

DEBATING THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION AND 'KONGOMANIA': *An African Rebellion on the Other Side of the Atlantic, or a French Creole Revolution in the Caribbean?*

ABSTRACT: Over the past 30 years, scholarship has shifted from viewing the Haitian Revolution as largely an extension of the French Revolution to understanding it as a revolt from the perspective of Africa and Africans. Four related factors contribute to explanations of this change in perspective. First, historians trained in pre-colonial Africa began to study slavery in the Americas. The second factor is the emergence of Atlantic History as a field of study, the third is the Bicentennial commemorations of the start (1991) and the end (2004) of the Haitian Revolution, and the fourth is Michel-Rolph Trouillot's much celebrated, widely circulated, and extremely influential essay "Unthinkable History" (from *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*; 1995), in which he critiqued the entire historiography of the Haitian Revolution and called for new perspectives. Taken collectively, the confluence of these four factors, all emerging prominently in the 1990s, contributed to the historiographical shift in Haitian scholarship that David Geggus labels "Kongomania."

The two main points of Geggus's contribution to this issue of *The Americas* is to challenge this recent understanding of the Haitian Revolution as essentially an African revolt in the Caribbean led by Kongos, and to give scholars reason to focus more attention on the active role of Creoles. Collectively, the responses by John Thornton, James H. Sweet, and Christina Mobley to Geggus's article emphasize that the point of their scholarship was to offer a Kongo perspective on the Haitian Revolution from their training and expertise in African history, not produce a new orthodoxy.

KEYWORDS: Haiti, Geggus, Congo

Among the major revolutions that reshaped the modern world over the past 250 years—for example, the American, French, Mexican, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions—the Haitian Revolution is one of the least studied. Only recently has it begun to receive its due from scholars as one of the most radical and thoroughly transformative revolutions of the Modern Era. In the span of 13 years, from 1791 to 1804, the most profitable French colony in the New World was overthrown by the largest slave rebellion in the history of the Americas. Eventually, the revolt that started against enslavement and became entangled with the twists and turns of the French Revolution, was transformed into a war of independence that emancipated over 400,000

individuals. In the process of destroying French colonial rule and abolishing slavery through violent revolution, the Haitian Republic was born.

In just a little over decade, one-time slaves not only defeated their French masters and colonial rulers, but also outsmarted and outlasted Spanish attempts to take over the territory and reunify the island of Hispaniola. If vanquishing the French and the Spanish was not enough for one revolution, the slave rebels also defeated a five-year attempt by the British to take over the colony, intended to limit the influence of the Haitian Revolution from spreading throughout the Caribbean and to take over Haiti's lucrative plantation system. Given the political scale, economic consequences, and human drama of the Haitian Revolution and its local, regional, imperial, and international aspects, scholars have long sought to answer this: How did the enslaved pull it off?

Over the past 40 years, perhaps no other scholar has published as much to help us answer this question as historian David Geggus. In this issue of *The Americas*, we feature Geggus's most recent work on the demographic and social structure of the French colony of Saint Domingue, and how its population dynamics influenced the Haitian Revolution. His published analyses on the slave population of Saint Domingue extend as far back as his 1978 article titled "The Slaves of British-Occupied Saint-Domingue" in the journal *Caribbean Studies*. Over the years, Geggus has continuously and systematically expanded his demographic analysis through research in disparate sources—multiple archives, inventories, notarial records, censuses, compensation commissions, and published demographic data. Drawing from all of these sources and pulling his findings together through long, diligent hours of study, he has been able to show the ethnic background of the enslaved population from 1770 to 1791, their place of birth in the Americas or Africa, and how the demographics of the colony varied by region and crop, whether that be sugar, coffee, indigo, or cotton.

The major empirical contribution of his analysis and the most important point of his article is that the slave population had a far larger percentage of enslaved Creoles than recent historiography on the Haitian Revolution seems to recognize. In other words, although the transatlantic slave trade fueled Saint-Domingue's plantation system with the arrival of over 200,000 enslaved Africans in the decade before the revolution, there remained a large population of slaves—as many as 50 percent of the total enslaved—who were born and raised in the Caribbean. According to Geggus, scholars have simply overlooked the large population of Creole slaves who fought in the Haitian Revolution, ignoring their cultural perspectives as persons born and reared in French Saint-Domingue, or, they have chosen not to give them significant weight in their analyses.

Geggus frames his article as a work that contributes to a deeper understanding of the demographic social structure of the Saint Domingue population that produced the Haitian Revolution, but even more importantly as an emphatic corrective to the historiography of the Haitian Revolution over the past 30 years. According to Geggus, the field of Haitian Revolutionary Studies has fallen into what he playfully and polemically labels “Kongomania.” That is, scholars have tended to focus on the African background of the slaves, and in particular Kongos from West Central Africa, to the neglect of other enslaved Africans, and most notably to the neglect of the Creole population. As suggested by Geggus’s provocative title, this “Kongomania” has produced a “mania” in the historiography that he characterizes as an excessive enthusiasm, fascination, and preoccupation with the role of Kongos in the Haitian Revolution. These excesses, he argues, have produced a historiographical “illness” that has gone from a “craze” to something of a new interpretive orthodoxy.

Readers who do not specialize in Caribbean History or the Haitian Revolution may be surprised to read that “Kongomania” has put down roots in Haitian historiography. Standard accounts of the Haitian Revolution, such as the classic by C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (1938, with a second edition in 1963); Thomas O. Ott, *The Haitian Revolution, 1789–1804* (1973); and even the more recent *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (2010) by Jeremy Popkin all made very little reference, if any at all, to the African background of the insurgents and how their place of origin on the other side of the Atlantic might have shaped the course and outcome of the Haitian Revolution. Given the relative neglect of the social, cultural, and intellectual contributions of Africans to the historiography of the Haitian Revolution (other than recognizing them as a large and homogenous group of Black slaves), how is it that a wave of “Kongomania” has presumably taken hold of the field, redirecting our analyses, captivating historians, and summoned David Geggus to correct these supposedly faulty interpretations?

Whether one labels this historiographical turn in the field of Haitian Revolutionary studies “Kongomania,” or simply considers it a concentrated focus on the African population and their experiences prior to arrival in Saint Domingue, it has undoubtedly been a major scholarly development that has generated new perspectives—if not new conclusions on the causality and outcome of the Haitian Revolution. To put it briefly, historians are now interested in studying the enslaved population before they disembarked in Saint Domingue and the ideas, concepts, perspectives, and experiences they brought with them after they disembarked and then toiled as an enslaved and racialized labor force.

For some, this shift may be abrupt, but for others it may be long overdue. As with most historiographical developments, some scholars have embraced this new focus on Africa and Africans and the nuanced interpretations reflected by the initial scholarship of Thornton, Sweet, and Mobley. These scholars are given the opportunity to explain their own conclusions and offer their own critiques of Geggus's article in this issue of *The Americas*. Whereas some scholars might find the focus on West Central Africans and Kongos to be a novel perspective, others may regard it as no more than adding a wrinkle of complexity to what we already know. Regardless of one's scholarly interest in "Kongomania," or indifference to it, this historiographical shift, like most historical events, was the result of the convergence of several scholarly and political movements in the 1990s.

Four related factors can help to explain how, over the past 30 years, the understanding of the Haitian Revolution as largely an extension of the French Revolution that spun out of control changed to a contrasting view: that it was a rebellion that should be framed as a revolt from the perspective of Africa and Africans. The first factor is that historians trained and focused on pre-colonial Africa began to study slavery in the Americas. The second factor was the emergence of Atlantic History, with its stated mission of connecting the histories of four continents to examine historical convergences. The third was the bicentennial commemorations of the start (1791/1991) and the end (1804/2004) of the Haitian Revolution, which produced a new interest in the topic. And the fourth and perhaps most important factor was the publication of "Unthinkable History" (1995), a much celebrated, widely circulated, and extremely influential essay by Michel-Rolph Trouillot that critiqued the entire historiography of the Haitian Revolution and called for new perspectives.

Taken collectively, the confluence of these four factors, all of them emerging prominently in the 1990s and continuing apace ever since, have caused the historiographical shift in Haitian scholarship to "Kongomania." The point of Geggus's contribution to this issue of *The Americas* is to challenge this recent development in our understanding of the Haitian Revolution as essentially an African revolt in the Caribbean led by Kongos, and to call for scholars to focus more attention on the active role of Creoles.

From a scholarly perspective, even the label "Kongomania"—whether applied as a compliment or a criticism—is reflective of how the development of pre-colonial African historiography has reshaped our understandings of the experiences of the enslaved in Latin America. Previously, scholars studying the backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs of the enslaved in the Americas often used contemporary descriptions of folk customs and a sort of

backward-looking telescope to explain historical religious practices. The publications of scholars such as Linda Heywood, Joseph Miller, Sandra Greene, Robin Law, Paul Lovejoy, Edna Bay, and John Thornton created a corpus of secondary texts that provided detailed historical analysis of pre-colonial Africa.

Just as important, this historical scholarship was framed in an Atlantic History context that not only enriched our understanding of pre-colonial African history, but also spoke directly to central issues animating the scholarship on slavery in the Americas. John Thornton's two articles, written in the 1990s, on political, military, and religious beliefs in West Central Africa and how they likely influenced the course of the Haitian Revolution—an argument that Geggus seeks to refute and refine in his article in this issue—is but one example of this scholarly trend. Thornton's expertise in the Kingdom of Kongo and the Portuguese colony of Angola has led him to connect belief systems, political dynamics over dynastic rule, civil wars, and military training and strategy to understand how they became grafted onto the French and Haitian Revolutions when read from a Kongo perspective.

Shortly after the publication of Thornton's articles, the importance of West Central Africans—and Kongos in particular, as representing the largest population of slaves brought to the colony of Saint Domingue—was corroborated and firmly established by the shipping routes documented in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database. The relative ease of accessing the database, first available as a CD-ROM in 1999 and then as an open online resource that is continuously updated, made it rather straightforward (and even expected) that scholars would chart out importation numbers and percentages of Africans transported across the Atlantic to American destinations. Accessing the database did not require archival research, or expertise in a specific technology, but simply connecting to the free and user-friendly resource.

The quantitative records on slaves from West-Central Africa, as reflected in the database, made Thornton's insights on the cultural and social background of Kongos, and what they may have brought with them to Saint Domingue, all the more relevant for understanding the Haitian Revolution. Indeed, scholars such as Laurent Dubois have relied heavily on the database for their interpretations of the African background to the Haitian Revolution to establish context, even when they were not writing a specialized demographic history. Emblematic of this approach is the scholarship of James Sweet and Christina Mobley, the other two respondents who answer Geggus's accusation of "Kongomania" in this issue. Like Thornton, neither would be classified as a scholar of demography, nor did either set out to write a demographic history of Kongos in Saint Domingue as a main focus and contribution. Rather, they

used the readily accessible population figures of Africans brought to Saint Domingue to ask this question: if Kongos made up a large percentage of the enslaved population, how did their religious, social, cultural, and intellectual experiences shape the course and outcome of the Haitian Revolution?

Unsurprisingly, the turn toward a Kongo perspective on the Haitian Revolution came with the bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution. Anniversaries of historical events generate new interest, commemorations, conferences, and scholarship. David Geggus himself organized and directed several of these conferences, which also resulted in a notable increase in publications and interest in the Haitian Revolution by scholars outside the field. And just as the 1990s were witnessing the bicentennial, Atlantic History was emerging as a field. Few events seemed to illustrate the purpose of Atlantic History—to frame historical investigations beyond the narrow focus of a colony, nation state, or a single empire—better than did the Haitian Revolution. The Haitian Revolution links the histories of Europe, Africa, and the Americas, involving the empires of France, Spain, and Britain; enslaved Africans from West-Central and West Africa; and the local colonial setting of the Caribbean. Scholars enthusiastically embraced a perspective of the Haitian Revolution that no longer regarded it as an episode of the French Revolution, or a specialized topic in French colonial history, but instead as an event whose study would not only have to account for its European and Caribbean dynamics, but also offer a nuanced perspective on how Africa and Africans (beyond recognition of them as racialized laborers) influenced the slave revolution.

For many scholars looking for new perspectives to explain the Haitian Revolution, Michel-Rolph Trouillot's influential book *Silencing the Past* (1995), and in particular his essay "Unthinkable History," pointed out everything that was wrong with the existing historiography, and urged scholars to look for new interpretations. In Trouillot's formulation, the Haitian Revolution was for many an "unthinkable" event—unthinkable because a slave revolt wherein slaves overthrew masters and created their own country was unthinkable. For contemporaries who lived through the event, this produced a documentary and epistemic silencing of the Haitian Revolution—a silencing that directed analysis away from the central protagonist of the event—namely the enslaved Africans. In other words, without a frame of reference to explain the Haitian Revolution as a successful slave revolt by Africans, observers who created the documentary record of the event seemed to ignore the vast majority of people involved in the largest slave revolt in the Americas and what they were fighting for, beyond just a generic notion of freedom.

Rather than placing the slaves at the center of analysis, the Haitian Revolution was explained as something of an aberration: the French Revolution that went too far. Or a failed revolution led by a mulatto elite, or the outcome of an outbreak of yellow fever that crippled imperial forces, or a lapse that occurred because Napoleon was too preoccupied with Europe at the time, or a rebellion that would have been crushed without early Spanish assistance, etc., etc., etc. David Geggus and other Haitian scholars recognized Trouillot's philosophical and epistemological argument that the Haitian Revolution had been silenced compared to other events in world historiography, but they were quick to point out that at least for the contemporaries, a slave revolution was a real possibility, despite it being ignored and subsequently silenced in the annals of history.

Trouillot's interpretation resonated strongly during the bicentennial period and became something of a clarion call for the historiography to explore new interpretations. Consequently, adopting an Atlantic History perspective and focusing on the Kongos offered a fruitful opportunity to "unsilence" the Haitian Revolution through analyzing the event from a Kongo perspective.

Geggus's contribution to this issue is not to dismiss out of hand any attempt to recover the perspective of Kongos, but rather to contest scholarship that has overstated the percentage of Kongos, and perhaps explained the Haitian Revolution by focusing overmuch on the Kongos to the neglect of other historical actors, most notably the Creoles. To facilitate a spirited debate, John Thornton, James Sweet, and Christina Mobley have all been given the opportunity to respond to Geggus's article and offer their own responses in this issue. Collectively, all three emphasize that the point of their scholarship is to offer a Kongo perspective on the Haitian Revolution from their training and expertise in African history, not to produce a new orthodoxy. In other words, their scholarship does not aim to reflect "Kongomania," but a "Kongo-Perspective."

The central methodological issue framing these perspectives on the Haitian Revolution is the long-standing divide that marks history as both a social science based on data and a field of the humanities that narrates a history from the perspective of the historical actors themselves. Geggus concludes his article by emphasizing the quantitative data: "Because the numbers of Kongo in Saint-Domingue were much smaller than John Thornton imagined, their military and political influence presumably was correspondingly smaller, and the enthusiastic claims regarding their linguistic and cultural influence made by Thornton, Mobley, and especially Sweet seem highly implausible." (29) Undoubtedly, the origins of people and their demographic numbers matter for

understanding a plantation society like colonial Saint Domingue that produced the Haitian Revolution.

Nonetheless, for all the emphasis Geggus places on demographics and statistics, he does not suggest or hazard a guess as to the percentage of Kongos in the population that would no longer be significant. It is one thing to show the percentage of Kongos in the population has been overstated, but it's another to claim their cultural influence was limited. Moreover, the importance of assessing the Creole-vs-Kongo demographics at the heart of this debate, raises other questions. By what criteria was a Creole born in Saint Domingue and raised by Kongo parents not a Kongo? And similarly, if a Kongo could speak French, understand French cultural dynamics, and navigate French colonial society was that person still a Kongo. In brief, what is at issue in the article by Geggus and the responses by Thornton, Sweet, and Mobley is how statistical categories of Creole and African can help to provide a context for understanding structural and cultural dynamics, and ultimately identify causal forces in charting the process and outcome of the Haitian Revolution.

As the author of the article that launched this Forum on the Haitian Revolution, David Geggus provides a final rebuttal to the responses by Thornton, Sweet, and Mobley to close out the debate (for now) in this issue of *The Americas*. In his rebuttal, Geggus offers an even closer examination into the evidence and interpretation of the role of Kongos in the Haitian Revolution. To be clear, Geggus is not dismissing the role of Kongos and recognizes their contribution, but he asks in reference to Kongo military experience, which can apply equally to the cultural, religious, intellectual, and political contributions of Kongos to the Haitian Revolution: "My concern has always been this: Can we say how important this factor was?" Analytically isolating the Kongos from other groups has allowed scholars such as Thornton, Sweet, and Mobley to narrow in on their contributions whether it was military, religious, cultural, lexical, and intellectual. And even more importantly, they have offered tantalizing suggestions on the unique role of Kongos in shaping, or at least influencing, the political goals, leaders, and outcome of the Haitian Revolution. Obviously, a specialized focus on the Kongos reflective of scholarly expertise does not preclude the significance of other groups, such as the Creoles as an important and decisive factor in the development, course, and conclusion of the Haitian Revolution. Scholarship celebrates novelty and nuance in looking for new interpretations to well-studied events, which sometimes overshadows the important lesson that historiographical advancements of a field are usually cumulative and additive by building on existing studies, rather than replacing and relegating to the workshop floor past investigations. Future scholarship will undoubtedly build on these studies by Geggus, Thornton, Sweet and

Mobley: Given the agenda setting, historiographical debate set out in this Forum, most certainly upcoming studies will not only illuminate Creole vs African approaches to the Haitian Revolution, but also shed further light onto how diverse groups representing the population of African descent became braided together through the course of revolution and emancipation to overthrow their masters and colonial oppressors. And, equally important, how these alliances, unions, factions, and divisions broke off in different strands reflective of their place of origin, local conditions, expediency, and contingency through the course of a violent and liberating revolution in creating the first independent country in the Caribbean and the second in the Americas.

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