

Munro on Bongie (2014)

Baron de Vastey. *The Colonial System Unveiled*. Ed. and trans. by Chris Bongie. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 329. ISBN: 9781781380314

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As the field of Haitian revolutionary studies deepens and matures, so its temporal boundaries begin to extend into the post-revolutionary period. As Chris Bongie writes in his preface to *The Colonial System Unveiled*, it engages with the “haunting dis/continuity” between the promise of the revolution and the post-revolutionary reality of curtailed freedom (4). The particular conditions of the early post-revolutionary period led to something of a false beginning for Haitian literature, which “proudly cultivat[ed] the memory of universal emancipation,” yet was answerable to the divisive polemics of the prevailing regime, which seemed to betray the revolutionary memory (4). Bongie presents this early Haitian literature as the work of “scribes, writers whose intellectual and creative production cannot be thought apart from the institutional framework with and by means of which it was conceived” (4). The scribal identity of such writers, Bongie writes, has led them to be “sorely neglected” by literary critics; a major objective of his work here is to challenge that neglect, and its supporting judgments of what constitutes good and bad art (5).

The particular scribe that Bongie seeks to promote is Baron de Vastey (1781–1820), the “chief publicist and ideologue” for the regime of self-proclaimed King Henri Christophe, from 1811 until his death in 1820 (5). Vastey has long been recognized (if not universally lauded) as a key figure in early Haitian writing, and features prominently in, for example, the dramatic works of Aimé Césaire and Derek Walcott. A prolific author, Vastey published nine works under his own name between 1814 and 1819, and several other works may be attributed to him.

All but one of his major works were translated into English in his lifetime, as part of an orchestrated campaign to promote Christophe’s regime in Britain. The exception was *Le système colonial dévoilé*, a ninety-seven-page essay that introduces the major themes of his oeuvre and that, Bongie says, anticipates “many of the central concerns of twentieth-century anticolonial and postcolonial thought,” and reads like a “Négritude manifesto *avant la lettre*” (6). Bongie’s ancillary materials—preface, biographical sketch, and three-part introduction—are highly impressive works in themselves, displaying a rare attention to detail, excellent use of the archives, and setting carefully the intellectual, political, and historical contexts in which Vastey wrote. These materials are complemented by four very good supplementary essays—one by Bongie, and others by Marlene Daut, Doris Garraway, and Nick Nesbitt—that expertly prepare the ground for the broader project of a general literary history of the early Haitian republic.

A first-time reader will no doubt find Vastey’s text a stirring evocation of the horrors of slavery, and, perhaps anticipating Anténor Firmin’s later work, an uncompromising denunciation of racist thinking, specifically that of the French. In contrast, in part because of the text’s intention of promoting the virtues of Christophe’s Haiti in Britain, the British are held up as paragons of justice and virtue despite the reality that the British Empire continued to hold slaves across the Caribbean in similar conditions to those that Vastey rightly condemns in the French colonies.

Some of the most interesting passages occur when Vastey considers his own status as a writer. Remarking that most historians who had previously written about the colonies were white, he notes that even when they discussed the brutality of slavery, they did so only “to disguise it, to diminish the enormity of those crimes through their manner of self-expression” (108). This is a critical observation, demonstrating Vastey’s awareness of the importance of style and form. It also influences his choice to write in a straightforward, unembellished way. There is perhaps false modesty in his claims to “not possess the same erudition” as a white man, and that his “Haytian pen will be lacking in eloquence” (108). As he says, “This is not a novel I am writing. [...] I will limit myself to reporting” (109). Thus, content apparently dictates form, and the “flowers of rhetoric and the embellishments of style” are not yet available to the Haitian writer (109). This is also a form of disaster writing, of bearing witness (Marlene Daut’s supplementary essay considers Vastey’s work as an early form of testimonial writing) to horrifying events in a way that anticipates the early post-earthquake writings of contemporary Haitian authors. It is also, importantly, a work of propaganda, particularly in the final pages, which laud the “great Henry, this good father, whose every care and solicitude is for the happiness of the Haytian family, all of whom are his children” (143), a phrase that would echo throughout subsequent Haitian history, in similar attempts to laud other authoritarian “fathers of the nation.”

In carrying out the extremely valuable work of re-presenting such texts to the growing Haitianist scholarly public, we must recognize the prescient, anticolonial significance of the work, but also read against it, considering, as Bongie and his

collaborators have done, its inherent ambiguities and contradictions, which will help further illuminate those of the nascent Haitian state itself.

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