2013

Narratives of Reversion: Portrayals of Haiti in the Old South

Skyler Robert Reidy

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation


This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
Narratives of Reversion: Portrayals of Haiti in the Old South

Skyler Robert Reidy

Encinitas, California

Bachelor of the Arts, College of William & Mary, 2011

A thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Lyon G. Tyler
Department of History

The College of William and Mary
May, 2013
This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Skyler Reidy

Approved by the Committee, March, 2013

John Smolec (proxy for Mel Ely)
Committee Chair
William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Humanities Melvin Ely, History
The College of William & Mary

Chandos Brown, History and American-Studies
The College of William & Mary

Brett Rushforth, History
The College of William & Mary
ABSTRACT

During the antebellum era, many Southern writers and intellectuals portrayed Haiti as a nation reverting from civilization to savagery. During the early years of the nineteenth century, the discourse surrounding Haiti was marked by contestation, with some newspaper accounts portraying Haiti as a promising new republic, while others condemned the nation's decline into barbarism and tyranny. After the 1830s, Southern opinion solidified behind the narrative of reversion; this closing of ranks was influenced by the emerging pro-slavery argument, Romanticism, and transnational discussions of Haiti. Some authors believed that Haiti's tropical climate caused a decline in civilization, while others believed that race determined Haiti's fate. John Taylor of Caroline, Thomas Roderick Dew, Josiah Nott, George Fitzhugh, and Edmund Ruffin all participated in debates about the meaning and significance of Haiti.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>ii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedications</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Considering Haiti</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Debating Haiti</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. An Consensus Emerges</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. Discourses of Tropicality</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. Racial Determinism</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This writer wishes to express his appreciation to Professor Melvin Ely, under whose guidance this investigation was conducted, for his patience, guidance and criticism throughout the investigation. The author is also indebted to Professors Chandos Brown and Brett Rushforth for their careful reading and criticism of the manuscript.
This Master of the Arts is dedicated to Michael and Laurel Reidy. My father’s instruction and my mother’s teaching are like a graceful garland for my head and pendants for my neck.
Considering Haiti

Yet here, unguided by Caucasian skill,
Unurged to labor by a master will,
Abandoned to his native sloth, that knows
No state so blessed as undisturbed repose,
With no restraint that struggling virtue needs,
With every vice that lazy pleasure breeds,
His life to savage indolence he yields,
To weeds and jungle, the deserted fields;
Where once the mansion rose, the garden smiled,
Where art and labor tamed the tropic wild,
Their hard-wrought trophies sink into decay,
The wilderness again resumes its sway,
Rank weeds displace the labors of the spade,
And reptiles crawl where joyous infants played.
Such now the Negro's life, such wrecks appear
Of former affluence, industry, and care,
On Hayti's plains, where once her golden stores
Gave their best commerce to the Gallic shores...1

The South Carolinian poet William J. Grayson included these lines in his epic poem, *The Hireling and the Slave*. The poem is ostensibly a defense of slavery, but it is framed as a world-spanning story of civilization's rise. The poem begins with the Fall and looks to the future, while casting its gaze around the Earth. Its defense of slavery is embedded within a world-spanning argument about the nature of labor and political economy and is communicated with a poetic style informed by the currents of contemporary literature. The poem is also deeply racist, offering a grand apologia for white supremacy. In all these things, from its cosmopolitanism and erudition to its blatant racism, the poem is characteristic of the antebellum South's intellectual culture. Indeed, Michael O'Brien has written that, "By [neoclassical] standards, *The Hireling and the Slave* has a reasonable claim to being the best poem written in the antebellum South, for

its wit, command of language, allusiveness, and tautness of argument.” At first blush, it may seem strange that a piece of antebellum poetry would concern itself with the tiny nation of Haiti. However, in this too Grayson's poem is characteristic of Southern thought at the time.

Grayson's couplets paint an image of an island in decline. In a poem focused on civilization's progress, the crumbling mansions and the alleged cultural regression of the Haitians form a striking counterpoint. The “savage indolence” of the current residents is, in Grayson's argument, a reversion from the “affluence, industry, and care” of the French colonists overthrown in the Haitian Revolution. Race is, of course, a central theme of this passage, which portrays people of African ancestry as inherently lazy and in need of guidance and command from the Caucasian race. The poem also lavishes attention on the “tropical wild” of Haitian nature, coupling the riotous growth of the jungle with the barbarism of the nation's inhabitants. Within the panorama of civilization offered in Grayson's poem, Haiti's role is that of an experiment in abolition, showing that savagery follows the liberation of blacks. Haiti is, at the same time, more than a case study for the pro-slavery argument; it serves as a foil for the South, proving by its alleged barbarism the superiority of Southern civilization. None of these observations were unique to Grayson; indeed, little in The Hireling and the Slave is. Grayson only rendered lyrically what many other Southern writers believed about the island of Haiti.

Haiti's significance in antebellum Southern discourse has not been ignored by historians, though no work has yet examined it exclusively. Furthermore, current historiography has focused primarily on the significance of the Haitian Revolution, and

---

less on Southern perceptions of the nation it created. The first, and most thorough, examination of the matter was Alfred Hunt's *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean.* Hunt discusses the fears engendered by the Haitian Revolution at the time of the first insurrection, and the ways that the specter of that violence lingered in the South. He also spends several pages discussing the ways that antebellum Southerners discussed contemporary Haiti, writing that "white observers of Haiti concluded that the unfettered black, left to himself, would regress to a more primitive state, as had presumably existed in Africa." This is an essential insight but one which, because of his monograph's scope, Hunt discusses only briefly. Chris Dixon, in *African America and Haiti: Emigration and Black Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century,* repeats this point to contextualize the counter-narrative of black nationalism with which he is concerned.

More recently, Matthew J. Clavin's *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* has explored the resonances of Haiti during the antebellum era and the war that ended it. The majority of Clavin's book discusses the influence of the Haitian Revolution, and Toussaint Louverture in particular, on abolitionists in the North and in African American communities during the Civil War. However, he also includes several chapters on the Confederacy. Like the historians discussed above, Clavin focuses on the cultural memory of the Haitian Revolution and examines ways that fears of a similar slave revolt shaped white Southern behavior. He expands on previous works by looking at the way that the trope of the

---


Haitian Revolution was deployed in the construction of white Southern identity. As he writes: “In addition to stoking the flames of Confederate nationalism, fear of a second Haitian Revolution also encouraged a white racial identity that would prove to be even more resilient than the ties that bound the citizens of the Confederacy.” Thus, he argues that fear of racial violence, and a shared language for expressing that fear, formed a touchstone for white Southern identity.

Matthew Pratt Guterl's _American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation_ seeks to write a more transnational history of Southern slaveholders, incorporating them into the currents of the Caribbean. As he writes: “The master class, I argue here, was connected—by ship, by overland travel, by print culture, by a sense of singular space, and by the prospect of future conquest—to the _habitus_ and _communitas_ of New World slaveholders, to institutions, cultures, and 'structures of feeling' that were not contained by the nation-state.” Like Hunt, Guterl discusses the relationship between nineteenth-century Haiti and the antebellum South. However, his analysis of Haiti's significance in the antebellum imagination focuses, like Clavin's, almost entirely on the significance of the Haitian Revolution. As Guterl writes: “The revolt in Haiti was a peculiarly significant memory—or social construct—for antebellum Southerners.” This social construct did indeed play a major role in Southern discourse, but I will argue that it shared the stage with the trope of Haiti reverting to savagery after the revolt.

In his magisterial intellectual history of the Old South, _Conjectures of Order_:

---


7. Ibid.
Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860, Michael O'Brien makes an argument similar to that of Hunt and others, arguing that "the emotional focus of Southern attitudes lay in Haiti, in the St. Domingue which had fallen to a slave revolt of ominous ferocity." While O'Brien does not discuss the ways that Southern writers analyzed post-revolutionary Haiti, he provides a vivid backdrop for an explication of that discussion. O'Brien describes the cosmopolitanism and dynamism of Southern culture. He shows how Southern views changed and adapted over time, moving from Enlightenment to Romanticism, and entering a conversation that spanned the Atlantic Ocean. In this conversation, individual Southern authors borrowed and adapted tropes and ideas, using them to further their own arguments and careers.

The narrative of Haiti's degeneration to savagery is most ably expressed by the famed Southern intellectual George Fitzhugh in his essay "Free Negroes of Hayti." Fitzhugh was writing in the Romantic tradition, and articulated a pro-slavery argument that identified slavery as a positive good. In "Free Negroes of Hayti" he argues that "the fruits of freedom in that island, since its independence in 1804, are revolutions, massacres, misrule, insecurity, irreligion, immorality, indolence, neglect of agriculture, and, indeed, an actual renewal of slavery under another shape." (emphasis original) Fitzhugh argues that the violent revolution that created the Republic of Haiti removed the guidance of civilized Frenchmen, and that when the blacks were left to their own devices, they reverted to savagery. His central piece of evidence for this contention is the plummeting sugar production of the island. He includes a table of Haiti's exports that

---

shows the decrease with statistical precision. These quantifiable decreases in agricultural output are paired with qualitative descriptions of the poverty of Haitians. Fitzhugh describes the crumbled transportation infrastructure built by the French, which has been reduced to footpaths, as well as the huts inhabited by rural Haitians, which he explicitly compares to the dwellings of equally savage Native Americans. This portrayal of economic decay was doubtless intended to be especially persuasive for readers of *DeBow’s Review*, a magazine that focused on issues of economic and agricultural development.

Fitzhugh does not confine himself to the economy of the island, however, as he writes: “The decline of commerce and industry has been succeeded by the neglect of education and religion, and by the spread of immorality and vice.” Fitzhugh describes the miserable state of the Catholic Church on the island, in which a corrupt and lecherous priesthood encourages primitive superstitions. The mass of Haitians wallowed in licentiousness and indolence, while their elites, “impatient of all restraint, and rejecting the distinctions of virtue and vice, as though imaginary, . . . gave free scope to their base passions and would suffer no obstacle to oppose their indulgence.” These elites, lacking in Western virtue as they were, became for Fitzhugh a mass of petty and incompetent tyrants.

For an example of the Haitian government’s decay, Fitzhugh presents the rule of King Henry Christophe, “who according to the fashion of the tyrants of this island, and in some other places, was first proclaimed president, then later crowned king. Like Nero, he

---

12538-539. Ibid.
15534. Ibid.
commenced his reign mildly; like Nero's, it ended in cruelty.\textsuperscript{16} The autocracy and the tempestuousness of black rule would have struck Southerner readers as a reversion to barbarism, for they believed that their own stable white republic was the epitome of good social organization, comparable to the Roman Republic whose withering and demise had eventually created Nero, much as the loss of white rule had yielded up Christophe, Fitzhugh's black Nero.

This loss of civilization is made explicit by repeated comparisons to Africa. Emperor Dessalines "reminds us of nothing more than those savage African kings, who, far removed from the influences of civilization, have, for ages, one with another, spent their time destroying the human race."\textsuperscript{17} Fitzhugh also compares average Haitians' way of life to that of Africans writing: "The Haitians are even giving up common carriages, and wagons, and high roads, and going back to horses and asses, and footpaths through the wilderness, such as their fathers of old and their brothers of today use in Africa."\textsuperscript{18}

The comparison to contemporary Africa is especially useful because it allows Fitzhugh to portray the Haitians as a racialized other, and thus separate them from the sphere of American states. The entirety of the essay's rhetorical thrust allows him to end by declaring that Haiti ought to be called "New Africa."\textsuperscript{19}

Fitzhugh was not analyzing Haiti in a vacuum. The debate over the morality of slavery was raging within the United States, and Fitzhugh was a prominent defender of the slave-holding states. His article is meant to be an exploration of what happens when blacks are permitted to govern themselves. He writes that the lesson to be drawn from

\textsuperscript{17} 541. Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{18} 538. Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{19} 549. Ibid.
“the whole of history of Hayti during the last fifty years, is, that by suddenly and
violently depriving negroes (as they are now constituted) of their white masters in the
western world, even though these be not perfect, you deprive them of their protectors and
leave them a prey to civil wars, discord, massacres, vice, and consequent disease, danger
of famine, and what is perhaps worse than all, the despotism of their own negro rulers.”

Thus, Haiti could become an object lesson to the United States, a piece of evidence
deployed by the paternalist defenders of the slave system. By this logic, slavery was a
positive good.

Fitzhugh explicitly engages abolitionists who pointed to Haiti as an example of
black liberty. Indeed, he warns that if abolitionists “can persuade the civilized and
philanthropic world that humanity has gained by the bloody revolution in Hayti, by the
long list of massacres that have occurred since, and by the irreligion, immorality,
ignorance, and indolence, that have reigned during the last fifty years, there is no doubt
but that we may yet see scenes enacted in the United States, compared with which, these
in that island would be child's play.” Thus, the true importance of Haiti comes to light.
The black republic in the Caribbean created by a bloody revolution was not merely a
morbid curiosity for Fitzhugh; it was a nightmare, and it was a nightmare that he feared
might be a prophecy for his own homeland.

Fitzhugh's “Free Negroes in Hayti” was published in 1859, on the very eve of the
Civil War, and it epitomizes the position of Haiti in the white Southern discourse at that
time. However, this view of Haiti did not spring fully-formed, Athena-like, from the
Southern mind. Indeed, there was no unitary Southern mind for it to spring from. Instead,
this narrative was constructed through a series of debates and dialogues, both within the South and between white Southerners and the wider world. The evolution of Haiti's position in Southern thought and discourse can be divided into two periods. From the independence of Haiti until the early 1830s, white Southerners took a wide variety of stances on Haiti, ranging from the openly sympathetic to the caustically hateful. By the late 1830s, however, Southern opinion of Haiti began to crystallize into the view expressed by Fitzhugh. This period, especially the decade of the 1850s, witnessed an outpouring of high-brow commentary on Haiti, accompanying the intensifying debates on the slavery question.

**Debating Haiti**

During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, Haiti was rarely discussed in the South other than in newspapers. These newspapers relied for their information on ship's captains who visited Haiti and on Southern merchants who resided briefly in that nation's major cities. These individuals were forbidden from conducting business with Haiti's lower classes and could only officially transact their trade with Haiti's primarily mulatto merchant and political class in designated port cities. Southern newspapers from this time reflect that imbalance. Their discussions of Haiti tend to focus on these elites, though vague descriptions of the mass of Haitians are occasionally given. The lives of working Haitians are generally treated as a product of elite actions, rather than as the consequences of racial or environmental factors. Prior to 1820, Haiti was in fact two struggling states. The southern portion was known as the Republic of Haiti, led first by President Alexandre Petion and, after Petion's death, by President Jean Pierre

---

Boyer. Both men were mulattoes. The northern portion of the country was known as the Kingdom of Haiti and was controlled by King Henri Christophe, a man of African descent. Because Southern newspapers generally confined themselves to analyzing one regime or the other, or contrasting the two, it is beneficial to consider the discourses surrounding the Republic of Haiti and the Kingdom of Haiti separately.

The Republic of Haiti and its leaders received what is, in hindsight, a surprising amount of sympathy from Southern whites. When a Southern merchant in Haiti sent the *Alexandria Herald* a copy of the correspondence between Petion and Louis XVIII of France, who was then attempting to recolonize Haiti, the paper published a proclamation made by Petion. The proclamation borrows heavily from the vocabulary of republicanism, citing the people's right to rule and the necessity of preserving Haitian independence in the face of monarchical aggression. Furthermore, the document is prefaced by a statement from the editor of the *Herald*, in which he says that the text will show Petion's "resolute rejection of any attempt to encroach upon the liberty and independence of the people of whom he is the chief." It is significant to remember that this was published in 1817, two years after the United States had prosecuted a war to retain its republican independence from an assault by its own former ruler. In this light, it is clear that the paper is praising Petion and the Republic of Haiti, and even inviting a comparison between Haiti and the United States.

A more detailed portrait of the Republic of Haiti was published by the *Baltimore Patriot* in 1826; it cites as its source Phineas Nixon Jr., who had visited Haiti with a

---

group of African American emigrants. The article describes the methods of election for the bi-cameral legislature of the Republic, the selection of the president, and the island's French style judiciary. It even refers to the president as “the fountain of all honor.” The article also looks admiringly at the anti-corruption law in the Republic, by which any legislator found guilty of selling his vote was banned from public life. It notes the establishment of parish schools, as well as a university and surgical school. The impression given by the article is one of a well-ordered and democratic republic that is making progress. After the collapse of Henry Christophe's regime and the unification of the island, the *City Gazette* of Charleston wrote that “the tranquility of the island was deemed to be completely established, and the consolidation of its Government under Boyer was hailed with universal satisfaction.” This portrayal of a successful republic was a far cry from the portrait of misrule and barbaric tyranny painted by later antebellum commentators, such as Fitzhugh.

However, not all descriptions of the Republic followed in this vein. After Boyer invaded the Spanish portion of Hispaniola in 1822, the *Carolina Gazette* referred to him as “a soldier of fortune” who commanded “a race of men too debased to do anything good or great,” despite the blessings of their fertile island. This description of Haitian savagery, like those that would come later, was politically motivated. The author feared that Boyer planned to continue his revolutionary movement by expanding to Puerto Rico or Cuba. The paper describes the position of the United States thus: “What should we think were Boyer to send an army of his new and old soldiers to Cuba, proclaiming liberty and equality as they advanced? Could we tamely look on and see approach almost

---

within sight of the *southern States* an army thus composed? No!"29 (emphasis original)

This is significantly different from the view of Haitian republicanism expounded by others. Instead of peaceful democratic rule, Haitian republicanism becomes a destabilizing and chaotic force, led by a strongman. The reference to “liberty and equality” is an intentional echo of the slogans of the French Revolution, the ultimate example of republican impulses run amok.

Another example of criticism for the Boyer regime comes from an open letter published anonymously in the *Baltimore Gazette* encouraging the women of that city to support the colonization of free blacks in Liberia. The colony which Nixon had helped plant in 1826 had collapsed due to cultural differences between the natives and new arrivals, and many of the emigrants had returned to the United States.30 This disaster is recounted by the anonymous colonization advocate, who writes that: “the emigrants that were induced to remove to Hayti soon found that, under its despotic institutions and amidst its semi-barbarous, ignorant and bigoted inhabitants, who speak a different language and have very limited notions of the rights of man, they enjoyed less freedom and tranquility than here.”31 This criticism of Haiti is politically necessary for the author, because it proves that the failure of the colony in Haiti was caused by unique circumstances, not by any inherent flaw in all colonization schemes. Furthermore, by contrasting Haiti with western Africa, the author is able to demonstrate the advantages of Liberia. The white author's criticisms importantly echo the narrative of savage reversion.

The evidence given for the “semi-barbarous” condition of the Haitians consists of their

“other-ness” in language, educational attainment, and failure to achieve republican goals.

While Southern writers and readers certainly took an interest in the Republic of Haiti, the more short-lived Kingdom of Haiti drew even more attention. Some of that attention was quite positive. One especially comprehensive article praises the finery of the court, the productivity of the Haitian economy, the establishment of the Church, and the spread of education; it concludes by saying: “When we consider how short a period has elapsed since the Haitians gained their independence...we cannot behold without admiration the rapid gains which have been made, not merely in the useful arts, but in literature. The love of liberty and independence pervade all literary compositions, especially the addresses of their chieftains, Dessalines and Christophe.”32 This is the mirror image of Fitzhugh's portrayal of Haitians regressing from civilization to savagery.

The idea of the Haitian royal court cast a spell over at least some white Southerners. In 1817 the American Beacon, of Norfolk, Virginia, ran a profile of the court after receiving a copy of the Royal Almanack of Haiti, probably from one of the many vessels engaged in the Caribbean trade that docked at that port. The article describes the royal family and the various ranks of peerage without a hint of sarcasm or disdain. The article even states that: “[The Royal Almanack of Haiti]’s Courts Lists may vie with those of any empire of whatever standing or complexion.”33 This equivalence between the Haitian court and the courts of Europe is also expressed in the Alexandria Herald’s obituary for Prince John. The author writes that: “In his last moments he demonstrated that the mania for glory is not confined to the whites. He regretted most of all that he had not the opportunity, in his death to shed his blood for the king and his

33. “Kingdom of Haiti, Court, &c.” American Beacon. January 3, 1817
country." He is described as well respected by merchants visiting the island, and a list of his military and aristocratic honors is given. Even after the Kingdom of Haiti had been absorbed into the Republic and the surviving members of the royal family had fled to Europe, Southerners remained interested in the black royalty. An article published by the *Baltimore Patriot* in 1829, a full nine years after the re-unification of the island, described how “Madame Christophe, Ex-Empress of Hayti,” was on her way to visit the mineral springs of Carlsbad, Germany.

It would be easy to overestimate the amount of real respect underlying the comparisons between the Haitian court and the courts of Europe. During the early decades of the nineteenth century monarchy was far from esteemed. Many Americans associated the pomp of European courts with foolish pretension, and the inherited titles of nobles with un-democratic oppression. For many Southern readers, the element of buffoonery was doubtless heightened by the thought of inferior blacks engaging in the trappings of courtly life. Still, several Southern papers saw fit to reprint an article from *New York's National Advocate* that said: “Henry the 1st of Hayti has an equal right to exclaim, with Lear, I'm 'every inch a king.'” The *National Advocate*, which held a fairly high opinion of Christophe, intended the comparison between the Haitian and the Shakespearean monarchs emphasize the majesty of Christophe. However, some of the Southern editors and doubtless some of the Southern readers well-acquainted with Shakespeare would have detected an ironic second meaning. When King Lear uttered those words he was in the middle of the moor, at the mercy of the elements, driven to

---

madness and paranoia by conspiracies in his own court and the threat of a French invasion, and that was just how many Southerners saw King Henry.\textsuperscript{38}

One of the men who saw King Henry as a paranoid madman was a merchant living in Port-au-Prince, who wrote to a friend in Camden, South Carolina, and later had his letter published in the \textit{Camden Gazette} in 1818. He waded directly into the contestations surrounding King Henry by writing: “It astonishes me a good deal to see that our editors treat the name of that monster, Christophe, the soi-deviant king of Haiti with the shadow of respect.” The writer seeks to de-legitimize Christophe, using the combining the phrase \textit{soi-disant}, meaning self-proclaimed, with “deviant.” King Henry Christophe is not a stately monarch dedicated to the progress of his nation; rather “Christophe's internal administration is marked by the most odious tyranny. The civil and social rights of the people are totally disregarded, while the slightest offence [sic] against his person or government, is punished with the most sanguinary and unrelenting vigor.”

The merchant went on to say that King Henry was dangerously paranoid, writing that “it is said that his apprehension of the French, and his conviction of the instability of power, founded like his upon terror, keep him in such a state of perpetual agitation.”\textsuperscript{39} It is likely that the merchant formed his negative impression of the Haitian government after being insulted or mistreated by the elites, or that his views on King Henry's capriciousness and tyranny were formed by learning of indignities suffered by other Southerners.

One of those victims was E.A. Duplessis, a merchant from New Orleans who was arrested in Haiti. Duplessis claimed that “nothing I could say could remove [the interrogator's] suspicions that I was formerly an inhabitant of the island and had come

\textsuperscript{38} Shakespeare, William. \textit{King Lear}. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1880)
\textsuperscript{39} “Kingdom of Hayti.” \textit{Camden Gazette}, June 19, 1818.
Duplessis describes the miserable conditions under which he was imprisoned and effuses patriotic gratitude for the American naval officers who argued for his release. Several years later, the *Richmond Enquirer* would reprint extracts from a letter written by another self-identified victim of King Henry's regime, a "gentleman" who had traveled to Haiti on the frigate *USS Hornet* in 1818. The writer alleges that King Henry intentionally kept the Americans waiting for days before pettily rejecting the appointment of a commercial agent. This no doubt shaped the American's impressions of the country and led him to disparage the regime, saying: "The people are wretched--grievously oppressed. [King Henry's] word is law. His nod is fate...just before our arrival he had ordered a thousand women to be selected in Cape Henry and transported to the country to labor on the plantations--the men being all under arms." (emphasis original) This description is intended to show that Haiti is grievously lacking in the material and moral benefits of civilization. Not only are the people impoverished and living under a despotism, but traditional gender roles have been abandoned in order to maintain a large standing army.

The reversion from civilization to barbarism is made clear when the writer describes ruins of the French plantations, saying: "The constant recurrence of ruined plantations, with the vestiges of spacious dwellings, splendid gardens and aqueducts, excite melancholy ideas...and still proclaim the taste, industry and skill of the former inhabitants. But these are gone--and power has passed into the hands of a ci devant St. Eustatia slave." The ruins of the European-style French mansions then stand as a symbol for the general social decay that Southerners saw when they examined Haiti.

---

41. Ibid.
The disparaging eyewitness accounts from Americans who had suffered under King Henry led some Southerners to form a distinctly negative view of the Kingdom of Haiti. Thus, when his government finally collapsed in 1820, the *Baltimore Patriot* could write that “neither Alexander nor Caesar more fairly gained his blood-stained laurels. But this enterprising chief transcended, in abandoned cruelty, the examples which history gives us of profligacy in those of any other complexion. His was not the ferocity of anger, or the severity of policy. It was a dark, diabolical thirst of blood, a sort of passion to inflict miseries.” The article invokes some of the tyrants of classical civilization in order to racialize King Henry and emphasize the extent of his brutality. He is separated from the figures of classical civilization by his race and his motivations; the desire to maintain order embodied in the “severity of policy” is replaced by a “diabolical thirst of blood.” This phrase associates King Henry with Satanic worship and cannibalism, two markers of savagery. The article goes even further when it describes King Henry’s death, saying that he, when “hunted like a wild beast, exerted the poor privilege allotted to the most depraved state of humanity, that of putting an end to his own existence.” Thus, King Henry is shown to have fallen as far from civilization as is possible, becoming so “depraved” that he was comparable to a feral animal. This dehumanizing rhetoric further reinforced ideas of white racial supremacy, stripping a black ruler of his claims to civilization and even humanity.

The trope of savagery was also present in Southern descriptions of warfare between the two Haitian regimes. The vast majority of news reports on Haiti’s numerous wars refrained from editorializing, giving only bare details such as casualties and troop

---

44. Ibid.
movements. However, some articles provide a glimpse into the chauvinistic assumptions that undergirded their analysis of the combat. In 1811, the editors of the Leesburg, Virginia Washingtonian described the brutality and anarchy of the Haitian conflict by saying that: “war, which among people more civilized leads to an open and generous contest, where mercy to the vanquished treads close on the heels of victory, here assumes the character of a massacre— a ferocious, brutal, & promiscuous slaughter of men, women, and children.”\textsuperscript{45} This line of argument created a duality between the civilized warfare of European nations and the savage warfare of Haitians, in which brutality exemplified regression into barbarism. In a similar vein, the Alexandria Gazette ran an article saying that the Haitians would “burn, lay waste, and destroy every City, Town, Fortification, and place they, by force of arms, may be compelled to retreat from” (emphasis original) rather than submit to “the mild and friendly protection of France.”\textsuperscript{46} The Gazette thus contrasts the savagery of the destructive Haitians and the civilization of the self-controlled French. The very language used to describe the Haitian military leaders reflects this bias. King Henry and President Petion, as well as their officers, are often referred to as “chiefs” or “chieftains.” This title draws a comparison between the Haitians on the one hand and Native Americans and Africans on the other, whose tribal governments were considered a marker of barbarism by Europeans.

One of the most bizarre manifestations of Southern writers’ belief in the savagery of Haitian violence is found in reports of corpse mutilation that appeared in Southern newspapers. After the death of both President Petion in 1818 and King Henry in 1820, Southern papers ran articles that falsely described the mutilation of their corpses. The

\textsuperscript{45}3. “St. Domingo.” \textit{The Washingtonian}. May 7, 1811.
\textsuperscript{46}3. “St. Domingo.” \textit{Alexandria Gazette}. December 29, 1814.
Star, of Raleigh, North Carolina, ran an article stating that after President Petion's death: “His body was interred with much pomp and splendor under the Liberty Tree opposite the capitol, his bowels in the National Fort, and his heart bequeathed to his daughter.”

Far more sanguinary are the initial reports of King Henry's death, which describe how: “his troops revolted, seized upon him, and cut off his head, which was placed on a pole, and exhibited at various places, after which many of his troops went over to Gen. Boyer, the rival chieftain of Haiti.” These two accounts are both purportedly based on the reports made by merchant captains returning from Haiti. Either these sailors had been duped by Haitians or they intentionally produced these lurid stories.

In either case, the publishing of these and similar accounts of corpse mutilation point to a Southern desire to believe that such things occurred in Haiti. In both cases, the savagery of the Haitians is so pervasive that it literally destroys not only life but also the human body itself. Southern writers' desire to repeat these stories of mutilation may have been fueled by the distinctive language of honor they shared, and by the importance this system of honor placed on the appearance and inviolability of the body. As Kenneth Greenberg writes, describing the mutilation of duelists' corpses in the antebellum South, “To mutilate his dead body is to turn his physical projection into an ugly object worthy of scorn and shame.” For Southern writers who already saw the Haitian leaders as objects of scorn and shame, tales of bizarre corpse mutilation would have been readily believed.

Accounts of warfare tended to perpetuate the idea that Haitians were savages ruled by tribal chiefs. However, Southern newspapers implicitly acknowledged the
legitimacy of the Haitian governments by reprinting speeches and declarations made by
King Henry and the Presidents of the Republic. The United States had not extended
diplomatic recognition to the Haitian government, yet these newspapers offered it a form
of de facto recognition. These texts were often accompanied by the name and title of the
leader who had produced them, and no other comment. For instance, President Boyer's
inaugural address and eulogy for Petion is presented under the headline “Republic of
Hayti” in The Reflector, of Milledgeville, Georgia. The document is well written and the
translator has taken pains to render the speech eloquently, and to use English phrases that
would have positive resonances for Southern readers. For instance, the speech includes
the phrase: “In a popular government the people are everything, their confidence is what
constitutes authority and that authority must be employed to their advantage. I feel, in the
ardent love of country which animates me in the respect that I bear to the will of the
nation, that I am no longer the same being; that I am the servant of the state.”50 By
printing this assertion of republican legitimacy without comment, the Reflector may not
have been lending its wholehearted support to the Republic of Haiti, since antebellum
papers often printed statements that they did not endorse, but the Reflector was implicitly
acknowledging that the leaders of Haiti were politicians capable of articulating their
ideas and their utterances were worthy of attention. In the early decades of the nineteenth
century, similar speeches and proclamations from Haitian leaders were reprinted
throughout the South. Their eloquence and even their mere existence provided an
implicit rebuttal to any writer hoping to relegate Haitians to beyond the pale of
civilization.

A Consensus Emerges

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, white Southerners held a variety of viewpoints on Haiti. Some saw the islands lapsing into barbarism, while others believed that the Republic and Kingdom of Haiti were progressing into the future as independent states. Most writers drew a distinction between the Republic of Haiti and the Kingdom of Haiti, at least until the Kingdom collapsed. Writers discussing Haiti, generally in the newspaper press, found evidence for their varying viewpoints in the reports of merchants and naval officers who visited the island and returned with their own agendas. This period of discussion ended swiftly during the early years of the 1830s. The Nat Turner Rebellion and the intensifying debates on abolition in the United States and in Great Britain quickened Southern writers' interest in Haiti, and led to a solidifying and souring of their views about the island. At the same time, Romanticism gave Southerners a new lens for the analysis of the Haiti. As Southern opinion coalesced behind the narrative of Haitian reversion to savagery, British and French reports of and perspectives on life in Haiti would provide the raw materials from which Southern authors constructed their arguments.

Southerners writing after the early 1830s professed to find abundant evidence for Haiti's decline. They cited Haiti's dwindling exports, its supposed moral degeneracy, and what they depicted as its blood-soaked government as proof of Haiti's descent into barbarism. They further argued that this decline had been caused by the removal of slavery. Without white paternalism, the Haitians had reverted to barbarism because of their racial inferiority and because of the tropical environment of the island, these Southern writers argued.
This discourse was an outgrowth of critiques of Haiti that had been published before the 1830s. However, Southern writers during the three decades preceding the Civil War brought a new aura of intellectual rigor to the question of Haiti. These writers were often public intellectuals such as George Fitzhugh, Edmund Ruffin, Josiah Nott, and Thomas Roderick Dew. They published their views on Haiti in the three major intellectual periodicals of the Old South: *The Southern Literary Messenger*, *The Southern Quarterly Review*, and especially *DeBow's Review*. They also included discussions of Haiti in monographs that dealt broadly with issues of race, slavery, and history. Newspapers continued to carry some coverage of political developments in Haiti, but Haiti received less newspaper coverage as time went on. The center of gravity for discourse about Haiti shifted from the popular newspapers to the books and magazines of elite Southerners. These publications could go beyond a cursory examination of Haiti's alleged reversion to savagery, and analyze in depth the manifestations and origins of this reversion.

As the medium for the discussion of Haiti changed, so too did the sources Southerners employed. Instead of citing the testimony of ships' captains, writers after about 1830 cited French and English travelers who had visited Haiti, and occasionally even Northerners who had spent time on the island. The authors read by Southerners produced monographs such as Charles Mackenzie's *Notes on Haiti: Made During a Residence in that Republic*, James Franklin's *Present State of Haiti*, and Victor Schoelcher's *Les Colonies Etrangères, et Haiti*. These texts were produced in the specific cultural contexts of their respective authors' home nations, but also in the context of a transatlantic discussion about slavery, abolition, and the state of Haiti. British abolition in
particular influenced Southerners, who heard the rhetoric in London with concern and worried about its consequences in the Caribbean. These debates invoked Haiti, pairing it with Jamaica to constitute what Guterl calls the “Scylla and Charybdis of this darker American Mediterranean...” As he explains: “The regular reflection on the meaning of Caribbean history hinted at deep, thoughtful concern by planters and pro-slavery apologists for the long-term economic consequences of emancipation elsewhere and at an awareness of the parallel circumstances that were afflicting other slaveholding societies.”51 This perception of parallel circumstances led Southerners to read English and French writers' commentary on Haiti.

If the transatlantic discourse surrounding Haiti and abolition gave Southerners an impression of gathering storm clouds, the Nat Turner Rebellion fell like a bolt of lightning. After the bloody events of Southampton, historian Scot French has written, “The case for slavery as a positive good became orthodoxy for a new generation of pro-slavery ideologues and demagogues.”52 These ideologues turned to Haiti as evidence for their vindications of slavery, as the resonance of the Haitian Revolution was intensified by the specter of a race war in Virginia that they said had been only narrowly averted.

In the immediate aftermath of the revolt, the Virginia legislature met in special session to discuss the future of slavery. The debate split Virginia along regional and class lines, with the landed elite of the eastern regions of the state generally defending the peculiar institution, while the representatives of western Virginia's yeoman farmers sought to explore gradual manumission as a means of preventing future uprisings. The

---

pro-slavery faction carried the day, and after the debates Governor John Floyd asked Thomas Roderick Dew, then a professor at the College of William & Mary, to write a summary. This he did, publishing his *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832*, which Drew Gilpin Faust has called “the first famous defense of slavery as a 'positive good.'” A Romantic conservative, Dew took a Burkean position, as O'Brien writes: “His argument was broadly located in the twilight zone where political economy met social ethics, where necessity was thought to create morality.” In order to demonstrate slavery's necessity, and therefore its relative virtue, Dew turned to several concrete examples, including Haiti.

Dew included a table in his monograph showing the island’s declining exports, with the quantities of goods exported demarcated by administration. This table, like Fitzhugh's and those produced by others, is intended to serve as a practical and incontrovertible demonstration of Haiti's regression, and therefore as proof that slavery in the American South must be maintained for the good of the political economy. Dew asked his readers, “Is not this fair experiment for forty years, under more favorable circumstances than any reasonable man had a right to anticipate, sufficient to convince and overwhelm the most skeptical as to the unproductiveness of slave labor converted into free labor?” For Dew, the primary cause of Haiti’s failure as a free society was not racial or climatic determinism, though he gestured at such notions elsewhere in the work; rather, the blame lay in the removal of slavery as an institution. It was slavery, he argued, that had made the island productive, and when the fanatical abolitionists in revolutionary

---


France removed it, they did great harm to Haiti. It was not only the island's productivity that suffered, Dew argued, but also the freed men and women themselves.

Dew asserted that the Haitian people, being unaccustomed to freedom, would only labor if compelled to do so. He went on to outline the various legal systems established to compel labor, seeking to show how inferior they were to domestic slavery. Dew writes that "slavery to the government and its military officers is substituted for private slavery; the black master has stepped into the shoes of the white; and we all know he is the most cruel of masters, and more dreaded by the negro than any of the ten plagues of Egypt." The notion that Haitians had been re-enslaved by their own government, and thus lost the benefits of a paternalistic domestic household, had already appeared in the republican work of John Taylor of Caroline. However, the more practical and Burkean Dew focused on the deleterious effects of this system on the standard of living for individuals, rather than on the evils of tyranny in the abstract. This led him to conclude his discussion of Haiti by writing: "But it is not necessary to further multiply examples; enough has already been said, we hope, to convince the most skeptical of the great disadvantage to the slave himself, of freedom, when he is not prepared for it." The assertion that slavery brought benefits to the slave were one of the major distinctions between the evolving pro-slavery argument and earlier defenses of slavery.

Dew cited as evidence for his assertions the writings of two Britons who had visited Haiti, Charles Mackenzie and James Franklin. Dew was unable to acquire, though he claimed to have attempted to do so, an original copy of Mackenzie's *Notes on Haiti: Made During a Residence in that Republic*. Instead, Dew relied on a review article

---

57 100. Ibid.
printed in London's *Quarterly Review*, a Tory publication that was skeptical of immediate abolition. The *Quarterly Review* printed several quotations from Mackenzie's chapter on "Agriculture," excluding the copious examples he provided and highlighting key points in his argument. These points included the "despotic" modes of compulsion to labor deployed by the Haitian government, Mackenzie's desire "to ascertain, as far as practicable, the degree of success which has attended each," and his conclusion that the evidence showed "the positive decrease of cane cultivation in all branches." The *Quarterly Review* considered this to be evidence that abolition was not only impractical, but would damage the moral and physical condition of master and slave alike, a view to which Dew also subscribed. Dew dedicated nearly a page of his *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832* to reprinting the *Quarterly Review*'s quotations and commentary on *Notes on Haiti*. Thus, Dew and the *Quarterly Review* acted as gatekeepers between Mackenzie and the Southern reading public, selectively editing and repackaging Mackenzie's observations. This circuitous and politically inflected route taken by Mackenzie's observations helps explain how Dew's seminal text of the pro-slavery argument came to include the work of Mackenzie, a black man.

Charles Mackenzie served as Consul General for the British Empire in Haiti, and as Gerald Horne writes, "arriving in Haiti in the 1820s, Charles Mackenzie, a man who would have been defined as a Negro in the U.S., was impressed with the site of his posting." According to Mackenzie, he arrived in 1826 and was assigned to handle
consular affairs and provide an account of Haiti's society, government, and economy for Parliament. This he did in a series of dispatches that strove to be as objective as possible, and never to impute broader implications to the facts he uncovered. Mackenzie's neutrality may have been motivated by a sense of duty and a strict adherence to his orders. He may also have feared that, because of his race, a laudatory description of Haiti would have been discounted. Whatever the cause, Mackenzie's Notes on Haiti rather scrupulously avoids drawing implications. For instance, at the end of his “Agriculture” chapter, which Dew and the Quarterly Review used to justify their anti-abolitionism, Mackenzie writes: “Such are the facts, authenticated by the best documents as can be procured in Haiti itself: the application of them to any other cases than that of which it has been my duty to treat is left to others.”63 Where Mackenzie feared to tread, others rushed in, and his analysis of Haiti was employed by many on both sides of the Atlantic.

Indeed, the work itself was published in its entirety, according to Mackenzie, only because his initial reports had been misrepresented by Members of Parliament in defense of slavery, which had in turn led to slanders of Mackenzie's character by abolitionists. The first volume is a sort of travelogue, detailing how Mackenzie found his evidence, and the second volume is a history of Haiti and an analysis of the island as he said it was at the time of publication. The details provided by Mackenzie are often grim, and his analysis of Haitian civilization certainly does not put the country in the best light.

However, he was not a believer in the proslavery narrative that his writings would later be used to support, the unstoppable decay of Haiti into barbarism. As he wrote: “It would form an interesting subject of research, to compare the short progress of the new

---


republic with that of other states emerging from the gloom of barbarism; and, in doing so, it might be determined how far the apology can be admitted, that is uniformly urged by one of the most patriotic and intelligent men in the republic, when pressed on varnishing over the defects of his country—"Nous somme jeunes." Here Mackenzie is willing to assert that Haiti is in a state of barbarism, but he adds that the country may be making progress out of it. His view of the Haitian gentleman's explanation for the current supposed savagery, which translates as "we are young," can be inferred by the burnished credentials Mackenzie provides for the anonymous Haitian. Yet Mackenzie's work, whatever its intentions, would influence not only Dew's thinking, but also Fitzhugh's, and it went on to be referenced in both DeBow's Review and the Southern Quarterly Review. Its thorough accounting of Haiti's shortcomings provided much of the evidence that would be deployed by the authors who rallied behind the narrative of Haitian decline.

James Franklin's Present State of Hayti was a less fraught source for Dew and others. It was written by a white merchant living on the island, who argued that Haiti was in a state of civilizational decline. The work was published in 1828 and contributed to the solidifying of Southern opinion on Haiti that soon followed its release. Contrary to the work's title, more than half the text is a history of the island, which Franklin included in order "to shew the decline which ensued in agriculture and commerce, the decay of knowledge, and the progress of vice and immorality among the citizens." Franklin's

---

argument conveniently buttressed the early antebellum writers who had argued that Haiti was in a state of reversion. Indeed, Franklin's work provided Dew with the data to construct his table of declining sugar exports, which would become a fetish for antebellum critics of Haiti.67

Franklin explicitly claimed that his work was written to counteract false claims being made in Britain about the progress and success of Haiti, and that “the following sheets will convey more correct information on the subject, and thus prove useful to the merchant, if not interesting to the general reader.”68 While his primary audience is ostensibly merchants considering the Haiti trade, with armchair travelers a secondary audience, the work is in fact an anti-abolition argument. Franklin was well aware of the charged debates in England surrounding slavery, and his book explicitly engages them. While not a fierce advocate of slavery, Franklin believed that slaves in the British colonies were, like the residents of pre-revolutionary St. Domingo, totally unfit for freedom. He makes this case explicitly in the conclusion to his work, writing: “Hayti bears me out in this [anti-abolition] opinion; for that country presents a lasting monument to what may be expected from injudicious emancipation, or what may be expected by free labor.”69 Franklin does not go as far as some of his readers, such as Ruffin and Fitzhugh, in asserting that slavery is a positive good. However, it is a very short logical leap from believing that Haiti represents the logical course of “injudicious emancipation” to believing that Haiti represents the logical course of all emancipation. When Franklin

69409. Ibid.
responded to the British debates on abolition by publishing his *Present State of Haiti* in 1828, he scattered intellectual seeds wide and far. Some landed in the American South and, watered by the bloodshed in Southampton, grew into powerful arguments for the inherent goodness of slavery and the descent of Haiti into barbarism.

After Dew had assembled and to an appreciable extent re-purposed the evidence collected by Britons in Haiti for his 1832 pro-slavery argument, at least one of his readers digested Dew's analysis and reapplied it to the British debates surrounding abolition. An 1833 editorial by "Anti-Abolitionist" in the *Richmond Enquirer* looked to Northern and British abolitionists and worried that "the spirit of fanaticism and false philanthropy are afloat in the world, and destined no doubt to produce numberless evils."70 While this shows a perspective that linked all abolitionist efforts around the world, and thus all slavery, Anti-Abolitionist was able to detect a silver lining. British abolition would likely increase the price of slaves and of the goods produced by them, since the British West Indies would inevitably lapse into unproductive barbarism. Anti-Abolitionist described Haiti by writing: "The abolition of slavery in that beautiful and rich island, rendered the negroes at once worthless and idle, and stopped the progress of civilization."71 He assured his readers that the same fate awaited the British colonies if slavery should be abolished. However, the contraction of slavery in the Caribbean would only increase the value and importance of American slaves, and might therefore make it harder for slavery to be abolished in the United States.

On August 1, 1834, slavery was abolished throughout the British West Indies. However, freed people were still bound to their former masters as "apprentices" for four

71. Ibid.
to six years, and their former masters were compensated for the loss of the freed slaves. This cautious abolition was analyzed in an article titled “Fanaticism,” published in the National Banner and Nashville Whig. An eyewitness described in dramatic terms the plight of the master class and the looming crisis in the island. As the article stated: “In a few years, in all human probability, Jamaica will become another St. Domingo—the grave of thousands of white men, women, and children—the abode of a race of blacks, too ignorant to enjoy the blessings of freedom, and too indolent to make a proper use of the advantages of a fertile soil, and a genial climate.” This image of Haiti employs the trope of savagery, while foreshadowing the two causes that later Southerners would cite to explain Haitian reversion: racial and climatic determinism, the Southern views on which will be discussed at length later in this paper. The article is also unabashedly pro-slavery, defending the institution in the abstract at several points. For writers like the Nashville editorialist, the narrative of Haiti’s reversion was essential, because it was the only perspective on Haiti that could undergird a defense of slavery as a transnational institution. Thus, earlier, more sympathetic, perspectives on Haiti had to be ignored by this author and others considering British abolition in the Caribbean.

The debate surrounding abolition was not the only transnational conversation that shaped Southern representations of Haiti. The early decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the growth of Romanticism in Europe, and Southerners were influenced by the emerging literary and philosophical tradition, experiencing what O’Brien describes as a Romantic moment beginning in the mid-1830s and stretching into the 1850s, the exact same period in which white Southern opinion coalesced around the narrative of Haitian decline. O’Brien writes that, compared with earlier Enlightenment thought, this moment

was Romantic and much more interested in collectivity, in the pleasures of belonging, and hence more sentimental and historicist, but also jaggedly nervous about the possibility of failure.”

These sentimental notions led political and social theorists to embrace emotion and believe that the human spirit, and not just the calculating mind, ought to be devoted to the project of civilization. Emotions were quickened by image and object, and thus Southern writers sought out the vivid and concrete to illustrate their views, including the pro-slavery argument.

The objects so used by writers were not limited to those in their immediate surroundings. William Wordsworth, the English poet and critic at the heart of Romanticism, described the ideal poet in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, using language that many Southern critics of Haiti could have applied to themselves. Wordsworth asserts that “the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. The objects of the Poet's thoughts are every where; though the eyes and senses of man are, it is true, his favorite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings.”

This atmosphere of sensation extended to the humid air of Haiti, where crumbling plantation houses, the filthy streets of Port-au-Prince, and riotous jungles provided emotion-laden images of reversion and barbarism. These Haitian objects represented one form of the failure of community about which white Southerners were so jaggedly nervous. The images provided an emotional link between the pro-slavery reader and “the vast empire of human society,” and, in particular, a link to the vast empire of human bondage.

---

One striking example of people and texts circulating around the Romantic Atlantic can be found in a single phrase. In his 1859 “Free Negroes of Hayti,” Fitzhugh approvingly quotes Mackenzie's description of Haitian existence as “a death-like languor, which is not repose.” In Mackenzie's 1830 monograph, the phrase also appears in quotation marks, and is apparently a pun on a line in the first canto of George Gordon Lord Byron's 1819 *Don Juan*. Byron describes an unchaste woman, Julia, as spending her nights in “a loving languor, which is not repose.” The substitution of death for sex allows Mackenzie to conjure up the sensuality of Byron, while emphasizing the stillness of the Haitians' non-repose, rather than its potentialities. The substitution of death for sex also served Fitzhugh's purposes, as it invoked images of decay.

Another form of social failure came not in the wholesale decay of societies, but in the failure of society and individual to integrate. Drew Gilpin Faust's *A Sacred Circle* deals with this theme. Many Southern intellectuals in the Romantic tradition saw themselves as Romantic heroes, alienated from their society. They longed for the connection, purpose, and belonging that they intuited was their birthright, and they sought it while simultaneously feeling that their isolation proved their exceptionality. As Faust writes: “Indeed, the stereotype of the alienated Romantic artist seemed so accurately to represent their own existence that it became both an explanation of their experience and an influence upon it, a model both of and for their lives.” This Romantic sentiment would lead some Southern writers to contribute to the pro-slavery

---

argument. By defending the peculiar institution, they hoped to demonstrate their social
importance. Publishing pro-slavery work also allowed alienated intellectuals to form the
interpersonal connections they yearned for. Contemplating Haiti, the isolated Romantic
artist believed that he had a duty to portray the island eloquently and to illuminate its
lessons for the broader populace. Romantic Southerners, such as Edmund Ruffin, also
used the rubric of the Romantic hero to examine the leadership of Haiti, asking whether
Haiti produced the passionate intellectuals Ruffin believed every society required.

In 1857 these Romantic currents were still carrying artists across the Atlantic.
Louis Moreau Gottschalk was a descendent of French emigres who had fled St.
Domingue during the early years of the Haitian Revolution. He was raised in a
Francophone household in New Orleans and had heard gruesome tales of his family's
former homeland from his parents and from the enslaved woman who had accompanied
them in their flight. Trained as a classical pianist, he set sail from New Orleans for a
grand tour of Europe in 1857. In Paris, he would perform for Frederic Chopin and attend
the same salon as the Romantic writers Victor Hugo and Alexander Dumas.79

As his ship passed the coast of Haiti, he relates, “I remained alone. Leaning
against the rigging I contemplated the desolate country which opened before me: High
mountains whose angular peaks seemed as if they wished to pierce the clouds. Solitary
palm trees hanging sadly along a desert shore. A horizon whose lines were lost on a
stormy sky. Altogether, and more especially the name of St. Domingo, seemed to speak
to my imagination by recalling to me the bloody scenes of revolution so closely

---

associated with my childhood memories." Here Gottschalk displays a thoroughly Romantic sensibility, characterized by a wistfulness for the past and an alienation from his current society. Furthermore, Gottschalk's feelings of alienation and nostalgia are kindled by a dramatic encounter with the natural world. Like the Wordsworth's Romantic poet, Gottschalk then uses words to capture the experience and relate it to his readers.

While Gottschalk does not mention the political economy of the island, he describes the desolation of its landscape. This was not an apolitical observation of nature. Rather, it was a viewpoint shaped by his exposure to the discourse of Haitian decline that had grown up alongside the Romantic sensibilities of the South since the early 1830s. The narrative of Haiti's reversion from civilization to savagery linked the desolation of the land with myriad other forms of Haitian regression. Southern writers argued that Haitian devolution was exemplified by economic, moral, religious, and political decay.

Many Southern intellectuals who discussed the regression of Haiti cited the country's economy, especially its declining sugar exports, as a major piece of evidence. As one article published by DeBow's Review in 1854 argues: "But, said the great Sully, minister to Henry IV, 'pasturage and tillage are the two nurses of the state,' and we must therefore judge of the tree by its fruit. By this judgment Hayti appears to be in a woful [sic] condition to what it was under French masters." This sentence is followed by a chart that indicates the precipitous decline in sugar exports. Pairing the statistical

---

evidence for declining sugar production with references to French history and scripture that assert the importance of agricultural production, typifies the Southern writers’ critique of Haiti from about 1830 onward. They saw themselves as the inheritors of the spiritual and philosophical traditions of Europe, and also as rational moderns capable of analyzing scientific data. The quantitative data on sugar exports were important for bolstering their argument. These numbers appeared in nearly every article on Haiti that was published in *DeBow’s Review*.  

Statistical evidence was accompanied by descriptions of the decaying economy and the impoverished condition of the Haitian people. In these prose descriptions, the true significance of the declining economic production becomes apparent. These commentaries show that for Southern writers, economic productivity, especially along the plantation model, was a mark of civilization. Therefore a decrease in productivity was equivalent to a devolution towards savagery. A correspondent dispatched by the *Times-Picayune* to the Caribbean in 1844 gave eloquent voice to the Southern view of economic and societal decay. Under the nom de plume Marinus, he writes: “But now the arts, by which man has been taught to subdue nature to his manifold purposes, have departed from among this wretched people. The sugar-cane, coffee, and cotton fields which once flourished at seed-time and harvest, are now dreary wastes—the splendid structures are crumbled ruins--picturesque villas and decorated lawns on the Eden-like plantations of the original French settlers, are among the things that were; and the busy mart of the once populous and great city now presents no show of commercial greatness,

---

but is crowded with idle, dissolute, worthless, ragged, filthy, brute-like negroes.”

Marinus uses parallel structure to emphasize the difference between the golden age of St. Domingue and the barbarism of contemporary Haiti. On the surface these contrasts are examples of economic decline, e.g., fertile fields becoming wastes and bustling markets places of idleness. However, on a deeper level these transformations illustrate a cultural reversion towards savagery. The fields lie fallow because the Haitians have forgotten “the arts” of mastering nature, and the crowds that fill what were once commercial hubs are marked equally by their economic idleness and their cultural brutishness. Even the reference to Eden implies a fall from a state of perfection to one of vice and suffering.

These sentiments were echoed in an essay published in 1847 by the *Southern Quarterly Review*. He wrote that “the aspect of the island affords a melancholy contrast with the appearance it presented under the colonial regime.” He describes the ruins of the French colony, which show a mastery over nature which is “at once the evidence and the triumph of civilization.” He then describes the state of current Haiti, saying that “The houses of the common population are mere huts formed from the branches of trees...their common food-the banana.” This contrast shows that while the French proved their civilized status by controlling nature, the Haitians are controlled by nature, proving their regression.

When writers in the late Old South considered the general population of Haitians, they often described them as grossly immoral. Sexual immorality is the most commented-upon Haitian vice. The essay “The Model Negro Empire of Haiti” states that “they live in a state of promiscuous intercourse, the meaning of morality being almost

---

86. 109. Ibid.
unknown among them.” This essay mentions no other categories of alleged Haitian immorality, but rather elaborates upon the unchastity and lewdness of Haitians in their sexual relations. Thus, it allows the alleged promiscuity of the Haitian people to stand as sole evidence of their moral destitution. “Marinus,” the correspondent dispatched by the Times-Picayune to Haiti, echoed this sentiment, writing that “religion and morality, or even outward decorum, is unknown to the greater part of the negro population. One obscene black wretch will have as many as twenty wives, if it is not outraging the holy ordinance of matrimony to call them by that sacred title; but such a thing as the ceremony of holy matrimony is hardly ever thought of among them.” The practices of polygamy and fornication serve to establish beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Haitian people exist in a state of sexual debasement. Polygamy and sexual vice were already associated with African savagery in the Southern mind, so these perversions of the family structure only served to further demonstrate alleged Haitian barbarity to outsiders.

Southerners also perceived a reversion to barbarism in Haitian religious practices. In 1852, rumors swirled regarding a possible annexation of Cuba by Haiti. The Times Picayune sought to dispel these rumors by writing that “in this age of christianity [sic] and civilization, the suggestion of turning over so beautiful and fertile a spot, with half a million white inhabitants, members, most of them, of the Catholic communion, to which the Spanish crown is a faithful, not to add bigoted adherent, to the horrors of black domination—a domination of the deepest ignorance, brutality, and barbarism, not to mention gross idolatry and paganism—is so revolting that no selfish interest of national

---

88 Marinus. “Letters from on Board a Man-of-War VII.” Times-Picayune, August 14, 1844.
rivalry or commercial gain could, we believe, reconcile to it a single government in Europe.” On the surface, this line of reasoning sought to dispel the rumors that Haiti would assume control over Cuba, an island that was connected to the antebellum South by what Guterl calls “something more than mere flirtatiousness and less than marriage.” But this passage also serves to illustrate the savagery and reversion of Haiti by asserting the superiority of Cuba and the South. It draws a trio of binary contrasts: civilized and savage; white and black; Christian and pagan. The article ascribes a further savage resonance to Haitian religion by referring to it as the “pious incantations of the Obi-men.” This is a reference to Obeah, a syncretic faith rooted in Igbo traditions and popular throughout the Caribbean. This African connection further highlights the theme of reversion from a Christian faith under slavery to an African apostasy under freedom.

Samuel Cartwright, a noted medical doctor and outspoken polygenist who would go on to serve in the Confederate government, located an even more cosmic origin for Haitian religion. In his 1860 essay “Unity of the Human Race Disproved by the Hebrew Bible” Cartwright asserted that all the dark-skinned races of the Earth are descendants of the “living creatures” created on the fifth day of the Biblical creation, while whites are descended from the “man created in our own image” on the sixth day. One of these proto-Africans then tempted Eve in the Garden, dooming mankind. This inaugurated a long period of serpent worship among the inferior races. This serpent worship was evidence of a civilizational inferiority, as it denied them contact with the Christian God.


39
and might even align them with his Enemy. As Cartwright describes: “They worshipped [sic] their snake-master, believed that the serpent-god was all-wise, all-powerful, and very wicked. At the present day there are half a million of slaves of the serpent in Hayti.” Cartwright alleges that all Haitian villages kept a snake in an altar, and that priests would enter states of ecstasy near the altar, receiving commands, such as a slaughter of mulattoes or of literate Haitians.

Thus, Cartwright points to demonic forces as both an example of Haiti’s barbarism and a motivating force for its people’s savage violence. In this passage Cartwright is drawing on L’Empereur Soulouque et son empire, which describes a voodoo ritual in which snakes are consulted, but which makes no connection between Haitian religion and the book of Genesis. By connecting Haitian religious practices to events in the Garden of Eden, Cartwright rhetorically linked Haiti to the single greatest moment of decline in history: the Fall of Man.

Southern newspapers after 1830 described the government of Haiti at turns as either tyrannical or ineffective, what would be in modern parlance a failed state. In 1833 the Southern Patriot of Charleston, South Carolina, described Haiti by saying that “the once beautiful colony is reduced to a state that beggars description. The people have no confidence in their rulers, and the rulers are obliged to surround their hovels with armed men whom they cannot, with any confidence rely.” This is meant to present a terrifying contrast to civilized democracies in which citizens and leaders trust one another, and standing armies are a menace. The oppressiveness and inadequacy of the current regime are explicitly contrasted with the paternalism of planters when the Southern Patriot states

---

that the Haitians who once enjoyed "having masters to look after their welfare are now ground to dust to provide for what is farcically termed the Haytien government."

The idea that the Haitian government is a farce represents a marked shift from earlier coverage of the Haitian state. This shift is clearly exhibited by the rarity of reprinted of Haitian government decrees in late antebellum newspapers. The few that did appear in later decades were always prefaced by explanations and critiques written by a white editor. Triumphal statements of republican ideals were no longer printed. Indeed, two of the rare statements by President Boyer that made it into Southern papers were his acknowledgment that Haiti would be unable to pay its debts to France and his abdication in disgrace.

Southern intellectuals writing in the more high-brow periodicals came to associate these failures of government with a reversion to savagery. In the 1858 essay "The Model Negro Empire," a writer for DeBow's Review states that Emperor Soulouque "is cruel and superstitious, so ignorant that he cannot write his name, and, while possessing a certain degree of shrewdness or cunning, devoid of all genius or ability. One cannot fail of being forcibly reminded by him of his countrymen, the barbarian chiefs of Africa." The connection to Africa is important, because it strips Haiti of the legitimacy enjoyed by the civilized nations of the New World, instead grouping the island and its government with Africa, a land that had yet to be civilized by Europeans. The Emperor's supposed illiteracy is also an important marker of his savagery, and the fact that it is compensated for by cunning hardly makes him any more fit to rule. Cunning and

---

shrewdness are traits necessary for conspirators, not civilized statesmen.

Southerners were not the only people criticizing Haiti’s decay. Indeed, they participated in a transnational discourse that included Britons like Mackenzie and Franklin, as well as French authors and entertainers. The nightlife of Paris itself, though worlds away from the plantations of the Old South, led many Southerners to perceive a gulf between Parisian refinement and Haitian barbarism. Elite Southerners often embarked on the Grand Tour as young men, and Paris was the crème de la crème of destinations, “Europe’s metropolis, where everything that rose converged.”99 Young Southerners came for the eclectic informal education provided by the city’s vibrant culture, and for the opportunity to drink in, sometimes literally, the pleasures of French life. Their seniors also came, on either business or pleasure, sometimes bringing their families. The city held special significance for Louisianans of French descent, which is probably why the Times-Picayune so frequently published dispatches from the city. These dispatches were composed by a Southerner, and they present politics, fashion, entertainment, and gossip in a jocular fashion. This correspondent proved his loyalty to the narrative of civilizational decline when he wrote that Haiti was “an island where ‘progress’ is moving backwards.”100

In one instance in 1855, a trio of Haitian nobles arrived in Paris, and were warmly received due to their free-spending habits. The correspondent repeated a French joke, observing that the Haitians, who often dressed from head to toe in white, “looked like flies which had fallen into a bowl of milk.” He went on to observe that the Haitian dandies “are accompanied by a servant, who is a droll fish, impudent and lazy as all

negroes become when they have nothing to fear." In his castigation of the servant, the writer implies that if the man were enslaved in the United States, he would be better behaved. It is a subtle and humorous yet unmistakable iteration of the pro-slavery argument.

Another column reports on a comedic year-end revue, in which politics and art were satirized. The event included a sketch in which a buffoonish Soulouque awarded medals to his most loyal followers, Duke Boboo and Duke Bobee. However, instead of the traditional Croix d’Honneur, they are presented with the Noix d’Honneur, a medal in the shape of a pair of coconuts. In still another column the correspondent also reports that the French cartoonists are producing caricatures of the newly crowned Soulouque and his queen, attended by pages, and that “the artist may not have intended these pages for monkeys, but it would puzzle the best naturalist living to say what other animal they were meant for.” These two jokes, while apparently little more than juvenile humor, served to reiterate two tropes, to be discussed at length later in this essay, that played an important role in the Southern narrative of Haiti: that the island was dominated by its tropical climate, and that primitive racial characteristics defined the island’s people and their society.

Commentary on French humor was not limited to the *Times-Picayune*. The *Daily Alabama Journal*, for instance, reprinted a satirical French news story describing a fictional visit to Haiti by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe dresses herself in blackface out of love for the Haitians, but spends her entire visit looking upwards, since she is too modest to witness Haitian nudity. Reading a French writer’s parody of Stowe would have

---

been affirming for Southern readers concerned with outsiders’ condescending critiques of the South. The target for most of the jokes, however, are the Haitian people and Soulouque. The Daily Alabama Journal’s translation of Soulouque’s supposed welcome speech for Stowe begins “Good white lady, we glad to see you, you love darkies, very black: daddy Soulouque should like to read Uncle Tom, but me cannot read, me stupid as a cabbage head, bad nigger, good for nothing but to be Emperor.”104 By indulging in this buffoonish caricature of Soulouque and his court, Southerners could easily dismiss his leadership and significance.

By confirming Southern prejudices about Haitian savagery, the French humor was an especially potent tool for reaffirming the post-1830s consensus on Haiti’s devolution. What better judge of civilizational decline could there be than the City of Lights? Those who visited the city could prove their own cosmopolitan sophistication by mimicking French sneers at the Haitians. Those who did not visit Paris could still read about it and vicariously enjoy others’ mockery of Haiti. This biting humor was an especially potent tool for critiquing Haiti during the 1850s, since much humor relies on incongruity. Many Southerners saw the court of Soulouque as ridiculous because the Haitians were attempting to be something that they never could be, honorable noblemen. The Times Picayune’s correspondent wrote: “But all joking aside, was there ever any greater farce enacted than that of turning Haiti into an empire?”105 Thus, he erases the distinction between the absurdity of fictional Parisian comedies the alleged absurdity of Haitian political realities.

Ironically, in the following paragraph the correspondent unwittingly reveals that

---

Haiti might have more to offer the world than opportunities for derision. The Times-Picayune’s correspondent praises the music of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the Romantic pianist. One of the compositions that brought Gottschalk such prominence was his “Le Bamboula,” which was described in the Times-Picayune as “a spirited negro dance, which was also every way successful.” The song was indeed inspired by the African American and Afro-Caribbean music Gottschalk had heard as a young boy, including the music of Haiti, which he had heard from his enslaved nurse. Gottschalk would write: “I should like to relate, in their picturesque language and their exquisite originality, some of those creole ballads whose simple and touching melody goes right to the heart and makes you dream of unknown worlds.” Thus, the same Parisians and Southern expatriates may have been laughing at a comedic portrayal of Haitian savagery one night, and the next night applauding a pianist who drew some of his inspiration from the music of Haiti. Perhaps something good could come from Nazareth after all.

French views of Haiti also reached the South by way of monographs published by Frenchmen who had visited Haiti. French works in the 1840s provided additional support for the narrative of Haitian decline. The Southern Quarterly Review published a review essay that addressed numerous works on slavery and emancipation throughout the Caribbean, featuring two French works on Haiti, and it highlighted the ways that these various texts undergirded the pro-slavery argument. The review essay primarily analyzed Victor Schoelcher's Colonies Etrangères et Haiti and occasionally added further commentary from Jules Le Chevalier's report for the French government entitled Rapport

---


45
Schoelcher was a French immediatist abolitionist who included a discussion of Haiti in his two-volume analysis of the Caribbean, published in 1843, in which he lamented the terrible conditions of Haitian agriculture, government, and society. His work focused on the British colonies in which slavery had recently been abolished, and Haiti was more peripheral to his argument. This was not atypical. While memories of the traumatic Haitian Revolution had been a stumbling block for early French abolitionists, this was not the case by the time Schoelcher published. As Lawrence Jennings has observed: “References to Saint-Domingue declined markedly after the British experience showed that emancipation could be achieved without violence.” Since Schoelcher and his countrymen saw the British West Indies as the primary laboratory of emancipation, Haitian affairs could be examined from many angles, rather than focusing on the consequences of abolition. Schoelcher used his analysis of Haiti to analyze the social consequences of racial division. Max Welborn summarizes Schoelcher's depiction of Haiti's government by writing: “[President] Boyer, a mulatto, adopted the following policy according to Schoelcher: he rewarded a few fellow mulattoes some political posts and financial largesse and in general encouraged the disdain that they felt toward the blacks. Most of them though, and all of the blacks, were deliberately left impoverished.” Schoelcher's discussion of conditions in Haiti thus focused on the inequality between the mixed-race elite and the bulk of the population, and on the resulting economic stagnation. The *Southern Quarterly Review* acknowledged that

Schoelcher addressed racial division on the island, but de-emphasized its importance in its summary of his work, despite the fact that Schoelcher had referred to racial difference between black and mulatto Haitians as “la clef de tous les malheurs d'Haiti,” or “the key to all the misfortunes of Haiti.”

Thus, Schoelcher and the Southern critics agreed that Haiti was in a state of misery. However, advocates of slavery believed that Haiti's barbarism was caused by an excess of egalitarianism, while Schoelcher asserted the cause was a dearth of the same. Because of this difference Schoelcher rejected a narrative of inevitable reversion. He believed that reform could empower the people and lead to a brighter future, writing that: “le jour d'Haiti n'est pas encore venu...,” meaning “the day of Haiti has not yet come.”

The Southern Quarterly Review acknowledged its difference of opinion with Schoelcher, and countered that “the forces that serve to exalt and to improve a nation are not found in its paper systems, but in the character of the population.” Thus, by replacing Schoelcher's French republicanism with a Romantic conservatism, the reviewer was able to press the evidence of Haitian backwardness amassed by Schoelcher into the service of the pro-slavery argument.

Southern writers did not only describe the reversion to barbarism that they perceived in Haiti's economy, morals, government, and religion. They also sought to explain why progress seemed to move backwards in Haiti. Southern authors turned primarily to two explanations: climate and race.

112 331. Ibid.
Discourses of Tropicality

Many antebellum white Southerners participated actively in a Western discourse that saw the tropics as a distinctly other part of the world. This rhetoric would play a significant role in how they portrayed and explained the island of Haiti and its alleged reversion into savagery. Historian David Arnold has termed this constellation of meanings “tropicality.” Arnold says that whites who sought to bring tropical places “into productive subordination of the north” believed they confronted “a landscape of seeming abundance and fertility [which] was also paradoxically a landscape of poverty and disease”—“a landscape in which the power of nature dominated human existence and to no small degree determined its characteristics and quality.” Tropical heat, it was argued, brought forth ecosystems whose riotous growth made stability and excellence impossible. Furthermore, the tropics lacked the seasonal changes that could strengthen and regulate the sprawling growth.

Arnold describes the ways that the rhetoric of tropicality extended to peoples as well as landscapes. In the view of northern commentators, “this was a primitive world, a land that time forgot and civilization had shunned.” Many believed that tropical societies had never advanced because they lived in a state of near-constant plenty. Because indigenes had never struggled to eke out a living like English yeomen, or been forced to unify for grand projects like Roman aqueduct builders, they remained in a more natural and savage state. There was also a racial component to these arguments. Race “science” was a controversial field in the early nineteenth century, but many Americans and Europeans looking south agreed that the inhabitants of the tropics were inferior.

115 Ibid.
biologically, and therefore less capable of attaining a state of civilization.

Southern whites embraced this vision of tropical nature, and those who visited the tropics reproduced scenes of tropicality for eager audiences. The paintings of Louis Remy Mignot, the most influential Southern landscape painter of the era, provided powerful pictorial representations of tropicality. Mignot traveled through rural Ecuador and went on to paint what O'Brien describes as “a rich collection of sensuous painting; ominous volcanoes, intoxicating jungles, limpid lakes, solitary palms, and threatening moonlight; scenes in which humanity's contribution is superfluous, and neat Spanish towns are dwarfed by the Andes.” Mignot's combination of riotous growth and vague natural menace seated him firmly in the emerging discourse of tropicality. His painting “Morning in the Andes” provides a perfect example. Superabundant growth, rendered in bright green, dominates the painting. A pair of humans and a tiny crumbling structure appear in the lower left, clearly dwarfed by the jungle around them. Lines from bent palm trees and sloping mountains draw the eye to a brilliant sun, the source of tropical heat, hanging above the scene.

These ideas of tropicality did not emerge out of nowhere in the nineteenth century. Indeed, Hippocrates, often revered as the father of medicine, articulated a schema of climate, race, and civilization that would lay the groundwork for future thinkers. He described Phasis, a city on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, and its inhabitants by writing that “their country is fenny, warm, humid, and wooded, copious and severe rains occur there at all times of the season...For these reasons the Phasians have shapes different from those of all other men.” For Hippocrates, tropical environs

were so torrid as to be revolting. The excessive rain and heat left fruits “unwholesome, of
feeble and imperfect growth,” and the Phasians themselves “of a very gross habit of
body.” Furthermore, Hippocrates argued that the climate of Asia retarded the
development of civilization, especially the development of the martial virtues so prized
in Greek culture. Hippocrates wrote: “Regarding the pusillanimity and cowardice of the
inhabitants, the principal reason why the Asiatics are more unwarlike, and of a more
gentle disposition than the Europeans, is the nature of the seasons, which do not undergo
any great changes either to heat or to cold, or the like.” Hippocrates went on to trace
the influence of this alleged cowardice on the despotic and backward governments of
Asia, and on their culture, which he deemed effeminate.

According to historian Gary Okihiro, it was Hippocrates who first imbued the
tropics with their alterity and inferiority, and some Southern intellectuals acknowledged
the significance of Hippocrates and various successors for their climatic doctrines.
Cartwright addressed the importance of Hippocrates in an article on the disease
environment of the Mississippi River. Cartwright states that “diseases are no less
influenced than plants and animals by local causes, as Hippocrates and the older
physicians, down to that eminent geographer and natural historian Linnaeus, long ago
proved, and the British physicians have since demonstrated, by their experience in the
colonies.” Indeed, Enlightenment writers and eighteenth-century travelers had
followed Hippocrates in treating the tropics as an alien environment, pervaded by heat

---

118 71. Ibid.
1859.
and fecundity. However, many of these writers eschewed the grotesque elements in Hippocrates’ portrayal in favor of a view that emphasized the abundance, beauty, and sensual promise of the tropics.

Foremost among these writers was Alexander von Humboldt, a German naturalist who traveled through the Caribbean and Latin America. He described these journeys in his travelogue *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent During the Years 1799-1804*, which had a tremendous influence on European and American perceptions of the tropics. In one passage, he exemplifies his view of tropicality while describing the Orinoco River: “Every rock, every islet is covered with vigorous trees, collected in clusters. At the foot of those paps, far as the eye can reach, a thick vapour is suspended over the river, and through this whitish fog the tops of the lofty palm-trees shoot up”—trees that Humboldt deemed “majestic.”¹²¹ The imagery of mist punctuated with imposing treetops invites the reader to see tropical nature as something mysterious and separate in a positive sense.

While the vast bulk of Humboldt's work on the tropics ignores the inhabitants of those regions, Humboldt does describe a connection between civilization and climate. Like many others, he believed that tropical nature could impede progress. As he wrote: “That richness of the soil, that vigour of organic life, which multiply the means of subsistence, retard the progress of nations towards civilization. Under so mild and uniform a climate, the only urgent want of man is food...and we may easily conceive, why in the midst of this abundance, under the shade of the plantain and the breadfruit tree, the intellectual faculties unfold themselves less rapidly than under a rigorous sky, in

the region of corn, where our race is in a perpetual struggle with the elements.”122 The image of a man’s head lying ignorant in the shade of a breadfruit tree captures the positive and negative attributes of tropicality that typify Humboldt’s thought.

Yet Humboldt did not believe that civilization and the tropics were incompatible. In surveying Latin America, he wrote that: “I shall not venture to decide on the various degrees of civilization, which society has attained in the various colonies. It is easier to indicate the various shades of national improvement, and the point toward which the unfolding of the intellect tends in preference.”123 Different colonies excelled in different fields; for instance, Humboldt praised Mexican science and Venezuelan letters. But for him, this progress was always rooted in their white elites’ connections to Europe and the ideals of the Enlightenment. He wrote of “the state of prosperity to which independence, the progress of reason, and free institutions will raise Spanish America, Brazil, and the island of Haiti.”124

Humboldt’s qualified belief in the possibility of civilizational advancement in the tropics, much like his wholehearted embrace of the beauty of tropical nature, was not fully embraced by antebellum writers. However, his works still formed the foundational text for nineteenth-century considerations of tropicality. As Nancy Leys Stepan writes: “To his empirical descriptions of the physical environment he married an intensely aesthetic approach to nature, creating a view of the tropics as a sublime place, a topos that lasted long after his pre-evolutionary and Enlightenment political optimism had been

123 471-472. Ibid.
replaced by an evolutionary, and more pessimistic, interpretation of the natural and social world."125

Joel Roberts Poinsett, a South Carolinian who served as a diplomat throughout Latin America, contributed to the antebellum Southern discourse of tropicality with his Notes on Mexico, Made in the Autumn of 1822. Poinsett was deeply influenced Humboldt's earlier work, as he freely acknowledged. While Humboldt had focused on tropical nature and entertained only a secondary interest in tropical peoples, Poinsett frequently discussed the Mexicans and the opportunities for and impediments to their progress toward civilization, at times invoking the climate.126 For instance, while describing the abundance of beggars, whom he described as filthy and deformed, he noted that "among the principal causes to which this great and growing evil is to be ascribed are a mild climate and a fertile soil, yielding abundantly to moderate exertions. In countries like these, the people rarely possess habits of industry."127

On the other hand, Poinsett praises the beauty of Mexican nature. He describes a valley in the humid and rainy south by writing: "the ascent is exceedingly steep, and the view most beautiful; so diversified, luxuriant, and romantic, that I shall exhaust all my picturesque phrases, and then fail to give you an idea of the beauties of the valley below us, cultivated in all tropical fruits, and studded with a number of small conical hills, wooded to their summits."128 This passage emphasizes the fertility and exuberant and uncontrollable side of tropical nature. It is also interesting because it shows the ways that

---

12830. Ibid.
tropical nature's superabundance outstripped human powers of expression. A tension may even exist here between a Romantic desire to revel in tropical nature's exuberance, and an Enlightenment desire to organize and classify it.

When Southern writers and travelers considered Haiti and its population, they drew on a Southern discourse of tropicality that Humboldt and Poinsett had done much to shape. The Haitian environment could be described as a curiosity on its own terms, a place of either beauty or filth, and at times of both. Landscape descriptions could be used to illustrate the alleged civilizational decline of the island; images of colonial French mansions being consumed by the jungle could symbolize white civilization succumbing to the indolence of the tropical races. Indeed, many Southern writers embraced a system of climatic determinism that located tropical nature as the root cause of Haiti’s supposed barbarism.

One of the earliest mentions of the Haitian climate in the Southern press came in the *Richmond Enquirer* in 1818, when a traveler reported home that “nothing can surpass the grandeur of the landscape, its beauties are picturesque and sublime.”¹²⁹ The traveler regretted that he could not spend more time describing the natural and agricultural aspects of the island, but he did include a discussion of the coastal wind patterns, which were unpredictable and at times dangerous. The writer mentions that the winds are stronger even than those described by Humboldt. The explicit invocation of Humboldt might have tropicalized the entire scenario for well-educated readers. The article goes on to puzzle over the unpredictable and apparently random nature of the winds, but it concludes that, if Southerners could gather enough data, then perhaps “it would appear that the irregularities remarked of late are periodical, occurring and recurring at stated

times; just as the French astronomers have demonstrated that the certain variations in the motions of the planets and comets happen as uniformly as the oscillations of the pendulum.\textsuperscript{130} This bespeaks an Enlightenment universalism that seeks to incorporate all natural phenomena into a single schema, and to explain tropical difference as a function of accessible scientific principles. However, it is important to remember that this rational project would presumably be carried out by whites rather than by Haitians.

Marinus, as a correspondent dispatched by the \textit{Times-Picayune} signed his dispatches, had a much more emotional reaction to tropical nature in Haiti in 1844. He and his unnamed companion rented mules for the day and rode them through the mountains above Port-au-Prince, and he described for his readers a scene of wild tropical fecundity. During their ascent, Marinus reports that “the most beautiful scenery imagination can paint everywhere astonished and delighted our senses. In the vale immense trees lined the way-side, whose branches interlocked over our heads and formed a natural arbor.”\textsuperscript{131} Like other travelers in tropical regions, Marinus was impressed with the superabundance of the region. In this account the language of emotion and sensibility come to the forefront, just as they did when Poinsett surveyed a Mexican valley. Tropical nature is presented not as a subject for inspection and classification, but as a set of images that excite rapturous enjoyment. Even the scientist would be consumed by the emotional resonance of the scene, Marinus writes, claiming that “the undergrowth of plants and flowers were so varied and singular, that a botanist would have gone off in perfect ecstasies contemplating them.”\textsuperscript{132} The emotional impact of this tropical nature isolated from its human inhabitants is purely positive, but when the

\textsuperscript{130} ibid.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid. \textit{Richmond Enquirer.} June 19, 1818.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid. \textit{Times-Picayune.} August 8, 1844.
Haitian landscape included Haitian people, it elicited more mixed responses.

Upon reaching the top of the mountain, the men survey the scene below them:
“the scene held [us] equally entranced in silent meditation. Far as the eye could reach, the valley and mead, with the green sward o'erspread, displayed Dame Nature in her richest garb. Here and there we discovered a negro hut, reared on the ruins of some foregone wealthy planter's stately mansion, and the ragged broken fences showed that landed property was once enclosed and the rights of man respected. But now all was wild luxuriance, for interloping art is banished.”

The scenery remains beautiful in this instance because the luxuriance of nature dominates the landscape. The meager human contributions to the tableau are overcome by the grandeur of the tropics, like figures in a Mignot landscape. However, Marinus also reads a narrative embedded in the scenery. He sees a story of civilizational decay, in which Haitian huts supplant superior French plantations, and crumbling walls are the only surviving evidence of the rule of order. Tropical fecundity is a part of this narrative, because it is the rapid growth of the forest, unchecked by an apparently indolent population, that has overwhelmed the built environment of French civilization.

With all “interloping art” removed from the forest, the remaining men and women are but features of the landscape, existing at the whims of nature. While Marinus’s tropical nature is beautiful as scenery, it can become more menacing when it imprints itself on mankind. When Marinus witnesses a Haitian suffering from a fever on a tropical farmstead, he reports that, “having an intuitive horror of an inglorious death of fever caught from a negro, I retreated in double quick time.”

---

134. Ibid.
of contamination, stoked by the trope of the unhealthy and febrile tropics. It was also a fear of racial contamination, a fear perhaps that the fevers of a black Haitian would reduce Marinus himself to a feature of the tropical landscape.

Marinus also discusses tropical decay when he describes his visit to the National Palace, once the home of the colonial governor. The building, Marinus reports, is lapsing into disrepair, and the park and gardens of the palace have been mowed over and replaced with fields of corn and lima beans, albeit rather productive ones. Among the examples of this degradation, Marinus writes: “Several marble statues are aligned on either side of the avenue; once they were white, doubtless, now their color is a muddy yellow, from a dingy incrustation, the accumulated dust, cemented by the rain and sun, of many years.”

This passage highlights the way that, for Marinus, the accoutrements of French civilization decayed in the tropical environment. There also may be a racial subtext to this example, as the statues are transformed from white to yellow.

This vision of tropical nature overtaking and corrupting civilization also appears in an article translated and reprinted in the Augusta Chronicle in 1823. The article discusses the climate and industry of Haiti; it originally appeared in Le Drapeau Blanc, an ultra-conservative, monarchist publication in Paris. Much of the article offers a polemical description of the Haitian landscape, contrasting the wealth and civilization of a former era with the riotous growth of tropical nature. For instance, “at Gonaives, fields of cotton have disappeared, owing to the considerable number of aloes and prickly pears. The fertile soil of Artibonite, and that of Arcahaye, are daily overgrown with arbutis [sic]

---

and thorn bushes.”¹³⁷ This imagery expertly deploys the fertility of the tropics as both the source of Haiti’s former agricultural wealth and the cause of its current reversion to nature. The French monarchists and the Southern planters both related positively to the slave-owning elite French of the colony, and this imagery of decay would have resonated with both groups.

Visions of tropical Haiti also appeared in Southern fiction, which articulated a radical alterity for the island. These works, influenced by the Romanticism of the day, set themselves in a past that was larger than life, much like the dramatic world of the stories Gottschalk had heard in his youth. Works of fiction were also more inclined to show that degeneration could strike even white visitors to the island.

William Gilmore Simms, perhaps the foremost novelist of the antebellum South, addressed Haiti in his 1853 work *Lucas de Ayllon: A Historical Nouvellette*. The novella describes a group of Spaniards in St. Domingo who launch a slave raid to capture Native Americans from what would later become South Carolina. The raid is necessitated by the fact that there are no slaves to be had on the island because “the blandness of [the indigenous Haitians’] climate, its delicious fruits, and the spontaneous gifts of nature, had rendered them too effeminate for labor and too spiritless for war.”¹³⁸ They, like the Phasians of Hippocrates, are weakened and denied the heroic virtues by dint of their warm and unchanging climate. The natives of South Carolina, on the other hand, are “of a very noble stature; graceful and strong of limb; of bright, dark flashing eyes, and of a singularly advanced civilization, since they wore cotton clothes of their own

¹³⁷ “Saint Domingo.” *Augusta Chronicle*. May 24, 1823.
manufacture." They resemble the Greeks of Hippocrates' imagining, and in Simms's retelling the courage of the Carolina Indian warriors and their lamentations over their widowed queen take on a Homeric tint. This dichotomy invites South Carolinians to see themselves as a similarly temperate race. Like the Native peoples who once inhabited their land, they can be brave, well-proportioned and civilized, and therefore superior to the latter-day Haitians.

The invocations of tropicality become more significant when we consider historian Sean Busick's contention that "Simms was familiar with, but suspicious of, overly deterministic European theories about historical progress. Simms's writings show that he was far more interested in the power of personal character and action to shape history than he was in impersonal forces such as materialism, climate, or a mystical national spirit." That Simms would deviate from this norm when addressing the tropicality of Haiti serves to reinforce Arnold's insight that, for many believers in the distinctiveness of tropicality, climate is seen as the dominant factor in the torrid zone, while human will is the dominant factor in the temperate zone. Indeed, even the Spaniards who travel to the tropical zone seem to regress, becoming capricious villains who terrorize the hardy residents of the Carolina coast. Simms seems to embrace climatic determinism fully when he refers to Haiti as "the delicious country which seems destined never to rear a population suited to its character." Thus, the tropics, though splendid in their way, can corrupt individuals and even doom entire races over the longue durée.

This trope of reversion, even of whites, also appears in an anonymously authored piece of short fiction presented in the *Southern Patriot* titled “The Hazard of the Die.” Set in colonial St. Domingo, the story focuses on a hot-headed creole gambler and a visiting sea captain. The two play dice, but the captain misunderstands the stakes of the game. This leads to a confrontation, and to the creole challenging the captain to a duel. Rather than fight with sabers or pistols, the two decide to settle it with a second game of dice, agreeing that the winner will shoot the loser dead on the spot. They play, and the creole wins. He shoots the captain dead, splatterng other pub-goers with gore. The short story appears to have been copied without attribution from the *Suffolk Literary Journal*, a not uncommon practice in American print culture.

The publishers of the *Southern Patriot* chose to alter the story in several ways, principally by adding several paragraphs of context for their readers and a stern condemnation of the Domingan gambling culture. These paragraphs seem to offer two explanations for the shocking story, both of which are rooted in the Haitian landscape. The anonymous contributor of the story writes that, “under the burning atmosphere of the tropics, the passions, naturally quick, become ardent, and even volcanic; while riches, which in great measure give rise to them, offer every means of gratifying them.” Thus, both the hot climate and the fecundity of tropical nature can cause even white men to lose their self-control and behave rashly. While many Southern readers would have found little to criticize in dueling and gambling, the introductory passage makes it clear that the behavior of the two men should be seen as excessive at best, and vice-ridden at worst.

The fact that this introductory passage implicates the climate of the island in the

---

violence, while the story appearing in the *Suffolk Literary Journal* does not, is a compelling example of the importance of tropicality for some Southern writers.

George Fitzhugh, perhaps the ablest and most thoroughgoing of Haiti's antebellum critics, embraced the logic of tropicality as an explanation for Haiti's supposed barbarism. He, like Humboldt, argues that the fecundity of tropical nature acts as an impediment to civilization, because so little exertion and organization are necessary for survival. In his 1859 essay “Free Negroes of Hayti” Fitzhugh writes: “We know, both theoretically and by experience, that a people living in a warm climate, where clothing may be dispensed with, and upon a fertile soil where the fruits of the earth spring forth spontaneously, cannot retain their civilization under such circumstances.” This is an extreme statement of climatic determinism. Because of their climate, the Haitians do not have to work hard; they will not produce the sorts of complex agricultural, industrial, and economic systems that Fitzhugh believed essential to civilization. This failure in the material realm, for Fitzhugh, dovetailed neatly into a failure in the social and moral realm, much as the supposed nudity of Haitians made possible by tropical warmth fed into the images of licentiousness he included in his writings.

It is also important to notice that Fitzhugh in fact tropicalizes the Haitian people; that is, he argues that they are especially suited to the tropical environment. This serves to link the bodies and indeed the race of the Haitians to the torrid zone they inhabit, reducing their agency and turning them into a part of the exotic and languorous landscape. This view of the Haitians as racially predisposed to tropical savagery pervades the article. Fitzhugh argues that “a population squatted on the earth, sucking bananas, though they might be fulfilling their own ideas of terrestrial happiness, just as their

---

brethren in Africa have been doing for these many centuries, were neither profitable to the state, useful to mankind, nor promoters of morality." This imagery bound together visions of tropical nature and civilizational reversion. Their diet of exotic and easily-harvested bananas is a consequence of tropical fecundity. The image of people “squatted on the earth” seeking “terrestrial” goals roots alleged Haitian savagery in the literal soil of the island.

Fitzhugh’s arguments surrounding Haiti’s climate and civilization contain a paradox, however, that he never fully addresses in “Free Negroes in Hayti.” The lush tropical environment has been the undoing of the Haitians, he says, because it doomed them to sloth. However, Fitzhugh also points to the blacks' supposed inability to capitalize on the lush tropical environment as further evidence of their incapacity for self-rule. He asserts that Haiti is blessed with “possessing a soil of unbounded fertility, a corps of laborers well instructed in the culture of those articles which ever return the most remunerative of prices, and a climate better adapted to the constitution of its inhabitants than any other under the sun— with all these advantages, it was to be expected that the empire of Hayti would soon assume an important rank in the family of nations.” Fitzhugh here claims that the productivity of the land should have made Haiti’s success more likely, rather than doomed its people to decline. Indeed, this seems to contradict his invocation of tropicality to explain Haitian decay. Rather than asserting that their connection to a languorous nature makes sloth their natural state, Fitzhugh expresses surprise that a people well-suited to the tropics would not have succeeded in their native clime. Fitzhugh’s works were always polemical, and generally lacked the

---

147528. Ibid.
systematic rigor of a writer such as Dew. Still, these internal contradictions seem to cry out for an explanation.

Fitzhugh gestures toward a racial solution to the apparent contradiction. He prevaricates, saying: “We do not pretend to say that the question, as to negro capacity being on a par with the white, is answered. All that we claim is, that the lives of two generations of men, living in a state of perfect freedom, and surrounded by every possible advantage, is another added to the many already existing proofs, that the negro race will never rise to that point [of civilization] through a process of freedom.”

Fitzhugh assumes the language of a cautious scientist, yet he conveniently concludes that Haiti confirms other experiments showing that slavery is essential for social development. Fitzhugh asserts that for blacks “perfect freedom” combined with a nature providing “every possible advantage” is not necessarily an advantageous scenario for progress. Rather, freedom and natural abundance cause blacks to lapse into barbarism. The advantages of tropical nature are simultaneously squandered blessings and ironic curses.

Fitzhugh comes closer to squaring the circle through a racial analysis of the island in his 1861 work, “Hayti and the Monroe Doctrine,” by advocating a teleological view of tropical nature and racial difference. Fitzhugh argues that Haiti should be reconquered by the French, so that they can return civilization to the impoverished and suffering people of the island. Fitzhugh, writing during the Civil War, envisioned a postbellum world in which the Confederacy could share the Caribbean with other white powers dedicated to the plantation model of agriculture. He summarizes the current condition of Haiti: “The civilized world will not much longer permit the naturally paradisiacal isle of Hayti to

---

remain a useless waste, infested by a horde of idle savages and pagans, and ruled over by despotism more cruel and blood-thirsty than King Dahomy himself.”

Fitzhugh again contrasts the tropical paradise of Haiti with the savagery he finds in its inhabitants. The current barbarism of Haiti is an affront to the principles of civilization and a misuse of the island. Arguing that the island has a proper use imputes a certain telos to tropical nature. Haiti’s barbarism, then, is the inevitable consequence of the inhabitants’ misuse of tropical nature, but not of tropical nature in and of itself.

Fitzhugh provides a clear vision of this telos, even imputing a divine origin to it. He writes: “Hayti was intended, by Providence, to be cultivated by man; and the negro was not created merely to worship idols, commit homicide, and perpetrate cannibalism. He is happiest when compelled to labor, and it is the right and duty of the white man to put him to work, to keep him at work, and to take care of him.”

Thus, the tropical fertility of the island can be a wellspring of civilization when its exploitation is directed by the white race, but it is an impediment to progress when Haitians are left to their own devices. This is because the black race is, in Fitzhugh’s imagining, a feature of the languorous tropical landscape rather than an agent in it. Fitzhugh’s vision of a Haiti returned to its intended course matches closely his depictions of the island before the revolt, and to his vision of the ideal society as laid out in Cannibals All!, his pro-slavery magnum opus that defends the idea of the paternalistic plantation. Thus, the logic of tropicality is employed to justify white dominance and defend the system of slavery.

Fitzhugh, like Simms, Marinus, and other Southern writers, saw an essential connection between climate and civilization. These writers drew on an intellectual

150 133. Ibid.
tradition of climatic determinism and tropicality to argue that Haiti had lapsed from
civilization into barbarism because of the superabundance of the tropical environment.
These explanations enabled Southerners to distance themselves, to marvel at Haiti’s
exotic landscapes even as they condemned its inhabitants, implicitly declaring their own
superiority whenever they described difference. Fitzhugh’s explanation for Haiti’s
decline, however, also emphasized the racial aspect of Haiti’s decline, in this he followed
other Southern writers that ignored climate, focusing instead on race.

**Racial Determinism**

While tropicality and climatic determinism played a major role in many writers’
descriptions of Haiti, there was a second tradition of thought in the antebellum South that
rooted the alleged barbarism of Haiti in the racial make-up of its populace. This tradition
included such writers as John Taylor of Caroline, Josiah Nott, and Edmund Ruffin, as
well as their anonymous contemporaries in the press. These thinkers were even more
likely than their tropicality-embracing contemporaries to turn to Haiti for insights into the
slave system, since lessons drawn from racial theory were equally applicable to enslaved
and free people of African ancestry, whatever climate they were found in. Taylor, Nott,
Ruffin, and others hoped that Haiti would provide insight into the slave system because it
was the only available example of a nation replacing plantation slavery with free labor.
To this end, they often examined the political economy of Haiti. While they all agreed
that the Haitian Revolution had destroyed domestic slavery, many believed that new
forms of unfreedom had sprung up in its wake, and that these vindicated the writers’
defense of the slave system.

John Taylor of Caroline, an agrarian writer and politician, laid out many of his
ideas in his monograph of 1813, *Arator*, originally published serially in 1803. Like Fitzhugh, Taylor treats Haiti as an experiment. However, Taylor easily universalizes the results of the experiment. This is perhaps because Taylor wrote at a time when the rhetoric of tropicality was still in its incipience. For example, Humboldt had yet to publish his *Travels in the Equinoctial Region* when Taylor's essays first appeared. Furthermore, while Taylor, like Fitzhugh, believed that certain places called for certain agricultural practices his conceptions of ideal systems were rooted in specific places, such as the Virginia tidewater or hill country, rather than in globe-spanning regions like the tropical and temperate zones. In his discussions of fertility and infertility, for instance, he does not offer a cosmological explanation, but rather points to specific land-use practices in particular regions of Virginia. He was infinitely more concerned with transforming Indian corn into mulch than in the inherent fecundity of distant lands. His ideas about human civilization, on the other hand, were far more universalistic; he spoke in broad terms about the interests of agriculture in all places and times. In all this, Taylor was firmly entrenched in the Enlightenment tradition that preceded Romanticism in the Old South.

Taylor was a critic of slavery, though not an abolitionist, writing that "Negro slavery is a misfortune to agriculture, incapable of removal, and only within reach of palliation." While Taylor was elsewhere willing to go to great lengths to remove any impediment to agricultural development, he saw slavery as unique because he believed the abolition of slavery was bound to result in a race war. For evidence of this, he turned

---


to the example of Haiti. Taylor wrote that in Haiti abolition “attempted to compound a free nation of black and white people in St. Domingo. The experiment pronounced that one color must perish.” Because Taylor believed the Haitian Revolution proved racial amalgamation was impossible, he concluded that race war was the inevitable result of any multi-racial society that lacked race-based slavery. On the strength of this example, Taylor concluded that slavery could never be abolished without bloodshed, and must either be improved or ended via a process of colonization.

Taylor's fear of this inevitable warfare was rooted in his republican antipathy to factions. As he wrote, drawing on the example of Haiti: “it is impossible to conceive a form of society better calculated to excite and foster factions and sub-societies, than one constituted of distinct colors, incurable prejudices, and inimicable [sic] interests...” For Taylor, racial differences were too wide a chasm ever to be bridged in a republic; race was an ultimate and determining factor for the course of a nation. Thus, the fate of Haiti's whites had supposedly been sealed by revolutionary France's decision to place the freed blacks on an equal footing with their former masters. Taylor did not fear equality because he believed that blacks were inherently inferior. Rather, he felt that it was impossible for two races to peacefully coexist in a single republic, since racial difference would incite factionalism, which would in turn foil attempts to seek the common good.

This concern about factions also led Taylor to abjure a compromise in which blacks might be liberated from chattel slavery but denied civil rights. If the slaves,
ignorant as Taylor thought they were of the manners of citizenship, were freed they would inevitably be brought under the control of some avaricious faction and oppressed. As Taylor argued: “Slavery to an individual is preferable to slavery to an interest or faction. The individual is constrained by his interest in the property of the slave and susceptible of humanity. An interest or faction is incapable of both.” Domestic slavery was palliated by human affection and local specificity, with masters taking a long-term interest in the slaves’ well-being in the same way they cared for their land and family. Taylor saw this as superior to a system in which laborers were overworked for the short-term gain of a distant capitalist class. The idea that slavery without masters was the inferior alternative to domestic slavery would have long legs in the antebellum South, eventually being taken up by Fitzhugh as the secondary title to his *Cannibals All! Or Slaves Without Masters*.

Taylor stated clearly in his work of 1820, *Constructions Construed and Constitutions Vindicated*, that the mass of Haitians had been reduced to this unenviable state. The Haitian Revolution, he argued, had been spurred by fanatics in France who had little knowledge of the local situation. The upheaval had resulted in “dividing the residue [of Haitians] into tyrants, and slaves to tyrannical laws, always more oppressive than any other species of slavery.” Thus, even Taylor, a critic of slavery, maintained that the end of that institution in Haiti had actually led to a deterioration in conditions for the citizens of that island. Taylor generally avoided the rhetoric of civilization and savagery; his great social concerns were liberty and tyranny. In Haiti's transition from domestic slavery to

---

157 Taylor of Caroline, John. *Constructions Construed and Constitutions Vindicated.* (Richmond: Shepherd & Pollard, 1820.)
oppressive government, Taylor could plot a story of decay in the political economy of the
island, though he employed a different lexicon than that of later writers.

Taylor's conception of Haiti was rooted in republican principles and a deliberately
reasoned political philosophy. For Taylor and many others in the Jeffersonian generation,
race mattered primarily as a division within a polity. However, as the nineteenth century
moved forward, race became imbued with more and more significance and meaning. A
new class of anthropologists was investigating the question of racial difference and its
origin, and their debates filled the American press of the day. The grand contest was
between two broad camps. The monogenists hewed close to the Biblical account of
creation and argued that all mankind had a common ancestor, with all racial distinction
explained by environmental factors. The polygenists proposed that the races of man were
the result of separate creations, making the races of man different species. The primary
criticism levied against polygenesis, other than its infidelity to Scripture, was that if the
races of man were indeed separate species, then racial mixture should be impossible.
Daily experience showed this not to be the case, and polygenists spilled oceans of ink
making sense of racial mixture.\textsuperscript{158}

This debate raged especially keenly in the South. As William Stanton has noted:
"The new anthropology thrust a dilemma before the Southerner...The Southerner was
forced either to admit that he was enslaving his fellow men, or, by arguing that the slaves
were of a lower species, to reject the scriptural account."\textsuperscript{159} Josiah Nott became the
standard-bearer for those who would attack the unity of mankind. Nott was a medical

\textsuperscript{158} For more on the rise of race science and the debates within it, see Stanton, William. \textit{The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Towards Race in America, 1815-1859.} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960.)

\textsuperscript{159} 112. Stanton, William. \textit{The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Towards Race in America, 1815-1859.} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960.)
doctor with a practice in Mobile, and a writer and lecturer in ethnology. He was a thoroughgoing skeptic in matters of religion as well, and remained in close contact with Samuel Morton, Louis Agassiz, and George Gliddon, the leading lights of polygenesis in the North.

In 1844 Nott delivered “Two Lectures on the Natural History of the Caucasian and Negro Races,” which was later published to significant controversy. Along with arguing for the separate creation of the races, Nott listed as one of his major conclusions “that there now exists and has existed, as far as history speaks, a marked moral and intellectual disparity between the races, and that a high state of civilization never has existed in any other than the Caucasian race.”

Nott surveyed the totality of history, to consider possible counterexamples, especially Egypt and Carthage. Drawing on the work of the Gliddon and Morton in Egyptology, he pronounced Egypt and Carthage accomplishments of the Caucasians and men of mixed ancestry, respectively. Then he turned closer to home, examining Haiti as another potential counterexample. If Haiti was a nation of blacks and was even partially civilized, it could threaten Nott’s reasoning. To explain the existence of the vestiges of civilization present in Haiti, Nott looked to racial mixture. He asserted that, “imperfect as the civilization of St. Domingo now is, if you were to abstract the white blood which exists now among them they would sink at once into savagism.” Thus, he imputed a system racial determinism to the course of Haiti’s civilization. He also explicitly argued for the hybridity of mulattoes, averring that they were the offspring of two distinct species.

The publication of these two lectures initiated a controversy, and Nott, never one

---

160 Nott, Josiah. “Two Lectures on the Natural History of the Caucasian and Negro Races.” (Mobile: Dade and Thompson, 1844.)
161 Ibid.
to back away from confrontation, went on to defend his arguments in a pair of lectures he delivered at Louisiana University in December 1848, later published as “Two Lectures on the Connection Between the Biblical and Physical History of Man.” Here he reiterated his belief in the inherent savagery of the black race, writing that: “Their highest civilization is attained in the state of slavery, and when left to themselves, after a certain advance, as in St. Domingo, a retrograde motion is inevitable.” Thus, Nott was able to wed his still controversial theories on race to the pro-slavery argument and its narrative of civilizational decay in Haiti. His assertion rested on the belief that racially superior masters could shepherd slaves a certain distance along the path to civilization. This was a rare move for Nott, who generally avoided the pro-slavery argument.

As Stanton writes: “It should be noted that Nott did not defend slavery as a positive good. He defended it only as the alternative to amalgamation, which, to his mind, meant the biological deterioration of the two races.” Even so, Nott used elements of pro-slavery rhetoric to further his arguments. Nott’s references to the civilizing influence of slavery serve to further his biological arguments supporting the white race’s predilection for progress. Nott opposed abolition not because he thought slavery was an ideal system, but because he believed that the end of slavery would be the beginning of miscegenation. Still, Nott participated in the pro-slavery movement because praising slavery might attract a receptive audience for his notions of hybridity.

In Nott’s fear of miscegenation he followed in the footsteps of Taylor, who worried that the principle of abolition “proposes to renew the last experiment [of

\[162\] Nott, Josiah. “Two Lectures on the Connection Between the Biblical and Physical History of Man.” (New York: Bartlett and Welford, 1849.)

Haiti]...and again to create a body politic as monstrous and unnatural as a mongrel half white man and half negro.”¹⁶⁴ Unlike Taylor, who feared amalgamation as a hazy menace, Nott had a concrete example of a society in which mulattoes held sway, and he was able to deploy it as further evidence for mankind's supposed diversity of origins. That example was the nation of Haiti.

In “Two Lectures on the Connection of the Biblical and Physical History of Man.” Nott restated his earlier contention, with a slight modification, writing that “the negroes of Hayti have been steadily relapsing into barbarism, and their downfall has only been retarded by the white blood mingled in the veins of a portion of them.”¹⁶⁵ As he had in his first lectures, Nott argued that what he regarded as Haiti's tenuous grip on civilization ought to be attributed to the partly white ancestry of leading elements on the island. Nott now proffered a more nuanced view than he had earlier in his work, placing this white blood in only a portion of the population.

Not surprisingly, Nott assumed that the white blood belonged to the ruling class. As he wrote, “the mulattoes of Hayti, as elsewhere, have always preserved a superiority which the white blood alone could account for.”¹⁶⁶ This superiority of the racially mixed caste provided further evidence for Nott's argument that biracial individuals were hybrids, existing halfway between the European and the African. Haitian race relations also provided further evidence for his vision of racial difference; he wrote that Haitian blacks were so “jealous, they are making constant efforts to exterminate their proud

¹⁶⁵ 32. “Two Lectures on the Connection Between the Biblical and Physical History of Man.” (New York: Bartlett and Welford, 1849.)
¹⁶⁶ 32. Ibid.
This racial tension on the island served to illustrate Nott's view of races that exist in permanent competition, and his argument that slavery and government could only delay or palliate that violence. Ironically, when Nott delivered his lecture in December 1848, his measured paean to the mulatto ruling class of Haiti ought to have been a eulogy.

The year before in Haiti, President Riche, a biracial leader, had died. In his place, the Senate appointed a man of entirely African descent named Faustin Soulouque, believing him to be a pliable leader who could hold the office until the elites could select a compromise candidate from within their own ranks. However, Soulouque was shrewder than expected and began pursuing an independent policy, much to the chagrin of the old elite. The conflict came to a head in the massacres of April 16, 1848. Soulouque, with the support of the military and many of the commoners, swiftly eliminated many of the biracial elite, replacing them with a cabinet and military administration that was filled primarily with men of completely African ancestry. This inaugurated a period of violent reprisals and warfare that would last until Soulouque's ascent to the throne as Emperor in August 1849. The same year that Nott published his warnings about the Haitians “constant efforts to exterminate their proud rulers” Emperor Soulouque proved that efforts of this kind had already taken place.

While Nott may not have described specifically the shifting power dynamics of Haiti, others did provide a racially tinged commentary on them. The Southern Patriot, the Richmond Enquirer, and the Times-Picayune of New Orleans all ran identical stories breaking the news of the massacre, which the Southern Patriot and Times-Picayune

16732. “Two Lectures on the Connection Between the Biblical and Physical History of Man.” (New York: Bartlett and Welford, 1849.)
attributed to the *Boston Courier*, and the *Richmond Enquirer* attributed to the *Times-Picayune*. The article that first announced Soulouque's consolidation of power to readers in Charleston, Richmond, and New Orleans contained these telling lines: “The determination of the blacks to exterminate the browns has been brewing for a long time, in fact since the tyrant Soulouque has been president; and it is now being realized with a vengeance that none but savages could be guilty of committing.”¹⁶⁸ The image of Haitian savages engaging in massacres was a familiar one to Southern readers, who were haunted by the original Haitian Revolution. By identifying the biracial elite as the victims, the newspaper account could elicit sympathy by inviting the reader to see a parallel with the violence of the earlier Revolution, in which darker people also attacked lighter ones. This account also branded Soulouque as the responsible party. The article served to further racialize Haiti, showing that control was slipping from those who, in Nott's vision and others, partook of the white race's capacity for civilization.

The *Baltimore Sun* ran several original pieces criticizing Soulouque and his consolidation of power. When the editors learned of the massacre of April 16, 1848, they ran an article that criticized the bloody and cruel tactics of Soulouque. When they analyzed the policies that had led up to the crisis, they wrote, “It is stated that Soulouque has systematically excluded the yellows (who, though the minority, are the most intelligent and substantial portion of the inhabitants) from all participation in the offices of government, and replaced them by blacks who are ignorant and incapable.”¹⁶⁹ The newspaper thus aligned itself with the old order in Haiti, defending the elites in the face

---
of a popular revolution. This view had a clear racial component, seeing the mixed race elite as naturally qualified to lead by virtue of their white heritage, diluted though it was. The *Sun* also took a racially determinist stance on Soulouque's newly installed leaders, deeming them biologically incapable of governing. Paradoxically, the racist logic of the *Baltimore Sun* led it to praise and sympathize with mixed-race individuals that, absent Soulouque's coup, they would have despised.

When Soulouque crowned himself, the paper printed a letter from an American living in Port-au-Prince who had witnessed the coronation. The correspondent racialized the entire scene, writing that “in the church an attempt was made to get up a very imposing spectacle, with what success you may judge, when you are told that the Emperor and the whole imperial family are very black, and this race are not usually very successful in getting up magnificent spectacles.” The entire scene, which was intended to be a demonstration of Haitian might, is undercut by the correspondent inviting his readers to apply their own racist assumptions to the coronation and to the supposed failure of the ritual. The editors of the *Sun* allowed themselves a bit of word-play in the introduction to the letter, writing that: “Soulouque, aping the style of Napoleon, placed upon his own head the imperial crown...” Their use of the term “aping” can be read as a reference to the supposed absurdity of the illiterate Haitian leader imitating a world-historical figure like Napoleon. It can also be read as a racist pun, comparing Soulouque himself to an ape.

Apparently, Nott, who was residing in New Orleans, did not pick up the *Times-Picayune* the day it announced the massacres of April 16. Perhaps he was consumed with

---

171. Ibid.
his temporary position at Louisiana University, where he was substitute-teaching for famed journalist J.D. B. DeBow, who was then serving in the State Legislature. After the rise of Soulouque, Nott paid little attention to Haiti, spending less than one sentence on the island in his magnum opus, *Types of Mankind*. He would, however, make one more contribution to antebellum discussions of Haiti.

Arthur Comte de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* has been called “the Bible of nineteenth century racists.” Nott was so impressed with it that in 1856 he supervised a translation of the work, selecting those passages which he believed might best substantiate the claims of the polygenists and provide guidance to America's leaders as they debated racial matters. The result was *The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of the Races*, which included six pages on the people and government of Haiti. These reiterated the familiar trope of reversion to savagery and argued that the official institutions of Haiti might be modeled on France, but that the habits of the citizens were firmly African and barbarous. Nott’s translation of Gobineau provided an image of the new Haitian elite that was thoroughly racialized, reporting that, upon meeting a Haitian noble, “you find an intellect of the lowest order combined with the most savage pride, which can be equalled by only as profound and incurable a laziness.” This image of the Haitian elite as completely incompetent and barbaric would come to dominate the Southern imaginary during the Soulouque era.

As Soulouque’s rule continued, Southern writers continued to argue for the impact

---


of racial determinism on Haitian development. An anonymous essay appearing in DeBow's Review in 1858 titled "The Model Negro Empire of Hayti," for instance, laid out the case for a racially deterministic view of the island's history. After a disquisition on Haiti's decay, the author wrote, "Such is the present condition of St. Domingo, or Hayti—a sad commentary on the negro race's capacity for civilization."

The author depicts Haiti as an ideal laboratory, since the Haitians had begun in what he considered a near-perfect situation. As he writes: "Here the undisputed ownership of one of the most fertile spots on the face of the globe, during the last fifty years, has afforded them the opportunity of proving to the world their capacity and intelligence, and no one who reads attentively the troubled history of the last half century can entertain a doubt that thus far the experiment has been a failure."

This writer, like many others, claimed to see Haitian history as an experiment in the possibility of civilization among blacks after African slavery was abolished—though it is doubtful he ever had, or would ever have, entertained any doubt about the outcome of this "experiment." Unlike the writers who had embraced tropicality with its notion of superabundance crippling ambition and industry, the anonymous writer in DeBow's Review saw the flourishing nature of the island not as an obstacle, but rather as a great asset. The situation of Haiti had provided an ideal opportunity to observe the capabilities of the African race, he said, without any possible hindrances to their progress other than the influence of race.

Edmund Ruffin also saw race as a central cause of Haiti's reversion into savagery. Ruffin was a Virginia writer who began his career as an agricultural reformer, arguing for the application of marl to neutralize the pH of exhausted land. However, he did not

achieve national prominence until he began publishing pro-slavery works. During this phase of his career, he turned to Haiti as an example of the disasters he believed would result from black liberation. In his 1857 pamphlet, *Political Economy of Slavery*, Ruffin wrote that “since the experiment, now of more than sixty years standing...no abolitionist of good sense and information can believe in the benefits of emancipation even to the slaves themselves, or in the fitness of the negro race for freedom or self-government.” Ruffin used what he depicted as the barbarism of Haiti to show that the African race was incapable of freedom in all times and places—a conclusion that bolstered the pro-slavery argument. The section of Ruffin's pamphlet dealing with Haiti would be reprinted in *DeBow's Review* as part of an essay titled “Equality of the Races—British and Haitien [sic] Examples.”

Ruffin's background as an agricultural reformer and a Romantic influenced his participation in the pro-slavery argument and led him to avoid climatic determinist arguments. As Drew Gilpin Faust has argued, Ruffin saw agricultural productivity as an outgrowth primarily of learning and the mind. Echoing Taylor, Ruffin discussed how fertility could be increased with responsible farming practices, even as it could be squandered by reckless agriculture. Ruffin's agrarian vision saw a deep unity between these agricultural and economic practices and the moral and political sinews of the nation. Ruffin's Romanticism led him to see the man of genius as a critical component in any well-ordered world. One role of the man of genius was to educate his countrymen about agricultural techniques and political economy. Needless to say, the man of genius

---


would always be a white man. On this basis Ruffin argued that the collapse of Haiti could be blamed entirely on the complexion of its leaders and farmers, and not on its climate.179

Ruffin spent little time in *Political Economy of Slavery* describing Haiti's decay in detail. So many other polemicists had discussed the island's regression, and demonstrated it beyond a shadow of a doubt with tables showing Haitian agriculture's decline, Ruffin writes, “it will be enough here to say, generally, that in regard to cultivation and production, population, social condition, and political importance—refinement, morals, and religion—in short, everything that can render a country or its people valuable—the general decline of St. Domingo (Hayti) has been far greater than any person or party could have anticipated.”180 That Ruffin felt no need to describe, beyond these perfunctory and polemical lines, the actual nature of Haiti's decay testifies to the cultural salience of the island in pro-slavery argumentation.

To explain the alleged failure of these institutions in Haiti, Ruffin looked to the political leaders of the island. Of the Haitian elite, he writes that “there has not appeared even one man whom all the advantages of wealth, education, and rank have enabled to exhibit the possession of strong or remarkable mental power. Is not this alone, sufficient to prove the natural and great inferiority of the negro mind!”181 Here again, Ruffin makes an implicit appeal to the notion of genius. As Faust writes: “The educated man of the nineteenth century understood genius to be a biological trait that made an individual both emotionally and mentally distinctive.”182 Genius was a biological reality that appeared

---

18118. Ibid.
only in some members of any race and naturally predisposed those individuals for leadership. The fact that, according to Ruffin, not a single genius had appeared in Haiti was thus evidence that the entire black race was mentally inferior to the whites, and that no person of African descent ought to exercise leadership. Ruffin explained the apparent exception of Touissant L'Ouverture by arguing that he had been raised in slavery and acquired his apparent greatness through that civilizing institution. What Ruffin perceived as the uniform failures of the later Haitian political class proved that a society without geniuses to lead it would suffer agriculturally, politically, and morally, and thus decline in civilization.

Ruffin described the leaders of Haiti as despots who compelled the common people to labor. Here he borrowed from the trope of slavery without masters that Taylor had expounded years earlier. Ruffin described the Haitian system of compulsion by writing that after the revolution Haitian laborers “were coerced to labor by government officials, instead of by individual masters. But under this much less efficient, beneficial, and profitable form of bondage, the former slaves were not less than formerly compulsory laborers, and driven by corporeal punishment [sic], as they continue to be to this time.”183 Ruffin’s description of this forced labor served his pro-slavery argument in several ways. It deflected the arguments of Northern philanthropists who hoped that abolition would benefit freedmen by ending the abuse of them. By arguing that Haiti was controlled by despotic rulers, Ruffin could also lay the responsibility for failures in crop yields at the feet of the Haitian leadership. Most important, Haitian developments seemed to Ruffin to provide evidence that coercion was always necessary in order to force black

people to work, whether that coercion took the form of slavery in the United States or of forced labor mandated by the Haitian leaders.

This was a far more racialized description of slaves without masters than Taylor's earlier analysis of Haiti. Furthermore, Ruffin treated the forced labor as necessary and beneficial, although far inferior to the ideal of chattel slavery. While Taylor had believed that the institution of slavery made enslaved people unfit for citizenship, and thus created a class that would always be in the thrall of either domestic masters or a state interest, Ruffin believed that people of African descent were naturally lazy, and thus that they would only labor when compelled to do so. Coercing blacks to labor in some way was essential to the progress of civilization, Ruffin believed, because it provided the agricultural backbone that every society needed.

However, under the guidance of Haitians, who lacked native genius, “this system of discipline and constraint is, of necessity, extremely defective,” Ruffin writes. “But imperfect as it is, compared to individual slavery, it has served to retard the rapidity of the descent which this community has been, and still is, making to unproductive and savage barbarism.” Thus, the compulsion at the root of Haiti’s political economy was actually a check on the county’s decay. However, it was not as effective a check as plantation slavery would be.

Ruffin’s racialized portrayal of Haiti, like Notf’s, took Haitian decay as a premise and then sought to explain why the descent into barbarism was not more rapid. The two saw a reversion to savagery as an obvious narrative because both embraced racially deterministic models of civilization. The two writers furthered their arguments by

---

highlighting certain forces they said were slowing Haiti's decay. For Nott, the supremacy of the white race and the hybridity of mixed-race individuals was demonstrated by the white ancestry of the elite whose relatively effective rule he said Soulouque and his fellow blacks had scuttled. For Ruffin, the centrality of agriculture to society, and agriculture's need for both domestic slavery and men of genius, was demonstrated by Haiti's racially inferior leadership and its faltering system of forced labor. Both Nott and Ruffin only found Haitian elites and institutions acceptable when they behaved like Southern elites and institutions. When Haitians didn't behave like Southerners, they were deemed racially inferior. In either case, the two writers could use Haitian examples to advance their own agendas.

Race, along with tropicality, helped Southerners explain Haiti's alleged reversion from civilization to savagery. As they enumerated the causes of that decline, they were able to differentiate their own civilization from the alleged savagery of the Haitians by constructing binaries that paired a white, temperate, and civilized American South with a black, tropical, and savage Haiti. Highlighting these differences was imperative for Southerners seeking to demonstrate their own civilization and to prove that slavery, the bedrock institution of their region, was a civilized way to organize society.

The eventual narrative of regression arose out of a period of contestation and debate in the early nineteenth century. Many Southern newspaper writers saw Haiti as a nation progressing in fits and starts towards a higher level of civilization, or at least believed that such progress was possible. Others began to expound the notion of Haiti's devolution to barbarism. In the early 1830s the latter became the consensus opinion. English and French texts provided the data and observations that Southerners would
fashion into their narrative, and transatlantic conversations that gave birth to

Romanticism gave Southerners an aesthetic matrix that many used to promulgate notions of Haitian reversion. After the Nat Turner rebellion and the intensifying debates over abolition that followed, Southern opinion coalesced behind the narrative of regression. On their surfaces, essays like George Fitzhugh's "Free Negros of Hayti" tell a story about Haiti. Beneath that surface, however, they tell other stories. They tell stories about the South, about the transatlantic world, and about the whole "vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time."185

---