

Past on Saint-Aubin (2015)

Saint-Aubin, Arthur F. *The Memoirs of Toussaint and Isaac Louverture: Representing the Black Masculine Subject in Narratives of Mourning and Loss*. Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2015. Pp. 286. ISBN: 978-1-61146-195-4

Mariana Past, Dickinson College

This fascinating study by Arthur Saint-Aubin sheds welcome light on a pair of intriguing and problematic personal narratives by the iconic Haitian Revolutionary leader, Toussaint Louverture (1743–1802), and his French-educated son Isaac Louverture (1783–1854), whose writing remains largely unknown to many Haitianist scholars. The men's memoirs, first published in France in 1853 and 1825, respectively—under the aegis of white metropolitan writers Saint-Rémy and Métral—provide texture to revolutionary events in Saint-Domingue prior to Haiti's independence in 1804. The Louvertures' autobiographies are part of a French tradition of memoir writing dating to the 1400s, which their voices inflect and disrupt; their memoirs simultaneously participate in a larger Haitian and African diasporic corpus of writing the masculine self, but cannot be considered “just” black Atlantic texts.

Saint-Aubin's extremely well-researched book contains a preface, five chapters, postscript, and a chronology of events related to the personal lives of Toussaint and Isaac Louverture, as well as the Haitian and French Revolutions. By engaging with recent readings of Toussaint Louverture's writing and his legacy (including Trouillot, Jenson, Fischer, Gaffield, Daut, Cauna, and Zanone), the author's work resonates with a wide range of contemporary scholarship on the Haitian Revolution, the Black Atlantic, and postcolonial literary and cultural theory. The book's theoretical framework draws from (among others) Pierre Nora, Frantz Fanon, Kobena Mercer, Maurice Wallace, Jeffrey Leak, and bell hooks. Saint-Aubin, recognizing that Toussaint's work in particular has received significant treatment by historians, turns to examine the poetic voices and psychological profiles of the Louvertures as evidenced in their memoirs, with the stated goal of showing how they help establish a black masculine subjecthood.

In historical and literary accounts since the Haitian Revolutionary period (1791–1820), the author notes, Toussaint (in particular) has been either demonized or romanticized, and his memoirs fetishized, while Isaac's memoirs have received scant attention. Scholars of Haitian historiography have tended to focus on questions of historical “accuracy” within Toussaint's memoirs, while his 1801 Constitution—which Saint-Aubin proposes as a sort of preamble that merits being read alongside his memoirs—has been considered primarily as a legal document. A critical focus on the Louvertures' literary strategies helps readers understand how and why father and son dramatize and lyricize their experiences in related but strikingly different ways.

Toussaint's memoirs, written in 1802 from a jail cell in the Jura region, are imbued with a sense of urgency and anxiety over his clearly impossible situation. Addressing his revolutionary counterpart, Napoleon Bonaparte, who would never consider him his equal, Toussaint simultaneously affirms his own worth and pleads for his life, delicately disavowing the radical Constitution that he wrote the previous year (in which he advocates for Saint-Domingue to break from France). The Haitian general casts himself in the role of alienated hero, seeking to legitimate his standing with respect to the French leader while erasing his racial difference from the narrative. Isaac's memoir, on the other hand, is utopian in nature: writing in the third person, the son endeavors to elevate and vindicate his father's legacy—and carve out recognition for himself—by showing Toussaint as an exceptional and exemplary figure who transcended his former state of enslavement.

While Toussaint personalizes the historical, Isaac historicizes the personal; the father engages writing as performance, and the son employs writing as transcription. Saint-Aubin examines verb tenses and modes used by both Louvertures in an effort to highlight their respective narrative strategies, arguing that both narrators appear “put-upon,” victims of an exclusionary social/political order based upon color hierarchy (80). Though father and son evince anxiety in their memoirs, in the form of hyper-awareness of their corporeality and vulnerability, Saint-Aubin convincingly contends that this tension represents an embodied black memory whose melancholic and mournful aspects are deliberate rhetorical strategies. The Louvertures' memoirs conflate a personal search for a masculine self-identification with a search for a national identity; father and son speak to authority from a subordinate but empowered position (113). Remembering involves a level of forgetting, after all; while Toussaint omits from his memoirs the 1801 Constitution and details regarding Jean-Jacques Dessalines and the Moyse Affair, Isaac's memoirs effectively erase the existence of his own brother.

Toussaint's relationship to the Haitian people has long been a contested matter; although Saint-Aubin recognizes that the revolutionary leader faced acute economic and political crises, he does not let him off the hook for abandoning the democratic

impulses of the Haitian Revolution and effectively re-subordinating the population through strict labor codes. In short, Toussaint remains complicit with a discriminatory system of power, and he is ultimately unable to escape that power structure. Following Enlightenment ideals, Toussaint projects a paternalistic moral order for Saint-Domingue that is based upon a masculinist agency of “soldier-planter-state agent” who also must be Catholic (132); a similar ideology has prevailed in Haiti for many years. Constructing the black male citizen—however indeterminate and anxious his position may be—is coterminous with constructing a national identity and legitimizing the nation.

Readers should forgive the author a few digressions, some reliance on jargon, and a Romantic tone struck at times in the Preface, referencing Toussaint’s “cherished sons,” “innocent children” who are hostages of Napoleon in France (xii), or Louverture himself, straightforwardly “Christian and literate” (xiv). These minor quibbles aside, the argument put forth in this book is original and compelling. Saint-Aubin concludes: “Father and son forge a political and personal bond with Napoleon Bonaparte as the very embodiment of hegemonic power. But it is precisely because Napoleon embodies an ideality—one which Toussaint and Isaac Louverture come to realize is forever foreclosed to them—that their autobiographic texts are underwritten, ultimately, by experiences of privation, loss, and mourning” (207).

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