

LUKASA

HISTORY OF AFRICA AND THE DIASPORA

The REVOLUTION

That GAVE BIRTH

To HAITI



Text by Laurent Dubois

Illustrations by Rocky Cotard



The REVOLUTION That GAVE BIRTH To HAITI



~ILLUSTRATOR~

Rocky Cotard, an illustrator and fine artist, passionately shares the Haitian story wherever he goes. Currently collaborating with Macmillan Publishing on a book that delves deeper into Haiti's rich history, Cotard's work has been showcased in esteemed institutions such as Lesley University, Simmons University, and most recently the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Always seeking new avenues for creativity, learning, and connection, Cotard welcomes you to explore more of his work on his website at rockycotard.com or follow him on Instagram @rockycotard.



~WRITER~

Laurent Dubois is a professor of history and the academic director of the Karsh Institute of Democracy at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (2004) and *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (2012), and co-editor of *The Haiti Reader* (2020).

LUKASA

HISTORY OF AFRICA AND THE DIASPORA

ABOUT THE SERIES

“History” is a word, in English, that we use to describe both the past and our means of knowing and relating to that past. In universities, history is mostly produced by people with advanced degrees called historians and mostly written in books and academic articles. But there are actually many ways that people relate to the past, even in our society. We encounter it in films and songs, learn about it in stories told by our grandparents and elders, come upon it in photographs and social media memes.

In Central Africa, the BaLuba people have long had a way of teaching about and engaging the past that is quite unique. They have a society of professional communal historians whose job is to learn and share accounts of the past. These historians use physical objects to help shape and remember their accounts, including scepters, staffs, and thrones. The most important of these is the lukasa, a wooden memory board studded with beads and pins and cut into shapes and marks. Using this board as part of their oral performance of history, the BaLuba historians both recall the important events and people of the past and put in their own interpretations that are appropriate to the audience they are addressing. More flexible than a written book, the lukasa nevertheless helps to connect the past to the present authentically.

Comics are a similarly flexible but authentic connection to the past. They are a means of communicating through art and text working together. Comics take many forms, but they are usually made up of panels that are read, one after another, to tell a story. Modern comics are the result of a legacy of creators from around the world. Some of them lived in particularly vibrant communities for making comics, like New York City in the twentieth century. Many great creators of comics have been of African descent, whether those in the diaspora like Jackie Ormes and Alvin Carl Hollingsworth or those in Africa like Ibrahim Njoya and Barly Baruti. Often working in difficult circumstances, they have managed to use comics to tell the histories and stories of their communities and peoples.

This series seeks to continue that tradition, focusing on accounts of the past. It is mainly the work of African and African-descended artists and academics who combine scholarly, popular, and local techniques and styles to interpret histories of individuals and societies and document the experiences of Africa and the global African diaspora. These histories are based on sources and stories created originally by people of African descent. They focus on the innovation and creativity of their communities, often in the face of challenges and opposition. These are real histories, even though they do not look like the kind of history you might have come to expect. They represent the experiences and perspectives of continental and diasporic Africans in the past and, at the same time, carry messages that these creators crafted for people in our time, and beyond, to read and learn.

INTRODUCTION

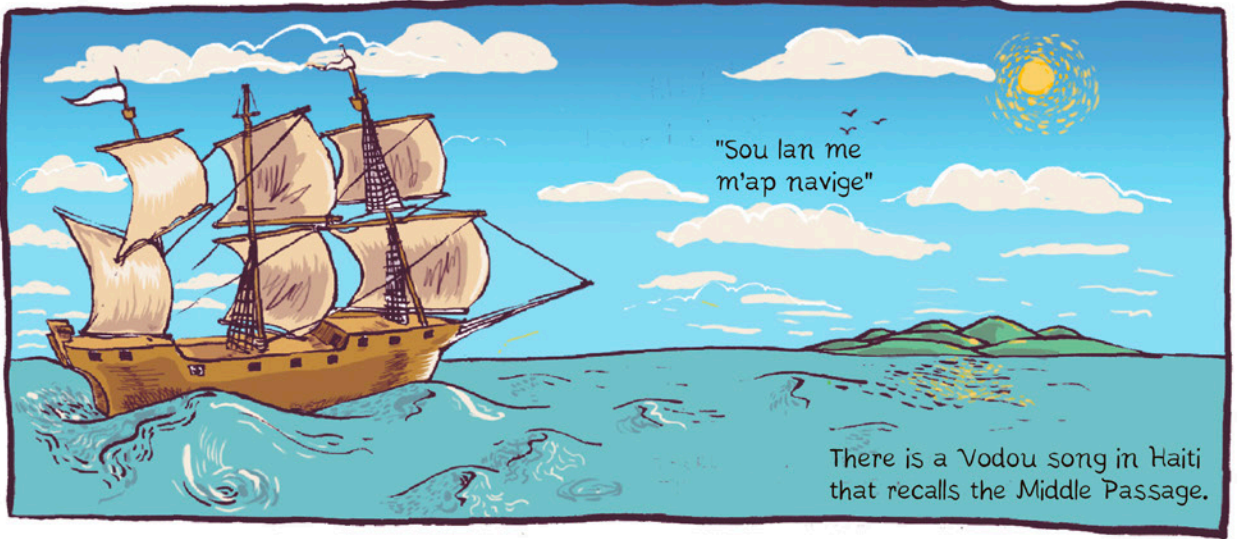
You have opened a comic that tells the glorious history of the Haitian Revolution. The enslavement of people and resistance to enslavement took many forms across the globe and over time. This is the story of what is arguably the most significant act of resistance in history.

The Haitian Revolution is the first truly democratic revolution in the Americas. The uprising of the African-descended people of the French colony of Saint-Domingue would totally transform the island and the world. This second issue of *Lukasa* reveals the accounts of these people and the world they created in *The Revolution That Gave Birth to Haiti*.

NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND CONTENT

Certain panels of this comic present the violence and coercion that were at the heart of colonial oppression and enslavement. Please use discretion when reading and teaching with this comic. In accompanying essays, the person-first term “enslaved person” is used instead of “slave” to reinforce the idea that a person’s enslavement was not intrinsic to that individual’s identity but a function of their sociopolitical condition. In thinking about this decision, this comic looks to “Writing About Slavery? Teaching About Slavery?” for current guidance on terminology used to “describe and analyze the intricacies and occurrences of domination, coercion, resistance, and survival under slavery.”¹

1 P. Gabrielle Foreman, et al., “[Writing about Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help](#),” community-sourced document, 2023.



"Sou lan me
m'ap navige"

There is a Vodou song in Haiti
that recalls the Middle Passage.



"In the belly of the slave
ship, we are all one."



August 1791

The Haitian Revolution was
dreamed up and carried
out by enslaved women
and men, most of them
African-born survivors of
the Middle Passage.



January 1804

They succeeded in freeing
themselves and created
a new country based on the
self-evident truth that no
one should be a slave.



How did they succeed,
against all odds?

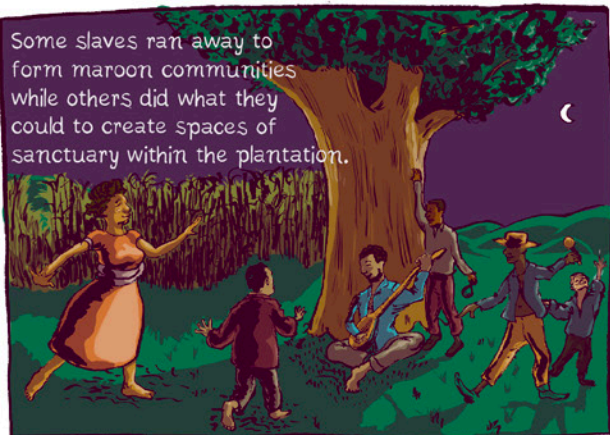
In the late eighteenth century, French Saint-Domingue was the most profitable colony in the world.



Slave labor produced sugar and coffee for the markets of Europe.



Some slaves ran away to form maroon communities while others did what they could to create spaces of sanctuary within the plantation.

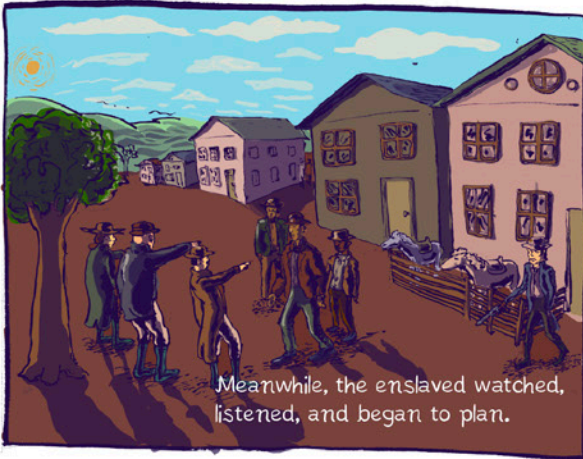
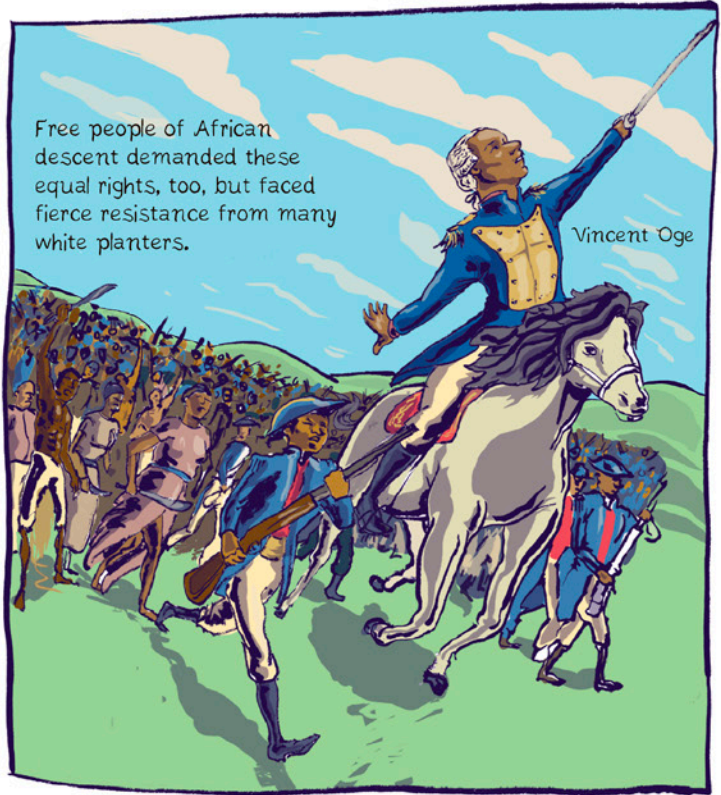


The huge profits for planters and merchants depended on daily violence and terror inflicted on the enslaved majority to keep them from rebelling.

Some free people of African descent were able to acquire plantations or properties in the towns, though they faced social and legal discrimination.



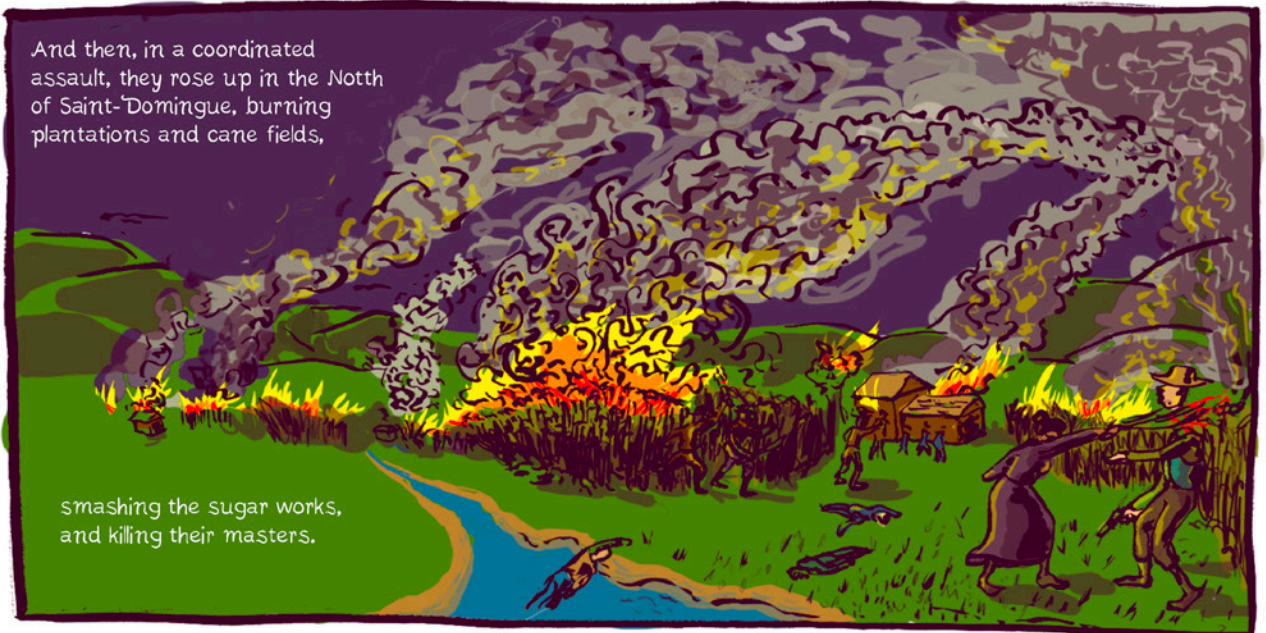
The French Revolution of 1789 changed things. Political conflict weakened colonial power, and news reached the island of declarations in Paris about universal human rights.



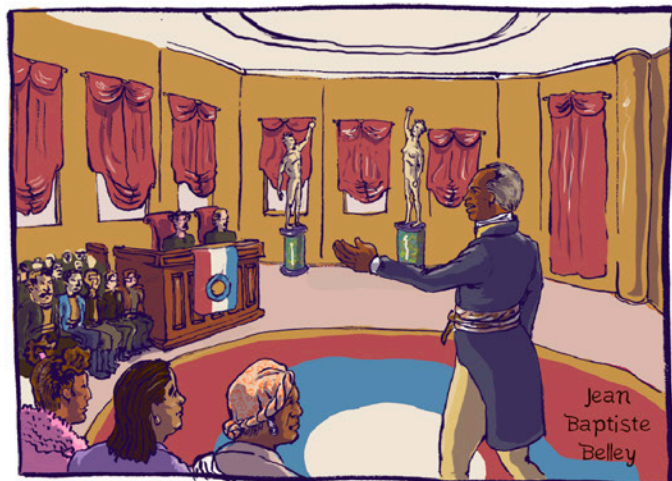
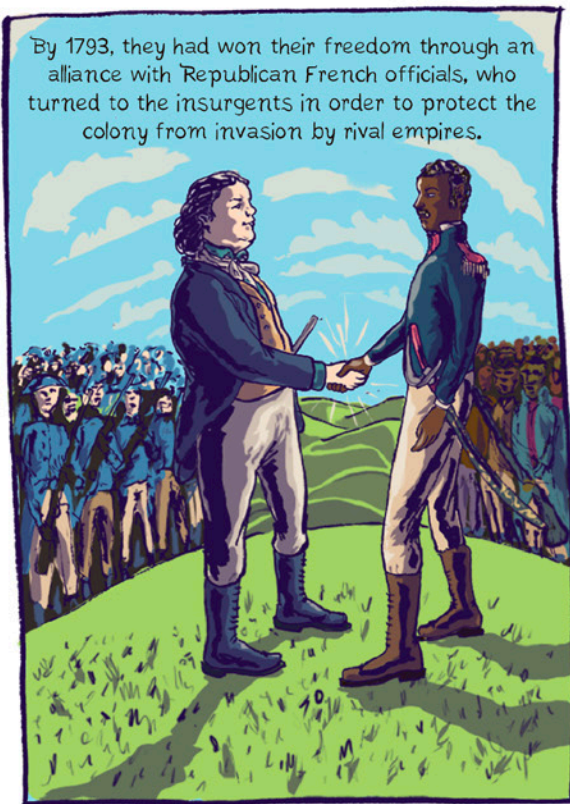
Meanwhile, the enslaved watched, listened, and began to plan.



And then, in a coordinated assault, they rose up in the North of Saint-Domingue, burning plantations and cane fields,



smashing the sugar works, and killing their masters.



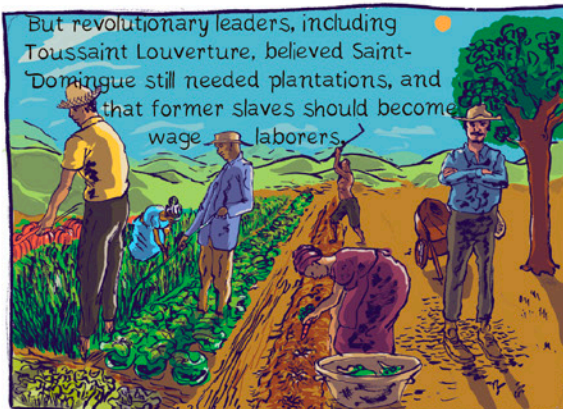
A delegation travelled to Paris and explained how the insurgents were protecting the colony for France, while white planters were turning to England in a bid to preserve slavery. The National Convention declared slavery abolished throughout the French empire. This was the first time in recorded history that a nation abolished slavery.



On many plantations, women took a lead role, insisting they had more time for themselves away from the fields.



But what is freedom? For the formerly enslaved, it meant having their own land to cultivate for families and communities.





They argued the colony needed sugar and coffee to trade for other goods, including the weapons they needed to defend freedom.



For they knew there were many enemies of emancipation

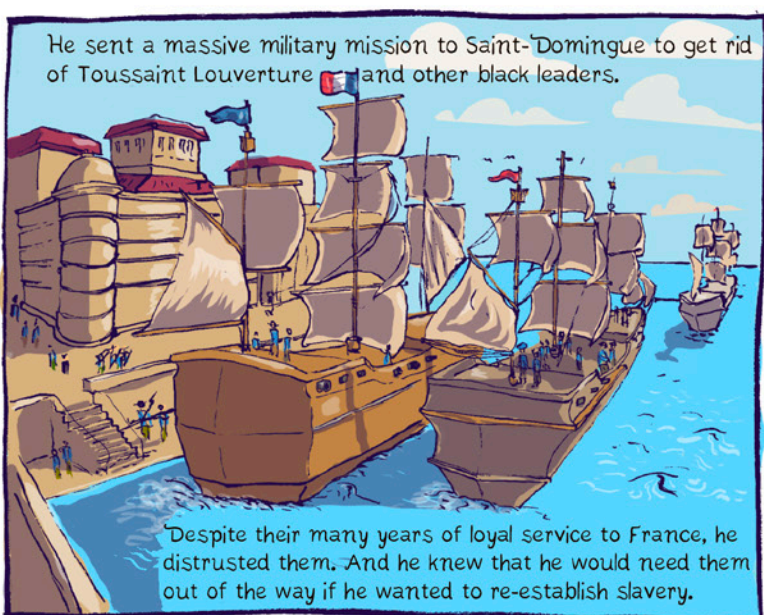
The Haitian Revolution was often represented at the time – and since – as an unleashing of barbarism, with white victims as martyrs.



Many scoffed at the idea that blacks could rule themselves, understood what freedom was.



When Napoleon Bonaparte rose to power in France, he listened to those who argued emancipation had been a disaster.



He sent a massive military mission to Saint-Domingue to get rid of Toussaint Louverture and other black leaders.

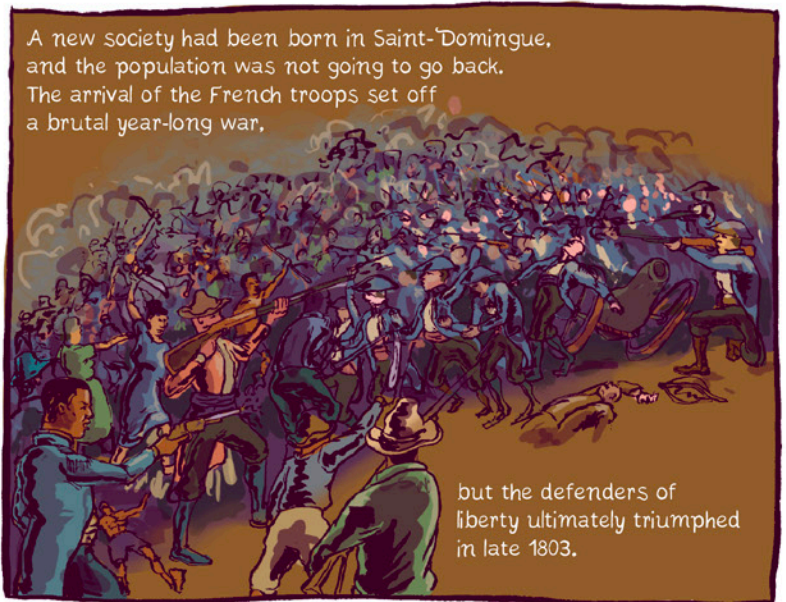
Despite their many years of loyal service to France, he distrusted them. And he knew that he would need them out of the way if he wanted to re-establish slavery.



But he severely underestimated the determination of the people of the colony to remain free.



It was the only successful slave revolution in history.



A new society had been born in Saint-Domingue, and the population was not going to go back. The arrival of the French troops set off a brutal year-long war,

but the defenders of liberty ultimately triumphed in late 1803.



With the defeat of the French, Haiti was born.

Read more about the Haitian Revolution!

To learn more, read *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 2004) by Laurent Dubois and *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1787-1804: A History in Documents* (Bedford Press, 2006) by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus, or watch the PBS documentary, *Egalite for All: Human Rights and the Haitian Revolution* (available on YouTube).

AN AGE OF REVOLUTION AND EMPIRE, 1750–1914

by Laurent Dubois

By 1750, European empires were firmly established in the Americas, and a thriving economic system based on slavery and the slave trade had transformed social, political, and cultural life on three continents. This Atlantic system was connected by the Triangular Trade, which tightly bound together not just Europe, Africa, and the Americas, but also the regions within these continents. This was also the Age of Sail, a time in which the fundamental routes of trade and communication were constructed around the movements of ships. This meant that the center of this world, holding it up and holding it together, were social groups who also often presented a threat to the system: sailors and the enslaved.

Looking out from London, Paris, or Madrid, the European rulers of these vast Atlantic empires understood that there were threats to their power. But they largely felt confident in their control, which was constructed around an intricate web of forms of governance, patronage, and trade. Since the late fifteenth century, Europe had been fundamentally transformed. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that Europe as we understand it—a powerful center of global domination, its ideologies, languages, and economic customs extending outwards to much of the world—had been invented. All the major developments in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe—the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the Age of Revolution—were made possible and crucially driven by the structural tensions and events that emerged from the Atlantic system.

How did this system work, and how did it work so well, at least for a time? The system pivoted around colonial conquest and its product and corollary: the ideologies of race which articulated a vision of humanity as built around a hierarchy in which Europeans were ordained to control and dominate other groups. That racial ideology had many complex roots, but it crystallized specifically first around the encounter with and mass destruction of Indigenous groups in the Americas, and then around the construction of the plantation complex. This was all an unruly and variegated process, for at first many plantation structures depended on the work of both enslaved Africans and European indentured laborers. In time, however, the plantation system became deeply racialized, the distinction between white and Black its ideological bedrock, establishing a form of social and cultural life that seemed to offer up a kind of order and security. We continue to live, in many ways, in a house built on that foundation, and still struggle to escape its legacies.

Africa was at the heart of this system. It was, of course, home to at least twelve million people who were brought to the Americas in chains. But its diverse societies, notably its large and thriving West and Central African kingdoms, played central roles not just in the slave trade but also in the broader economic matrix of the Atlantic world. Before 1820, at least two-thirds of the people, perhaps as many as three-quarters, who crossed the Atlantic towards the Americas came from Africa. The scholar Robert Farris Thompson first coined the term “Black Atlantic,” taken up famously by Paul Gilroy, to describe this world and all the cultural forms that arose from it. But their work, and that of more recent scholars, emphasizes the extent to which the Atlantic was always and everywhere “Black” in the sense that people of African descent defined and shaped all aspects of the system.

There was almost nothing that was not touched by the system of slavery in one way or another, and that system was not simply imposed but also constructed through constant struggle, resistance, and negotiation. While we still live with the ideological legacies of the history of plantation slavery in the Americas and beyond, we are also always surrounded by the cultural forms that were produced by the enslaved as they sought to survive and challenge that system.

The enslaved, sailors, small farmers, and Indigenous people all worked constantly to find spaces of autonomy and freedom within the colonial system. Yet the surprise of the late eighteenth century was the extent to which various movements for autonomy and independence also began to implicate elites, those who in many ways had profited from the colonial system, but who also resented some of the limitations it placed on them. In North America and Latin America, colonists of European descent, often owners of land and enslaved people, began to agitate for economic freedoms and autonomy and more political control over fiscal matters. These conflicts were spurred on in North America by the Seven Years' War, which pitted the two great empires of the day (France and England), against one another in what was essentially a global conflict between emerging superpowers. One of the results of this war was to set in motion the processes that would ultimately lead to the American Revolution, whose 1776 Declaration of Independence represented the emergence of a new form of political imagination.

Between 1776 and the 1820s, the Americas were rocked by a series of revolutions with increasingly dramatic and violent outcomes. The most radical and far-reaching of these revolutions was not in the United States, which preserved the social order based on slavery; it was in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, France's most lucrative colony, which through its sugar and coffee plantations produced more profits alone than the thirteen colonies combined did for Britain. The Haitian Revolution that began with debates over local colonial autonomy was transformed by the widespread participation of enslaved people beginning in 1791. They organized a mass insurrection that became a great abolitionist revolution, the most successful abolitionist movement in the history of the world. Within two years, by 1793, they had secured immediate and universal emancipation in the colony of Saint-Domingue, a decision ratified by the French National Convention and extended to all French colonies.

The enslaved revolutionaries had found important allies among French activists and intellectuals influenced by the currents of antislavery Enlightenment thought, but it was their own political and ideological work in the Caribbean that in fact created modern universalism as we know it. They were the first to insist that natural rights truly extended to all human beings, of all backgrounds. The movement inspired enslaved people throughout the Americas, but it was also met with fierce reaction, for it threatened the very core not just of the order of slavery but of the ideological structure that had constituted Europe, and people of European descent, as being the destined rulers of the world and everything in it.

By the first decades of the nineteenth century, Europe was increasingly losing its grip on the Americas. First the United States, then Haiti, then the Latin American Republics found independence. In Haiti and Latin America, this process led also to the abolition of slavery, though the process was a slow and complicated one, even in Haiti itself where post-independence rulers continued to try and enforce forms of control over labor and

movement. In the United States it would take another war, far more devastating than the American Revolution itself, to ultimately secure at least the beginnings of a truly democratic society.

By the mid-nineteenth century, though it continued in Cuba and Brazil, the slave system was largely gone as a result of the combination of abolitionist activism and wars of liberation. European empire began to pivot towards Africa and Asia. In both regions there had been centuries of European presence in ports along the oceans. In Africa, because of the massive slave trade, that presence had devastated life in the interior. In Asia, too, European presence had begun to have impacts on societies, notably in India. Over the course of the nineteenth century, slowly at first but with increasing determination, Europeans took control of Africa and South and Southeast Asia, creating a new imperial world of remarkable breadth.

This imperial order was built on the ideological foundations of the earlier Atlantic colonial and plantation order. Racial thinking in particular was refined and extended in the nineteenth century, as European currents of thought articulated increasingly intricate analyses and justifications for a hierarchy of human beings. Yet in the colonial world the reality was often much more complicated, with various social groups participating in one way or another in colonial administration. In India and Africa, European governors established various forms of legal control that depended on distinctions between various indigenous “customs” that they sought to define and codify in new ways. The ramifications of these structures and ways of thinking continue to shape life in Africa and Asia in many ways. But fundamentally the colonial order was based on violence, rooted initially in conquest, and secured by the threat of force to control labor (most notably and visible in the Belgian Congo) as well as brutal repression of resistance. Still, the ideological apparatus in place guaranteed that most Europeans accepted these forms of violence as necessary and justifiable, part of an ultimate story of civilizational advancement in which they were at the helm. By the early twentieth century, European colonial rule was firmly established throughout the globe, seemingly unshakeable.

Technological changes were crucial in cementing European control, notably through the rise of the steamship, which eliminated the long-standing dependence on wind but created a dependence on coal and coaling stations. In the Americas, the rise of the steamship helped drive the expansion of the United States into the Caribbean and Central America. Expansion efforts included interventions in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines in 1898, involving in the isthmus that led to the creation of the Panama Canal, and ultimately occupations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic beginning in 1915 and 1916. By this time, the United States itself had been transformed into a continental territory, first thanks to the Louisiana Purchase (itself a direct result of the Haitian Revolution), then the Mexican-American War and the wars of conquest against Native American groups on the plains. On that basis, by the late nineteenth century, the United States itself was becoming a powerful empire able to compete for global prominence with the European empires.

This long era of Atlantic slavery, incomplete emancipation, and the emergence of new forms of empire left lasting legacies in the contemporary world. It created forms of thought, most notably racial thinking, as well as forms of economic and political inequality that deeply shaped the twentieth century and continue to shape the twenty-first.



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THE REVOLUTION THAT GAVE BIRTH TO HAITI

by Laurent Dubois

The Haitian Revolution was a global event. To tell its story in comic form, author Laurent Dubois and illustrator Rocky Cotard use a combination of text and image to capture the scale and complexity of that history.

The comic opens with a text from a Vodou song that evokes the Middle Passage, the voyage that brought as many as a million Africans to the French colony of Saint-Domingue, which became Haiti in 1804. This song, part of Haiti's religious tradition, is also part of an archive of thousands of songs that are kept alive within Vodou and tell the history of the nation and its culture. It is also a reminder of a crucial demographic fact about the Haitian Revolution: that the majority of the people involved had been born in Africa.

The song's first lines, which begin our comic, translate as: "On the ocean we are sailing." The experience of the Middle Passage—of being chained and put in the hold of a ship—is vividly described in the first verses of the song. As the song builds, and as we are brought to that moment in people's lives, it also talks about a future for that community of the enslaved. "There will come a time," one line calls out, "when they see us." The song culminates in a call for unity: "In the belly of the slave ship, we are all one." It is a reminder of a common ancestral experience that unites most Haitians.

The reason for the predominance of African-born enslaved people in the Haitian Revolution was the brutality of the slave system in Saint-Domingue. The enslaved died at massive rates, such that the only way to satisfy the system's hunger for labor was to keep importing people. In the years before the revolution, as many as forty thousand a year were arriving in the colony. And they came from places at war. In fact, many of the enslaved had been soldiers who were captured in internal wars that were partly driven by the expanding slave trade. That meant that they brought with them an experience that many would put to use after August 1791, when the revolution began with a massive armed uprising in the northern part of Saint-Domingue.

The leaders of that uprising were largely part of a group of enslaved men who had been appointed to positions of authority on plantations by their masters. They were overseers, controlling the work of other captives, as well as their punishment. But they turned collectively against the system and used the authority they had to fight on behalf of those they had commanded in the fields.

These leaders understood that the events of the French Revolution provided an opening for them. The popular movements that led to the creation of a National Assembly and the promulgation of a Declaration of the Rights of Man & Citizen in France in 1789 had many ramifications for the colony. These political transformations destabilized the colonial power, but they also brought into circulation a language of rights, which insisted that all human beings were born free and equal, that could be turned against slavery itself. The enslaved who rose up against slavery in Saint-Domingue insisted that those rights also applied to them, and that slavery was an unacceptable violation of

revolutionary principles. In the process they crucially expanded the political possibilities of the era.

Slavery was abolished by French officials in Saint-Domingue in 1793, a decision that was ratified by the French National Convention early in 1794. This was the first time a nation abolished slavery, and it created a set of profound political and economic challenges in the colonies. It fell to revolutionary leaders like Toussaint Louverture, who had been born into slavery himself, to oversee the transition from slavery to freedom. And there were deep differences about what precisely freedom should mean. For colonial officials and leaders like Louverture, it meant maintaining the plantation system but adapting it so that laborers had a bit more freedom and received some pay. This plan, however, still largely enforced working in the fields. But the formerly enslaved, often led by women, articulated a much more expansive vision of freedom, demanding control over their own labor and over what was to be produced on the land.

The revolution in Saint-Domingue created a profound set of cultural and social changes over the course of the 1790s. Freedom created new possibilities for forming families and communities, and the people of Saint-Domingue drew on their many different African roots as they forged a new world for themselves. In the process they created a Haitian culture organized around the search for autonomy and meaningful freedom.

But there were those in France, and in other countries that still had slavery, who saw all this as a threat. They told the story of the revolution as one of violence and decline, rather than possibility. They ultimately convinced a rising ruler in France, Napoleon Bonaparte, to reverse emancipation and reconstruct the old order of slavery. Napoleon sent tens of thousands of troops to Saint-Domingue to do so, but ultimately the resistance of a population that refused to go backward vanquished the French. Haiti was founded on January 1, 1804, and became the first nation to permanently abolish slavery.

The history of the Haitian Revolution is a crucial part of human history and of our broader struggle to craft a world based on dignity and freedom.



FURTHER READING ON THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

Articles

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NYC Department of Education

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The REVOLUTION That GAVE BIRTH To HAITI

A Hidden Voices Comic

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Department of
**Social Studies
& Civics**

THANKS FOR READING!

COMING SOON:

LUKASA #3

**A Graphic History of the
Mau Mau Rebellion and
the Fight for Kenya's Independence!**

