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Baron de Vastey, *The Colonial System Unveiled*. Translated and edited by Chris Bongie. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014. x + 329 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-7813-8304-9.

Review by John Savage and Sean Anderson, Lehigh University.

In the spring of 1814, the Baron de Vastey was sent by Henry Christophe to London on a mission to negotiate French recognition of Haitian independence. By the time he got there, Napoleon had abdicated, and Haitian leaders soon learned that the new Bourbon regime was planning to re-impose French authority in Haiti and restore the colony of Saint Domingue. By the fall of that year, Vastey penned the extraordinary tract that is the centerpiece of this volume. As the supporting texts that accompany Vastey's essay make clear, the particular moment of its production is the crucial context for reading "The Colonial System Unveiled." Yet Vastey's text not only highlights the multifaceted and conflicted perspectives of the post-revolutionary moment. What is most striking is how he attempts to theorize it himself in what the volume's editor is surely accurate in calling an "astonishingly prescient" (p. 5) invective that represents "the first systemic critique of colonialism ever written" (p. 7). As a result, this volume holds great interest not only for specialists of the Haitian Revolution, French Empire, or Atlantic World slavery, but also for scholars of transhistorical African Diaspora studies and a broader postcolonial intellectual history.

Vastey's essay is a remarkable document in many ways, not least because it offers us a window into the Christophe regime, which is often denigrated or even more frequently simply ignored; bracketed off from the earlier era as the mere "aftermath" of the Revolution. It is striking that this particular essay has never been published in an English language translation. The volume under review makes it available in a relatively low-cost paperback edition, accessible for classroom use, and couples Vastey's essay with several supporting texts that provide context and interpretive frameworks, all organized under the direction of Chris Bongie of Queens University. Though very attentive to the historical moment, the contributions by Marlene Daut, Doris Garraway, Bongie himself, and the conclusion written by Nick Nesbitt, tend to favor literary analysis, the field in which these authors are specialists. Indeed, this volume is one piece of evidence that in general literary scholars are taking the lead in exploring Haiti's post-independence period. As historians writing this review, we offer our thoughts and reactions especially with the hope of making clear the great value of this volume for those in our discipline or indeed for scholars across a range of fields.

Much of the scholarly apparatus provided in the volume attempts to analyze the essay's perplexing formal properties. The first part of the text, a broad and apparently fairly conventional survey of colonial history from Columbus to the eighteenth century, seems dramatically different in tone and content from the essay's second section. Bongie demonstrates how Vastey drew extensively in this first section from well-known eighteenth-century authors, especially Mungo Park and the Abbé Grégoire. Bongie argues that the stitching together of these texts was a tool used by Vastey to claim a place in a transatlantic literary community. By using this starting point, Vastey could more effectively introduce a

critique of colonial rule while also appealing to a broader Atlantic abolitionist movement that was not ready to accept mass emancipation. As Doris Garraway argues in her contribution, “Abolition, Sentiment, and the Problem of Agency in *Le système colonial dévoilé*,” this established literature emphasized a long history of noble, exploited Indians and Africans, and Vastey’s appropriation of this narrative can be understood as an appeal to the Atlantic cult of sentimentality that especially resonated with English abolitionists (pp. 221-223).

But in the second section of the essay Vastey breaks from this form entirely and presents a jolting and relentless inventory of brutal atrocities committed under the slave regime. Garraway argues that these systematic revelations of violence serve the dual purpose of appealing to the sympathy of “sensitive” Europeans but also implicitly justifying the violence of the revolutionaries. Vastey tells us he collected the scenes of violence found here “from the survivors of families whose kinsfolk experienced the acts of torture” (p. 109). Bongie finds that this switch from widely known European texts to local, silenced voices suddenly gives Vastey’s essay potent ballast “from below” that was not to be found in other contemporary anti-slavery tracts. Indeed, all four essayists in this volume emphasize how the use of this testimony makes Vastey’s account exceptional, particularly when we consider that we have so few Haitian voices in the written record. “The Colonial System Unveiled” therefore has unexpected value for social historians, as well as intellectual and cultural ones.

But it is not just the detailed descriptions of violence or the appeal to European sentiment through uncovering horrors that makes this part of the essay so powerful. In a virtually unprecedented move, Vastey calls out specific planters by name in his descriptions. Daut argues that by making violence personal, Vastey brings colonial crimes into the public sphere, making his examples akin to court testimony that can put “the entire colonial system” (p. 194) on trial. By exposing crimes in this way, Vastey gives life to the ghostly voices of the enslaved, thereby both challenging the conventional European historical accounts he employed in the first section while also giving Haitians a powerful political argument for why the world should not allow France to restore the colonial system in Haiti. Following up on this idea, Nick Nesbitt makes a distinction between the two forms of violence that are present in Vastey’s text: the unjust violence of planters and the “just, necessarily violent struggle to institute a post-slavery state in the midst of a reactionary, slave holding Atlantic World” (p. 292). Overall, by drawing on the voices of enslaved people and by considering violence in a way that does not adhere to the standard tropes of prevailing literary forms, Vastey’s argument for ending the colonial system presents a take on abolition and black sovereignty unique in the Atlantic World at the time.

The challenge of finding some kind of coherence in the essay is amplified by the fact that Vastey is operating first and foremost as an official representative of the Christophe regime in, as Chris Bongie puts it, a “scribal” role in relation to power. The paradox of combining the voice of the state and, through the second section’s use of oral testimony, the voice of silenced masses reflects the complexities and seeming contradictions embodied by the author, Baron de Vastey himself. Indeed, part of the appeal of this volume is the way each of the contributing authors gradually uncovers the mystery of his personal and professional background. Until recently, little was known about Vastey, who is perhaps best known through the literary representations of Aimé Césaire and Derek Walcott. Having written on these fictionalized accounts at some length before, Bongie is able to put a number of standard rumors to rest here.[1] Apparently born of a white French father and a free woman of color, we learn, for example, that Vastey may have lived in France at the height of the Revolution in the early 1790s and published various works there. But even with several real contributions to our knowledge of his life, Vastey remains a perplexing and “protean” figure (p. 68). Vastey was the official scribe for a nation not yet recognized by the outside world, a person of mixed race within the black empire of Haiti, and an intellectual who was both insider and outsider relative to an Atlantic Republic of Letters dominated by Europeans.

Vastey's arguments often reflect this complexity. His essay does not follow the tropes of more obviously sentimental forms such as the slave narrative, a genre Bongie has elsewhere argued fulfilled "the requirements of a 'literary humanism'" but was by its nature not directed at a more systemic level of analysis.<sup>[2]</sup> At the same time, the dangerous "intemperate"-ness of Vastey's writing is clear (p. 42), and his use of "irony, sarcasm, and insult" (p. 240) pervades many sections of his text. The final image he deploys, that of sharpened bayonets waiting to be used on whites, is perhaps best understood as an appeal to a local audience rather than a European one (p. 145). In short, the character of Vastey, it seems, has only paradoxes to offer. How can the same author represent Christophe's regime and also the formerly enslaved who were forced to return to plantation life under that regime? How can he claim an "authentically" black identity after a life of mixed-race privilege and European education? How can he invoke sentimental tropes about the history of slavery and yet, when denouncing the atrocities that were "common knowledge" in his society, write a seemingly detached, factual reportage? His apparently willful rejection of any appeal to sentiment and feeling in his denunciation of slaveholder atrocities becomes even more remarkable when we learn that one of the incidents he describes involves his own mother—a detail never revealed in the text (pp. 129, 166n, 180, 210).

The apparent schizophrenia of the essay may well reflect, once again, the particular context of its creation. Just one of the paradoxes of this historical moment is that Napoleon, through his return to power in the Hundred Days, appears effectively to have pushed the Bourbon regime to abandon its plans to return to Haiti. Before this happened, Vastey was instructed, on the one hand, by the noted British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson to provide "a *plain* statement of facts," the better to shock and convince European skeptics of Haiti's claim to sovereignty (p. 34). On the other hand, Vastey felt the need to respond to the emphatic defense of slave society put forth by Pierre Victor Malouet, Louis XVIII's Minister of the Marine, a work that drew Vastey's visceral contempt. It was in fact Malouet who spoke first of a "colonial system" (p. 47), and it was by turning Malouet's argument on its head that Vastey's essay reached its most penetrating critique. Spurred by both Clarkson's sober instructions and Malouet's sinister taunts, Vastey found his own voice.

Both the emancipatory project of the Haitian Revolution as a movement "from below" and the state authority that led former slaves to be subjected to a new kind of forced plantation labor in the years that followed come together in the person of Vastey. His position as a state official seems to complicate the desire of scholars like Michel-Rolf Trouillot to see a clear separation between state actors and subaltern subjects in the revolutionary era.<sup>[2]</sup> In the volume under review here, perhaps Nesbitt is the author who offers the most suggestive path toward breaching this impasse. Nesbitt argues that we must resist the comfortable appeal of a sentimentalist anti-slavery agenda that denies the continuity of violence in the functioning of slavery and any successful attempt to end it. Recognizing this reality leads us to what could be called a teleological suspension of noble humanistic methods, if not underlying ideals. This is what Nesbitt identifies as the core principle of what he refers to as Black Jacobinism. In Vastey's telling, the noble African, who was the ancestor of Haitians like himself, should be considered the legitimate sovereign of the island in light of the horrors committed by the colonial regime. Indeed, the very power of the Haitian Revolution is the establishment of a sovereign state that officially denounced and worked against the slave system as a whole, and not just against individual abuses. That broad, structural stance must be understood as humanistic, Nesbitt argues (pp. 288-290), and can be seen as anticipating Fanon's defense of anti-colonial violence (p. 300n). As Bongie discusses earlier, this framework may help us move beyond a stark choice between a "heroic or horrific" Haitian Revolution (p. 71n).

Having, we hope, made clear the striking and extraordinary interest of this volume, we should also point out that some readers may find that the scholarly apparatus overwhelms the central text itself. For at least some readers it might have been preferable to start the volume with a briefer, general introductory section, rather than the combination of the preface, the biographical sketch, and the extensive three-part introduction, all authored by Bongie, a total of seventy-nine pages, before getting to Vastey's essay, which comes to eighty-nine pages. In addition, Bongie has one of the critical essays that follow the main

text, “Memories of Development: *Le système colonial dévoilé* and the Performance of Literacy.” While all of his contributions are insightful, they might have been somewhat streamlined for the purposes of the volume. Readers familiar with Marlene Daut’s recent work will recognize her use of the concept of “monstrous hybridity” in her contribution here, “Monstrous Testimony: Baron de Vastey and the Politics of Black Memory.”<sup>[4]</sup> This construct places an obviously warranted emphasis on the central role of racial constructions in this period. But the authors are less likely to delve into Vastey’s suggestion that the underlying dynamic cause of violence in Saint Domingue had to do as much with capitalism (“greed”) and with what we might call class issues more broadly, as with his image of France having expelled “men descended from the dregs of the people” to the colonies (p. 123). Both rhetorical strategies allow him to better overcome the racial divide in his readership and hold up a dark mirror to his European readers while simultaneously appealing to their better angels.

Overall, the volume performs the great service of renewing attention to the remarkable and little understood figure of Vastey, and more broadly to the need for further research on a less well-known period of the Haitian revolutionary era. While Bongie and his collaborators have done an admirable job of unpacking the internal paradoxes of Vastey’s text, historians in particular may seek more context around certain questions raised by the essay. For example, the context of debates around the end (or perpetuation) of the slave trade is only touched upon in general here, but it seems crucial to Vastey’s calculations relative to the British audience at the particular moment he was writing. Further, at times Bongie seems to chafe at historians like David Geggus or Malick Ghachem, whom he sees as having argued, in different ways, for a more balanced view of violence in Saint Domingue (pp. 159n, 162-163n, 281n). More specifically, Bongie suggests that “the Christophean regime offered Haiti other solutions, and hope for a different sort of future” (p. 60). Fleshing these ideas out further would be welcome and would seem to require more systematic attention to social and historical context.

It is certainly not a new question, but the recurring reference in Vastey’s essay to the role of white women in colonial violence is striking and certainly cries for more research (see pp. 123, 138, 164, and 235). Further, only Garraway seems to touch briefly on the shocking claim made by Vastey that free people of color suffered the same as enslaved Africans in colonial society (p. 131). Though Vastey’s claim of a fully black identity is a powerful rhetorical move that is foundational to his argument and his vision of the Christophe regime, to what extent was his position in the state inflected by colorism? Finally, part of understanding the paradoxes and apparent contradictions of Vastey’s essay no doubt has to do with what we know to be its rushed production, but also the very different audiences for which it was intended, including a local reading public. To make more sense of this, part of what we need would be a better understanding of the social act of reading in early Haiti. But we hope it’s clear that these few notes are meant not to suggest the limitations of this extraordinary volume, but as encouragement to scholars from a range of disciplines to read and engage with it, and to extend the new vistas on early Haitian history it opens up.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Chris Bongie, “Preface: Baron de Vastey and Post/Revolutionary Haiti”

Chris Bongie, “Jean Louis Vastey (1781-1820): A Biographical Sketch”

Chris Bongie, “Introduction”

Chris Bongie, “1820: Death of a Scribe”

Chris Bongie, “1814: The Colonial System Restored”

Chris Bongie, “1814-2014: Reading the Protean Text”

Baron de Vastey, "The Colonial System Unveiled"

Marlene Daut, "Monstrous Testimony: Baron de Vastey and the Politics of Black Memory"

Doris Garraway, "Abolition, Sentiment, and the Problem of Agency in the *Le système colonial dévoilé*"

Chris Bongie, "Memories of Development: *Le système colonial dévoilé* and the Performance of Literacy"

Nick Nesbitt, "Afterword: Vastey and the System of Colonial Violence"

#### NOTES

[1] Chris Bongie, "'Monotonies of History': Baron de Vastey and the Mulatto Legend of Derek Walcott's Haitian Trilogy" in his *Friends and Enemies: The Scribal Politics of Post/Colonial Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), pp. 221-253. See also chapter six in John Patrick Walsh's *Free and French in the Caribbean: Toussaint Louverture, Aimé Césaire and Narratives of Loyal Opposition* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013); and Jean Jonassaint, "Toward New Paradigms in Caribbean Studies: The Impact of the Haitian Revolution on Our Literatures," in Doris Garraway, ed., *Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2008), pp. 200-222.

[2] Bongie, "'Monotonies of History,'" pp. 235-236.

[3] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

[4] Marlene Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015). Daut's second book, *Baron de Vastey and the Origins of Black Atlantic Humanism*, is forthcoming in fall 2017 from Palgrave Macmillan.

John Savage  
Lehigh University  
[savage@lehigh.edu](mailto:savage@lehigh.edu)

Sean Anderson  
Lehigh University  
[sda213@lehigh.edu](mailto:sda213@lehigh.edu)

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