Unfinished Revolution

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Introduction

In 1804, British abolitionist and lawyer James Stephen discussed what he presented as “The Opportunity.”1 Published in London, this document presented an assessment of England’s opportunities—given the declaration of independence of Haiti—to marshal its commercial interests and, importantly, to recognise Haiti’s sovereignty and protect the new nation from French interference. Stephen, who spent time gaining first-hand experience in the Caribbean of the atrocities of Atlantic racial slavery, positions this critical moment in 1804 as a choice—actually more like a political path—that could help Britain and Haiti form a lasting and economically beneficial relationship. Importantly, this path would slight the French and position the influencers in public who meddled in these moves as they steered the conversation about Haiti and sovereignty.

A pivotal figure in British anti-slavery, Stephen may not be as well-known as his contemporaries, William Wilberforce or Thomas Clarkson, but he was well connected—and influential—even eventually marrying Wilberforce’s sister. Born in Dorset, but having worked in St. Kitts and travelled throughout the Caribbean for a time, Stephen returned to England, settling in London. A member of a group of Anglicans focused on philanthropy and service, known as the Clapham Sect or “Saints,” Stephen and “this well-connected, pious, and activist group was the creative center of an extraordinary range of missionary, social, and philanthropic initiatives that

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1 James Stephen, The Opportunity; Or Reasons for an Immediate Alliance with St. Domingo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1804]).
would leave an enduring mark on British society”—including the creation of a colony in Sierra Leone.²

Stephen, with his African Institution membership, advocacy, writing and links to anti-slavery societies in England, presents an important example of the types of anti-slavery supporters of Haiti. Although this chapter will make clear Stephen's advocacy, it is less interested in charting how he and other English abolitionists thought through and formed their moral obligations against slavery and for freedom.³ Many scholars have covered the work, thought, agitation and politicking of the Clapham Sect, the African Institution, William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, radical anti-slavery in Britain and French and British intrigues at the start of the nineteenth century.⁴

Instead of retreading this known ground, this chapter draws together two disparate voices—James Stephen's and Prince Saunders's—in order to highlight the related links in their writings on sovereignty, recognition, trade and bodies—and how those terms and issues would be manipulated by Haitian officials, notably Henri Christophe, as a way to legitimate his monarchical state. While slavery and abolition danced within these debates, political power—and sovereignty—were still framed within the context of European leaders and their nation-states. Yet, as this chapter notes, European articulations over the political and economic future of the Caribbean had

³ There are a number of researchers who are taking this area of scholarship into intriguing terrain. For more on this work, see Kate Hodgson, “Internal Harmony, Peace to the Outside World: Imagining Community in Nineteenth-Century Haiti,” Paragraph 37, no. 2 (2015): 178–92 and Jack Webb, “The Morant Bay Rebellion, British Colonial Policy, and Travelling Ideas About Haiti,” Journal of Caribbean History 50, no. 1 (2016): 70–89.
to contend with the political machinations of Caribbean officials and their designated instigators, such as Henri Christophe, Alexandre Pétion and Prince Saunders—and the role of race in these processes. This interplay between actors, agents and accomplices would have significant ramifications once multiple Haitis emerged to contest for legitimacy as the new nation-state. Just a few short years after Stephen’s text on recognition circulated, Haiti comprised both a republic and a separate monarchical state. While these Haitis fought each other for absolute power of the territory, the multiple “official” representatives manipulated/enticed European officials regarding the recognition and power of the one true and “real” Haiti.

The political actors involved in framing the foundations of each government nimbly negotiated the formal international legal apparatuses of sovereignty that hindered (or buttressed) their respective governments. Reading Stephen’s personal and official writings alongside the writings and documentary archives of Saunders and Christophe is less a battle over recognising Haiti’s independence and more of a visual and discursive battle over the frames (and limits) of Haiti’s black sovereign power, its packaging and its sovereign demands. In drawing these frames together, this chapter aims to construct a different trajectory for Haitian recognition that responds to and considers black sovereignty.

**Opportune Times**

In 1804, Dessalines—one of the highest-ranking rebels who fought alongside Toussaint Louverture—declared that Haiti was independent. After a tumultuous and bloody two-year fight against a re-invading (and determinedly re-enslaving) French empire, Dessalines (and his secretary Louis Boisrond-Tonnerre) would forever chart a new future for the former French colony of Saint-Domingue in proclaiming that Haiti—riffing on Ayiti, its Taíno name, meaning mountainous land—was free, independent and black. According to historian Philippe R. Girard, “however strongly worded, his proclamation was in the end neither an emancipationist call to arms nor a political manifesto articulating the rights of men, but a narrowly focused declaration of independence that denounced French imperialism.”

Although Girard, above, describes Dessalines’s proclamation in ways that could be read as a singular “declaration,” critics have recently become much more nuanced in their descriptions of the various documents and

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performances that formed the core of Dessalines’s break from France and declaration of Haiti in 1804. In the 2016 collection, *The Haitian Declaration of Independence: Creation, Context, and Legacy*, historians David Armitage and Julia Gaffield describe the materials that have now come to be regarded as Haiti’s “declaration of independence” as “the oath sworn and then signed by Dessalines’s generals to renounce France forever and to die rather than live under its dominion”; “the proclamation signed by Dessalines and addressed to the people of ‘Hayti’”; and “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.”

Containing violent imagery, these documents set up the demand of Haitian sovereignty, as well as the refutation of French (and white) control—in addition to the concretisation of Dessalines’s power.

Soon after declaring Haiti a sovereign nation, Dessalines began a violent purging of (some) whites—mostly the French. Even as the exterminations increased, and some lucky former colonists managed to escape Dessalines’s campaigns of vengeance, Haiti remained a potentially lucrative new nation. It was also one in which whites, according to the 1805 Constitution, could neither hold the title of master or proprietor, nor own land. Dessalines’s Haiti heralded a new world order in which people of African descent controlled the laws and structures of power at the nation-state level.

It is probably never wise to overinflate moments, but Dessalines’s announcement must have shaken the world. Imagine: at the time, the British, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Americans and the French all participate in the capturing, selling and trading of people of African descent in the Atlantic world. Industries such as sugar, coffee and cotton produced substantial wealth for their investors from the blood and sweat of enslaved labourers. Many people, purportedly unconnected with the slave trade, happily bought and sold products made through these enterprises.


7 Deborah Jenson, in an essay on the declaration, argues that “as new, contemporaneous copies of the Haitian Declaration of Independence come to light, evidence emerges of a collaborative verbal transmission and preservation process in which citizens worked with Dessalines to declare Haiti’s independence as if it were a well-loved poem.” See Jenson, “Living by Metaphor in the Haitian Declaration of Independence: Tigers and Cognitive Theory,” in Gaffield, *The Haitian Declaration of Independence: Creation, Context, and Legacy*, 76.

8 This document and related speeches have recently been examined by a number of scholars. See the following texts for a good overview: Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, Gaffield, *Haitian Connections in the Atlantic World: Recognition after Revolution* and Gaffield, *The Haitian Declaration of Independence: Creation, Context and Legacy*. 

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Atlantic racial slavery flowed through and helped form power and profit in the Atlantic world. The arrival of Haiti—born from the fires of blood and the brutal system of slavery under the French—must have signalled to those profiting from this system of dehumanisation, racial capitalism and violent enchainment that their days of legal control over dispossessed bodies was limited. Its presence asserted that if a large group of mostly formerly enslaved persons could revolt, fight off French, British and Spanish forces and declare themselves an independent nation that disallowed slavery from its origins, then many of the premises and rationales for the continued use and currency of slavery must be unfounded. Although those who rejected the system of slavery may have found the collapse of slavery within Haiti a welcome warning to other slave empires, it would be far too simplistic to imagine that these same abolitionists openly supported the active black political agency and governance engaged in by the new Haitians. All eyes, it seemed, turned to the Haitian “experiment” of governance to see what might happen.

As Saint-Domingue exiles travelled and fled to various ports, and news reports of creeping revolutionary fever spread from ships to novels, Haiti loomed as an imagined racial spectre of dis-ease, violent rebellion and black retribution—but also a potentially lucrative one. Contact with various economic agents continued, even as nation-states pondered how best to respond to the creation of Haiti. Two significant objects haunted these flows of trade, lamentations of catastrophe and even praisings of black freedom and political equality: (1) the former wealth of the colony as France’s “pearl of the Antilles” and (2) the future wealth of the nation, if it could return to its former plantation glory.

In the introduction, I outlined some of the motivations for Louverture’s agricultural policies that sought to continue the practice of plantation economies and enforced labour, whether supplied by the masses or imported labourers from other islands, within Haiti. Capital mattered especially in the afterlife of slavery. This will not be the last time that capital will infiltrate black sovereignty and give it additional morphologies. I will untangle other stories in future chapters. In this chapter, I am more concerned with the ways that Haiti’s potential/future wealth gave meaning to its black sovereignty, turning any form of recognition of its actual political reality into an actuarial exchange that constantly shifted along a value chain. The refrain that haunted these encounters? “How much are you/your people worth”?

James Stephen, great grandfather of Virginia Woolf, is an unlikely advocate for Haiti’s sovereignty. Considered the chief legal architect of the Slave Trade Act of 1807, Stephen moved in fairly important circles alongside those engaged in working to remove Britain from the slave trade. After a
formative experience in the Caribbean witnessing a trial involving enslaved persons of African descent and further interactions with the violent system, he focused on describing and discussing slavery. Born into a fractious family wracked by debt, he would rise and become the head of a family notable for their continued resistance against slavery. In his monumental *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*, historian David Brion Davis describes James Stephen as “perhaps the most powerful intellect of the British abolition movement” who for some 30 years “had a decisive influence on the movement’s policy.”

Stephen’s arguments against the British slave trade extended into concerns about international relations, something that can be seen in his writings and letters in the midst of the Haitian Revolution about the crisis of revolution, the horrors of slavery and what the future inevitably held in the Atlantic world for the control—and production of—Saint-Domingue’s sugar. In a pamphlet entitled *The Crisis of the Sugar Colonies; or an Inquiry into the Objects and Probable Effects of the French Expedition to the West Indies* (1802), Stephen takes aim at France’s brutal history of slavery, Britain’s related slave system in the Caribbean, the fervour of the rebellion in Saint-Domingue, the real reason for France’s “return” to the colony (he described it as re-enslavement) and what he saw as the ultimate result of the confrontation between France and the rebels in the colony: the eradication of slavery. In his eyes, the sequence of events offered no other possible outcome given the extent of the violence and the brutality of the system of enslavement. The overall conclusion of the pamphlet was: let this violent upheaval be a lesson for Britain and its continued reliance on slavery.

Two short years later, in 1804, Stephen returned to the Caribbean with a new pamphlet, *The Opportunity, or Reasons for an Immediate Alliance with St. Domingo*. It begins, though, with a circle back to *The Crisis* and a recounting of Stephen’s prognostications of the future of sugar production, capitalism and power in the Caribbean. In the opening pages of *The Opportunity*, Stephen congratulates himself for being right about the reason why France sent a force to Saint-Domingue in 1802. Talks with the rebels were not planned. Peaceful negotiations were not desired. The entire exercise aimed to place the might of France against an erstwhile cadre of rebel fighters who dared to set the terms of their relationship with France—not exactly independence, but definitely an insistence on determining their own future. Napoleon responded to Toussaint’s claims of autonomy, as noted in the introduction, by sending tens of thousands of troops to Saint Domingue. Stephen did not accept France’s public statements concerning the arrival of

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Games of Sovereignty and Opportunity

troops in the Caribbean. To him, this was an invasion that had the potential to destabilise British colonies. He feared—and he was right about this—that Napoleon planned to reintroduce slavery. In *The Crisis*, he argues that any attempt at re-enslavement would be met with violence on the part of the revolutionaries. They would not go back to chains. In *The Opportunity*, he reflects on that moment and offers this commentary:

The author’s premises [in *The Crisis*], as he has reason to believe, appeared not less questionable than his conclusions: yet, reasoning from these premises, he inferred with much confidence the high probability of events which have since actually occurred in St. Domingo [the former French colony], extraordinary and wonderful though these events have appeared to the European public.10

Undeceived by the rhetoric of reconciliation and entreaties of respect, Stephen was able to detect France’s true intent and clearly foresee an improbable outcome—war with the free people of colour and the rebels after a refusal to resubmit to French rule and the re-establishment of slavery. In *The Crisis*, he details what he sees as France’s plan—divide, reconquer, re-enslave—but acknowledges not anticipating the treachery that awaited Toussaint Louverture. He discusses France’s duplicity and the arrest and death of Toussaint in *The Opportunity*, noting that even he failed to imagine that the French would set up a false meeting, then an ambush, and arrest Toussaint before sending him to die in the Jura Mountains far away in Europe. Stephen laments that he was “ignorant of the yet unfathomed depth of French depravity.”11 But, being right about nearly everything that happened in *The Crisis*, he suggests in *The Opportunity* that he will probably be right about what he considers the only path forward for Britain in the Caribbean. In bold, capital letters, he announces the new pamphlet’s thesis: “You ought, sir [addressing the Right Honourable William Pitt, Chancellor of the Exchequer], I CONCEIVE TO ACKNOWLEDGE WITHOUT DELAY, THE LIBERTY OF THE NEGROES OF ST. DOMINGO; AND TO ENTER INTO FœDERAL ENGAGEMENTS WITH THEM AS A SOVEREIGN AND INDEPENDENT PEOPLE.”12

Stephen makes this startling recommendation and then provides detailed support for it through an examination of Haiti’s declaration of independence, how its independence will potentially impact the future of the region and the economic opportunities for Britain (and its colonies in the West Indies) if it allied with Haiti. The first topic that he tackles is not how Britain

should take control of the Caribbean or remove France as an influencer in the region. His emphasis is not European control, but the changing world order that now included a black nation-state.

With the arrival of Haiti, the Atlantic world had turned on its head and something new had emerged. According to Stephen: “A new order of things has arisen in the West Indies, to which former precedents are quite inapplicable.”13 Imperial fortunes may have brought Napoleon to the throne, but the Haitian Revolution shifted the basis of colonial policy. As Stephen explains, “it was [...] a fundamental maxim of all the powers of Europe who possessed colonies in the Antilles, that the supremacy of the European race, and the depression of the African, must be at all times [...] maintained.”14 For Stephen, the former maxim no longer held and, in fact, had shifted in much the same way as the social revolutions within Europe saw the rebalancing of social hierarchies. In linking the eradication of racial antipathy and notions of black inhumanity with social transformations in Europe, Stephen signals the naturalness of these shifts and tries to place them within similar progressive political changes more recognisable to his audience—and mostly imagined as the privilege of people racialised as white.

While it may be tempting to read his sentiments as an expression of racial equality, Stephen denies that his view is some sort of moral awakening or a plot to transform the social order within the British Empire. Recognition of Haiti, for him, was merely a part of any good colonial policy that recognised how, and in what way, to maximise profit and power within a changing new world order, rather than resisting change due to a too ready reliance on the continued political policy of black nullification. For Stephen, continuing to resist acknowledging the existence of Haiti and refusing to steer and control the terms of connections with the nation would guarantee Britain faced economic and political consequences for pursuing a path of refutation and disavowal.

He reminds his readers that the former rebels possess “an entire island, the most important of the group: An island of far greater extent than any other (Cuba alone excepted) in the whole Western Archipelago, and which, in population and produce, was lately equal to all the rest united.”15 This unencumbered, large, prosperous new territory, Stephen asserts, considered Britain an ally. To reap the benefits of this allegiance, Britain must recognise and maximise this gift. In extolling the potential political benefits of an alliance with Haiti, Stephen also issues a challenge, calling on his audience to recognise that the former French colonists had defeated the powerful

and purportedly unassailable French forces and, therefore, were a fighting community that had achieved the impossible and deserved Britain’s respect.

The formal recognition that Stephen wants does not occur until 1839—well after France recognises Haiti in 1825. Although there has been a suggestion within a number of historiographies of early Haiti that Haiti suffered isolation and rejection, more recent works have worked hard to redraw these narratives. For example, Julia Gaffield notes that after Dessalines’s death, British merchants and officials were in contact with Haitian leaders. As Gaffield notes, “both Christophe and Pétion used foreign delegates to communicate and negotiate with British ministers in London.” These manoeuvres, although sparked into being due to a lack of formal diplomatic ties, enabled a range of players—including later designees of African descent—to engage in political work on behalf of Haiti. Stephen, even at the time of the writing of this pamphlet, understood what was at stake in maintaining and encouraging these alliances.

To Stephen, the drive of the rebels and their conviction to live and die free made them a formidable adversary and a cautionary friend. “Hispaniola,” he argues, “no longer under the dominion of the house of Bourbon, or of that power, styling itself a republic, which has seized upon one of the thrones of the Bourbons will, if hostile to Spain, and in confederacy with ourselves, be found a most important ally.” He recognises that this moment offered significant political and economic gain for Britain—if it made the small effort to form an alliance with the new nation. Stephen writes: “With the numerous ports on the North, South, and West of this large island at our command, and with an auxiliary army of negroes at our call, our power to distress the Spanish colonies and commerce, would be as wide as our inclination to do so.” Stephen’s observations and prognostications make clear the benefits—and risks—of this moment. For an empire still practising the enslavement of people of African descent, the emergence of Haiti signalled that slavery may soon be over—but black politics had only just begun.

The solution for Britain in these uncertain times? Seduction, entreaty and friendship. Stephen warns that if Britain rejected the former colonists and refused to offer its recognition of the new nation’s sovereignty, Britain would obtain a formidable foe and face interminable difficulties controlling the flow of freedom and the contours of power shifting in the Caribbean. If Britain decided to protect the former colony against France, Britain would gain an economic powerhouse in the region as a new friend. Only by channelling the fervour of freedom could Britain temper the winds of change within its own colonies.

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Other British commentators held different views. British vicar and visitor to Haiti William Woodis Harvey produced a “sketch” of Haiti that drew on his purported experiences in the country and his many interactions with Haitians and others, entitled *Sketches of Hayti; From the Expulsion of the French, to the Death of Christophe* (1827). Published in London, this long-format essay provides a curious counter-narrative to Stephen’s more radical anti-slavery rhetoric. Rather than see slavery as an evil that must be eradicated, swiftly, Harvey sees the only and sensible solution to the ending of slavery as one of gradualism. For him, Haiti is a case study of what can go wrong when ardour and passion are allowed to rule the necessary and careful steps needed to move black people from the evils of bondage into society. Harvey begins his tract by outlining what he sees as the circumstances facing Haiti and the future of its people:

[This moment] presents to us the picture of a people newly escaped from slavery, yet still suffering and exhibiting in their character, its pernicious and demoralising effects; gradually returning from scenes of confusion and bloodshed, to habits of industry, peace and order; steadily aiming, amidst frequent reverses, to establish a regular and independent government; and under circumstances of difficulty, with confined resources, labouring to improve their agriculture, to repair an exhausted population, to form commercial connexions [...] thus laudably endeavouring to lay the foundation of an empire, which may perhaps be compared hereafter with nations the most celebrated for their civilization and refinement.18

Laced throughout this passage are conditional terms that suggest a people in the throes of becoming something else. According to Harvey, Haitians, “newly escaped from slavery,” were in the process of forming a regular government. Although the task of forming a new nation is hinted at here, Harvey suggests that this formation is further constrained by “a people” who continue to exhibit “in their character” the “demoralising effects” of slavery. What is implied in the above, but unstated, is Harvey’s question whether a “regular” government could ever form from formerly enslaved persons. He has good things to say about many people he met in Haiti, but he clearly worries about the future of the country given some its leaders—especially some of the black ones.

Harvey, having also spent time with Henri Christophe, looks back on Dessalines’s rise to power and concludes that Haitians remain impacted by their “suffering” under slavery. At later points in the text, Harvey will argue,

countering Stephen, that the British system of slavery could never produce a Dessalines due to its gradual and perhaps more merciful approach to ending slavery. Whatever his thoughts about slavery, Harvey’s articulations about the constraints facing Haiti—from resources to “repairing an exhausted population”—seem laced with considerations of incompleteness and, while not exactly black nullification, rationales that at least attempt to frame Haiti as not quite normal. As a nation striving to reach a better condition, Harvey sees this state of becoming as something immensely difficult for the country, not due to foreign interference, lack of economic support or French insistence on meddling in Caribbean affairs, but because of the blackness of the country and its history of slavery.

These views come through in articulations about Dessalines. Laurent Dubois notes the conflicting public responses to Dessalines. “Today,” he argues, “Dessalines is widely and justifiably venerated for his role in leading Haiti to independence. But the mythology surrounding him tends to obscure the internal conflicts within the revolutionary movement.” It also tends to distort the life trajectories that brought many of the rebels from Africa to the colony of Saint-Domingue, as well as the realities of those rebels during the Revolution who never sided with the French. Myopic vision notwithstanding, criticisms of Dessalines—and there were/are plenty—also conflate the purported vanity and grandiosity of the man with the absurdity of the nation’s existence. As mentioned in the introduction, ridicule often emerged even in attempts to offer recognition and reciprocity, as mainly white Atlantic world officials struggled to place politics, aptitude and self-actualised black futures within their political landscapes. This view is captured in the following passage from Harvey as he critiques what he sees as Dessalines’s egotistical “joyride” to emperor-dom:

In selecting this title, he [Dessalines] consulted his vanity alone. The mere name could tend neither to increase his power, nor to confirm what he already possessed; and with the less imposing title of chief, he would have been equally respected, and equally powerful. Vanity indeed is a fault not confined to negroes; but it is seldom displayed in a manner so bordering on the ridiculous. For what could be more absurd than an uneducated, barbarous, though indeed successful negro, having authority over negroes as ignorant and uncivilized as himself.

21 Harvey, *Sketches of Hayti; From the Expulsion of the French, to the Death of Christophe*, 31; emphasis mine.
Absurd. Ridiculous. Harvey may have produced a book that contains positive statements about Toussaint Louverture and Henri Christophe, but it also contains vitriolic articulations about Dessalines that highlight his negative views about people racialised as black and those who claim an identity as a person of African descent. Harvey labels Dessalines’s power-grabbing and his assumption of the title of emperor as an absurdity. Although Dessalines would claim a sovereign designation synonymous with that of Napoleon Bonaparte (who would become emperor in France), Harvey argues that Dessalines’s power-grabbing bordered on the ludicrous as it placed a “barbarous” man at the head of a nation of “uncivilized” people.22

This figuration will be echoed in later encounters as Haitian leaders and their governance structures are labelled as a burlesque of empire. Abolitionist, orator, writer and future politician, Frederick Douglass, writing in an 1861 issue of his Douglass’ Monthly (a monthly abolitionist magazine that ran from 1859 to 1863), encapsulates the views of Haiti that sought to denigrate its status and its people. While outlining his excitement about a planned trip to Haiti and, as a formerly enslaved person, what arriving on Haiti’s shores would mean, he makes this astute observation about Haiti’s international relations in the Atlantic world, especially within the context of interactions with the United States:

Both the press and the platform of the United States have long made Haiti the bugbear and scare-crow of the cause of freedom […]. The fact is, white Americans find it hard to tell the truth about colored people. They see us with a dollar in their eyes. Twenty hundred millions of dollars invested in the bodies and souls of the Negro race in this Republic—a mountain of gold—constitutes a standing bribe, a perpetual temptation to do injustices to the colored race. Haiti has thus constantly been the victim of something like a downright conspiracy to rob her of the natural sympathy of the civilized world, and to shut her out of the fraternity of nations.23

Reading Douglass’s later work focusing on the USA against Harvey’s more British articulations highlights the ways that Harvey links black sovereignty not with the chiasmus-like shift in power and wealth that Douglass imagines but with the comical and ridiculous posturing that emerges when blackness and politics mix. Although complimentary about some Haitian leaders,

22 For more on this link between Dessalines and Napoleon Bonaparte, see Fischer, Modernity Disavowed, 230–31.
23 Frederick Douglass, “A Trip to Haiti,” Douglass’ Monthly May 1861, as reprinted in Philip S. Foner, ed., Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings, abridged and adapted by Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 441.
Harvey targets Dassalines for his condemnation, signalling his contempt for the power—and the violence—embraced by Dassalines. This view, and contempt, were not unique.

In Francophone critic J. Michael Dash’s influential Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination, Dash argues that “the stereotype of Haitian barbarity was highly favoured by those who believed that the sustained domestication of blacks was the only way of curbing their natural barbarous instincts.” As Dash notes, though, this translated throughout various international encounters with Haiti, especially by North Atlantic majority-white nation-states, as a pejorative narrative in which “Haiti became the extreme example of blacks lapsing into savagery when restraints were lifted. The denial of recognition,” manifested as the refusal to accept black sovereignty, “denied the black race the right to subjectivity and relegated Haiti to a zone of negativity and absence.”

Consistently, throughout the passages on Dassalines, Harvey stresses that there is nothing beneficial about Dassalines’s actions. Instead, he rejects Dassalines’s anger, his violence and his sovereign power. In pushing Dassalines outside of the normal frames of sovereign power—even for power-hungry emperors, such as Napoleon—Harvey implies that Haiti is neither normal nor a model for future black political possibilities. For Harvey, the only appropriate response to Haiti—and Dassalines—is a paternalistic condescension. Britain would never produce a Dassalines, but it would also never allow a black emperor to place himself as the leader of one of its former colonies. Harvey makes it clear that the only power appropriate for a “suffering” and demoralised people was one that knew its place in the (white) Atlantic world. Gradual moves. Subtle shifts. A black nation in the Atlantic world needed a (white) paternalistic guide to help steer it away from its unnatural and uncivilised tendencies. Without these tempering constraints, a Dassalines emerges and has the audacity to take over a nation. What Harvey makes clear is that the problem of Dassalines is not just a problem of one man, but the problem of black people trying to claim more rights and power than their “state” allows. Harvey’s assessment, in clear opposition to Stephen’s “opportunity,” sees Haiti’s black sovereignty not as an economic potential for Britain, but as a warning of the danger of unchecked black power. To guard the Caribbean, Britain needed to be vigilant and smart about its links to other nations and what any alliance with Haiti would mean to its internal black colonial populations. He would be right to worry about the impact of Haiti on relationships inside Britain and the British Empire.

The Unfinished Revolution

Black Advocacy

In 1816, advocate, educator and, for a time, Haitian adviser and representative Prince Saunders (1775–1839) published a collection of letters, reports, proclamations and other translated documents from the then monarchical government of former Haitian Revolutionary leader Henri Christophe, who was the head of one of two Haitis that had splintered in the aftermath of Dessalines’s death—Christophe’s monarchy in the north of the nation and Alexandre Pétion’s republic in the south. Saunders, born in Connecticut in the USA to a West African mother and an American-born black father, obtained an education at schools in Vermont and Connecticut, before eventually attending a school affiliated with Dartmouth College and then moving, upon graduation, to Boston to become a teacher at the prestigious African School. It would be in Boston, as a vibrant member of the black community, that Saunders would join in causes, such as the movement to Sierra Leone, with Paul Cuffee; become an active leader within the African Masonic Lodge; spend considerable time influencing the abolitionist societies, such as the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and corresponding with influential white British antislavery advocates, including William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson; and working, for a time, with Henri Christophe (through many of the above connections) to advance education and black sovereign rights within the Atlantic world, before eventually taking up the post of Attorney General in Haiti where he died in 1839.

Saunders’s advocacy and work for Christophe began not through interactions with Haitians but through engagements with British allies—specifically, allies of Henri Christophe. Saunders would meet Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce during a trip to the United Kingdom for another of his many campaigns and causes. Saunders quickly earned their praises and soon found himself sent to Haiti to buttress further support for


plans for deeper links between the United Kingdom and Haiti. Although undoubtedly motivated by the same capitalistic urges and concerns about power (notably weakening France’s influence in the Caribbean) that flowed through and within Stephen’s and Harvey’s writings, Wilberforce’s and Clarkson’s turn to Haiti involved the paternalistic moralism of (white) training and advancement in order to elevate Haiti and its people into a “civilised” nation. Stephen, Harvey and the continued practice of slavery within the British Empire, notwithstanding, the United Kingdom remained, at least in the Atlantic world that surrounded Saunders, a leader within the antislavery movement. Its role would be so prominent that Saunders will write his *Haytian Papers* specifically for the British people, penning an open letter to the British reading public in the opening pages to the compendium that includes these lines:

> O happy England! to thee most appropriately belong the exalted appellations of protectress of the Christian world; the strong hold of rational freedom; the liberatress as well as the genuine asylum for oppressed humanity, and the promulgatress of civilization, knowledge, and piety to every region of the globe. In thee we see a practical exemplification of those principles of benevolence and kind affection which encompass the human character with the imperishable lustre of glory and honour.27

Saunders’s rhetoric regarding England is saturated in rhetorical turns that identify the British people and their officials as agents and activists on behalf of the world. At no time does Saunders wrestle with Britain’s continued practice of enslavement, its continued colonial and imperial desires or its difficult and contested entanglements and oft-repeated actions of dispossession when national representatives encountered indigenous cultures around the world. Instead, Saunders sees in the history of the fight against slavery within England—including the successful passing of the Slave Trade Act of 1807 that made it illegal to transport enslaved persons on British ships and participate in the slave trade—a moral light that provided a model of liberation and freedom that all people—and nations—should emulate. This over-inflation of British deeds and activities serves a specific purpose for Saunders: to gain the attention of the British public and encourage, for once and for all, the recognition of Haiti’s sovereignty. He understood the difficulty of his task.

In *Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St Domingo* (1797), British politician, wealthy plantation owner, writer and fierce slavery proponent Bryan Edwards (1743–1800) presented his views on the then

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colony, Saint-Domingue, its rebellious people, its antislavery fight against the French and its anti-colonial fight against the Spanish, British and eventually, also, its former colonial rulers. Edwards, in producing remarks replicated by later pundits, such as Harvey, regarding Haiti and its political capabilities, sets the tone for the improbability of people of African descent ever being able to become anything that remotely resembles a prosperous, lawful or industrial society. Influenced by anti-slavery instigators, the “revolting Negroes”—as Edwards calls them—were dangerous, uncivilised and probably incapable of governance. In detail, Edwards writes:

I might here expatiate upon the wonderful dispensations of Divine Providence in raising up enslaved Africans to avenge the wrongs of the injured Aborigines; I might also indulge the fond but fallacious idea, that, as the negroes of St. Domingo have been eye-witnesses of the benefits of civilized life among the whites; have seen in what manner and to what extent social order, sober industry, and submission to the laws, contribute to individual and general prosperity (advantages which were denied to them in their native country), some superior spirits may hereafter rise up among them, by whose encouragement and example they may be taught, in due time, to discard the ferocious and sordid manners and pursuits of savage life; to correct their vices, and be led progressively on to civilization and gentleness, to the knowledge of trust, and the practice of virtue.28

On the one hand, Edwards has no love for those with fanciful, imagined dreams of avenging slaves. He might consider their actions sound retribution against perceived French ills, but he is clear that this agitation is a contagion that will transform the Caribbean and eventually infect all who participated in the sugar trade—including neighbouring British colonies. Yet, he also cautions supporters of the revolution in Saint-Domingue that the “negroes of St. Domingo” might never develop the order and industry that they had witnessed in their former state. Although this development might still happen in some future for the colony, what clearly seems impossible to him is the arrival of a leader who “may hereafter rise up among them, by whose encouragement and example they may be taught, in due time, to discard the ferocious and sordid manners and pursuits of savage life.” Edwards stresses that moving toward civilisation—especially under the rule of another black person—would be impossible for the “revolting negroes.” Only those prone to dreaming, he claims, would imagine a prosperous and industrial people could form from the seeds of black revolt. In fact, Edwards argues that “it

is the mere creation of the fancy, the fabric of a vision” 29 to believe that anything remotely organised and political could emerge from the revolutionary fervour of the fires of 1791 in Saint-Domingue. If Edwards could not envision a strong and astute formerly enslaved individual, there was no way that he could imagine the creation of a black nation-state formed from the seeds of slave revolt.

Edwards died before Haiti was born, but he would have most likely criticised overtures toward Haiti by British abolitionists, philanthropists and traders after his death who ignored his warnings that blackness distorted everything. Looking at the world through his anti-black lens, black sovereignty could only be an improbable, absurd and dangerous configuration. In “sketching” Saint-Domingue, Edwards does more than just describe the world as it is. His chronicle also puts limits on the world as it could be. Into these frames, Edwards places doubts about the possible capital futures of territories without slavery and the ability of people of African descent to lead prosperous and productive lives. In routinely referring to the people of African descent in Saint-Domingue—and the wider Caribbean—as “barbarous men,” Edwards makes clear that people of African descent will forever be less than capable persons. Considering anything otherwise was an act of fancy. Edwards would not be the last to consider the absurdity of blackness and politics. Chapter 3 picks up this refrain in a different time period in Haitian history. What that chapter traces in a later context is what Saunders’s compendium stresses: Haiti mattered and would be heard. This reckoning is similar to what instilled Douglass with a mixture of excitement and hope on the lead up to his trip to Haiti in 1861. Haiti—and by extension, Haiti’s national existence—mattered.

Rather than leading a revolution by blood, Saunders engaged in a battle involving textual and figurative combat. If the Haitian Revolution from 1791 to 1804 and the further Haitian Constitutions after the creation of the nation laid out the rejection of slavery and anti-colonialism, the word battle that Saunders and others enacted in the 1810s centred on altering the currency of black life and black futurity by arguing that people of African descent refused to be silent in the face of attempts to re-enslave, disavow, colonise and reject the humanity—and politics—of people of African descent. Saunders would be joined in these endeavours by Haitian writers and statesmen, such as Baron de Vastey (1781–1820), who spent considerable time as Henri Christophe’s secretary.

Ostensibly born in Saint-Domingue into what was a wealthy mixed-race family (with possible familial connections to novelist Alexandre Dumas), Vastey would join the revolutionary army under Toussaint Louverture as a

young man and, potentially, spend time in Paris as a poet before producing his most well-known and militant work that condemned colonialism, *Le système colonial dévoilé* (1814). According to literary historian Marlene Daut, “in the early nineteenth century, Vastey was an international public figure who was well known for anti-colonial and black positivist writing.”

Through his writings, he set up a counter-narrative argument that contested articulations of black inhumanity and degeneration. “Vastey’s attention to the many racist distortions being produced in colonial discourse,” Daut stresses, “was aimed at contesting the dominant idea that Africans were a barbaric species, incapable of enlightenment, and that nineteenth-century Haiti could furnish the definitive proof for such beliefs.”

It is Daut and postcolonial critic Chris Bongie who perhaps have contributed most significantly to repositioning Vastey within African Atlantic writing and political thought. This reckoning includes the recent English translation (2016) by Chris Bongie of Vastey’s most famous work (*The Colonial System Unveiled*). In what follows, I seek to add another voice to the early nineteenth-century Atlantic debates about Haiti and blackness: that of Prince Saunders. Circling around Christophe and Vastey were the writings and thought of a black intermediary who attempted to disrupt pejorative constructions of Haiti and black political futures by archiving, documenting and translating the actual political practices of Haiti’s leader, King Henry, and settling Haiti’s sovereignty within normative discursive frames of power within the Atlantic world.

He, too, would sit, for a time, in the circles closest to Henri Christophe, offering advice mainly about education. Although not Haitian, Saunders saw himself as a black political conduit who could, through his efforts to translate material surrounding Haiti’s political infrastructures and procedures, change the rhetoric towards and the political future of Haiti. Although asked by Christophe to return to the United Kingdom and


recruit British teachers who would help advance Christophe’s vision for education in Haiti, Saunders was not asked to style himself as a royal cipher or a member of the royal court. He did that without any prompting, enjoying the love and attention from British abolitionists, newspapers and journals enamoured by the educated, erudite man of colour. That performative went down well in British circles as many purportedly confused his first name with a hereditary title. Saunders did not disabuse those who made this assumption.32

For all of his grandstanding, Saunders was committed to removing falsehoods and elaborate constructions of inhumanity from the political cloud that surrounded Haiti. What he produces, through the compilation of materials, is an archive of political reactions, thought and influence that aptly refuses black nullification and black degeneration. This is also a refusal of any political formulations or frameworks that deny the mixing of blackness with politics and power. In reconfiguring space for black sovereignty, Saunders engages in a productive and generative disavowal of the terms of abjection that, to borrow from Africana studies scholar and black feminist theorist Tina Campt, “is defined less by opposition or ‘resistance,’ and more by a refusal of the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy.”33

Saunders includes a letter addressed “to the Public” in the opening pages of his compendium of decrees, proclamations, imperial laws and letters from Haitian officials. In it, Saunders outlines his rationale for reproducing the documents, the current state of political life for people of African descent (although limited in his geographical reach), the need to address erroneous information about Haitians and black people, in general, and the power contained within the collection’s pages. For Saunders, the collection assembled irrefutable evidence of black peoples’ possession of the “natural intelligence which the beneficent Father of all ordinarily imparts to His children.”34

Forced, in his letter, to address critics, such as Edwards, who saw the Haitian Revolution as a rebellion stoked by meddling (white) anti-slavery advocates, he quickly moves on to the major question of aptitude and abilities of people of African descent. The passage (above) brings up the idea of intelligence and the arguments of some opponents of black people and Haitians who questioned the capability of people of African descent to comprehend freedom, marshal the population into a productive national

32 For more on this, see Julie Wench, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten*.  
34 Saunders, *Haytian Papers*, iii.
community and construct a nation governed by people of African descent. Saunders, savvy to these pejorative claims, tries to head off dismissals of black authorship and political thought as absurdities or, to reuse Edwards’s term, “fancy.” Saunders calls out those who cast doubt about the capabilities and aptitude of Haitian people, and other people of African descent, as racist, spiteful and evil. He continues:

I say, being convinced, that for these inglorious and malevolent purposes, such persons have endeavoured to impress the public with the idea, that those official documents which have occasionally appeared in this country, are not written by black Haytians themselves; but that they are either written by Europeans in this country, or by some who, they say, are employed for that purpose in the public offices at Hayti; and, for the entire refutation of this gross misrepresentation, I upon my honour declare, that there is not a single white European at present employed in writing at any of the public offices; and that all the public documents are written by those of the King’s Secretaries [including Vastey] whose names they bear, and that they are all black men, or men of colour.35

Yes, Haytian Papers contains papers regarding Haiti and its political infrastructure and laws. And, yes, Haytian Papers presents those documents (now translated into English, presumably by Saunders) as the unvarnished reality of the social and political conditions of life in Haiti—in contradis-tinction to the chronicles from white Europeans and Americans who may never have walked on Haitian land. But Haytian Papers does something else. It makes space within public and political discourse for a black nation to exercise and practise sovereign rights, as well as room for future nations (and by extension people of African descent) to engage in similar performances of black sovereignty. In demanding sovereign rights for black national futures that had not yet happened, but could—now that Haiti had led the way—Saunders strengthens and adds to the grammar of black sovereignty.

Echoes of Saunders’s grammatical formulations can be found in the framework of black feminist futurity proposed by Tina Campt. In this framework, Campt moves beyond considerations of what will happen in the future and instead “strives for the tense of possibility that grammarians refer to as the future real conditional or that which will have had to happen. The grammar of black feminist futurity,” Campt stresses, “is a performance of a future that hasn’t yet happened but must […] It’s a politics of prefig-uration that involves living the future now—as imperative rather than

35 Saunders, Haytian Papers, iii.
subjunctive—as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in
the present.”

Turning back to Saunders and reconsidering his collection
through Campt’s “future real conditional” lens, allows us to recognise that in
order to see the future in the now Saunders had to evidence Haiti’s political
world—and the future political worlds of people of African descent. In
so doing, he carved a space for black sovereignty as something that went
beyond the singular example of Haiti. In detailing Haiti, Saunders makes
the case that black sovereignty had already arrived. It was now up to other
entities to profit from its political existence—starting with Britain.

To that end, he made sure that Haitian declarations of sovereignty,
proclamations and laws ended up in the hands of the British public in 1816.

Included in the collection are details about Code Henry (King Henri’s
cultivation policy governing labourers, farmers and plantation owners),
constitutional laws, the rise of Christophe to the throne and comments from
Saunders about the abolition of the slave trade. Alongside these documents,
Saunders placed a manifesto from Christophe that contains additional
descriptions of the rise of black power in the Atlantic world.

Although Christophe would write letters to British abolitionist Thomas
Clarkson, engaging in a long correspondence on many topics, including
how to strengthen the training and education of Haiti’s youth, we must
be careful not to presume that Christophe’s British matchmaking, or
Saunders’s, weakened Christophe’s rule, and by extension Haitian power,
in the Caribbean. Allies and assistance, including trade agreements, were
encouraged. Giving up land or Haiti’s rights to self-determination would
never happen in exchange.

Saunders’s collection includes one of Christophe’s manifestos that repeats
this assertion. It starts not with grand proclamations of trade and economic
vitality but with sovereignty and liberty and Haiti’s claims to both. The
opening paragraph states:

Sovereign of a nation too long oppressed, a nation which has suffered
cruel persecution, and which, by its energy, its perseverance, its valour,
and its prowess, has succeeded in acquiring, by the sword, liberty and
independence; the only object of our constant solicitude, of our incessant
labours, for the happiness of the virtuous, brave, and generous people,

36 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17.
37 Although, importantly, the expenses during this trip and the publication of the
decrees were probably not sanctioned by Christophe. Relations between them would be
tested after this episode.
38 For more on this correspondence, see Earl Leslie Griggs and Thomas Prator, *Henry
Christophe and Thomas Clarkson: A Correspondence* (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 1952).
who have confided to us their destinies, has always been, to give it a place within the pale of civilized nations.39

In this passage’s re-telling of history, and in the pages that follow it, Haiti emerges as a fought for and sought after dream made reality, where enslaved persons violently rejected the brutality and the cruelty of their former masters and then formed a new nation that now sat amidst “the pale of civilized nations.” Given what Haiti had to and still does face, the phrase “within the pale” takes on a double meaning. It hints at the etymology of the term that suggests “within the limits,” yet the phrase in the context of black sovereignty highlights the actual paleness (or whiteness) of sovereignty’s limits. Giving Haiti a place within sovereignty means confronting the ways that sovereignty, as acknowledged by other sovereign nation-states, never considered and may even outright reject black political bodies. Christophe’s manifesto addresses this limitation through its very demands for placement within sovereign space. It also makes clear the limitations of what Haiti will give up to maintain its placement amongst (white) nations:

> We appeal to all the Sovereigns of the world, to the brave and loyal British nation, which has been the first to proclaim, in its august Senate, the abolition of the infamous traffic in Negroes; which has done still more, in employing the ascendancy of victory for the noble purpose of recommending the abolition to all other states with which she has concluded alliances; we appeal to the philanthropists of all nations; in fine, to mankind at large, to the whole universe, what people, after twenty-five years of battle and bloodshed, having won their liberty and independence with the sword, will ever consent to lay down their arms, and become again the sport and victims of their cruel oppressors? We ask, what people would stoop to such an excess of baseness? No, the last of the Haytians will breathe out his last sigh before he will renounce his independence.40

Christophe’s strident warnings were contested, at the time, and further constrained by practices of accommodation and alliances for profit that often placed labouring black bodies as anchor points for Haiti’s future capital. For all of his entreaties to the British—including taking on Thomas Clarkson as an honorary adviser and announcing plans to make English the national language—history has not been kind to Christophe. Although Aimé Césaire produced an entire play focused on Christophe, *La tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963), Christophe has often been styled as an opportunist monarch whose end—a debilitating stroke and then fatally shooting himself—in the midst

of a mutiny, brought about unification with the republican south, but not without consequences, including the long afterlife of the “debt” of revolution (more on this in Chapter 2).  

Conclusion

Although interested in improving education (an area where Saunders played a role) and laying the groundwork for infrastructural support within Haiti, Christophe seemed mostly interested in advancing his stature. With the building of the fortress the Citadelle Laferrière (now a UNESCO World Heritage site in Haiti), constructed as part of a fortification effort against a future French invasion, and the monumental Sans-Souci Palace, another UNESCO World Heritage site, Christophe displayed his opulence to his people and to foreign visitors—while utilising Haitian labour to erect these buildings. Saunders would have undoubtedly spent time in these spaces and seen the ways that Christophe performed sovereignty as much as he proclaimed it into existence.

Beyond the legacy of the grand structures now sprawled as icons across Christophe’s former monarchical holdings, Christophe’s manoeuvrings have also given us the collection that Saunders has compiled, in addition to the letters that he wrote to British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. That relationship would spark potential forays into a discussion with Czar Alexander in Russia and eventually lead to Christophe’s widow and daughters temporarily taking up refuge in Clarkson’s home in England. Through these encounters, what emerges are aspects of the pendulum of currency, capital and absurdity that move into and out of formations of black sovereignty and responses to it. Stephen, Edwards and Saunders will each respond to different dynamics of black sovereignty and different black political futures. Each, though, had to struggle with the very real constraints of power that would bring one leader in and force that same leader out of control.

By the time Christophe fired the fatal shot that took his life, and his son and heir was assassinated, Jean-Pierre Boyer (1776–1850), who would rule Haiti from 1818 to 1843, had assumed control of the south, following the

41 For more on the positioning of Christophe, see David Nicholls, From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour, and National Independence in Haiti (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996) and Fischer, Modernity Disavowed, 245–59. In addition to Césaire’s play, additional Caribbean writers have produced fictionalised accounts of Christophe’s involvement in the Haitian Revolution and his monarchical rule. See C. L. R. James’s Toussaint Louverture (1936) and Alejo Carpentier’s El reino de este mundo [The Kingdom of this World] (1949), for two examples of later takes on Christophe’s role within Caribbean history.
death from yellow fever of Alexandre Pétion (1770–1818), who controlled and led the southern-based Haitian republic from 1806 to 1818. Boyer would face many of the same obstacles, limitations and difficulties positioning Haiti as a sovereign nation within the Atlantic world, but he would focus, quite specifically, on labour, wealth and capital—many would say to the country’s demise.