slavery in the entire French Empire and extended citizenship to all men.

After the abolition of slavery, Saint-Domingue returned to a level of relative stability under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture. Louverture had previously been enslaved but at the time of the 1791 uprising he was a free man. He established himself as a leader early in the revolution but spent a significant amount of time fighting for the Spanish. After the 1794 abolition of slavery, Louverture joined the French forces and soon after he was named governor-general of the colony by the French government. Louverture maintained the plantation system and instituted a quasi-slave system in which the laborers, or *cultivateurs*, were forced to return to the sugar and coffee plantations, many of which they had recently burned to the ground. In 1801, Louverture issued a constitution that maintained a loose alliance to the French Empire but that essentially allowed Saint-Domingue to operate as a sovereign state.

Napoléon Bonaparte, recently established as First Consul of France, resented what he

perceived as a challenge to his authority and sent an army to disarm, kill, and deport the colonial leadership (meaning, Louverture's government). It is also widely believed that Bonaparte instructed his brother-in-law General Victor Emmanuel Leclerc to reinstitute slavery in the colony; at the very least, rumors began to spread in the colony that this was the case.¹⁰ Leclerc's arrival in Saint-Domingue reignited the smoldering revolution and transformed the war into a war for independence. While Louverture had struggled for greater colonial autonomy, the revolution had not been about political independence. The French army's arrival changed this. It was only when it became clear to the former slaves in the colony that their legal freedom could not be assured under French authority that they began the fight for independence.

The period between 1802 and 1803 was characterized by extreme violence on both sides as each sought the complete eradication of the other army. Louverture was tricked and deported by Leclerc and the colonial armies—now labeled “rebels”—fought under the leadership of Jean-Jacques Dessalines. The period after 1802 represents a break in the Revolution. Anti-slavery was still at the core of the movement but Dessalines and his leading generals now knew that liberty and freedom could not be assured under French rule.

Leclerc's army was not able to achieve the swift victory that they anticipated as Dessalines and his troops waited out the battle until the rainy season when they knew that they would have the advantage of the Europeans' susceptibility to yellow fever. Indeed, the guerrilla-style warfare of the rebels and the vulnerability of the French troops to disease put the French in a desperate position. Despite the fact that the British were France's enemy, Leclerc and his successor, General Donatien Rochambeau, begged the governor of Jamaica to help them. The governor of Jamaica, however preferred to let the war continue and even supported a rebel

¹⁰ See Jeremy Popkin's discussion on Leclerc's plans: Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 118-120.

victory because it would land an important blow to the French Empire.¹¹ By mid-1803, it was clear to Dessalines that he had the upper hand and he began making preparations for independence. He sent letters, as Philippe Girard shows us in his chapter, to the governors of Jamaica and Cuba and to the President of the United States inviting merchants to Saint-Domingue.¹²

On November 19, 1803, Dessalines and Rochambeau signed a treaty coordinating the evacuation of the French Army from Cap Français. The articles provided for the safe evacuation of the army and any civilians who wished to follow. The French would have ten days to leave. As Rochambeau's ships set sail from Cap Français, they faced a fleet of British ships that lay waiting to capture them. The French were then brought to Jamaica as prisoners of war and eventually sent to Europe.

With the French gone from the western side of the island, Dessalines and his leading generals could now prepare for the official independence of the island. On November 29, 1803, Dessalines, Henry Christophe, and Augustin Clerveaux issued a proclamation announcing the independence of Saint-Domingue under the authority of the "Black People and Men of Colour of St. Domingo." They proudly announced the success of their war, raging since 1789, for freedom and dignity. "The frightful veil of prejudice is torn to pieces," they declare, "and is so forever. Woe be to whomsoever would dare again to put together its bloody tatters." The proclamation is therefore also a warning; the authors justify preserving the abolition of slavery by any means necessary, "every means are lawful." They hint that the fight could erupt into a global war if their liberty is not respected. "Were they [the defenders of liberty] to cause rivers and torrents of

¹¹ For more on these negotiations, see Julia Gaffield, "Haiti and Jamaica in the Re-making of the Early Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 69, 3 (July 2012): 583-614.

¹² Philippe Girard, "Did Dessalines Plan to Export the Haitian Revolution?," p. 000 below; see also Gaffield, "Haiti and Jamaica," 583.

blood to run;” they announce, “were they, in order to maintain their liberty, to conflagrate the seven-eighths of the globe, they are innocent before the tribunal of Providence, that has not created men to see them groaning under a harsh and shameful servitude.” With this document, Dessalines, Christophe, and Clervaux vied for the inclusion of Haiti in the community of recognized nations of the Atlantic by emphasizing their goals of peace and organized government. “Now that the calm of victory has succeeded to the troubles of a dreadful war,” they concluded, “everything in St. Domingo ought to assume a new face, and its Government henceforward to be that of justice.”¹³

At the same time as they jealously protected the hard-won freedom that they had achieved, Dessalines, Christophe, and Clervaux were also careful to ease the anxiety of the international community. They attempted to justify and pardon those who may have been excessive during the revolution and made excuses so as to absolve them of their guilt in the eyes of foreign onlookers. Secondly, they invited French landholders to return to their properties and promise protection. As the chapters in this volume highlight, however, the French were not in fact safe in Haiti and this promise might have even been a set up for the post-independence massacres.

The 1803 declaration has occupied a contentious role in the historiography of the revolution, as Patrick Tardieu and David Geggus’s chapters highlight, and the details surrounding its creations and dissemination are mostly unknown.¹⁴ Furthermore, the relationship between the November 1803 document and the official *Acte de l’Indépendance* of January 1, 1804 are murky. Why did the generals feel the need to issue two proclamations? Why is January

¹³ English translation of November 29, 1803, declaration: “St. Domingo,” *The Times* (London), 5938 (6 February 1804): 3. On the 1803 declaration, see Leslie F. Manigat, “Une brève analyse-commentaire critique d’un document historique,” *Revue de la Société haïtienne d’histoire et de géographie*, 221 (2005), 44-56; Deborah Jenson, “Dessalines’s American Proclamations of the Haitian Independence,” *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, 15, 1/2 (2009): 72-102.

¹⁴ Patrick Tardieu, “The Debate Surrounding the Printing of the Haitian Declaration of Independence: A Review of the Literature,” p. 000 below; David Geggus, “Haiti’s Declaration of Independence,” p. 00 below.

1 celebrated as Independence Day and not November 29? What was the motivation in the writing and distribution of the January 1 document in place of the November 29 document?

The chapters in this volume address these issues in the context of assessing the broader historical significance of the document now canonized as “the Haitian Declaration of Independence”. Throughout this Introduction, and the volume itself, we refer to the document as the Haitian “Declaration of Independence,” even though those words, and that title, never appeared in the original versions of the text. As we shall see, it was in fact an “act” of independence, closer in form and meaning to the parallel, and later, Latin American documents than to the US Declaration of Independence of 1776, and to many contemporary commentators it appeared as a “proclamation” of independence, an utterance with the power of the spoken word. The document was as multifaceted as the Haitian Revolution, open-ended and future-oriented but arising from history; innovative and even anomalous, but also recognizably akin to other events and texts of its moment. The recent rediscovery of the “Declaration” by scholars and wider publics closely tracks reconsideration of the Revolution itself. The essays collected here contribute to that broader vision through a close focus on a single text and its contexts.

* * *

In 1995, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued that the Haitian Revolution had been intentionally “silenced” by historical actors and historians alike, particularly by people outside of Haiti’s borders. There were, however, some notable exceptions, most importantly C. L. R. James’s popular book *The Black Jacobins* (1938).¹⁵ The attention that Trouillot brought to this

¹⁵ C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Dial Press, 1938); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); see also:

purposeful neglect of the world's only successful slave revolution sparked a small insurgency in the field. Scholars such as Carolyn Fick, Jacques de Cauna, Mats Lundahl, Gérard Barthélémy, David Geggus, Vertus Saint-Louis, John Garrigus, and Laurent Dubois built on the work of James and other 19th- and 20th-century Haitian historians such as Thomas Madiou, Beaubrun Ardouin, Claude and Marcel Auguste, Auguste Nemours, Gérard Mentor Laurent, and others to re-evaluate the historical neglect of this momentous event.¹⁶ Because of their groundbreaking work, the Haitian Revolution is no longer at the margins of the Age of Revolutions or of Atlantic World history. There is still much work to be done, of course, but this volume is part of a broader movement to research, understand, and explain the Haitian Revolution in Atlantic and global contexts.

Recent developments in the historiography of the Haitian Revolution and the early independence period reveal the challenges in undertaking archival research on the period but also the many opportunities available because of new archival strategies and methodological innovations. “Many of the original archives of the Haitian state were destroyed over the years,” sociologist Mimi Sheller argues, “thus there is great dependence on the writings of a few Haitian

Thomas Ott, *The Haitian Revolution, 1789-1804* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973); Yves Bénot, *La Démence Coloniale sous Napoléon* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1992); Pierre Pluchon, *Toussaint Louverture, fils noir de la révolution française* (Paris: Ecole des loisirs, 1980); Jean Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons: Liberty or Death* (1972; reprint, New York: Edward Blyden Press, 1981); Robert K. Lacerte, “The Evolution of Land and Labor in the Haitian Revolution, 1791-1820,” *The Americas*, 34, 4 (1978): 449-459.

¹⁶ For example see: David Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002); Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus, editors, *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004); Jacques de Cauna, *Haïti, l'éternelle révolution: Histoire d'une décolonisation: 1789-1804* (Monein: PRNG, 2009); Vertus Saint-Louis, *Aux Origines du Drame d'Haïti: Droit et Commerce Maritime, 1794-1806* (Port-au-Prince: Bibliothèque Nationale d'Haïti, 2006); John Garrigus, *Before Haiti*; Mats Lundahl, “Toussaint L’ouverture and the War Economy of Saint-Domingue, 1796-1802,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 6, 2 (1985): 122-138; Gérard Barthélémy, *Créoles, Bossales: Conflict en Haïti* (Petit-Bourg, Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge, 2000); Beaubrun Ardouin, *Etudes sur l'Histoire d'Haïti Suivies de la Vie du Général J.-M. Borgella* (Port-au-Prince: F. Dalencour, 1958); Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haïti* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de J. Courtois, 1847-1848); Claude B. Auguste and Marcel B. Auguste, *L'Expédition Leclerc 1801-1803* (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1985); Auguste Nemours, *Histoire Militaire de la Guerre d'Indépendance de Saint-Domingue*, 2 vols. (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1925-1928); Gérard Mentor Laurent, *Le Commissaire Sonthonax à Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince: La Phalange, 1965-74); For a recent account of the historiography see: Philippe Girard, “The Haitian Revolution, History’s New Frontier: State of the Scholarship and Archival Sources,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 34, 3 (2012): 485-507.

historians like Thomas Madiou or Beaubrun Ardouin, or the records kept by hostile foreign consulates and the (often racist) publications of European visitors.”¹⁷ Indeed, all studies on the Haitian Revolution and the early independence period use the valuable 19th-century histories produced by Madiou and Ardouin. These early Haitian historians relied on archival documents—and often reproduced the full documents in their histories—as well as oral histories of veterans of the Revolution. They therefore remain, as David Geggus argues, “indispensable sources today.”¹⁸ As scholarly resources, however, they are not without their complications. Madiou and Ardouin both had political, national, and social agendas when they produced their histories. While “both were determined to produce serious works of history that would meet the standards of the leading European scholars of the time,” scholars have criticized their bias in favor of the *mulâtre* class in their efforts to counterbalance negative portrayals of Haiti and Haitian history.¹⁹ Furthermore, while they should not be dismissed, their sources should be questioned and, when possible, supported with complementary sources.

Over the course of the past decade, the scholars responsible for the boom in research on the Haitian Revolution have revealed the possibilities for new archival discoveries in the field and the importance of connecting Haitian history to new methodological and theoretical developments more generally. “Notwithstanding the revolution’s extensive historiography,” Geggus argued in 2002, “much of these sources remains little or entirely unexploited by historians. Moreover, as material continues to pass from private hands into the public domain and finding aids multiply in number, opportunities for research continue to increase.”²⁰ Since then, as can be seen in this volume, scholars have begun to study these unexploited sources and

¹⁷ Mimi Sheller, “Sword-Bearing Citizens: Militarism and Manhood in Nineteenth-Century Haiti,” in Alyssa Goldstein-Sepinwall, ed., *Haitian History: New Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 161.

¹⁸ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, p. 31.

¹⁹ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p. 165.

²⁰ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, p. 32.

the field has benefitted immensely from this creative and collaborative undertaking. Newly discovered archival collections in Haiti and throughout the Atlantic world, careful readings of historical secondary sources, and the use of oral histories and contemporary Vodou songs have allowed scholars to gain new insights into a variety of topics related to the Haitian Revolution and the early independence period.

The amount of attention that scholars are devoting to the Haitian Revolution and the developments in archival research is also the result of a historiographical shift in Atlantic World history that highlights the multidirectional flows of people, information, goods, ideas, political philosophies, cultural practices, and every other imaginable mode of social, economic, and political interactions. The colonies are no longer thought of as being at the margins of empire or as the passive receivers of metropolitan power structures. Instead, colonial peoples (both subjects and the disenfranchised) are increasingly being understood as active participants in the creation of empires. The Haitian Revolution, therefore, cannot be seen simply as an offshoot of the French Revolution; rather it was an intertwined movement with sometimes independent and sometimes convergent events, goals, and outcomes.²¹ This interconnectedness, too long underemphasized in popular understandings of Haiti's history as well as in the historiography, has resulted in an emphasis on Haitian exceptionalism in the Americas. This fact is most evident in contemporary descriptions of Haiti in the months after the devastating 2010 earthquake and in the years since then. Most journalists and foreign observers sought to explain how the country came to be nicknamed "the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere"—a phrase repeated in the media so frequently after the earthquake that it began to sound like a single run-on word.

This expression set Haiti apart and marked the country as exceptional rather than as part of the

²¹ Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); David A. Bell, "Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies*, 37, 1 (Winter 2014): 1-24.

Americas and the history that the different countries share. The expression also seems to assign ownership of their current troubles to Haiti and Haitians; poverty and distress become their identity and not a historical process.

While much more attention is being paid to the Haitian Revolution in the historiography, this focus has yet to spill over into the independence period. Scholars still tend to study the Revolutionary period, the American Occupation, and the Duvalier dictatorships.²² There are, of course, important exceptions that focus on the 19th century and the years between the American Occupation and the Duvalier era.²³ The overall result, however, is that the traditional image of independent Haiti is oversimplified, often in an attempt to explain “what went wrong.” The narrative tends to emphasize isolation, stigmatization, and internal instability and suggests, sometimes explicitly, that Haiti was doomed from day one. The reality of the early independence period was much more complicated. The entirety of Haiti’s history cannot simply be seen as a linear path from celebrated revolution to third world devastation.

The valuing of the revolution over the independence period is perhaps because the first decades after January 1, 1804 do not match our idealized version of the Haitian Revolution as a moment when the disenfranchised won, when equality triumphed, and when racial barriers were broken. The independence period makes clear that many of the colonial hierarchies remained—sometimes in a reimagined way—after the end of the Revolution. There are some aspects of the independence period that we cannot study in the same celebratory way as the revolution. The massacres initiated by Dessalines, the revised labor regime that too much resembled slavery, the

²² Melanie Newton, “‘We Are All Haitians Now’? The Caribbean, Transnational Histories, and Empire,” presented at the American Historical Association, New Orleans, January 4, 2013.

²³ For example see: Matthew J. Smith, *Red and Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict, and Political Change, 1934-1957* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Chantalle Francesca Verna, “Haiti’s ‘Second Independence’ and the Promise of Pan-American cooperation, 1934-1956” (PhD Thesis, Michigan State University, 2005); Thorald Burnham, “Immigration and Marriage in the Making of Post-Independence Haiti” (PhD Thesis, York University, 2006); Julia Gaffield “‘So Many Schemes in Agitation’: The Haitian State and the Atlantic World” (PhD Thesis, Duke University, 2012); Jean-François Brière, *Haïti et la France, 1804-1848: Le Rêve Brisé* (Paris: Karthala, 2008).

militarization of society, the overthrow of one dictator after another—we cannot champion these as the roots of the enlightened modern world as we do the rest of the ideals laid out in the Haitian Revolution. To sharpen our sense of these anomalies and paradoxes arising from the Haitian Revolution, this volume concentrates on a single pivotal document, the text generally known as the Haitian Declaration of Independence.

* * *

“Vow before me to live free and independent,” Jean-Jacques Dessalines announced to a crowd gathered in the city of Gonaïves on January 1, 1804, “and to prefer death to anything that will try to place you back in chains. Swear, finally, to pursue forever the traitors and enemies of your independence.” Dessalines, the leader of the victorious *Armée Indigène* in Saint-Domingue, proclaimed what was in effect, if not in name, one of the world’s earliest declarations of independence. Before July 1776, no people or nation, country or state, had formally declared its “independence” to the world; adoption of the model for declaring independence created by the representatives of the United States was piecemeal and slow. In the years between American and Haitian independence, there had been only two similar announcements, both patterned after the American template: Vermont’s declaration of independence from the new United States (1777) and the manifesto issued by the Flemish estates when they seceded briefly from the Austrian empire in 1790.

The Haitian “Declaration” was therefore not the first or even the second such pronouncement, in the Americas or in the Atlantic world more broadly defined; it was not even the first announcement of the independence of Saint-Domingue. However, it was novel in ways

that pointed to the future rather than to the past. And it helped to initiate the feverish “contagion of sovereignty” that swept the world, from Latin America to South Asia, in the first half of the 19th century.²⁴ While the Haitian Declaration did not follow the same style or format as the American Declaration of Independence just under three decades earlier, it helped to solidify the development of a new genre of political writing. The content and tone were quite different, but the goal was the same: to announce the independence and sovereignty of a territory and its people. Since 1776, more than one hundred similar documents have been issued and the number continues to grow across the world, from Kosovo to South Sudan.²⁵

Thanks to the work of the scholars assembled in this volume, we now know more about the 1804 Haitian Declaration than we do about any other similar document, with the exception of the US Declaration of Independence.²⁶ This fact is all the more striking because the physical document of the Haitian Declaration has never been prominent in Haitian history or memory. There is no national shrine to it, as there is to the US Declaration in the National Archives in Washington, DC, or at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. It was not the subject of popular reproductions or general reverence during the 19th or 20th centuries. Attempts to find original copies of it ahead of the hundredth and hundred-and-fiftieth anniversaries of Haitian independence all drew a blank.²⁷ Meanwhile, scholarship on the Declaration, and the similar document from November 1803, appeared only in fits and starts, initially folded into early histories of Haiti by Ardouin and Madiou in the mid-19th century, but only recently broken out

²⁴ David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 115.

²⁵ Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence*, p. 104; Armitage, “Declarations of Independence, 1776-2012,” in Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 215-32.

²⁶ For important comparative studies of declarations of independence, see Alfredo Ávila, Jordana Dym, and Erika Pani, eds., *Las Declaraciones de Independencia. Los textos fundamentales de las independencias americanas* (México, D.F.: El Colegio de México/Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2013).

²⁷ Julia Gaffield, “Haiti’s Declaration of Independence: Digging for Lost Documents in the Archives of the Atlantic World,” *The Appendix*, (2014) 2(1).

into a handful of separate studies.²⁸ Since the two-hundredth anniversary of independence in 2004—but especially after the Haitian earthquake in 2010 and the discovery of the earliest printings of the Declaration in The National Archives of the United Kingdom—study of the Haitian Declaration has greatly accelerated. We may not know everything we would like about its composition or its circulation, but its meanings and significance are now better understood than at any time since 1804.

This volume's three sections shed light, respectively, on the creation and dissemination of the Declaration, on its content and reception, and on its afterlives in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. The first part, "Writing the Declaration," investigates the motivations behind the Declaration; the social background of its most likely writer, Louis Félix Boisrond-Tonnerre; the initial printing and circulation of the document; and the psychological implications of its uniquely violent imagery. The second part, "Haitian Independence and the Atlantic," broadens the frame geographically to illuminate the Declaration's role in the creation of a new state and in the elaboration of a new conception of the Haitian people as sovereign; its implications for neighboring islands and for the international impact of the Haitian Revolution; the meanings of the violence that unfolded after 1804; and the connections between violence and independence in Haitian history more generally. Finally, the third part, "The Legacy of Haitian Declaration of Independence," traces the enduring impact of the Declaration across Haitian history and its relationship with the outside world: specifically, its role in the recognition of Haiti, its place in the annual celebrations of independence since 1804 and its remembrance and celebration in Haitian Vodou song and ceremony. Taken together, the book's chapters use innovative research

²⁸ Most notably, Manigat, "Une brève analyse-commentaire critique d'un document historique"; Jean François, "Habiter la terre: une lecture de l'Acte d'indépendance d'Haïti," *Ethnologies*, 28, 1 (2006): 119-132; Jenson, "Dessalines's American Proclamations of the Haitian Independence"; David Geggus, "La declaración de independencia de Haïti," in Ávila, Dym, and Pani, eds., *Las Declaraciones de Independencia*, pp. 121-131.

and novel methods to uncover the intricacies of a document whose importance grows with every new perspective on its complex history.

The Haitian Declaration itself had three parts—at least, in the versions that have become canonical since 1804, printed as an eight-page pamphlet (see Appendix) and as a single-sheet broadside.²⁹ The first, headed “Armée Indigène,” recorded the oath sworn and then signed by Dessalines’s generals to renounce France forever and to die rather than live under its dominion. The second, the longest and most often reproduced section, comprises the proclamation signed by Dessalines and addressed to the people of “Hayti.” It explains why they should definitively cast off their links with France and concludes with an oath “to live free and independent”; this section is the one closest in substance (if not in form) to other declarations of independence before and after 1804. The third section records another oath by which the generals of the Haitian army affirmed Dessalines as governor general for life, with sovereign powers to make peace, war, and name his successor. The words “indépendance” and “indépendant” appear eleven times in the document—the three of them dating January 1 as the first day of Haitian independence (*l’indépendance d’Hayti*), a new year’s day and a traditional holiday on slave plantations—but nowhere does the term “declaration” or its synonyms appear.

The designation of the document as a “declaration” first came from the English-speaking world. This should not be surprising because it was there that the American Declaration was already familiar: thus, when Edward Corbet, the British agent sent to Haiti in early 1804, sent the first copy of the document to George Nugent, lieutenant-governor of Jamaica, in January 1804, he called it “their declaration of Independence.”³⁰ In French documents, it was more often termed a “proclamation” or “acte” of independence rather than a declaration, indicating the

²⁹ The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), CO 137/111, fols. 113–117; For the broadside version see TNA, MFQ 1/184 (removed from the Admiralty records ADM 1/254).

³⁰ Edward Corbet to George Nugent, January 25, 1804, TNA, CO 137/111.

distinct genres available within Anglophone and Francophone legal and political culture. As Patrick Tardieu shows in his chapter, when Jean-Baptiste Symphore Lissant de Pradine collected Haiti's laws in 1851, he began with the "Acte de L'Indépendance" of 1804—the year zero of Haiti's independent, post-revolutionary, history.³¹

As a historical record of the proceedings at Gonaïves on the first day of independence, 1804, the Declaration was both incomplete and confused. According to Thomas Madiou, that day began with the speech Dessalines delivered in *Kreyòl* recalling the brutalities of the French and urging his generals to join in defense of the independence of the island territory now called by the indigenous name of "Hayti."³² The Declaration was incomplete because it contained no text of that speech, for which we have no other testimony. The Declaration was also confused because events must have unfolded somewhat differently from the sequence implied by the 1804 printing. In that version, two separate oaths book-ended Dessalines's proclamation, but on the day itself the first oath defending Haiti's independence must have followed Dessalines's *Kreyòl* oration. Then, switching to French—a language Dessalines probably knew poorly and certainly could not write—one of his secretaries, Louis Félix Boisrond-Tonnerre, read the proclamation in the name and voice of Dessalines, explaining the reasons for renouncing France and for protecting Haiti even unto death: "Let us vow to ourselves, to posterity, to the entire universe, to forever renounce France, and to die rather than live under its domination; to fight until our last breath for the independence of our country." Later the same day, the military generals of the *Armée Indigène* swore the second oath naming Dessalines head of state. There is no evidence that the proclamation was ever issued in *Kreyòl*: indeed, its first published translation into that

³¹ Jean-Baptiste Symphore Lissant de Pradine, *Recueil général des lois et actes du Gouvernement d'Haiti depuis la proclamation de son Indépendance jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: A. Durand, 1851); Tardieu, "The Debate Surrounding the Printing of the Haitian Declaration of Independence," p. 000 below.

³² For more on the renaming of the territory, see David Patrick Geggus, "The Naming of Haiti," in Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 207-220.

language was not until 2011.³³ By then, it had long since taken on a life of its own, separate from the other documents that accompanied its initial dissemination in the Atlantic World.

The Declaration rested on multiple authorities. The first was the authority of Dessalines himself, as “Général en Chef” at the head of his army. The second, derived from the first, was Dessalines’s voice speaking to his people and in their name. In similar contexts—most notably, again, the infant United States in the summer of 1776—the next layer of authority would have been that of manuscript publication, often with affirmatory signatures attached. Although we can infer the existence of such a stage of authority, and authorization, the textual trace of it no longer exists. Finally, the last, but most immediately material and most enduring, was the authority of print which publicly settled and circulated the form and content of otherwise dynamic and shifting texts. There seems to have been no printing press in Gonaïves, and the pamphlet version of the Declaration appeared from the “Imprimerie du Gouvernement” at Port-au-Prince, where it became one of a sequence of public utterances issued in late 1803 and early 1804. Enlightenment ideals of publicity demanded that such statements be made not just before witnesses but addressed to the wider world of international opinion. It is therefore not at all ironic that the only two known copies of the 1804 printings of the Declaration were preserved among the papers of a British governor of Jamaica and the British Admiralty and that they can be found at The National Archives of the United Kingdom and not in Haiti. Nor is it surprising to learn that the text of the Declaration had reached Venezuela by April 1804 and Bombay by January 1805.³⁴ The text—or portions of the text—also circulated throughout the world with the production of handwritten transcriptions and translations of the document as well as its publication in newspapers. To date,

³³ Jacques Pierre, “L’Acte de l’Indépendance d’Haïti en créole Haïtien,” *The Journal of Haitian Studies* 17, 2 (Fall 2011), 168-180.

³⁴ Alejandro E. Gómez, *Le Spectre de la Révolution noire. L’Impact de la révolution haïtienne dans le monde atlantique: 1790-1886* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013), 41 (Venezuela); *The Bombay Courier*, XIV, 644 (January 19, 1805): [3-4] (our thanks to Mitch Fraas for this reference).

only about half a dozen of these handwritten transcriptions are known to exist but the newspaper records reveal the document's widespread distribution beyond the printed and manuscript transcriptions that remain.³⁵

Beneath the authority of print was the authorization for a new distribution of power sanctioned by Dessalines's generals. Like the US Declaration of Independence, the Haitian Declaration derived its force from representation not direct, plebiscitary authority. When it spoke in the "name of the people" (*Au nom du peuple d'Hayti*) it did so in the same way it spoke in the "name of liberty, [and] in the name of independence": abstractly but not directly, on the people's behalf but not in their voice.

The bulk of the Declaration spoke in the voice of Dessalines but this masked a more artful feat of ventriloquism. The proclamation begins with a title, which might also stand as a stage-direction—"Le Général en Chef, au Peuple d'Hayti". It ends consistently with the endorsement, "Signé, J. J. DESSALINES," even though it was otherwise anomalous for the presumed transcript of a speech to carry any affirmatory signature, as if signaling the hybrid nature of the document as spoken and printed, spontaneous and fixed. But the signature was a mark of authorization not of authorship—an anachronistic role in this period and certainly in this place, far from the determinants of copyright law, Romantic subjectivity, and the constraining operations of the "author-function."³⁶ The consensus among scholars is that the proclamation distributed over Dessalines's name was scripted by Boisrond-Tonnerre, a metropolitan-educated free man of mixed racial ancestry in Saint-Domingue. Behind the fixed text we read today surely

³⁵ For manuscript transcriptions see: The National Library of Jamaica, MS 72; *Archives Nationales*, AB-XIX-3302-15; Duke University Rubenstein Library, RLT Vault 320A items 1-2; *Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer*, CC9a; for more on the document's circulation in newspaper see: Deborah Jenson, "Dessalines's American Proclamations of the Haitian Independence," *Journal of Haitian Studies*, (2010) 15(1&2): 72-102; on newspapers during the Age of Revolution see: William Slaughter, "The Paragraph as Information Technology: How News Traveled in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, (2012) 2: 253-278.

³⁶ Roger Chartier, *The Author's Hand and the Printer's Mind*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), 12-14, 83-86.

lay multiple discussions among Haiti's leaders as well as many lost drafts and revisions. We should therefore think of it as a collective production, even though it was issued over the name of Dessalines and under the shaping hand of Boisrond-Tonnerre.³⁷

Boisrond-Tonnerre's family background showed what John Garrigus calls "a successful economic conservatism with a striking degree of political confidence vis-à-vis white society." The violence of the war of independence determined his allegiances and, as Garrigus argues, may have inflected the notorious violence of the proclamation's language. Deborah Jenson had earlier made a powerful circumstantial argument, which she reaffirms in this volume, that we should think of Dessalines himself as the "author" of the proclamation, and that the document's imagery provides an index of his "unschooled" poetics and the cognitive style of an unlettered, but not therefore conventionally illiterate, rhetorician.³⁸ Although other chapters (notably those by Geggus and Garrigus) analyze the Declaration primarily as Boisrond-Tonnerre's text, Jenson's neurological analysis reminds us that the document was the work of many hands, with Boisrond-Tonnerre as its literal scribe imaging Dessalines speaking in French and in tune with the passions of his mixed-race audience.³⁹

The many voices of the Declaration spoke in as many languages. The most obvious is its metaphorical freight of violence. The most frequently noted image, analyzed at length here by Jenson, is its figuration of the French as "tigers still covered with [the] blood" of the Haitian people and their families. Tigers are not only carnivorous, threatening, and implacably menacing to weakened human beings: they are also not native to Haiti. Their prominence in Dessalines's

³⁷ Compare the account of the collective and collaborative production of the US Declaration of Independence in Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 97-153.

³⁸ Deborah Jenson, "Neuroscience and the Poetics of the Haitian Declaration of Independence," pp. 000-00 below; compare Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative*; and Jenson, "Dessalines's American Proclamations of the Haitian Independence."

³⁹ John Garrigus, "'Victims of Our Own Credulity and Indulgence': The Life of Louis Félix Boisrond-Tonnerre (1776-1806)," pp. 000, 000, below. For more on Boisrond-Tonnerre's life, see the recently discovered, and digitized, copy of the first edition of his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire d'Hayti* (À Dessalines: De l'imprimerie centrale du gouvernement, 1804): <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/mobile/index.html?id=45983757&n=1>

proclamation suggests at once that Boisrond-Tonnerre was putting a foreign language into Dessalines's mouth and, more pointedly, that the French were alien creatures from distant climes. This underlined the proclamation's central claim that the inhabitants of Haiti and the French were now wholly distinct peoples. Unlike the US Declaration of Independence, which still spoke of the former colonists' "British brethren" even at the moment of separation, the Haitian Declaration definitively asserted that French "are not our brethren." There could be no kinship with such a savage people if the newly liberated Haitians were to live free and independent.

The language of freedom and independence derived from widely circulated texts of 18th-century natural law, most notably the Swiss jurist Emmerich de Vattel's hugely popular compendium, *Le Droit des gens* (1758). In that work, Vattel wrote repeatedly of the natural condition of humans in the state of nature as "free and independent" (*libre et indépendant*), words that rapidly became terms of legal and diplomatic art to describe peoples and states in the international state of nature.⁴⁰ Vattel's work may have been in the hands of Dessalines's secretaries—Jeremy Popkin here notes a possible echo of it in Dessalines's April 28, 1804, proclamation on the massacres of whites—but his language had long since broken away from its immediate source, as in the refrain of the "Hymne Haytiène" (1803): "Vivons, mourons, ses vrais Enfants,/ Libres, indépendans."⁴¹ In natural jurisprudence, the connection between individual freedom and collective independence was metaphorical: humans and states were both persons, sharing similar characteristics of autonomy and vulnerability to extinction or unfreedom. In the rhetoric of the Haitian Revolution, the analogy was far more than metaphorical. For the people of Haiti to lose their independence would be more than a return to

⁴⁰ Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought*, 223-225.

⁴¹ Jeremy Popkin, "Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Norbert Thoret, and the Violent Aftermath of the Haitian Declaration of Independence," p. 000 below; "Hymne Haytiène" (1803), TNA, CO 137/111.

collective subordination within an empire: it could mean their actual re-enslavement. “Swear then to live free and independent” (*vivre libre et indépendant*), “and to prefer death to every thing that would lead to replace you under the yoke,” urged Dessalines.

This double-edged language of freedom and independence suited the multiple purposes of Dessalines’s proclamation. The primary motive at Gonaïves was to forge a sovereign Haitian people. Haiti was not created by Haitians: the Declaration of Independence began the process of making them into Haitians. As Jean Casimir notes, “the wars of Haitian independence were not the exploit of a pre-existing people, but rather the invention of this people as an expression of its sovereignty. Its existence and its sovereignty generated each other reciprocally.”⁴² If that was the domestic aim of the Declaration, its outward-facing task was to announce to the existing powers of the earth that a new “free and independent” state had emerged to join them and sought their recognition.⁴³ As Philippe Girard argues in his essay, “the Declaration was an act of political theater performed on a world stage,” in the full knowledge that the idea of an independent black country led by emancipated slaves and free blacks was deeply threatening to other slave societies in the circum-Caribbean and the Americas. Dessalines may not have intended to export his revolution, but the example of its success resonated long after Dessalines’s death in 1806, even if the Declaration itself did not.⁴⁴

The sequence of events in the Declaration—from the oath of the generals, via Dessalines’s proclamation, to the appointment of Dessalines as arbiter of the two major prerogatives of international sovereignty, the rights of war and peace (*le droit de faire la paix, la guerre*)—effectively communicated that to an international readership. However, as would often

⁴² Jean Casimir, “The Sovereign People of Haiti during the 18th and 19th Centuries,” p. 000 below.

⁴³ Eliga Gould’s recent study on the aftermath of the US Declaration of Independence highlights the importance of the foreign audience and foreign recognition in the publication and dissemination of the document: Eliga Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁴⁴ Girard, “Did Dessalines Plan to Export the Haitian Revolution?,” p. 000 below.

be the case with unilateral declarations of independence, securing recognition for the claim of independence was much harder than asserting the claim itself. Dessalines's proclamation was mostly not cast in the prevailing language of the law of nations nor was it submitted to the wider world in one of the recognized genres of international discourse, as an "act," "declaration," or "manifesto," for example. *De facto* independence could not lead to independence *de jure* without foreign recognition. "The *Acte*" therefore, "has to negotiate the entry of Haitians to the world in the manner of a founding ritual."⁴⁵ As Julia Gaffield shows in her chapter, that ambiguity bedeviled Haiti's status well into the 19th century, Haiti "being neither independent nor part of the mother country," as the Swiss-American politician and diplomat Albert Gallatin put it in 1815.⁴⁶

The rules for declaring independence were still very much in flux in 1804. If the US Declaration stands as the model, then the Haitian Declaration deviated from it in almost every respect. In this regard, David Geggus notes that the Haitian Declaration signaled the end of the fifteen-year process we know as the Haitian Revolution.⁴⁷ In setting the seal on a series of events, rather than being the trigger for them or an accelerant for their progress, as most later declarations of independence were, the Haitian Declaration was anomalous in its own time and also among most later similar declarations, which often ignited such upheavals. It was also unusual up to that point in being proclaimed orally in the first instance. The American Declaration had been written for oral delivery but its initial form was in print, not speech.⁴⁸ The Haitian Declaration foreshadowed later spoken or shouted declarations in Iberian America, such

⁴⁵ François, "Habiter la terre," 125.

⁴⁶ Albert Gallatin (1815), quoted in Julia Gaffield, "'Outrages Against the Law of Nations': American Diplomacy after the Haitian Declaration of Independence," p. 000 below.

⁴⁷ Geggus, "Haiti's Declaration of Independence," p. 00 below.

⁴⁸ Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

as the Mexican *Grito de Dolores* in 1810 or Dom Pedro's declaration of Brazilian independence, the *Grito de Iparanga* of September 1822.⁴⁹

The precedents for Haitian independence before 1804 were hardly encouraging. Of the three previous declarations, only one—the US Declaration of Independence—had led to lasting stability and formal recognition of independence from the powers of the earth, but it did not guarantee sympathy or recognition for other claims to independent statehood. The reception history of the American Declaration also showed how rapidly even a successful declaration could be forgotten: after Great Britain had formally acknowledged American independence in 1783, the document itself fell into oblivion—little remembered, uncontested, and certainly not mythologized as its formal work had been done and its intentions achieved. The struggle to affirm Haitian independence and to achieve external recognition would be more drawn out than it had been for the United States: French recognition came in 1825 after the payment of hefty reparations, but the United States waited almost forty years longer, until Abraham Lincoln's administration confirmed it—along with the independence of that other black republic, Liberia—in 1862.⁵⁰ The transformation of the act of independence into the fact of independence would always be fraught.

The part played by the Declaration in that process was hardly minimal after its initial circulation around the Atlantic world in 1804 but it joined a repertoire of other symbols and customs that were replayed with variations across two centuries. As Laurent Dubois and Erin Zavitz show in their chapters, the afterlives of the Declaration, and of the independence celebrations from which it sprang, were deep and continuous across the centuries after 1804. The

⁴⁹ Carlos Herrejón Peredo, "Versiones del grito de dolores y algo más," *20/10. Memoria de las revoluciones de México*, 5 (2009), 39-53; Alfredo Ávila and Erika Pani, "De la representación al grito, del grito al acta. Nueva España, 1808-1821," and Isabel Lustosa, "Cambio y continuidad: monarquía constitucional y república en el proceso de independencia de Brasil," in Ávila, Dym and Pani, eds., *Las Declaraciones de Independencia*, 275-295, 383-407.

⁵⁰ Jean-François Brière, "La France et la Reconnaissance de l'indépendance Haïtienne: Le débat sur l'ordonnance de 1825," *French Colonial History*, 5 (2004), 125-138; Gaffield, "'Outrages Against the Law of Nations,'" p. 000 below.

kinds of legal and political heritages familiar from the United States, for instance, did not project the Haitian Declaration into the future. By contrast, commemorative ceremonies on the anniversary of independence and the memories of the war transmitted through traditions of popular song and Vodou ritual were the main vectors of historical memory. The Declaration was read annually on January 1 until French recognition in 1825 rendered its reiteration of bloodthirsty imprecations against France impolitic; also, as Zavitz shows, the memory of Dessalines blossomed after a period of oblivion following his murder in 1806. He finally emerged as “the only revolutionary hero to become an *lwa* or deity” in the Vodou pantheon and a central figure on Vodou songs recounting the oral history of violence and loss, trauma, and victory, in the Haitian struggle for independence.⁵¹

The Haitian Declaration, no less than the Revolution from which it arose, was an event within multiple histories—Haitian, Caribbean, hemispheric, Atlantic, and global. The chapters collected in this volume allow us to see why it so immediately shaped national memory, beginning in 1804, and why it should still be commemorated and studied over two hundred years later. It has taken much of those two centuries to have the Haitian Revolution accepted into the standard narratives of Atlantic revolution structured around the American and French Revolutions. Yet if we take the Haitian Declaration as a synecdoche for the Revolution itself, it becomes increasingly evident how anomalous it was even in the course of early 19th-century Atlantic history. Malick Ghachem argues here that “1804 marked the end of the era of the Atlantic Revolutions,” because it shared neither the methods nor the aims of the American and French Revolutions.⁵² It might therefore be more productive to see the Haitian Revolution as the

⁵¹ Laurent Dubois, “Haitian Independence in Haitian Vodou,” pp. 000-00 below; Erin Zavitz, “Performing Revolution: Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Haitian Independence Day, 1804-1904,” p. 000 below.

⁵² Malick Ghachem, “The End of the ‘Age of Revolution’: Law, Exceptionalism, and the Haitian Declaration of Independence,” p. 000 below.

first of the Latin American Revolutions—American in its origins from a mixed-race plantation society nurtured as a limb of European overseas empire, its turbulent grapplings with new forms of sovereignty and authority, and even its passage to military rule, internal conflict, and persistent underdevelopment. The Haitian Declaration and the Haitian Revolution cannot be used to support progressivist narratives of unfolding democracy, republicanism, or economic growth. Instead, they challenge historians to rewrite those narratives in order “to find the roots of contemporary forms of inequality, domination, and terror, rather than the origins of freedom, rights, and universal prosperity.”⁵³ The essays collected in this volume render that task more urgent. In their richness and complexity, they do not make it any easier or more reassuring.

⁵³ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 259; see also Brown, “A Vapor of Dread: Observations on Racial Terror and Vengeance in the Age of Revolution,” in Bender, Dubois, and Rabinowitz, eds., *Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn*, 177-198.