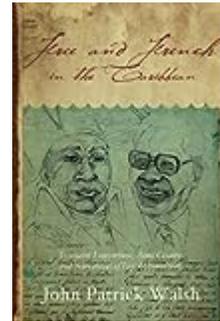




**John Patrick Walsh.** *Free and French in the Caribbean: Toussaint Louverture, Aimé Césaire, and Narratives of Loyal Opposition.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. x + 193 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-00627-1; \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-00630-1.



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## The Limits of French Republican Imperialism

In *Free and French in the Caribbean*, John Patrick Walsh examines the irreconcilable contradiction of *à*free and French<sup>à</sup> as invoked in two critical moments of colonial conflict between France and its colonies. Walsh considers this paradox<sup>à</sup>s consequences for French republican imperialism by examining two related parallels. The first is between two of the most important moments in French Caribbean history, one well known, the other less so: the Haitian Revolution and departmentalization. This parallel may initially seem a stretch, and, as Walsh notes, many scholars have treated these moments as events of an entirely different nature, distinct because of the extreme levels of revolutionary violence of the 1790s and the more placid legal change of the 1940s. Yet while the parallel may not be intuitive, there is much to recommend it. Both were moments when the idea of *à*free and French<sup>à</sup> was simultaneously asserted in theory but undermined in practice. For these two events represent the failure of France to extend the lofty ideals of its own revolution to its colonies, which stemmed from the subordination of universal rights to the mandates of imperial

sovereignty.

The second parallel is between two key figures of these movements, Toussaint Louverture and Aimé Césaire. Toussaint was the famous leader of the Haitian Revolution from the mid-1790s until his death in a French prison in 1803, while Césaire was a leading Martinican writer, intellectual, and politician who was instrumental in the passage of the 1946 departmentalization law. For Walsh, both men were literary figures as well as political leaders, and *Free and French* is the first book to examine their writings in concert. While Césaire is universally accepted as a monumental literary figure, *Free and French* views Toussaint in similar light. He may have had well-documented limitations in written French, but his prolific use of secretaries did not preclude him from wielding spoken word to brilliant rhetorical effect.

As befits Walsh<sup>à</sup>s background in Romance studies, a central contention of *Free and French* is that the forms in which ideas were conveyed are as important as the ideas

themselves. The insights gained from this perspective are especially rich when he applies a historicist lens to the genre analysis. Taking inspiration from Hayden White's concept of "emplotment," Walsh meditates on the overlapping and contradictory stories that emerge from any archive as well as the process by which historians select a particular narrative from a mountain of evidence. In the case of Toussaint, Walsh suggests that many scholars have been too consumed with uncovering obscure aspects of his biography instead of examining the ways he himself manipulated his own story. This emphasis on form continues throughout, as Walsh suggests that both men's modes of writing were "often more revolutionary" than their politics (p. 100).

The book proceeds over the course of six short but dense chapters, divided into two parts, bookended by an introduction and conclusion. Throughout both parts, Walsh subjects the writings of Toussaint and C saire to historically minded textual analysis, focusing particularly on texts that illuminate the tensions inherent to the concept of "free and French."

Toussaint is the subject of part 1. Out of the 1,600 or so known texts written by Toussaint, Walsh chooses four for special emphasis, while mentioning others along the way. The chosen texts cluster around the mid-to-late period of Toussaint's rule as he consolidated power, and they highlight a central theme: the working out of the concept of "free and French" through the metaphor of the family. Chapter 1 begins with a letter that Toussaint wrote in 1798 to his sons, chiding them for copying sections of other writings in their personal letters. Walsh makes much perhaps too much of this short text, using it to launch a broader discussion of the trope of the family romance. He applies this concept to the colonial context, arguing that French authorities used the rhetoric of the family to bind together the colonies and the new republic. Similarly, Toussaint positioned himself as the "father" of Saint Domingue's blacks, while simultaneously adopting a son's wary deference toward France. Chapter 2 continues in the vein of examining Toussaint's correspondence, especially the 1797 report to the French Directory in which he lambasted civil commissioner L ger-F licit  Sonthonax, the official who had abolished slavery in 1793.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at writings from the final years of Toussaint's life. Chapter 3 examines the 1801 constitution, written after Toussaint consolidated power across the entire island. The text represents the fullest articulation of the leader's vision of "free and French," for

the constitution was a proposal that Saint Domingue remain French but under the primary rule of Toussaint, not Napoleon. While the constitution banned slavery, proclaiming that "All men are here born, live, and die free and French" (p. 71), its specifics were quite authoritarian as Toussaint appointed himself ruler for life. Furthermore, its most controversial articles restricted the movement of black workers so that agriculture could thrive and proposed the importation of workers to support the plantation system. Toussaint preserved the plantation system so forcefully, Walsh argues, because of his vision of a society that functioned as a family, with agricultural labor the required sacrifice for the communal whole. Thus the constitution established freedom while constraining it. Finally, part 1 ends with analysis of Toussaint's prison writings, with special attention paid to the *M moire du G n ral Toussaint Louverture* (1802). According to Walsh, some scholars have downplayed the text's significance because they have misunderstood it to be an autobiography. The confusion comes from the varied French meanings of the word "memoir." While in the plural *memoires* are life chronicles, *memoire* in the singular is a summary or report. Yet the dominant but incorrect transcription of *Memoire* has been *Memoires*, leading many to be disappointed when the text does not shed light on the hazy early decades of Toussaint's life. For this reason, Walsh insists, the text is most fruitfully read as a defense of his actions in Saint Domingue.

Part 2 turns to Martinican writer Aim  C saire, who wrote about the Haitian Revolution during the aftermath of the 1946 departmentalization law. Departmentalization transformed four colonies—Reunion, French Guyana, Martinique, and Guadeloupe—into overseas departments, geographic units that were under the same legal regime as French departments. It had precursors in the French Directory's 1795 constitution and a subsequent 1798 law that turned colonies into departments, which Napoleon overturned. After departmentalization's passage, the French government delayed implementation; moreover, once in place, it did not provide the social improvements that C saire and others had anticipated. Thus, Walsh suggests, C saire used Toussaint's own campaign to critique contemporary French politics. Several of C saire's writings—essays, published letters, student newspaper columns, and plays—feature similar conceptions of the "free and French" as well as the familial register necessary to critique it. Through these texts, moreover, C saire "revis[ed]" the historical record for the political problems of his own day (p. 134).

Walsh has written this book for historians and liter-

ary scholars of the French Caribbean, but many historians will find it a tough read, especially those who do not frequently read literary criticism. At times, Walsh's approach is revelatory and worth the difficulty, such as the careful unpacking of the distinction between *memoire* and *memoires*. At other points, however, the dense prose does not pay off. Not all of the texts seem to merit such detailed analysis, especially Toussaint's letter to his sons, which is too slight to bear so much analytical weight. Aside from the jargon-heavy prose, readers without detailed knowledge of either event will struggle to follow the text. Walsh provides too little context for the Haitian Revolution—and that which he does provide is often limited to the immediate events without a larger sense of the overall trajectory. Those with only a passing familiarity with the twists and turns of the revolution will be lost. On the face of it, departmentalization was a less complex process, and readers will understand the issues at stake in Césaire's writings. However, since departmentalization is less well known and less studied—and let *Free and French* stand as a call for even more English-language scholarship on this crucial legal and political process—a longer explanation of it is necessary.

Walsh similarly pitches two of the book's methodological claims—that genre matters as much as content and that archives reveal numerous possible stories or narratives—at literary scholars and historians. Literary scholars can better determine how useful Walsh's injunctions are to their field, but historians have generally been better attuned to the various possibilities that archives throw up than Walsh acknowledges, though his emphasis on Hayden White serves as a useful reminder of the latter's work. Further, I am not as convinced as Walsh that historians are on the whole working without sufficient examination of how present-day concerns impact research questions and the resulting narratives.

By addressing the book to such a narrow audience, moreover, Walsh misses the chance to explore parallels in the Caribbean more broadly. He attempts comparison briefly when he explains the authoritarian elements in Toussaint's 1801 constitution. To explain how he could insist on emancipation while still yoking black workers to plantations, Walsh turns to the post-emancipation problem that plagued the Americas throughout the nineteenth century. In particular, he references Thomas Holt's classic *The Problem of Freedom* (1992). Yet he uses this comparison to highlight the singularity of Saint Domingue. When noting the common desire of Toussaint and British officials to transform the wayward children, he argues that this is "[d]espite enormous differences of time and place, of levels of violence, of colonial programs and ambitions, and certainly of the former slaves themselves" (p. 77, my emphasis). Certainly the impetus for requiring plantation labor was different, and Walsh persuasively argues that Toussaint's autocratic plans were an attempt to preserve universal freedom, while the British wanted to preserve the economic viability of the Caribbean colonies. Yet these differences only confirm the persistence of the shared conundrum of the Americas: could former slave societies truly rid themselves of their original slavery-based economic systems?

Yet that *Free and French* inspires so many questions is testament to its ambition, the provocative parallel at its heart, and the richness of Walsh's analysis. The book is another important reminder not only that the Haitian Revolution proved powerful inspiration for the rest of the Caribbean, even centuries later, but also that perhaps its most significant ideological victory was exposing a fundamental truth: the colonies could never be free while French.

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