

## [All Together Now: Haitian Studies at the 2019 AHA and MLA Annual Conventions](#)

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### **All Together Now: Haitian Studies at the 2019 AHA and MLA Annual Conventions**

*Claire Antone Payton, University of Virginia*  
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The annual conventions of the American Historical Association and the Modern Languages Association were both held in Chicago, IL on January 3-6, 2019. This fortuitous coincidence provided the occasion for interdisciplinary collaboration between members of the two scholarly organizations. The result was a unique series of joint AHA/MLA panels on colonial Saint-Domingue and Haiti, topics of scholarly inquiry that thrive on interdisciplinary conversations and collaborations.

At the end of the first of four panels on colonial, revolutionary, and independent Haiti at the AHA and MLA, commentator Marlene Daut (UVA) observed three major recent developments in the field of US Haitian Studies that affect how we present our work at conferences: first, there is less need to justify the validity of focusing on Haiti; second, we can now assume the audience comes to the conversation familiar with the contours of Haitian history; and third, as scholars, we have started to nuance--if not entirely disrupt--stock narratives of the Haitian Revolution, Haitian independence, and nineteenth-century Haiti. Taken together, the four panels raised important questions about the interdisciplinarity and accessibility of Haitian Studies. As Chelsea Stieber (Catholic University of America) pointed out in her comments to the final panel, the assemblage of scholarship offered over the day caused us all to reflect on how we approach, theorize, and periodize Haitian historical and literary study. Where do we locate the struggles over freedom, sovereignty, and autonomy associated with the Haitian Revolution in broader world history, for example? In what ways does (or should) the Haitian Revolution remain the intellectual nexus of Caribbean historical and literary studies?

Friday, January 4th (or "Haiti day at the AHA/MLA") began with an exploration of different approaches to the [Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804](#). Robert Taber (Fayetteville State University) used the *mouchoirs* (madras cloths) as a point of departure to examine networks among women of color in late colonial Haiti, including "durable patterns of inheritance" and the everyday politics of clothing, adding to the gender analysis of Saint-Domingue and the Revolution. Erica Johnson (Francis Marion University) then used the role of Catholic priests as intermediaries between the Haitian revolutionaries and the French state. Attending to concepts of religious duty, she argued, highlights the ways Catholics in the revolution, both

white and Black, thought about rebellion and emancipation, thus, nuancing the conflation of race and revolutionary politics. Finally, Jesús Ruiz's (Tulane University) work in the Spanish archives built on existing studies by Graham Nessler and Charlton Yingling, illuminating the actions of French counter-revolutionaries and the ways insurgents could--and did--exploit divisions among the French.

The next panel highlighted new research on [Haitian politics in the 19th century](#). Nathalie Frédéric Pierre (The Spence School) analyzed the origins and meanings of the family names of members of Haiti's first government under Jean-Jacques Dessalines. In so doing she provided insight into the international composition of Haiti's early leadership. Using sociolinguistics, Pierre argued that Haiti's was the most ethnically diverse government in the Atlantic World, made up of Africans, Creoles, and Europeans. Julia Gaffield (Georgia State University), for her part, continued to nuance the idea of an "isolated" Haiti by exploring the religious dimensions of the Haitian state's pursuit of recognition into the middle of the nineteenth century. This effort included long-standing negotiations with the Vatican, whose institutional connections to the Haitian state occurred after the north Atlantic powers redefined "the family of nations" as race-based rather than primarily Christian-based. Brandon Byrd (Vanderbilt University) offered a late-19th-century microhistory in which a US-born father living in Haiti objected to the state's military conscription of his two sons by claiming US citizenship, adding to the rich and dynamic history of 19th-century African-American migration to Haiti. Indeed, Byrd's work highlights the significance of immigration law and border controls for the articulation and practice of sovereignty.

During the first afternoon panel, literary and historical scholars convened for a [roundtable](#) on interdisciplinary approaches to studying Saint-Domingue. This was an AHA gathering that, as John Garrigus (University of Texas, Arlington) remarked, would have been unimaginable in the 1980s. Roundtable participants included Logan Connors (University of Miami), Laurent Dubois (Duke University), Yvonne Fabella (University of Pennsylvania), Garrigus, and Julia Prest (University of St. Andrews). These scholars argued that the theater provides an illuminating space for exploring colonial culture and creolization. In a striking nod to the ways the Haitian school of the 1950s is resurging in the historiography of Saint-Domingue, Jean Fouchard's work on theater and marronage/resistance was by far the most cited by the panelists. Fabella made an important point, however, for scholars of Saint-Domingue to keep in mind that texts and authors have their own histories and that the perspective and arguments of Moreau de Saint-Méry, for example, shifted over his life. Finally, the panelists pointed to the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in the many remarkable digital humanities projects related to Saint-Domingue, including the [marronage database](#) and [Prest's new site on colonial theater](#).

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MLA Panel, Friday, January 4, 2019 (Photo credit: Marlene L. Daut)  
From left to right, Chelsea Stieber, Grégory Pierrot, Michael Reyes, Shanna Jean-Baptiste

The importance of narrative in Haitian literary and historical study dominated [Friday afternoon's MLA panel](#). Grégory Pierrot (University of Connecticut, Stamford) traced the trope of Toussaint Louverture as “Black Spartacus” beyond the writings of Abbé Raynal to French newspapers and archives of the eighteenth century. In offering this new information, he showed how French officials, after realizing their lack of control over developments in Saint-Domingue, referenced the Enlightenment to make claims to cultural authority. They also used such narratives to ostracize opponents of mixed racial background by portraying them as morally dubious. Michael Reyes (Queen's University) called for a rehabilitation of Haitian novelist Demesvar Delorme, arguing that his 1872 novel *Francesca, ou les jeux du sort*, which is about Italian-Ottoman conflict in medieval Europe, could be read as a critique of European modernity, modeling engagement with postcolonial conflicts more commonly associated with 20th-century literature. Reyes pointed out, nevertheless, that Delorme also advanced self-congratulatory accounts of European modernity that obfuscated the role of violence, racism, and prejudice. Finally, Shanna Jean-Baptiste (Yale University) used two works by a later Haitian author, Fernand Hibbert, to unpack Haitian frustration with foreign immigration to the country at the beginning of the 20th century. Baptiste referred to the historical genre of the family romance to point out how German immigrants were portrayed as toxic parasites that might drain Haitian society through predatory lending or intermarriage with Haitian women.

As these panels demonstrate, the ties between historians and literary scholars have shaped new directions of Haitian Studies in the United States. It is encouraging to see how the field of Haitian Studies in the US continues to expand its boundaries beyond the revolutionary period of 1791-1804, or the confines of the US Occupation (1915-1934), where Haiti often appears as merely ancillary to foreign events, interpretations, and theories. As Daut remarked in her comments to the first Haiti panel, even though Trinidadian author C.L.R. James's *The Black*

*Jacobins*, remains standard reading in revolutionary studies, few of the Haitian revolutionaries saw themselves as “Jacobins.”

While we have made many strides in US-Haitian Studies, questions remain about how we might better incorporate archaeology, ecology, and other non-social science, non-humanities fields. US historians and literary critics interested in Haiti’s past may also want to think about how they can better contribute to discussions about the country’s present and future, while also increasing collaboration with Haiti-based scholars, students, and readers. Haitian Studies in the US remains, as ever before, a work in progress.

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