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Ada Ferrer

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Haitian Revolution and Cuban Slave Society

Of what happened that night there are many accounts, but of this we can be fairly certain: in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, today Haiti, late one night in August 1791, hundreds of men and women held as slaves gathered together at a clearing in a forest called Bois Caïman, or Bwa Kayiman in Kreyòl. It was probably August 21, a Sunday, so some may have arrived at the meeting on their way back from the Cap Français market. If not exactly a day of rest, it was, at least, a day away from the grueling work of sugar, the principal crop of the region. The labor done on one day, by any one of the individuals gathered that night, had been compounding exponentially for years to make Saint-Domingue Europe's most profitable colony and the world's largest producer of sugar, king long before cotton. By the time of the Bois Caïman assembly, the colony had half a million slaves and nearly 800 sugar plantations, producing almost as much as all the islands of the British West Indies combined. French Saint-Domingue was the envy of all Europe, the jewel of the Antilles, the Eden of the Western world.

It was in part the very foundation of that wealth – the brutality of the work and the violence of the coercion imposed on captive Africans and their descendants – that drew so many to the meeting at Bois Caïman that night. They were there to prepare for a radically different future. A leader named Dutty Boukman, himself enslaved, addressed the assembly. In some accounts his words were inspired: he spoke of God and vengeance, closing with a call to “listen to liberty that speaks to all our hearts.” At the center of the gathering, a woman lifted a knife and killed a black pig in ritual sacrifice; then the congregants swore an oath to obey their leader Boukman, who was organizing them in rebellion against their masters,

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and to maintain utmost secrecy so as to ensure the success of their bold endeavor. For additional protection, some took hair from the pig to put in amulets.¹

We cannot know with what mixture of buoyancy or trepidation the men and women gathered at Bois Caïman walked back to their plantations that night to sleep briefly before daybreak. But the next evening, they did more or less as planned. On Monday night, August 22, they rose up. The strike was substantial from the start: from one plantation to the next, insurgents burned cane fields and buildings, and sometimes killed masters and overseers. By the end of the year, the rebel slaves numbered in the tens of thousands; the property destroyed amounted to over a thousand sugar and coffee farms; and about 400 white colonists had lost their lives. This was the largest and best coordinated slave rebellion the world had ever seen. It made war on the system of slavery at its seat of most extreme and opulent power, and, intentionally or not, it forced the question of slavery on the French Revolution and the world.²

Immediately, French colonial authorities sent emissaries to the United States, Jamaica, Cuba, and elsewhere in search of aid: money, men, munitions, hunting dogs, anything that might help them turn the tide and make their world right again. In pleading for assistance, the French painted a grim portrait. The glorious talk of the Antilles' preeminent jewel gave way to laments of devastation and ruin: a veritable paradise turned a mountain of ashes. France, they wrote, was "in imminent danger of losing the colony due to the insurrection of the blacks."³ Did they believe that? Or

¹ David Geggus, "The Bois Caïman Ceremony," in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 81–92; Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 93–94, 264–265; Robin Law, "La Cérémonie du Bois-Caïman et le 'pacte de sang' dahoméen," in Laennec Hurbon, ed., *L'Insurrection des esclaves de Saint-Domingue (22–23 août 1791)* (Paris: Karthala, 2000), 131–147; Léon-François Hoffman, "Un Mythe national: La cérémonie du Bois-Caïman," in Gérard Barthélemy and Christian Girault, eds., *La République haïtienne: Etat des lieux et perspectives*, (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 434–448.

² C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963 [1938]); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

³ Las Casas to Conde de Campo de Alange, September 15, 1791, in Archivo General de Simancas, Spain (AGS), Secretaría y Despacho de Guerra (SGU), *legajo* (or bundle, hereafter leg.) 6846, *expediente* (or file, hereafter exp.) 79. My research in this archive predated the digitization project that has since made many of the materials available online at <http://pares.mcu.es/>. Therefore, some references to AGS, SGU materials do not list the *expediente* number, as those were not always clear before the digitalization.

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was that possibility merely a flicker of doubt that emerged sometimes as they narrated the events for the benefit of people who might provide assistance? Even as they prophesied the end of the world as they knew it, they surely believed that the French would ultimately prevail. Africans, slaves, and blacks, they probably thought, would not defeat them. France faced a massive slave rebellion, certainly; but in the late days of August 1791, few in Saint-Domingue or elsewhere – black, brown, white, free, or enslaved – could have imagined that the unrest would become what we know today as the Haitian Revolution.

Yet the process begun that late August evening produced the most unexpected outcomes. The slave rebels persisted, the colonial army unable to subdue them. By April 1792, in hopes of securing the allegiance of free people of color and with it subduing the rebel slaves, France decreed legal equality among free men of all colors. In August 1793, realizing that the strength of the slave insurrection threatened the loss of the colony to Spain and England, colonial authorities began decreeing the end of slavery in the areas of Saint-Domingue under their control: “all the *nègres* and mixed-blood people currently in slavery are declared free to enjoy all the rights of French citizens.” A few months after that, the National Convention in Paris followed suit and went further, declaring that “the slavery of the *nègres* is abolished . . . all men living in the colonies, without distinction of color, are French citizens.” The rebellion of enslaved men and women had forced first colonial officials and later European ones to declare the end of slavery not just in Saint-Domingue but in all French territory. In 1795, the French Constitution declared the colonies “integral parts of France . . . subject to the same constitutional law.”⁴

In all this, one former slave, Toussaint Bréda, soon to be Louverture, emerged as preeminent strategist and politician. Black, only moderately literate, and born and raised as the legal property of a white man, Toussaint became commander-in-chief in May 1797 and governor soon after.⁵ When Napoleon decided that the colonies would be ruled by special laws, thus paving the way to quarantine particular rights on European soil, it was Governor Toussaint who took it upon himself to author special laws for Saint-Domingue, in the form of a constitution that reiterated that

⁴ Translations of the decrees and constitutional articles are from Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus, eds., *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford-St. Martin's Publishing, 2006), 115–116, 120–125, 129–132, 167–170.

⁵ Jesús Ruiz, a PhD student at Tulane University, has recently discovered documentation suggesting that Toussaint might have taken on the name “Louverture” earlier than is generally supposed. “On Becoming Louverture,” article manuscript in preparation.

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“there can be no slaves in this territory; servitude is abolished within it forever.” When Napoleon attempted to reassert French control – to rip every epaulette from the shoulders of those “gilded Africans” – and to reimpose slavery, hundreds of thousands of people fought against the French, winning independence and founding a new country as a way to avoid enslavement and preserve the right of liberty. Thus, on January 1, 1804, Haiti was born, the second independent state of the hemisphere and the only one ever founded by former slaves and without slavery.⁶

This new country sat in the middle of the Caribbean Sea surrounded by islands that remained European colonies deeply invested in the regime of slavery. On all of them the black population either comprised the majority or was quickly gaining demographic ground. European governors protected and encouraged the slave trade, plantation production, and the violent imperative that sustained both. If the Haitian Revolution was born precisely from the implosion of that kind of system in Saint-Domingue, the new state of Haiti stood as a profound challenge to that order. Not a colony but an independent state, it took an Amerindian name. Its first president – a former slave – proclaimed to have “avenged America,” and he denounced France for assuming that human rights were white rights. Blacks, too, were bearers of rights, he said, and henceforth all Haitians would be called black.⁷

In Cuba, just fifty miles distant, no one could have imagined the power of what began at Bois Caïman. But wealthy men there did harbor some hope that the massive August rebellion might work in their favor. Cuban sugar planters had spent the last two decades attempting to emulate the magnificent wealth and power of the Saint-Domingue planter class. Now their model confronted a catastrophe; their competitor faced a colossal handicap. If there was certainly cause for concern, there was perhaps also reason for optimism. “There is no need for doubt. The hour of our

⁶ The 1801 Constitution of Saint-Domingue is available at Constitutions of the World Online (http://www.modern-constitutions.de/nbu.php?page_id=02a1b5a86ff139471c0b1c57f23ac196&show_doc=HT-00-1801-05-19-fr). Napoleon’s “gilded Africans” statement is quoted in James, *The Black Jacobins*, 271.

⁷ *Gaceta de Madrid* (GM), March 23, 1804, 267–268; *The Balance and Columbian Repository*, Hudson, New York, June 17, 1804, and *Journal des débats*, August 7, 1804. On the Declaration of Independence and the 1805 Constitution, see also Deborah Jensen, *Beyond the Slave Narrative: Politics, Sex, and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), chaps. 11 and 13; and Julia Gaffield, ed., *The Haitian Declaration of Independence* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, forthcoming).

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happiness has arrived,” announced the colony’s most prominent sugar planter.⁸

If by *our* he meant white planters such as himself, rather than the inhabitants of the colony more generally or the enslaved labor force in particular, his prediction proved more than correct. Sugar took off. In Havana province, center of the boom, the number of mills almost doubled in the two decades after the start of the Haitian Revolution. The average productive capacity of those mills also more than doubled, with the largest ones producing well above that average. With so much more sugar suddenly being produced, Cuba surpassed Saint-Domingue, overtook Jamaica, and became by the 1820s the world’s largest producer of sugar, the new pearl of the Antilles.⁹

But in August 1791, none of that was yet apparent. And as the architects of that imminent boom whetted their appetites in anticipation, they soon realized that they were not the only ones hoping for a transformation. The first sign came early and in a most unexpected manner. In Havana, just about three weeks after the Bois Caïman ceremony that launched the Haitian Revolution, members of the city council (*cabildo*) learned of a shortage of pork in the city’s meat markets. The scarcity, in and of itself, was nothing out of the ordinary in a city with perpetual shortages and all manner of illicit and contraband business. Yet this time the origin of the problem appeared to be far from routine. “Inquiring as to the cause,” the councilor heading the investigation concluded that “it derived from the abuse committed in the slaughter of pigs for some of the insurgents who inspire [with] their perverse ideas those whom we have in our possessions.”¹⁰

How might we read this surprising reference to a shortage of pigs in Havana somehow linked to insurgents from other colonies? The verb used to describe the slaughter is the Spanish *beneficio*, an archaic term for the killing (with a knife), bloodletting, and quartering of animals. According to the councilor’s statement, the killing was done not for the

⁸ Francisco Arango, “Discurso sobre la agricultura” in *Obras*. (Havana: Imagen Contemporánea, 2005), 1:159.

⁹ Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *El ingenio: Complejo económico social cubano del azúcar* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1978), 1:68, 3:43–44; Dale Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 75–94.

¹⁰ Archivo Histórico de la Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad, Habana (AHOHCH), Actas Capitulares del Ayuntamiento de la Habana (AC), tomo 50, f. 247, September 9, 1791. Original: “Yndagando la causa de esta inovación se le havia indicado procedia del abuso que se hacia en el beneficio de los cerdos para algunos de los insurgentes, y estos inspirasen sus perversas ideas a los que teníamos en nuestras posesiones.”

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benefit of those committing the crime, but rather for insurgents, defined contextually as foreign. Finally, the councilor attributed the insurgents' desire to contaminate local blacks to innate, racial qualities: "the malevolent inclinations of the descendants of Ethiopia are well-known and troubling, notwithstanding the care with which we try to teach them in these dominions."¹¹

The mention of the killing of pigs in Havana for the benefit of foreign black insurgents, however oblique, hints at some surprising possibilities. Perhaps the councilor referred to a network by which blacks in Havana sent aid to black rebels in Saint-Domingue. Alternatively, his emphasis on "perverse ideas" and "malevolent tendencies" might suggest an assistance more metaphorical than literal. In the French colony, the killing of a pig at Bois Caïman served as the ritual beginning of the war against the slave regime. Might this brief and enigmatic allusion to foreign insurgents and pork shortages be a documentary trace of the ritual sacrifice of pigs in Havana in support of black revolution in Saint-Domingue?

The potential existence of such a ceremony in Havana would have indicated that "descendants of Ethiopians" in Cuba managed – just days after the start of the Haitian Revolution – to inform themselves of events in the neighboring colony. If the sacrifice of pigs in both places might have suggested a world of shared cultural repertoires, it also revealed the presence of a potent black solidarity in which people across colonial and imperial boundaries provided moral, spiritual, and perhaps material aid to their black counterparts elsewhere: Cuban blacks to Haitian ones by honoring them ritually or aiding them materially; Haitian blacks to Cuban ones by inspiring them to act. Just weeks after Bois Caïman and the war it launched, then, we see perhaps an early and surprising sign of what Julius Scott famously called the "common wind" of communication among black men and women of the African Diaspora in the era of the Haitian Revolution.¹²

That is one way to read the mysterious mention of pork shortages in Havana somehow caused by foreign insurgents. But it is not the only one.

¹¹ Ibid; the remainder of the original statement is: "es constante y de temerse las malas inclinaciones en los descendientes de la Etiopía aun sin embargo del esmero con que se les quiera enseñar en estos dominios." On the terminology of slaughter, see Esteban Pichardo, *Diccionario provincial casi-razonado de voces cubanas*, 3rd edition (Havana: Imprenta la Antilla, 1862), 26.

¹² On African and creole elements of Bois Caïman, see Law, "La Cérémonie du Bois-Caïman." The classic account of the circulation of Haiti's example in the Black Atlantic is Julius Scott, "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution," PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1986.

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That reading is based on the minutes of the meeting of the Havana city council on September 9, 1791, preserved today in Havana's municipal archive, which is housed, along with the Museum of the City of Havana, in the old Palace of the Governor and Captain-General on the verdant and graceful Plaza de Armas. In September 1791, the building was so new it was not yet quite finished. The governor, himself a sugar mill owner and holder of slaves, lived in temporary quarters on the mezzanine floor, the same one on which the city council had its headquarters and meeting hall.¹³ Today, on that floor in those quarters sit the handsome leather-bound volumes with neat transcriptions of those meetings' lengthy discussions – about meat shortages and street lights, slaves and sugar. The handwriting in those volumes is so neat and regular that it is hard to imagine the councilors ever raising their voices in disagreement. The script is so perfect that one can almost imagine the steady, precise rhythm of the scribe's pen on paper making him perhaps unmindful of mistakes, of things that might have made little sense had he paused to reread. Could an error in transcription account for the mysterious written record that seems to conjure possible pig sacrifices in Havana?¹⁴

As is often the case with colonial documents, multiple transcriptions of the same documents are sometimes scattered in several locations. In the Spanish colonial archives in Seville, another partial record of that September 9 meeting has survived, almost by accident. Well into the Haitian Revolution, in February 1794, months after colonial authorities in Saint-Domingue had abolished slavery in French-held territory, the

¹³ M.E. Martín Zequeira and E.L. Rodríguez Fernández, *Guía de arquitectura: La Habana colonial (1519–1898)* (Havana and Seville: Junta de Andalucía, 1995), 82–83, 126–27; and “Un palacio entre sombras y luces,” in *Opus Habana*, Vol. III, No. 2, 1999, 4–15.

¹⁴ In 2002, I spent some time working in the Santiago Municipal Archives reading the minutes of the Santiago city council. Researchers were not allowed to consult the original volumes and instead were required to use the handwritten transcriptions in ink that were then being compiled by one of the archivists. We worked in the same room the whole time: I was reading her transcriptions of the 1790s and 1800s; she was transcribing meeting minutes from well into the nineteenth century. She did this every day, all day. Her transcriptions were neat; sometimes they sloped because the paper had no lines, and sometimes the ink became faint (there were not always ready replacements once the ink ran out). Very occasionally, I encountered a mistake: a line missed, a word repeated. Throughout this book, we will have occasion to consider the archive, in Michel-Rolph Trouillot's phrase, as an institution of power. But it is worth remembering that not all archives are equal, and that such phrases do not take adequate account of the ways in which the contemporary archives that historians rely on in places such as Port-au-Prince or Santiago de Cuba sometimes project insubstantiality as much as power. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).

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governor and captain-general of Cuba wrote to the minister of state in Madrid. The topic of the letter was not too out of the ordinary for that place and time, conveying as it did his conviction that Cuba was gravely threatened by the events unfolding in Saint-Domingue. To his letter, the governor appended the minutes of a Havana city council meeting held on February 12, 1794. In that 1794 meeting, one of the councilors read aloud from the minutes of the September 9, 1791 session in which the members discussed the pork shortages. In that manner, the words spoken at that September 1791 meeting resurfaced in a different time and form.¹⁵

In this second transcription, however, the meeting unfolds quite differently. Here, the members of the city council arrive at the same point, lamenting – with exactly the same words – the ways in which foreign insurgents could contaminate their own slaves. What precedes this consideration of evil and contagion, however, is not a discussion about the fate of pigs, but rather a discussion of the September 8, 1791 arrival in Havana of a slaving vessel named the *Deux Soeurs*.

The *Deux Soeurs* was a slave ship, not unlike the many that were then arriving and transforming the face and feel of Havana and its environs. Captained by a Frenchman named Louis Houet de Kehu, it had arrived in Cap Français on August 9, 1791 from Porto Novo on the Bight of Benin loaded with 346 captives. It usually took French traders about two to three weeks to sell their human cargo in the colonies, which meant that sometime in the middle of that process, Kehu would have found his buyers suddenly under siege by the slave rebellion in the surrounding northern plain. Amidst that turmoil, and perhaps unable to finish his business, Kehu set sail for quieter shores, arriving in Havana on September 8, with 292 men and women to sell as slaves there.¹⁶ Perhaps the 292 enslaved men

¹⁵ A partial transcript (quoted here) of the September 9, 1791 cabildo meeting is appended to the minutes of the February 12, 1794 meeting, in turn attached to Las Casas to Secretary of State Pedro Acuña, February 19, 1794, in Archivo General de Indias, Seville (AGI), Estado, leg. 14, exp. 73.

¹⁶ The itinerary of the ship is reconstructed from sometimes conflicting accounts in multiple sources. *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (hereafter *Voyages*) (<http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1791&yearTo=1791&shipname=soeurs>) identifies a 1791 voyage (31351) of the *Deux Soeurs* as captained by a Louis Huet de Relia. Jean Mettas, *Répertoire des expéditions négrières Françaises aux XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 1978–1984), 1:758–59, gives the captain's name as Louis Houet de Kehu. See also “Estado de los negros introducidos en la Habana, Septiembre 1791, in AGI, Santo Domingo (SD), leg. 2207. Spanish sources sometimes refer to the ship as the *Dos Hermanos* (rather than *Hermanas*) and *Los Hermanos*, and the captain as Luis Quichud. On the timing of slave sales in the French colonies, see Robert Louis Stein, *The French Slave Trade in*

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and women he brought to Havana represented the difference between the 346 he arrived with in Cap Français and the number he had been able to sell before the onset of trouble there.

The members of Havana's city council had a different hypothesis. They suspected that Kehu was carrying and attempting to sell black insurgents captured in Saint-Domingue, representing them to Havana authorities and buyers as *bozales*, or new African arrivals. That prospect worried the councilors, who imagined that these insurgents, once sold into slavery in Cuba, would ally with local slaves to destroy the emerging plantation order. "Some of the insurgents," they said – using the exact same wording as in the version of the minutes that hinted at possible pig sacrifices – would "inspire with their perverse ideas those that we have in our possessions, for the malevolent inclinations of the descendants of Ethiopia are well-known and troubling, notwithstanding the care with which we try to teach them in these dominions."¹⁷ Potential contagion was an immediate cause of concern in Havana, where – thanks to changes recently underway – there were suddenly many more people susceptible to being contaminated and significantly more wealth for them to destroy.

Neither account of the September 9, 1791 meeting makes it possible for us to know whether its claim was true. The brief inkling of potential pig sacrifices in the first reveals nothing about the participants, nor the place where they gathered, nor the means by which they learned of the insurgents they allegedly honored. Meanwhile, the discussion of captured insurgents illegally introduced in Havana aboard the *Deux Soeurs* provides absolutely no information on who those captive insurgents might have been or to whom they were sold. And information available elsewhere about the *Deux Soeurs* reveals nothing about the people it transported to Havana.¹⁸

While both claims remain unverifiable, placed side by side they expose perfectly the contradictory effects of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World. One account of the city council meeting suggests a story of black solidarity and the circulation of emancipatory ideas and rituals. The second confronts us instead with the remarkable possibility that the same people making dramatic bids for freedom in Saint-Domingue

the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 110–113.

¹⁷ Quoted in minutes of the February 12, 1794 cabildo meeting, attached to Las Casas to Secretary of State Pedro Acuña, February 19, 1794, in AGI, Estado, leg. 14, exp. 73.

¹⁸ *Voyages*, <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1791&yearTo=1791&shipname=soeurs>; and Mettas, *Répertoire*, 1:758–59.

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were being captured and sent to Cuba as slaves, transformed in the quick journey across Caribbean waters from participants in a historic struggle for black liberation to hostages in the violent entrenchment of slavery, from protagonists in the Haitian Revolution to targets of Cuba's sugar revolution. In the tension between those two possibilities lies the heart of this book.

At a basic level, liberation in Saint-Domingue helped entrench its denial in Cuba. As slavery and colonialism collapsed in the French colony, the Spanish island underwent transformations that were almost the mirror image of Haiti's. The sugar no longer produced in Saint-Domingue was now produced in Cuba. Machinery, suddenly without a purpose in revolutionary Saint-Domingue, found its way to Cuba; so too did men who worked as sugar technicians and others considered experts in managing slaves. Many of the African captives who would have once arrived in Cap Français or Port-au-Prince were diverted to Havana. The Haitian Revolution thus hastened and hardened Cuba's sugar revolution and the brutal practices of enslavement that came with it. Two decades after Haitian independence, Cuba had emerged as the world's largest producer of sugar and one of the greatest consumers of enslaved Africans in the nineteenth-century world.

To examine the ways in which the Haitian Revolution contributed to the entrenchment of slavery in Cuba, however, is not to deny the profound antislavery power of that revolution. Indeed, the power of the Haitian Revolution derived from the fact that it was forced to operate precisely in a world still committed to the linked realities of slavery, racism, and colonial rule. The Haitian Revolution formally eliminated each of those phenomena in its own territory, but not elsewhere. In the territoriality of its institutional outcomes, it resembled every revolution of the modern world. But the absence of foreign abolition decrees or slave rebellions directly attributable to Haiti does not diminish the significance of the Haitian Revolution. Nor does it mean that its impact was purely in the realm of "symbolic discourse" or "powerful mythos," as Seymour Drescher has argued.¹⁹

Controversies over the influence of the Haitian Revolution began almost immediately in August 1791, even if participants at the time did

¹⁹ Seymour Drescher, "The Limits of Example," in David Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 10–14. See also Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chaps. 6–7.