



Toussaint L'Ouverture, the best-known leader of the Haitian Revolution, in a comic by Rocky Cotard & Laurent Dubois

Haiti: An “Unthinkable” Revolution?

“The Haitian Revolution entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened.”
– Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Haitian anthropologist & historian

The slave revolt & creation of an independent black state challenged Western frames of reference – the idea that enslaved Africans could not only envision freedom, but formulate strategies for gaining & securing such freedom.

As a result, the revolution has entered into our national history as a “non-event” & has been relegated to the historical backburner due to its inherent link to racism, slavery, & colonialism.

From Rising Up in the Past to Today’s Classroom

Although contemporary scholars recognize the revolution as a defining moment in world history, its lack of emphasis – & even incorporation – in our U.S. & World History curriculum suggests:

- 1. It has been difficult to design & teach a topic that is antithetical to the Western Civilization model of history, which our national(ist) history is based
- 2. The teaching of history at the high school & college level has not caught up with recent scholarship

However, a conscious integration of the Haitian Revolution in our courses can teach students about power & production in history, & help them understand significant developments & interactions in history.

Teaching the Haitian Revolution in undergraduate history courses represents an act of epistemological resistance against the dominant Western narrative.

Unsilencing the Past: Teaching the Haitian Revolution in Undergraduate History Courses

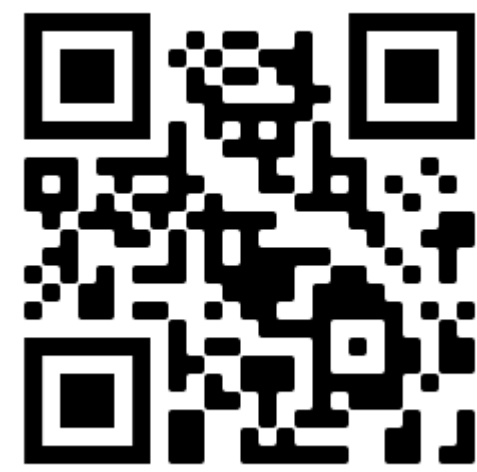
Vivian Tang, M.A.
California State University, Sacramento

Selected Strategies & Recommendations for Teaching the Haitian Revolution

- **Incorporate an ecological approach to examine the settler colonialism of the island.**
- Highlight:
 - Presence of the island’s indigenous Arawaks.
 - Europeans brought Old World diseases that natives lacked immunity to → decimated the population & brought flora & fauna that created biogeographic similarity to home country.
 - Island’s location & particular rainfall, soil composition was ideal for growing cash crops.
- **Examine the island’s integration into the “plantation complex,” a politico-economic order centered on slave plantations in the New World tropics.**
- Highlight:
 - Plantations grew sugar, rice, tobacco & indigo → funded purchase of Indian textiles → traded for African slaves → labor produced commodities for European consumers.
 - Europeans violently inserted themselves into existing international trade networks through “war capitalism” (imperial expansion, expropriation of indigenous land, & slavery) to forge new economic order.
- **Center enslaved agency and non-traditional forms of resistance including music/dancing & transatlantic communication networks.**
- Highlight:
 - Slavery as an embodied experience & intended to control mobility in space. Thus, music & dancing represented forms of resistance.
 - Differences between enslaved men’s vs. women’s resistance
 - News, ideas, & rumors about freedom & equality circulated throughout African diasporic communities in the revolutionary Caribbean → new visions of freedom among the enslaved.

Student Learning Goals

- Students will understand the importance of unconscious, biological forces in facilitating European colonialism.
- Students will problematize teleological assumptions about Western hegemony.
- Students will analyze how increasingly world historical forces impacted & were impacted by the region.
- Students will define “war capitalism” & trace its connections to the emergence of a Western-dominated capitalist economy.
- Students will distinguish what “counts” as resistance & describe how enslaved people engaged in multiple forms of resistance.
- Students will analyze revolutionary discourse & how it traveled & transformed among African diasporic communities.



Scan QR Code to listen to “Dédé Mwen Kalé,” a Haitian slave song performed by a Gwoka ensemble in 1962.



A “weed” that proliferates on already-disrupted ground, one of the flora that Europeans brought to the Americas. Art by Patterson Clark.

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