

Garrigus, John D. *A Secret among the Blacks: Slave Resistance before the Haitian Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023. 256 pages. \$39.99.

Not only did the Haitian Revolution of 1791 not happen spontaneously as much of the existing historiography wants us to believe, but John Garrigus' *A Secret among the Blacks* specifies that social explosion had been simmering under the surface for almost a century if not more. Before inspiring freedom fighters elsewhere in the world, Parisian revolutionaries perhaps little expected that their statements could mobilize slaves against the class of French planters in a French colony: that of Saint Domingue.

The book delineates precise acts of defiance starting from as early as the 1720s the way such acts were spearheaded by enslaved communities overall the colony of Saint Domingue. The book illustrates that defiance grew in scope and scale, eventually becoming the saga otherwise known as the Haitian Revolution. Readers learn how arrangements defining the plantation economy of this resource-rich French colony was heading towards strife from the beginning. Not only did the number of the enslaved far exceed the number of settlers and the island's repression forces, but the rivalries between the two superpowers of the time, France and Britain, dictated, among other things, contradictions that could only end in emancipation. France's war against Britain in today's Canada meant that French shipments of provisions to the colony became infrequent at the start of hostilities and later impossible considering Britain's ability to enforce an embargo. Adding insult to injury, planters in the colony allocated all available farming space to the most profitable cash crops: sugar and coffee. Depriving the slaves of their ability to tend to their own small gardens meant that they were literally left to famish. Add to this, times of severe drought were not infrequent throughout the eighteenth century. Garrigus details that when even settlers had been underfed, it follows that the enslaved suffered from malnutrition at

alarming scales. Yet colonial administrators did not pay heed. Life expectancy among the enslaved, in bleak circumstances such as the did not supersede eight years.

Indeed, it is when slaves begin dying at ever unprecedented levels that his account becomes breathtaking. *A Secret among the Blacks* dares to question established historiography by shedding light on the other side of the story of the revolution narrative. Garrigus' account does not see in death and misery only death and misery. The starving of the slaves betrays the malnutrition of cattle. Cattle started dying and soon did planters and managers. This was often sudden and excruciatingly painful. In a context of fear and uncertainty, poison hunts and subsequent trials blinded colonists to consider rational explanations. Instead, through poison hunts, enslavers accused slaves of practicing voodoo allegedly to compromise not only the enslavers as individuals but rather to topple the slave economy. Evidence discovered through torture fooled enraged planters to think that the enslaved had a full-scale plan to overtake the white colonists.

In hindsight, however, Garrigus' argument adds, that anthrax had been the cause of the mysterious deaths, not African voodoo, and certainly not slaves poisoning their enslavers. Anthrax is a fatal disease that became understood among veterinarians in the 1850s. Consecutive droughts made the spread of contamination from animals to humans very easy. However, the endemic distrust between planters and the enslaved in the French colony forged fraternities among the enslaved and the free Blacks, even when they did not share the same language or place of origin. Malnutrition and poison trials alerted the disenfranchised to the necessity of mobilizing behind leaders with both spiritual with political agendas. Even when such leaders and their movements were violently suppressed,

the legacy they left inspired both enslaved and free blacks to initially resist abuses in every way they could.

Escalation arrived as the planters' class kept overworking slaves to death after the embargo was lifted (in consequence of the Paris Peace Treaty of 1763). Garrigus highlights how underground fraternities were revived and became more politically pronounced. We read that towards the end that "drivers," those principal slaves planters engaged to coerce other slaves and increase production, turned against their masters. They mobilized their leadership to bring down slavery. Through trial and error, the drivers succeeded in leading the enslaved toward a full-blown insurrection.

Since Garrigus' study covers almost a century, the book dedicates a chapter to either one spiritual leader or the circumstances framing his rise and demise as a person via complicating even further the contradictions between the enslaved and white colonists. Médor's confessions of poisoning, through which we learn crucial details both in chapters One and Two, were basically acts of mistranslation. Facing enraged interrogators, Médor happened to testify in French while thinking from a cluster of West African languages in which "poison" meant "affecting a cure." Other than alarming the colonial administration to consider the real cause behind the sudden deaths, the side-effects from Médor's coerced revelations and his subsequent cutting is the unbridgeable divide between the enslaved and the colonists. Indeed, in refusing to confront their confirmation bias, the colonists sealed their fate.

Similarly, Makandal's spiritual leadership, as we read in Chapters Three and Four, during the 1740s and 1750s was not intended as an empty abstraction or compensating diversion for mistreatment in the plantation. Those nightly vigils and ritual dances

(*maquindas*) helped slaves to reboot their energies and achieve record productions, just as the planters had hoped. Slowly propagating towards secret societies, Makandal's fraternities made the slaves register that healing is more political than spiritual. That explains why the colonial authorities eventually deemed his message hostile and acted accordingly.

In Chapters Five and Six, the struggle of the enslaved became conducted by the least expected elements among the enslaved population, plantations' drivers. People like Jean-Jaques, Hippolyte and several others were enslaved foremen who reverted when they saw their privileges cut, principally due to planters' greed. Drivers rallied the enslaved both within their plantations and beyond for strikes and acts of sabotage. Garrigus' evidence illustrates that in the long run, the drivers carried out Médor and Makandal's emancipatory work, albeit in accelerated intensities. Drivers knew precisely that for colonists, profit remained the Achille's heel, hence drivers made certain that plantations failed. Together with the free Blacks, they called for the extension of the Rights of Man, the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789, deploying them pawns for the cause of their emancipation.

In the years that lead ultimately to the brothel (for the planters) of 1791, Garrigus concludes that Médor and Makandal's lives' work slowly but surely ripened convictions, and as such drivers had neither started from scratch nor skipped steps. These early leaders' labor contributed towards the totality that made 1791 possible. Precisely, Médor and Makandal's secret societies cemented the crystallization of a radical consciousness among both the enslaved and free blacks, underlying the necessity of confrontation irrespective of the cost. The book's contributions become self-evident as it smoothly leads readers to the realization that these two leaders forged a vision for a differential threshold in the

consciousness of the enslaved that later facilitated the transition from passive resistance to an active one, and from there to a full-blown insurrection.

Like Vincent Brown's groundbreaking study on British-ruled Jamaica, *Tacky's Revolt* (2020), Garrigus' too is a game-changer, particularly as far as the exact (not the propagandistic) circumstances leading to the end of slavery are concerned. What studies such as Brown's or Garrigus' explain in the *longue durée* is that slavery, and in contradistinction to the politically correct narrative, did not cease to exist thanks to the consorted efforts of abolishing societies both in England and the United States. Rather, that end was decided by forces of production, precisely, when it becomes no longer viable to pretend that the contradictions slavery as an institution accentuates profits at all costs. Building on such an understanding, slaveries, whether past or present, can be abolished once the victims can crack the material conditions that make them profitable to ruling establishments.

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