

[Stieber on Gonzalez, 'Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti' and Jean Alix René, 'Haiti après l'esclavage: Formation de l'état et culture politique populaire \(1804-1846\)'](#)

Review published on Thursday, April 16, 2020

Johnhenry Gonzalez. *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti*. Yale Agrarian Studies Series. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. Illustrations. 320 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-23008-6. **Jean Alix René.** *Haiti après l'esclavage: Formation de l'état et culture politique populaire (1804-1846)*. Port-au-Prince: Editions Le Natal, 2019. 453 pp. n.p. (paper), ISBN 978-999706514-8.

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Commissioned by Grégory Pierrot (University of Connecticut at Stamford)



Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=54998>

One would be hard-pressed to dispute the world historical significance of the Haitian Revolution and its impact on the nineteenth-century imperial slaveholding Atlantic. But what happened *in Haiti* in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution? There has long existed a gap between the utopian scholarly and artistic narratives of the revolution that end in 1804 and the pragmatic, unromantic realities of state formation in the post-independence period. As Chris Bongie has argued, one of the reasons for the dearth of North Atlantic scholarship on Haiti's early nineteenth century is precisely because the early post-independence period offers only a "disappointing vista that fails to match the transformative expectations raised by 'the idea of 1804.'" [1] Recent scholarship has sought to address this gap, attending to questions of post-independence state formation and political life in early Haiti. [2] Yet despite this belated turn to Haiti's nineteenth century, there exists very little work on post-independence state formation from below: the role of popular politics and peasant agency in the formation of the Haitian state and society during the first decades of independence.

Two new books, Jean Alix René's *Haiti après l'esclavage: Formation de l'état et culture politique populaire (1804-1846)* and Johnhenry Gonzalez's *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti*, contribute much-needed archival documentation and reflection on the crucial question of Haiti's early post-independence history from below. Though they have a number of similarities, they reach conclusions that differ in important ways—most notably, in relation to the practice of marronage and its impact on post-independence Haitian society. Both were adapted from doctoral dissertations in history, Gonzalez's at the University of Chicago in 2012 and René's at Concordia University in 2014. [3] Each makes use of the same previously untapped archival sources on land reform, agricultural policy, and popular legal and extrajudicial challenges to the state in Haiti's early nineteenth century, including documents from the Archives Nationales d'Haiti as well as a cache of letters and government ledgers from the Edmond Mangonès collection at the University of Florida Libraries. [4] The books both challenge the myth of the utopian Haitian Revolution and the meaning of

Citation: H-Net Reviews. Stieber on Gonzalez, 'Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti' and Jean Alix René, 'Haiti après l'esclavage: Formation de l'état et culture politique populaire (1804-1846)'. H-Haiti. 04-16-2020.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/116721/reviews/6117029/stieber-gonzalez-maroon-nation-history-revolutionary-haiti-and-jean>

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liberté as defined from above by revealing how former slaves continuously fought for freedom and equality in the post-independence period. Lastly, both engage and revise Jean Casimir's foundational idea of the "counter-plantation system" (*The Caribbean: One and Divisible* [1992] and *La culture opprimée* [2001]) in order to articulate the meaning of liberty organized around land ownership and the dignity of work that former slaves actively cultivated in the post-independence period. In what follows, I will provide a brief overview and the strengths of each work, before drawing some broader conclusions about their contribution to the study of Haiti's nineteenth century.

René's *Haiti après l'esclavage* aims to reframe early nineteenth-century Haitian history from a popular, "subaltern" (his phrasing) perspective from below. He establishes a view of a post-independence state formed by the mutual push-pull of elite authorities and "subaltern" demands. Peasant resistance forced Haiti's early leaders to modify their plans for post-independence state formation based in large-scale plantation schemes. The book proceeds chronologically, from the start of slave uprisings in 1791 to the 1844 revolt among small landowners and farmers in Haiti's southern peninsula. Chapters 1 and 2 articulate the foundational tension of the post-independence state between "la liberté et la raison d'état" (between freedom and reason of state) (p. 94).[5] In its discourse of freedom, equality, and individual autonomy, the Haitian state hewed to the Enlightenment philosophy of rights; in its creation of the military authoritarian state, it revealed its preoccupation with maintaining effective independence by concentrating power in the head of state. René argues that this foundational tension led to the articulation of two conceptualizations of citizenship in the early post-independence period: participation, or the full exercise of civil and political rights reserved for civil and military elites; and protection, in which "subaltern" former slaves made demands of the state to protect them from reenslavement and colonial exploitation and protect their claims to dignity, honor, and respect. René presents the concept of citizenship-as-protection as unique to Haiti, based in part on the moral imperative to protect subordinates in the Kongo military tradition, and in response to the specific concerns for the survival of the anticolonial, antislavery state in the nineteenth-century imperial slaveholding Atlantic.

Chapter 3 analyzes Alexandre Pétion's post-1807 agrarian reform, a "projet de compromis social et politique" (a project of social and political compromise) that abandoned (most) plans for large-scale plantations in favor of land distribution (p. 153). Of particular interest is René's discussion of Pétion's brand of liberal republican compromise, which accorded unparalleled freedoms and citizenship to unpropertied former slaves but simultaneously embraced a Western hierarchy of "civilization" and "progress" that fixed "subalterns" at the bottom of a social and cultural hierarchy—in need of acculturation and civilizing in order to be integrated into the national politics. Chapter 4 explores Jean-Pierre Boyer's dramatic shift away from Pétion's liberal compromise through the imposition of strict laws and codes (including the infamous 1826 Code Rural) designed to reduce the civic rights of subalterns and codifying a two-tiered system of citizenship based in a rigid geography between rural inhabitants and city-dwellers.

If there is a villain in René's narrative of the early post-independent Haitian state, it is Boyer: he creates a repressive, illiberal regime under the guise of promoting republican rights, and, in signing the indemnity agreement with France, "se fit complice de l'élimination symbolique de tout ce qui avait été accompli de 1791 à 1804" (made himself an accomplice in the symbolic erasure of all that had been accomplished between 1791 and 1804) (p. 218). Chapter 5 traces the development of popular political practices over the course of the early post-independence period, which René locates

in work societies like the konbit; judicial and extrajudicial popular strategies to secure landownership; leisure structures; religious practices; secret societies; and finally (and most interestingly), a popular politics constructed around the defense of honor, respect, and dignity. René's definition of popular politics is noteworthy here, extending beyond resistance toward a more Caribbean notion of opacity and play: early popular politics is "une activité créatrice qui permettait au populaire de s'engager dans la production de nouvelles manières de remodelage des relations de pouvoir pour se garantir des droits et autres conquêtes à l'intérieur même des rapports de domination" (a creative activity that allowed the populace to engage in the production of new means of reshaping power relations in order to avail themselves of rights and other gains within these very patterns of dominance) (p. 271). Chapter 6 culminates with the 1844 popular uprising among small landowners and farmers in the South, which René argues must be considered as "une lutte pour le républicanisme populaire" (a struggle for popular republicanism) (p. 371). He ends with a stark account of the election improprieties and voter suppression that occurred in the wake of the uprising, arguing that the supposedly liberal elite seized the opportunity to quash reforms that would have put at risk "leur monopole sur l'appareil d'État" (their monopoly on the state apparatus) (p. 373).

While the book offers an excellent overall history of the first fifty years of Haitian independence, it is focused almost exclusively on the West and South with little discussion of the North/South civil war that was foundational to the country's post-independence formation. René acknowledges this shortcoming by pointing to the lack of documentation on popular peasant practices in the North, though he could have done more to engage with this documentary gap and shine a light on the interdependence between the northern and southern governments during the first two decades of independence. Still, there is much to like about René's book beyond this relatively minor quibble. Its bibliography and notes are comprehensive and evince a deep engagement with Haitian historiography and North Atlantic scholarly debates, rendering his work legible to scholars of many national and linguistic schools and bringing important new reflections to bear on both. His argument that Pétion and Boyer rejected European colonialism and racial domination while simultaneously embracing European norms of "civilization" and acculturation is nuanced and compelling. He reveals how early Haitian elites worked within the dominant discourses of Western modernity and civilization as a tool for "la mise en oeuvre de leur propre autorité sur ceux qu'ils avaient désigné comme leurs subalternes" (asserting their own authority over those they designated as their subalterns), consolidating their own political and social power and limiting the power of former slaves to exercise their civic rights (p. 394). His close discursive analysis of early Haitian documents from above and from below, such as the 1805 constitution as well as a handful of peasant petitions, is rich and well executed. His analysis of peasant petitions and court documents provides a window onto the affective dimension of the lived experience: their names, affiliations, desires, and sense of honor and duty.

Gonzalez's *Maroon Nation* covers a similar chronological scope, exploring the history of peasant resistance and land reform from the revolution through Boyer. Chapter 1 establishes the major arguments of Gonzalez's book and his "maroon thesis." Chief among them is his challenge to the widely held teleological assumption that Haiti's nineteenth century was a desolate, unproductive wasteland that resulted from the dismantling of the plantation system. Gonzalez argues that for the peasantry, Haiti's nineteenth century was prosperous and free—marked by a surplus of food production and unprecedented demographic growth—precisely *because* the peasantry continually resisted the state. Central to his argument is what he identifies as "the unprecedented parceling out and outright decommodification of Haiti's rich farmland" achieved by Haiti's former slaves, a process

that shaped early Haiti into “an entrenched, self-reinforcing cycle of counter-institutionality” (p. 30)—the contours of which Gonzales identifies as the “maroon nation.” As René, Gonzalez takes aim at the lofty, utopian narratives of the Haitian Revolution, arguing that by focusing on the peasant we must also consider the Haitian Revolution as “one of history’s most successful acts of industrial sabotage” (p. 35). Chapter 2 examines the revolutionary period in order to situate the origins of postemancipation marronage in the forced labor regimes under Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henry Christophe. Chapter 3 focuses specifically on Dessalines’s “despotism and forced labor,” which Gonzalez sees as generative of flight, clandestinity, and marronage among former slaves (p. 84).

Indeed, if there is a villain in Gonzalez’s narrative, it is Haiti’s early military authoritarian leaders, who appear somewhat interchangeable in his depiction, concerned as they were with acquiring luxury and treasure, maintaining the social prestige of plantation ownership, and abusing the state “as a vehicle for accumulating personal wealth” (p. 90). Chapter 4 proceeds chronologically to the civil war period between Pétion and Christophe, arguing that the instability these wars created among political and military elites “created a context that favored the persistent emergence of defiance from below,” which Gonzalez links closely to the parallel political and social organization of secret societies that thrived during the same period (p. 131). Chapter 5 focuses on Pétion’s liberal land reform policies and their transformation under Boyer. Here, Gonzalez makes a particularly interesting argument: despite Boyer’s staunch, repressive efforts, the post-1818 period represents a *failure* of Haitian elites to “corral the laboring population into large-scale workplaces, nor impart upon them ideological association of capitalist wage labor with freedom” (p. 167). The chapter includes useful analysis of land prices to show that Haitian peasants decommodified the Haitian land and a brief but fascinating discussion of the carceral system and prison complex that developed as a result of Boyer’s strict codification of criminality and vagrancy. Chapter 6 departs from the chronological progression to provide a thematic overview of agricultural production and the Haitian rural economy during the post-independence period, which Gonzalez describes as the “countercommercial logic of Haitian rural life” (p. 201). Here, he softens the stark presentation of isolationist marronage that dominated earlier chapters, arguing that there was still an interconnectivity between maroon communities, the state, and the wider Atlantic World because of the need for goods and technologies to trade. The chapter includes a riveting discussion of local uses for sugar; export commodities; food surplus; “cryptoculture” (a kind of maroon mixed agricultural practice of seemingly random intercropping that renders crop production and surplus illegible to state authorities); and the role of women traders and other artisans in the rural economy.

The strength of Gonzalez’s book is in the revolutionary arguments he makes, which seek to challenge dominant assumptions and received notions about Haiti’s social order and its putative failure within a capitalist economic model. In place of the utopian or celebratory accounts of the revolution from above, he offers a new narrative of the revolution from below: “The experiences of the country’s former slave citizens offer another framework with which to conceptualize and evaluate the revolution, however: as a prolonged, collective, popular campaign of escape from the confinement of plantation labor and the repressive hand of the state. Judged in this light, whatever the treacherous and corrupt nature of the country’s weak official institutions, the rise of partially autonomous rural communities in nineteenth-century Haiti represented an unprecedented triumph for former slaves and their descendants” (pp. 48-49). Furthermore, his novel focus on agricultural practices, cryptoculture, and the rural economy is an especially welcome addition to the political histories and

will be essential reading for scholars of the period. Nevertheless, the reader senses that in writing a history of resistance and marronage, Gonzalez somewhat isolates himself from scholarly dialogue with political or social historical narratives “from above,” resulting in a bibliography that is light on secondary literature. Chapter 1 is particularly vexing in this regard. It reads in many places like a polemical essay, making sweeping statements about large swaths of Haitian history that obscure a more complex and nuanced historical reality. Gonzalez laments, for instance, that “Haiti’s elite never seriously endeavored to offer school to the children of the masses” and that “the Haitian rulers were content in their knowledge that as long as the masses were illiterate, spoke only Kreyòl, and clung to the remote mountaintops in order to distance themselves from the repressive and exploitative hand of the state, they would not challenge the established upper-class monopolies on foreign commerce and government office” (pp. 34, 35). If national schooling initiatives under Pétion and Boyer were decidedly elitist, as Linsey Saint-Claire’s research has shown, it is worth pointing out that many of the “repressive” and “draconian” leaders of Haiti were interested at least in the outward performance of popular education.[6] Henry Christophe famously sought to establish the Lancasterian system of education in the northern monarchy, while a subsequent law passed in 1848 by then-president Faustin Soulouque sought to make education accessible to all genders, regions, and social classes.[7]

In addition, I found the theoretical framing in discussions of colonial slavery, post-independence forced labor, and the question of *liberté* insufficient in both books. René relies on Orlando Patterson’s notion of “social death” in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) to establish a difference between the experience of plantation slavery and post-independence structures of forced labor. For Gonzalez, post-independence forced labor is simply a continuation of plantation slavery by another name. This is a provocative stance, one that I would have liked to see more explicitly theorized, perhaps through a more thoroughgoing engagement and critique of Neil Roberts’s 2015 *Freedom as Marronage*, which Gonzalez cites in passing. Finally, and related to the question of slavery, forced labor, and *liberté*, I longed for more speculative work on the affective dimensions of the post-independence experience from below. René and Gonzalez each touch on the concept of dignity, especially René’s notion of post-independence peasant agency as a “construction d’une vie dans la dignité” (building of life in dignity) (p. 11). The concept of human dignity resonates deeply with the current moment and is one that future scholars should take up and further develop as it relates precisely to the questions of postcolonial and post-slavery society, labor, and *liberté*.

For all of their similarities, René and Gonzalez disagree on a fundamental point: the role of marronage in the post-independence Haitian state. Gonzalez is fairly cut and dry on this question: the insurgent practice of marronage fundamentally defines post-independence Haiti, as his title suggests. His presentation of the practice is based primarily in the idea of isolation and resistance-refusal of the state: “the early Haitian masses literally vanished up the mountains and into the spreading undergrowth” (p. 31). Conversely, René argues precisely against the idea of marronage as isolation. Instead, he seeks to show that state power, “subaltern” subjecthood, and political agency were mutually constructed and dependent on one another for legitimacy. He relies here on a few archival examples of small landowners petitioning the state, which he argues radically calls into question this idea of a rural world “se construisant dans l’isolement, et dont les membres organiseraient dans une quasi-clandestinité leur vie ... hors des atteintes de l’État” (being built in isolation, and whose members would organize in quasi-clandestinity a life beyond the reach of the state) (p. 152). Indeed, in place of Casimir’s counter-plantation model, René argues for the concept of a “post-plantation” system that looked beyond marronage and isolation to different forms of identity formation,

resistance, and engagement with the state.

In sum, the books provide essential new approaches to Haitian studies readers for the study of Haiti's long nineteenth century from below. In many ways, they complement each other and warrant being read in tandem: René's is indispensable for its careful curation of information and in-depth contextualization in post-independence history; Gonzalez's is vital for its provocative arguments that challenge dominant notions of peasant agency and state formation.

Notes

[1]. Chris Bongie, introduction to *The Colonial System Unveiled*, by Baron de Vastey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 2.

[2]. Here, work from Mimi Sheller (*Democracy after Slavery: Black Publics and Peasant Radicalism in Haiti and Jamaica* [London: Macmillan Caribbean, 2000]; and *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012]) and Sibylle Fischer (*Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004]) remain indispensable, along with more recent work by Jean-François Brière (*Haïti et la France 1804-1848: Le rêve brisé* [Paris: Karthala, 2008]), Matthew J. Smith (*Liberty, Fraternity, Exile: Haiti and Jamaica after Emancipation* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014]), and Marlene Daut (*Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865* [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015]), among others. On Haitian sources on post-independence state formation, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot (*Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1995]), Michel Hector and Laënnec Hurbon (*Genèse de l'État haïtien (1804-1859)* [Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2009]), and Délide Joseph (*L'état haïtien et ses intellectuels: Socio-histoire d'un engagement politique (1801-1860)* [Port-au-Prince: SHHGG, 2015]). There is an abundance of new research set to come out on Haiti's long nineteenth century, including my forthcoming book, *Haiti's Paper War Post-Independence Writing, Civil War, and the Making of the Republic, 1804-1954* [New York: New York University Press, 2020], Julia Gaffield's new project on the Catholic Church and Haitian sovereignty, Michael Reyes and Jonas Kjærgård's work on nineteenth-century literature, Shanna-Dolores Jean-Baptiste's PhD dissertation, and excellent work in Dominican studies from Anne Eller (*We Dream Together: Dominican Independence, Haiti, and the Fight for Caribbean Freedom* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016]) and Andrew Walker (*Strains of Unity*, forthcoming).

[3]. It is worth noting that Carolyn Fick advised René's dissertation work at Concordia University; we can place his work as a necessary post-independence continuation of her methodology on history from below in *The Making of Haiti: Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990). René's work was awarded the Prix d'Histoire given by the Société Haïtienne d'Histoire, de Géographie et de Géologie in partnership with the Fondation Roger Gaillard in 2017. The prize guarantees publication of the work with imprimerie Le Natal. Gonzalez's book came out as part of the Yale Agrarian Studies series.

[4]. See David Geggus, *The Caribbean Collections at the University of Florida: A Brief Description* (Gainesville: University of Florida Libraries, 1985), <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00015493/00001/1j>.

[5]. All translations are my own.

[6]. Linsey Sainte-Claire, "Régénération et élitisme scolaire sous Alexandre Pétion et Jean-Pierre Boyer (1816-1843)," *L'Esprit créateur* 56, no. 1 (2016): 116-28.

[7]. See Edner Brutus, *Instruction publique en Haïti, 1492-1945* (Port-au-Prince: Editions Panorama, 1948).

Citation: Chelsea Stieber. Review of Gonzalez, Johnhenry, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti* and Jean Alix René, *Haiti après l'esclavage: Formation de l'état et culture politique populaire (1804-1846)*. H-Haiti, H-Net Reviews. April, 2020. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54998>

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