Latin American Research Review (2025), 1–14
doi:10.1017/lar.2025.10065

LARR Latin American Research Review

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The Liminal Position and Underappreciated Relevance of Haiti for Latin American Studies

Olukunle P. Owolabi

Villanova University, Villanova, Pennsylvania, US
Email: olukunle.owolabi@villanova.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

The Black Republic: African Americans and the Fate of Haiti. By Brandon Byrd. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. Pp. xi + 297. $99.95 hardcover, $34.95 paperback, $34.95 ebook. ISBN: 9780812225198

The Haitians: A Decolonial History. By Jean Casimir, translated by Laurent Dubois. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. Pp. xxix + 419. $99.00 hardcover, $41.95 paperback, $26.99 ebook. ISBN: 9781469660486

You Can Cross the Massacre on Foot. By Freddy Castillo, translated by Margaret Randall. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. Pp. 176. $119.95 hardcover, $29.95 paperback, $29.95 ebook. ISBN: 9781478003830

Freedom Roots: Histories from the Caribbean. By Laurent Dubois and Richard L. Turits. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Pp. 395. $29.95 paperback, $19.99 ebook. ISBN: 9781469653600

A Secret among the Blacks: Slave Resistance Before the Haitian Revolution. By John D. Garrigus. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023. Pp. 236. $39.95 hardcover, $31.16 ebook. ISBN: 9780674272828

White Gloves, Black Nation: Women, Citizenship, and Political Wayfaring in Haiti. By Grace S. Johnson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023. Pp. xi + 316. $99.00 hardcover, $29.95 paperback, $22.99 ebook. ISBN: 9781469673684

Transnational Hispaniola: New Directions in Haitian and Dominican Studies. Edited by April J. Mayes and Kiran C. Jayaram. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018. Pp. 273. $89.95 hardcover, $28.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781683400387

Haiti's Paper War: Post-Independence Writing, Civil War, and the Making of the Republic, 1804–1954. By Chelsea Stieber. New York: NYU Press, 2020. Pp. xi + 367. $99.00 hardcover, $32.00 paperback, $32.00 ebook. ISBN: 9781479802159

Haiti, the world's oldest black republic, occupies a liminal space within Latin American studies. Despite sharing the same island as the Dominican Republic, Haiti stands apart from its Latin American neighbors for its long and brutal history of forced settlement under French

colonial domination and the political repercussions of its late eighteenth-century revolution, which established the first independent black state in the Western Hemisphere following a successful slave revolt against white planter control and European colonial domination.[1] Moreover, the 1791–1804 Haitian Revolution had very different social and political consequences from the independence wars that swept across the Spanish American mainland colonies during the 1810s: Whereas the Spanish-American independence wars strengthened the economic and political dominance of white and light-skinned Criollo elites that controlled their respective countries after independence, the Haitian Revolution completely destroyed the white planter class that had dominated St-Domingue's colonial economy and society. Indeed, thousands of St-Domingue's white colonial planters fled the violence of the Haitian Revolution, and in 1804, Haiti's independence leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines ordered the massacre of the remaining white colonists who had survived the revolution. Consequently, Haiti's independence constitution included several radical clauses that defended the permanent abolition of slavery (Article 2), defined the Haitian population as 'black' (Article 14), and prevented whites of any nationality from acquiring property or permanently settling on Haitian territory (Article 12).

As a result of this history, Haiti's early postcolonial elites faced a greater degree of hostile foreign intervention and neocolonial exploitation than the white Creole elites who rose to power in Latin American countries after 1820.[2] Because Haiti faced more extreme developmental and political challenges than other Latin American countries, it is often excluded from the seminal works that examine long-term political and/or development trends across the region.[3] Nevertheless, this essay argues that Haiti's exclusion from Latin American studies can obscure or limit our understanding of the region's sociocultural, economic, and political trends.

My review essay follows a broadly chronological order that emphasizes four themes that connect Haiti's history, culture, society, and political development to the broader field of Latin American studies. These include the political legacies of revolution and anticolonial resistance, the limits of Republican state building and national development during the golden age of US imperialism, race making and nation building, and Haiti's complex and multifaceted interactions with Latin America and the broader Atlantic world.

[1] *Forced settlement colonization* refers to the pattern of imperial domination in which European colonists established large-scale agricultural plantations in tropical regions of the New World with imported and enslaved African labor. This process was far more intensive in the non-Hispanic Caribbean territories, where enslaved Africans accounted for more than three-quarters of the colonial population during the eighteenth century, whereas enslaved Africans in Spanish colonial territories were typically outnumbered by white colonial settlers and/or free peoples of color. See Olukunle P. Owolabi, *Ruling Emancipated Slaves and Indigenous Subjects: The Divergent Legacies of Forced Settlement and Colonial Occupation in the Global South* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 4–6.

[2] Britain, France, and the Netherlands were quick to recognize the political independence of Latin American countries during the 1820s, but they refused to recognize Haiti's independence until the Haitian government agreed to pay an indemnity of 150 million French francs to compensate Saint-Domingue's colonial planters for their property losses during the Haitian Revolution. See Julia Gaffield, *Haitian Connections in the Atlantic World: Recognition After Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 13–14. The slaveholding United States also refused to recognize Haiti's independence until 1862 (Gaffield, *Haitian Connections*, 194), despite being the first country to recognize the independence of the Spanish-American republics in 1822. See Caitlin Fitz, *Our Sister Republics: The United States in an Age of American Revolutions* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2016), 3–5.

[3] See, e.g., Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (University of California Press, 1979); Alan Knight, "Democratic and Revolutionary Traditions in Latin America," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 20, no. 2 (2001): 147–186; David Collier and Ruth B. Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2002); Miguel Centeno, *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America* (Penn State University Press, 2002); Miguel Centeno and Agustín Ferraro, eds., *State and Nation-Making in Latin America and Spain*, vol. 1, *Republics of the Possible* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); James Mahoney, *Colonialism and Postcolonial Development: Spanish America in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival and Fall* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The eight books reviewed in this essay make a compelling case that Haiti's unique history, culture, and political development can advance and inform future research in Latin American studies.

European diseases, African "witchcraft," and anticolonial resistance before the Haitian Revolution, 1750–1804

John Garrigus's 2023 book, *A Secret Among the Blacks,* provides a fascinating new history of colonial disease epidemics, African healing practices, and anticolonial resistance in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue. Garrigus's narrative begins with the trial of an enslaved West African laborer, Médor, who was accused of poisoning people and livestock who had died from a mysterious illness on the sugar estate where he was employed. Under conditions of torture, Médor confessed to giving "poisons" to several plantation workers who had died, but Garrigus astutely points out that the words for "poison" and "medicine" are interchangeable in many West African languages (34), whereas eighteenth-century Europeans tended to associate poisons and non-Western healing practices with witchcraft. Consequently, many of Saint-Domingue's colonial planters became convinced of a secret plot by enslaved Africans to massacre the entire population of local whites and take over their plantations. As the unexplained plantation deaths spread from Saint-Domingue's coastal sugar estates to the expanding coffee frontier and into the highland Maroon communities, colonial planters initiated an inquisition-like witch hunt that led to the torture and execution of dozens of enslaved Africans for alleged crimes of poisoning or witchcraft.

By the late 1750s, however, French medical advances revealed outbreaks of anthrax and smallpox, introduced by livestock shipments from Louisiana, as the real cause of most of Saint-Domingue's unexplained plantation deaths. Despite this scientific breakthrough, colonial planters continued to accuse enslaved Africans of "witchcraft" and "black magic," as enslaved plantation workers frequently sought the protection of traditional African healers and spiritual leaders who used animist (Vodou) cultural practices and traditional medicines to protect community members from colonial violence and, in some cases, sanction their own community members and other individuals who were deemed threats to community life. By the end of the eighteenth century, the small group of literate enslaved Africans with a greater understanding of European technology and economic practices—such as drivers, coachmen, and foremen—were organizing acts of economic sabotage, including work stoppages that threatened the economic profits of white colonial planters and estate managers in the years leading up to the Haitian Revolution.

Garrigus's book makes three important contributions to the extensive literature on slavery and anticolonial resistance in the Caribbean and Latin America. First, Garrigus uncovers the everyday and extraordinary acts of economic and cultural resistance by enslaved African healers and spiritual leaders, entrusted slave drivers and coachmen, and literate enslaved Africans, whose personal stories and acts of organized resistance might have been lost to history. Because Saint-Domingue's colonial planters systematically destroyed the court records of colonial trials that convicted enslaved African plantation laborers for poison and witchcraft, Garrigus's research is based on nonofficial archival sources, including the memoirs and personal letters of Saint-Domingue colonists, including estate owners, attorneys, and plantation managers, as well as white colonial doctors and veterinarians, who returned to France following the Haitian Revolution. By triangulating these sources with existing research on eighteenth-century medical advances and research on West and Central African languages and cultural practices, Garrigus reconstructs the secret history of organized resistance among Saint-Domingue's enslaved plantation laborers. In doing so, Garrigus's research significantly expands

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

existing knowledge of economic and cultural resistance by enslaved Africans in Latin American countries like Brazil and Colombia.[4]

Garrigus's research also highlights the increased occupational specialization and competing economic and political interests within Saint-Domingue's different racial communities during the second half of the eighteenth century. In colonial legal trials, for example, French-trained doctors and veterinarians often questioned the cultural prejudices of white colonial planters, attorneys, and estate managers who leveled accusations of poison or witchcraft against enslaved African laborers. Garrigus's research also emphasizes the increased occupational specialization of enslaved African laborers and the economic and political agency of propertied *gens-de-couleurs* who lobbied the French National Assembly for political representation, voting rights, and racial equality in the years leading up to the Haitian Revolution.

Garrigus's narrative presents a useful framework for identifying the common factors that contributed to the success of the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804 and the subsequent independence wars in Spanish America. Indeed, both conflicts were facilitated by imperial crises—the 1789 French Revolution and the 1808 French invasion of the Iberian Peninsula during the Napoleonic Wars—that severed the long-standing political alliance between European colonial officials and light-skinned colonial settlers. In both cases, it was light-skinned and propertied colonial elites—that is, white Creole elites in the Spanish-American colonies, and light-skinned *gens-de-couleurs* in Saint-Domingue—who forged a strategic alliance with nonwhite political actors against a colonial order that was increasingly perceived as illegitimate. In both cases, the strategic alliance among racially diverse colonial actors was very much a marriage of convenience that would be severely tested once these newly independent societies had to govern themselves.

The aspirations and limits of Republican state building in postcolonial Haiti, 1804–1915

The challenge of forging a stable, independent, and inclusive republic was as deeply contested in postcolonial Haiti as in Latin American countries that gained independence after 1820. Consequently, the books by Chelsea Stieber and Jean Casimir address a seminal question that has motivated generations of scholarship on the political legacies of the Haitian Revolution: What explains Haiti's abject failures in establishing effective democratic governance, political stability, and inclusive economic growth following the political success of the Haitian Revolution?

In *Haiti's Paper Wars*, Chelsea Stieber argues that the instability of Haiti's postcolonial regime resulted from two competing political cultures that emerged from the Haitian Revolution—one nationalist and the other republican—with vastly different interpretations of how Haitians should exercise and defend their hard-fought liberty. Although Haiti is frequently celebrated as the oldest black republic in the Atlantic world, Stieber correctly points out that Haiti's independence leader, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, first established a military-authoritarian state with himself as its Emperor-for-life. Dessalines clearly prioritized Haiti's national sovereignty (i.e., freedom from foreign domination) over the protection of individual liberties and political rights, and it was not until 1806 that the Haitian Republic was established by self-styled "Republican revolutionaries" who sought to limit Dessalines's unrestricted political authority. Throughout the book, Stieber highlights the rise, fall, and contested political aspirations of black nationalist (or *noiriste*) political leaders who openly embraced Dessalines's legacy with that of Haiti's Republican

[4] See James H. Sweet, *Domingos Alvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Pablo F. Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

elites, whose political aspirations were more firmly grounded in the bourgeois ideals of "political liberalism, republicanism, and Enlightenment humanism" (7). Stieber argues that Haiti's black nationalist leaders—like Emperor Dessalines (1804–1806), King Henry Christophe (1806–1820), and Emperor Faustin Soulouque (1849–1857)—were more willing than their liberal Republican counterparts to embrace the African-inspired cultural traditions and to protect Haiti's economic and political independence, and the country's black and Kreyòl-speaking rural majority, from foreign domination. These leaders also rejected "the putative universalism of Enlightenment [principles]," which remained circumscribed by Eurocentric racial and cultural prejudices (7).

Yet the Haitian Revolution also bequeathed a Republican political tradition that embraced the liberal and universalist aspirations of the 1789 French Revolution. Haiti's earliest Republican leaders, like Alexandre Pétion and Nicholas Geffrard, tended to favor liberal and Republican notions of *liberté* that emphasized individual liberties, political rights, and the universalism of European enlightenment values. Many of Haiti's early Republican leaders were educated in France, and they supported Haiti's reintegration into the Atlantic world economy. Nevertheless, the political reality of Haitian republicanism fell short of its universalist principles, as Republican leaders tended to embrace bourgeois and Euro-normative symbols and measures of Haitian excellence, and their economic policies tended to marginalize the country's rural, black, and Kreyòl-speaking majority. The elitist and Eurocentric cultural traits of Haiti's Republican leaders, coupled with their failure to recognize and support the economic and cultural autonomy of Haiti's rural black majority, contributed to numerous popular uprisings, military coups, civil wars, and chronic regime instability that undermined Haiti's economic and political development after independence.

Rather than seeing Haiti's instability as the mark of a primitive culture or failed state, Stieber examines the extensive corpus of Haitian government gazettes, newspapers, literary sources, and visual works of art that narrate the distinctive self-conceptions and competing priorities of Haiti's "nationalist" and "Republican" political elites from 1804 until the mid-twentieth century. Stieber's opening chapters trace the political and cultural roots of Haiti's infamous regime instability from Dessalines's assassination in 1806 until the popular uprising that toppled Jean Boyer's "universal Haitian Republic" in 1844. Chapter 5 examines the revival of black nationalist political writings and cultural production during Haiti's Second Empire (1849–1857), when many of Haiti's deposed republican political and intellectual elites fled to British-ruled Jamaica and the neighboring Dominican Republic. Finally, chapters 6 and 7 illustrate how the long-standing political cleavage between nationalist and republican elites reproduced itself in Haiti's electoral competition at the end of the nineteenth century, generating significant regime instability that toppled most Haitian governments in the years leading up to the US military occupation of 1915–1934. Taking stock of the chronic instability fueled by Haiti's dueling political cultures, Stieber insists that the "book has no heroes" (17). Rather than taking sides in Haiti's ideological paper wars, Stieber's primary objective is to "recover . . . marginalized texts in order to explain why they have been overlooked in the historiography and literary histories of Haiti" (17).

For me, the most important contribution of Stieber's outstanding book is its nuanced evaluation of the competing political aspirations, appeals, and tragic shortcomings of Haiti's nationalist and republican elites. For Latin Americanists who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of Haiti's fascinating, messy, and often violent nineteenth century, this book provides a conceptual framework that makes this history accessible to scholars who are familiar with the ideological struggles that frustrated postcolonial state building in other Latin American countries—that is, the long-standing and often violent political struggles between conservatives and liberal elites in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela, or Uruguay's civil wars between *blancos* and *colorados* during the nineteenth

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

century. Stieber's conceptual framework can also be applied to today's political tensions between populist authoritarian leaders and proponents of liberal democracy in countries like Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

In contrast to Stieber's top-down account of Haiti's competing nationalist and Republican state-building projects, Jean Casimir's book *The Haitians* offers a bottom-up revisionist history of Haitian national consciousness from the late colonial era until the mid-1840s. Casimir rejects the dominant view of postcolonial Haiti as a failed state and instead argues that Haiti's successful revolution and its early years of independence demonstrate the economic and cultural triumph of Haiti's rural black peasants against the despotic state control of domestic political elites who sought to restore a European-dominated economic system that reinforced the political dominance of Haiti's light-skinned and Francophile urban and professional elites, mixed-race landowners, and black military elites. Casimir's self-styled "decolonial history" emphasizes the importance of Haiti's rural, peasant communities (which he calls the counterplantation) as the site of economic and cultural resistance against despotic state control. Whereas Stieber focused on elite political rivalries as the source of Haiti's postcolonial regime instability and state failure, Casimir highlights the creative ways Haiti's rural peasant communities resisted oppressive state efforts to regulate and control plantation labor by withdrawing from plantation life and embracing subsistence agriculture as a "uniquely African expression of political liberty" (57).

Those who read Casimir's latest book might recognize similarities with Florencia Mallon's seminal texts on peasant and indigenous resistance to top-down state-building efforts in Peru and Mexico.[5] In contrast to Mallon's books, however, *The Haitians* was initially published in French and intended for a narrow audience of specialist readers with detailed knowledge of the vast historiography of French-language scholarship on the political legacies of the Haitian Revolution. Readers unfamiliar with this historiography might struggle with the complexity of Casimir's text. The book's accessibility is also limited by Casimir's unfortunate habit of employing concepts that are differently defined than their mainstream use in social science disciplines. For instance, Casimir conceptualizes the Haitian state as the political, social, and cultural organizations of Haiti's black, rural, peasant majority and the state in Haiti as the formal administrative, legal, and political institutions that control Haiti's population and territory (2). This language is confusing because it contradicts the conventional definition of the state as the formal institutions that governments use to control a given population and territory, and the nation as an imagined political community of citizens who share a sovereign political destiny.[6]

Both Stieber and Casimir contribute to existing literature on the shortcomings of Republican state building in postcolonial Haiti, but the two books differ in important ways. Whereas Stieber emphasizes the competing political aspirations and shortcomings of Haiti's Republican and nationalist elites, Casimir argues that all Haitian elites sought to preserve a system of labor-repressive export-oriented plantations that would enable them to distribute land to their supporters and regulate commerce for political advantage. To an extent, this is true. Casimir's bottom-up narrative of postcolonial peasant resistance does a better job than Stieber's of connecting Haiti's long history of anticolonial resistance to the political instability that followed Haiti's independence.

[5] See Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (University of California Press, 1995), and *The Defense of Community in Peru's Central Highlands: Peasant Struggle and Capitalist Transition, 1860–1940* (Princeton University Press, 1983).

[6] Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Postcommunist Europe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 17, 22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nevertheless, I found Stieber's analysis of Haiti's postcolonial instability more accessible and persuasive than Casimir's for three reasons. First, Casimir's analysis primarily explains subaltern resistance to Haiti's elite-led state-building projects from the 1790s until the 1840s, whereas Stieber explains Haiti's intraelite conflicts, as well as the subaltern resistance that frustrated Haiti's elite-led state-building project during its first century of independence. Indeed, Stieber's analytical framework can be extended to more recent times, as it also explains the political strategy and popular appeal of twentieth-century nationalist elites, like the dynastic Duvalier family dictatorship (1957–1986), which openly embraced Afrocentric cultural practices that facilitated their political manipulation and control over Haiti's rural black masses. Consequently, Stieber's analytical framework seems to have more staying power, whereas Casimir's conclusion that Haiti's rural black peasants benefited from organized resistance to centralized state control seems frozen in the economic and geopolitical realities of the 1840s. Consequently, Steiber's sober conclusion that there were "no winners" in the historic struggle between Haiti's Republican and Nationalist elites seems more apt to me than Casimir's more hopeful one, given the persistence of Haiti's regime instability, political violence, and economic underdevelopment into the twenty-first century.

Black and female political mobilization during the golden age of US imperialist expansion, 1865–1975

Brandon Byrd's *The Black Republic* examines how African American elites articulated their aspirations, ideals, and fascination with the Haitian Republic from the American Civil War until the US military occupation of Haiti (1915–1934). This historical period dramatically transformed Haiti's economic and political engagement with the rapidly expanding United States, which acquired its first overseas colonial territories in Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines and established overseas military bases in Cuba and Panama following the 1898 Spanish-American War. The Union victory in the Civil War also contributed to the permanent abolition of slavery in the United States and the short-lived expansion of black political mobilization during Reconstruction (1865–1877). Nevertheless, as the political aspirations of African Americans were frustrated by rising levels of antiblack violence, political disenfranchisement, and Jim Crow segregation after 1880, Byrd examines how many black American professional and intellectual elites looked to Haiti as a space where they could realize their economic and political ambitions and claim their piece of the "American dream."

Byrd's narrative unfolds through three historical moments. During Reconstruction, African American civil war veterans, newspaper editors, church leaders, business owners, educators, and professionals frequently celebrated Haiti as a symbol of black progress in their demands for racial and political equality in the United States. These views were also supported by black statesmen like Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett, John Mercer Langston, and Frederick Douglass, who represented the US government as diplomatic officials in Haiti. Nevertheless, the loss of opportunities for black economic and political advancement in the United States after 1880 led to a hardening of African American attitudes toward Haiti. By the end of the nineteenth century, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church leaders and African American educators like Booker T. Washington began to advocate for Protestant missionary evangelization and US-led capitalist investment to develop Haiti and promote "black uplift" in the United States. For a growing number of black American professionals, Haiti was increasingly viewed as "a space where they could establish their Americanness by proving themselves [as] successful imperialists" (32). The final section of Byrd's account examines the brutality and violence of the US military occupation of Haiti, which galvanized a new generation of black international activists who increasingly linked

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the struggle for black civil rights, political representation, and racial equality in the United States to anticolonial resistance across the Global South. Consequently, African American activists like W. E. B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells joined forces with black international activists like Marcus Garvey in US-based activist networks during the 1920s.

Byrd's historical narrative is an important new contribution to the significant literature on US engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean during the golden age of US imperialism. Byrd's account is one of the few scholarly works that prioritizes the political voice and economic agency of African American political, business, and cultural elites, who initially supported but ultimately rejected the United States' imperialist project in Haiti. Byrd's account also highlights the racial and cultural limits of democracy, citizenship rights, and Republican government in both countries. This offers a refreshing change from the dominant narrative about the fin-de-siècle United States as a more enlightened, advanced, and inclusive national polity than the Latin American countries that were the object of US imperialist ambitions. Byrd's analysis challenges this narrative by highlighting the domestic political violence and antiblack racial violence that motivated and constrained US imperialist expansion after the Civil War.

Grace Sanders Johnson's book, *White Gloves, Black Nation,* picks up where Byrd's historical narrative ends. Johnson uncovers the fascinating history of Haiti's first modern feminist association, the Ligue Féminine d'Action Sociale (LFAS), established in 1935 by Haitian bourgeois women who presented themselves as the female heirs of the Haitian Revolution's Black Jacobin tradition. Johnson's story of women's political activism in post-occupation Haiti is told through the lives and activism of the LFAS's "first family," which included Haiti's first female lawyer, Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau; her sister Suzanne, Haiti's first female Haitian anthropologist and professor of sociology; Yvonne Sylvain, Haiti's first female gynecologist; and Haiti's first female social worker, Jeanne Sylvain. The Sylvain sisters were the daughters of Georges Sylvain, a prominent Dominican Republic–born Haitian lawyer and antioccupation activist. Following the US military withdrawal from Haiti in 1934, the Sylvain sisters channeled their activism into expanding Haitian women's economic and political agency as independent wage earners, voters, citizens, and elected officials. Johnson draws extensively from the personal letters and academic research of the Sylvain sisters, who collected their own data and published extensively on the living conditions of Haitian women. By examining the political speeches, newspaper editorials, published research, and personal correspondence of LFAS activists uncovered in library and archival collections in the United States, Canada, and Haiti, Johnson uncovers the captivating story of how LFAS activists navigated the complex web of class, racial, gender, and ideological prejudices that divided Haiti's postwar society.

Johnson describes, for example, how LFAS activists mobilized Catholic charities to develop social outreach programs for rural Haitian women who were displaced into urban slums by US-owned rubber plantations during World War II. LFAS activists also successfully lobbied the Haitian government for economic and social reforms that enabled married Haitian women to maintain their employment earnings independently from their husbands and facilitated civil marriage rather than the informal *plaçage* arrangements that enabled married Haitian men to maintain extramarital relations with "kept" women. In doing so, LFAS activists were able to advance the economic well-being and financial autonomy of Haitian women without threatening the bourgeois and Catholic social preferences of Haitian elites.

Nevertheless, the LFAS' mobilization for universal women's suffrage encountered hostile and violent opposition from nationalist politicians like Senator Emile Saint-Lôt and Deputy Castel Désesmin, who resisted these reforms with the sexist accusation that Haitian women "corrupt male politicians, senators, and deputies" and "drive the country to ruin" (171). *Noiriste* politicians also denounced the LFAS activists as communists and socialists, despite their bourgeois social background, which engendered a strong preference for

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Catholic and Eurocentric interpretations of social progress. Nevertheless, the fear of being associated with alleged communists caused many liberal Haitian politicians to distance themselves from the LFAS. As a result, the LFAS's demand for female suffrage and political representation was delayed until the 1957 general election that brought François Duvalier to power. In an ironic twist of fate, however, many Haitian women supported Duvalier's *noiriste* campaign, given his credentials as a former minister of health and well-respected physician who had worked in Haiti's impoverished rural communities. Over the following fourteen years, Duvalier installed a repressive dictatorship that unleashed a violent reign of terror against all political opponents, including LFAS activists and their families. In the end, many LFAS activists, including the Sylvain sisters, were forced into exile after their headquarters were burned down by Duvalier's paramilitary forces in 1970. In this way, the political mobilization for women's political suffrage in Haiti resembles the experience of Latin American countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, where universal suffrage was implemented under populist authoritarian regimes that restricted electoral competition and political contestation after 1930.

In evaluating the contributions of Johnson's outstanding new book, it is worth considering its similarities with Brandon Byrd's analysis of African American political engagement with Haiti following the US Civil War. Both books offer new insights into the unfulfilled promises of the Haitian and American revolutions. Byrd's analysis shows how emancipated African Americans, like their Haitian counterparts, experienced significant restrictions on their civil liberties and political rights following the abolition of slavery. This is why many African American elites came to imagine Haiti as a liberated space where they could advance their economic and political interests. Similarly, Johnson introduces a gendered dimension to the circumscribed nature of Republican citizenship in postcolonial Haiti. In addition to the racial, class, and ideological limits to Haiti's Republican state-building project that were emphasized in the earlier accounts by Stieber and Casimir, Johnson's narrative also highlights the myriad ways in which the citizenship rights of Haitian women remained circumscribed long after Haiti's independence. Last, both authors deserve praise for their exhaustive primary research that unearthed the hidden transcripts of African American intellectual, political, and business elites and Haitian women activists who are generally overlooked in the standard narratives about US imperialist expansion and women's political mobilization in Latin America.

Distant neighbors, mortal enemies, or kissing cousins? Reconsidering the relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti

The well-established practice of excluding Haiti from Latin American studies inadvertently reinforces a tacit assumption that the Dominican Republic and Haiti are distant neighbors with vastly different economic, cultural, and political realities. By contrast, the new title by Freddy Castillo and the edited volume by April Mayes and Kiran Jayaram suggest a more complex reality. Freddy Castillo's *You Can Cross the Massacre on Foot* provides the first English-language translation of the author's 1973 semi-autobiographical account of the 1937 border massacre of tens of thousands of Haitian migrant laborers and black Dominicans of Haitian descent, which the author witnessed as a magistrate in the Dominican border town of Dajabón. Known to Dominicans as *el corte* (i.e., the cutting) and to Haitians as *kout kouto-a* (i.e., the stabbing), this gruesome genocide of Haitian migrant laborers was carried out by Dominican soldiers during the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. First published in Spanish in 1973, Castillo's fictionalized account is one of the earliest published works on the 1937 border massacre, which remained obscure to most Dominicans until after Trujillo's assassination in 1961.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Blurring the lines between autobiography and fiction, Castillo demonstrates the long history of economic interdependence and cultural exchange between Spanish-speaking landowners and Kreyòl-speaking laborers in the Dominican Republic's border communities. Castillo's narrative unfolds in a series of vignettes that describe how the novel's fictionalized characters were affected by the racist and xenophobic political discourse that led to the 1937 genocide. In one tragic example, a black washerwoman who had lived her entire life in the Dominican Republic tried to assert her Dominican identity to avoid being killed by Trujillo's intoxicated soldiers. After crying out in Spanish, "No! No! I am Dominican! This is my country!" (21), she screams in both Krèyol and Spanish as she is raped and then killed by Dominican soldiers.

Other scenes reflect the conflicting economic and political interests of Dominican landowners who were heavily dependent on Haitian migrant labor. For example, a conservative landowner and local notable, Don Sebusto, laments the loss of the "good blacks" who worked as his employees. Whereas many nonelite Dominicans blamed Haitian migrant laborers and local blacks for the economic and political turmoil of the Great Depression, Don Sebusto blames the oppressive Trujillo government for its excessive taxes and tariffs on trade and economic exchange with Haiti. Another landowner, Don Lauterio, argues that the remote border region needs free trade and lower taxes to promote economic opportunities, instead of public schools that extend the reach of the Dominican state. In contrast, many Dominican soldiers, peasants, and small landholders are unrestrained in their genocidal violence against local blacks and Haitian migrant laborers whom they perceive as economic competitors. In the words of one of the community's local residents: "Damn blacks ... ! Kill 'em all ... ! Get rid of them for good ... ! Even the small ones! I can't wait to go to war with Haiti, so we can cut off heads and rip bellies all the way to Port-au-Prince ... finish that damn race off once and for all" (49). In one of the novel's most disturbing scenes, readers are led to a grisly moonlit specter of three hundred decapitated heads lining the Castellanos palm grove, "where pigs and blacks used to live" (37). Here, a vengeful Dominican sergeant, Pío Tarragona, brags of beheading hundreds of black or Haitian men, women, and children while sparing the life of his compadre Yosefo, the wealthiest black landowner in the district. In the end, Yosefo and his Spanish-speaking, Dominican-born children were herded across the aptly named Río Masacre into safety in Haiti.

Amid this gory genocide, both Haitian and Dominican characters refer to past historical events to justify their political actions. For example, an elderly Haitian schoolteacher asserted his right to remain in the Dominican Republic based on Haiti's military occupation of its neighbor following the Spanish-American independence wars. Facing the racist and xenophobic hatred of community members who included his former students, he mutters under his breath, "Toussaint va vuelva pa manda dominiquén!" (i.e., Toussaint will come back to rule over the Dominicans!) (49). Yet Castillo's narrative is not entirely bleak. He also highlights acts of kindness by a small number of Dominican schoolteachers and landowners who faced their own reprisals for protecting Haitian migrant laborers and black schoolchildren from the vengeance of the Dominican soldiers.

In many ways, this English-language translation of Castillo's book could not have been released at a better time. Reading this book in 2024, I could not help but notice the similarities between the current right-wing backlash against undocumented immigrants and foreign migrant laborers in the United States and the racist and xenophobic anti-Haitian tropes held by many of the Dominican characters in Castillo's fictionalized historical narrative. The fact that Dominican schoolteachers were also targeted for protecting the lives and interests of their black and Haitian students also bears resemblance to the current political effort to ban books and teaching methods that foster racial inclusion in many parts of the United States. Castillo's subtle discussion of how taxes, tariffs, and the expulsion of labor migrants can undermine the economic vitality of

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

border regions is also applicable to today's troubled times. Castillo's fictionalized account of the 1937 border genocide of black Dominican workers and Haitian migrant laborers is now required reading in Dominican schools. The text is particularly relevant for Dominican students today, given the resurgence of racist and xenophobic political discourse that contributed to the denationalization of tens of thousands of black Dominicans with Haitian ancestry in 2013.

Taking a longer historical perspective of the Haitian-Dominican borderlands, Mayes and Jayaram's edited volume *Transnational Hispaniola* highlights the porous and contested nature of the cultural and political boundaries that have simultaneously united and separated Haitians and Dominicans from colonial times until the present. This essay highlights six contributions from this volume that complicate the dominant narrative of ancient hatreds between the two nations. First, Nathalie Bragadir's essay "Shifting Territories: The Production of Space on Eighteenth-Century Hispaniola" argues that the contested colonial border that separated French-ruled Saint-Domingue from Spanish Santo Domingo represented a *raya de tolerancia* (line of tolerance) that enabled nonwhite people to seek refuge from colonial state oppression. For free blacks and runaway slaves from Saint-Domingue, the borderlands offered freedom from white planter control and economic opportunities for land cultivation, cattle ranching, and contraband trade. For mixed-race Spanish colonists and recent settlers from the Canary Islands, the contested border region also provided opportunities for land acquisition and contraband trade. By examining the extensive archive of "borderland files," this essay demonstrates the shared economic and political interests of the Spanish- and Krèyol-speaking peoples of the contested border region, whose inhabitants were "loyal to neither Spain nor France" (28).

Fidel Tavárez's essay "The Contested State" challenges the dominant narrative of *antihaitianismo* as a defining feature of Dominican national identity. Instead, Tavárez presents two competing narratives of nationality and citizenship that have existed since the Dominican Republic's establishment in 1844. He argues that Dominican separatists initially articulated a civic and Republican national project motivated by their political opposition to Jean Boyer's dictatorship during the Haitian military occupation of 1822–1844. Many of these early separatist leaders had French names and had served as government officials in the Haitian military occupation. Consequently, they articulated a civic notion of citizenship based on "loyalty to the [Dominican] community and an intention to maintain residence in the Dominican Republic" (59–60). In response, a rival group of "Trinitarios" created an alternative view of Dominican nationality based on ethnic, racial, and cultural differentiation from their Haitian oppressors. Tavárez argues that the ethno-racial interpretation of Dominican national identity gained ascendancy after the military coup that brought the Trinitarios to power in 1844. In examining the political conflicts that led to the Dominican Republic's separation from Haiti, Tavárez's essay highlights the historic tensions between civic inclusion and ethno-racial exclusion that shaped the political construction of Dominican national identity.

Anne Eller's essay "To Cap-Haïtien, with My Family" continues the theme of cross-national family ties and shared economic interests during the US Civil War, when Spanish forces occupied the Dominican Republic and reestablished a firm border that separated Dominican families from their Haitian relatives. Eller's essay presents sixteen petitions from Dominican residents requesting Spanish passports to visit family members or engage in commercial activities in Haitian communities across the border. These petitions reveal the extent to which Dominican border communities were culturally integrated and often economically dependent on commerce, trade, and supplies from neighboring Haiti.

Régine Jean-Charles's essay "A Border Between Geographies of Grief" reviews three literary works by black Haitian feminist authors wrestling with Haitians' collective memories of the 1937 border genocide and the 2000 border massacre of Haitian migrant workers by Dominican soldiers. By contrast, Raj Chetty's essay "Archives of Afro-

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Affirmation" examines the political and cultural transformations of the early 1960s, when a growing number of Dominican writers and literary scholars began to embrace the black roots of their national identity. Chetty argues that the cultural and political liberalization of Dominican society following Rafael Trujillo's death, coupled with the transformative events of the global 1960s (e.g., the US civil rights movement, the establishment of newly independent black countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the resurgence of US military imperialism in the Caribbean following the 1959 Cuban Revolution) inspired many Dominican activists to link their country's political aspirations to the aspirations of oppressed black peoples around the world. This trend is illustrated in "Listen: American Negro," an eight-paragraph letter from the Afro-Dominican writer Antonio Thomem to the US military forces that invaded and occupied the Dominican Republic in 1965 (132–133). Thomem's letter acknowledges the shared racial identity of Dominican citizens with the (predominantly black) US occupying army while recognizing that African Americans were oppressed by the same racist and imperialist forces that limited the economic and political aspirations of the Dominican nation.

Last, April Mayes's essay "Ties That Bind" examines the resurgence of antiblack racism and anti-Haitian political discourse leading up to the 2013 constitutional reform that revoked the citizenship rights of forty-four thousand black Dominicans of Haitian descent and threatened hundreds of thousands more with deportation. In contrast to the dominant media narrative of "ancient hatreds" between the two countries, Mayes emphasizes the importance of democratization and neoliberal market reforms that widened the developmental gap between the Dominican Republic and Haiti after 1978, thereby increasing demand for cheap migrant labor in key sectors of the Dominican economy. The influx of Haitian labor migrants into the Dominican Republic only increased after Haiti's devastating 2010 earthquake, which prompted complaints from Dominican citizens that Haitian migrants were driving down domestic wages. In response, right-wing Dominican politicians revived General Trujillo's well-tested practice of instrumentalizing anti-Haitian sentiment to boost their electoral fortunes. Mayes's essay suggests that the recent resurgence of *antihaitianismo* in the Dominican Republic is driven by the same economic and political forces that have generated a racist and xenophobic backlash against recent immigrants and nonwhite minorities in the United States and other Western countries.

Taken together, the essays in this collection force readers to question the received wisdom that *antihaitianismo* and the denial of blackness are essential and permanent features of Dominican national identity. Instead, the essays by Anne Eller and Nathalie Bragadir highlight the long history of constructive economic and cultural exchange, and overlapping family ties between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, whereas the essays by Fidel Tavárez, Régine Jean-Charles, and April Mayes emphasize the cyclical nature of *antihaitianismo* and antiblack racism, which increased at specific historical moments in the long history of economic, political, and cultural exchange between the two countries.

Freedom Roots: The enduring relevance of anticolonial resistance in the Caribbean

Finally, Laurent Dubois and Richard Lee Turits's new book, *Freedom Roots*, offers a magisterial overview of Caribbean history from the sixteenth century to the present. The book's first section—"Land and Freedom"—highlights the long history of indigenous resistance against European colonization efforts during the sixteenth century, the establishment of colonial plantations with enslaved African labor during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the revolutionary upheavals that contributed to the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century. The second section, "Empire and Revolution," examines how the region's oldest independent republics—Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba—responded to the United States' imperialist expansion following the 1898 Spanish-

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

American War. The book's final chapters examine the post–World War II transformation of the Caribbean region, from the 1959 Cuban Revolution to the postcolonial transformation of English-speaking Caribbean nations that emerged from British rule after 1960.

There are several reasons Latin Americanists might wish to read this book, which is more comprehensive in its historical scope and geographic coverage than the other titles reviewed here. The book's early chapters devote significant attention to the survival and resistance of the eastern Caribbean's indigenous communities into the eighteenth century and the economic interactions and cultural exchanges between indigenous and black African communities that gave rise to "Black Carib" (or Garifuna) populations in St. Vincent, Dominica, and Belize. Scholars of colonial Latin America might also appreciate the book's excellent treatment of slavery, anticolonial resistance, and abolition in the British and French Antilles. Latin Americanists will also appreciate the book's nuanced treatment of the Cuban Revolution and its political consequences for neighboring countries in the region. This book provides an excellent foundational text on Caribbean history or a supplementary text for undergraduate courses that seek to bridge the porous and artificial divide between Caribbean history and Latin American studies.

The case for integrating Haiti into Latin American studies: Some concluding thoughts

The titles reviewed here emphasize four important themes from Haiti's history, culture and society, and political development that are extremely relevant to Latin American studies. The theme of revolution and anticolonial resistance is prominently featured in the titles by Garrigus, Stieber, Casimir, and Dubois and Turits, which highlight how subaltern populations resisted the oppressive state-building projects and predatory economic practices of colonial and postcolonial elites. These titles also emphasize the punitive ways in which Haiti's free black population was punished and ostracized by nineteenth-century Atlantic powers for having the audacity to emancipate themselves in a violent revolution that threatened the racial and political order of the Atlantic world economy. I have argued elsewhere that it is this postcolonial ostracization and economic exploitation by global powers like France and the United States—more so than the colonial legacy of plantation slavery—that explains Haiti's crushing poverty, chronic regime instability, and persistent underdevelopment relative to other Caribbean and Latin American societies.[7] A century and a half after the Haitian Revolution, the United States would adopt a similarly hostile response to the 1959 Cuban Revolution, which also threatened its core economic and geostrategic interests throughout Latin America. Consequently, by placing Haiti's long history of anticolonial resistance and the lasting economic, cultural, and political legacies of the Haitian Revolution in a broader comparative perspective with other Latin American countries, comparative scholars can deepen their understanding of the region-wide and country-specific factors that have induced subaltern resistance against oppressive state-building projects from the colonial era until the present.

The titles by Stieber, Byrd, and Johnson also highlight the contested nature and practical limits of Republican state building in postcolonial Haiti, whereas chapters 4–6 of Dubois and Turits's book and the essays from Mayes and Jayaram's edited volume extend this discussion into the Dominican Republic. The contested nature of postcolonial Republican state building in the Dominican Republic and Haiti bears a strong resemblance to the political struggles between liberals and conservatives that generated political violence and significant territorial losses for Mexico, Bolivia, and Paraguay during the nineteenth century. During the first half of the twentieth century, Colombia, Cuba, and

[7] See Owolabi, *Ruling Emancipated Slaves*, esp. 205–224.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

most Central American republics continued to face interelite political violence and subaltern resistance that hindered their economic and political viability and contributed to US military interventions. The US military occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 may have been the longest and most brutal in the region, but other Latin American republics—including Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama—also faced the wrath of US-led economic sanctions and/or military interventions during the twentieth century.

Finally, the titles reviewed here highlight important themes of race making and nation building and, to a lesser extent, Haiti's multifaceted economic, cultural, and political interactions with its regional neighbors and the wider Atlantic world. This is an important contribution because many of the seminal works on postcolonial state-building and national integration in Latin America—at least in my home discipline of comparative politics—tend to downplay the extent to which the nation-building projects of many Latin American countries have been shaped by Eurocentric racial and cultural prejudices that reinforced antiblack racial exclusion and/or the socioeconomic marginalization of indigenous populations. This reality has long been acknowledged in humanities disciplines like history, literature, and cultural studies, and it is increasingly reflected in recent social science research.[8] Nevertheless, the books reviewed here bring these questions to the forefront in ways that encourage scholars to think more critically about the complex relationship between "race making," citizenship, and nation building in other Latin American countries.

In conclusion, the titles reviewed here make a strong case for integrating insights from Haitian and/or Caribbean studies into future scholarship on revolution and anticolonial resistance, postcolonial Republican state building, race making and nation building, and Latin America's cultural, economic, and political interactions with the wider Atlantic world. In this way, future scholarship might bridge the porous and artificial border that currently exists between Haitian/Caribbean history and Latin American studies.

Olukunle P. Owolabi is an associate professor of political science at Villanova University, where he teaches courses on comparative politics, African politics, comparative democratization, and the developmental legacies of colonialism in the Global South. His most recent book, *Ruling Emancipated Slaves and Indigenous Subjects* (Oxford University Press, 2023), examines the divergent developmental legacies of forced settlement and colonial occupation on both sides of the Black Atlantic world. Owolabi holds degrees from the University of Toronto, Oxford University, and the University of Notre Dame, and he was a visiting fellow at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies in 2016.

[8] The "third wave" of democratization and subsequent implementation of neoliberal market reforms generated new research on the political mobilization of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in many Latin American countries after 1990. See Deborah Yashar, *Contested Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Raúl Madrid, "Indigenous Parties and Democracy in Latin America," *Latin American Politics and Society* 47, no. 4 (2005): 161–179; Tianna Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

Cite this article: Owolabi, Olukunle P. The Liminal Position and Underappreciated Relevance of Haiti for Latin American Studies. *Latin American Research Review*. https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10065