

## Couti on Daut (2017)

Daut, Marlene. *Baron de Vastey and the Origins of Black Atlantic Humanism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 244, ISBN 978-1-137-47067-6

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Marlene Daut offers an extensive, well-researched and compelling historicization of the formation and influence of Black Atlantic humanism. Like Chris Bongie and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, she recalls that there is still much to be said about the legacy of the Haitian revolution and its revolutionaries. She also urges scholars to reconsider what defines a valuable archive. At the same time, she encourages researchers to rethink the ways in which they read certain texts, particularly those by controversial authors such as the Baron de Vastey.

She expands on the second chapter of her earlier study entitled *Tropics of Haiti* (2014), which explores Vastey's 1814 political memoir *Le Système colonial dévoilé* as one of the foundational texts of anti-colonial discourse. In the book under consideration, she concentrates on the ways in which various factions across the Atlantic and over time have engaged with Baron de Vastey, focusing on the distinctiveness of the reception of his work, which was immediately translated into English during his own lifetime. Her book articulates a well-organized archaeology that unearths the story not merely of the Baron de Vastey's life but of the many people that his essays influenced, from colonial times to today. Daut demonstrates that a holistic reevaluation of identity construction and history in a transatlantic context can only be fruitfully when accomplished in relational fashion. She thus brings to life Édouard Glissant's concept of the Relation. Her methodology highlights the interconnections of history, historiography, and intertextuality to excavate unknown literary interconnections of power, and discourses around identity, race and nationhood. She even eventually suggests how Vastey has delineated a powerful but overlooked decolonial strategy for changing mentalities and reforming societies *avant la lettre*, before Caribbean thinkers like Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Glissant.

In her discussion of Baron de Vastey's role in the development of a new humanism and the pushback against his conception of black sovereignty, Daut's prologue makes a significant statement. This section expertly articulates a new epistemology of the impact of earlier Haitian writers such as Vastey on the reassessment of European humanism and philosophy of the Enlightenment. She has thus organized a detailed discussion of the reception of the works of Vastey in the form of a compelling historiography that spans several centuries. The introduction delineates a recovery methodology that allows for a great recontextualization and reassessment of Haitian, Caribbean, and transatlantic studies. The five chapters that follow can be divided into two parts; each part eventually questions the lasting influence of a master narrative or metanarrative and its "vocabulary" that often fails to present the *real* Vastey.

The first section (chapters one to four) deals with Vastey's representation in non-fictional writings. Chapter one, the introduction, offers a compelling and well-researched contextualization of the reception of Baron de Vastey's political writings in his time, and the acceptance of and resistance to, his anti-colonial ideas while raising the issues at play with the production of history. Daut demonstrates how his voice, particularly concerning his stance on anti-colonialism and violence, resonates in other voices such as those of Césaire and Fanon. The second chapter explores the pitfalls inherent to reproducing history when historians get the facts wrong. Taking her own research as a cautionary tale, Daut examines a case of mistaken identity that presents Vastey not only as a political essayist, but as a writer of poetry. The third chapter recalls that, despite his staunch opponents, particularly in France, Vastey's anglophone readership generally praised his anticolonial stance, his defense of black humanism, and his desire to build Haitian sovereignty. The fourth chapter teases out the cultural and political implications of the *testimonio* genre, and further explores the necessity for readers and scholars to question their own biases. Reading and rewriting without self-awareness and mindfulness can be dangerous activities, and thus Daut argues for the creation and use of a different "vocabulary" to reframe our understanding of Vastey's texts.

The second section of the book, namely chapter five and the epilogue, deals with the often problematic representations of Vastey in fiction. This last chapter studies the plays by several Caribbean writers who, from 1935 to 2002, revisit the Haitian Revolution and Vastey's role from shifting perspectives. Looking at these authors' political biases, Daut emphasizes the crucial role of fiction in not only the construction of (dubious) truth and knowledge, but in their dissemination. The epilogue further examines the salience of fiction in

the propagation of truth. This time Daut dissects Vastey's representation in the twentieth century with the 1975 play by Haitian René Philoctète, *Monsieur Vastey*. This play delves into the intricate issue of the colonial relationship as an inherent part of globalization. This work offers a more positive view of Vastey and reenvisions him as a forefather of discussions about black sovereignty. Grappling with contemporary discussions, the epilogue shows how this play highlights the ways in which Vastey offers a transatlantic and anticolonial discourse that is relational in nature. The play insists on the influence of the former colonial bond to France and the meddling interventions of other western powers such as the US. Talking about Haiti, its colonial past and postcolonial future, is the equivalent of talking about the intervention of, and interaction between, France, Great Britain, and the United States in a transatlantic and global world.

Daut makes multiple contributions to Haitian, Caribbean, and Atlantic Studies, as well as to race studies, that will serve specialists and non-specialists alike. She engages with nineteenth-century and more recent scholarship to update knowledge and correct errors. Her mindfulness and self-reflexivity demonstrate that rigorous scholars need to be able to reframe an idea and recognize when they have reproduced and disseminated erroneous information. She demonstrates, as she argues in her prologue, that the understanding of Vastey's virulent deconstruction of French colonial discourses as a deconstruction of white supremacy itself has many ramifications. This understanding allows us to comprehend Vastey's ideas in the context of a long tradition of black Atlantic humanism whose latest manifestation is the Black Lives Matter movement. The many variations of black humanists did not "argue for the supremacy of any particular racial, ethnic and/ or national groups," but instead "sought to promote racial, ethnic, and national equality" (xxix). Vastey's advocacy for the humanity of people of African descent, his discourse on the ways in which their lives matter, and his defense of a Black Atlantic humanism, do not simply constitute a discussion of blackness but of the human condition as a whole—from a non-Eurocentric standpoint.

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