Atlantic Amnesia?
French Historians, the Haitian Revolution, and the 2004-2006 CAPES Exam*

Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall
California State University – San Marcos

In the last twenty years, transnational and Atlantic histories have become popular paradigms among historians in the United States as scholars have seen the benefits of looking across national borders when studying topics from slavery to the international effects of revolutions. Although these models descend in no small part from the work of Annales historians, recent generations of historians in France have been less interested in pursuing transnational work. In this essay, I will discuss one manifestation of the resistance to transnational and Atlantic models in France: the treatment of the Haitian Revolution in the 2004-2006 CAPES/Agrégation early modern history examination. The topic announced for this exam appeared broadly comparative; it asked about "Revolts and Revolutions in Europe (including Russia) and in the Americas, 1773 – 1802." The question hinted at a shift in history teaching away from Franco-French topics; in particular, it raised hopes of renewed attention to the Haitian Revolution, long cast out of popular memory.

In practice, however, the Haitian Revolution was either ignored or poorly presented in most of the manuals and bibliographies created to prepare students for the exam. To explain this lapse, I will briefly compare American and French

---

* I am grateful to Dominique Rogers, David Bell, Jennifer Heuer, Cécile Vidal, Bertrand Van Ruymbeke, Laurent Dubois, Claude Liauzu, Allan Potofsky, and François Regourd for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.
traditions of writing about Haitian independence, focusing on different approaches to race and on the phenomenon of Atlantic history. I then turn to some specific ways in which the CAPES guides covered the Haitian Revolution with implications for what French students are – and are not – learning about race and France's colonial past.

The Haitian Revolution – the first successful rebellion of African slaves in the Americas – horrified whites throughout the Atlantic world. For slaveowners and their allies, the world was turned upside down; the very words "Saint-Domingue" conjured up a terrifying alternative universe in which whites could lose their power, their fortunes, and even their lives. For over a century, these cataclysmic effects prompted a kind of amnesia in both the United States and France in which the Haitian Revolution was erased from both popular and scholarly memory.

In the United States, this situation has been changing. Since the 1940s, several waves of scholarship have created a sizable literature on the impact of the Haitian Revolution in the United States. Historians have explored the effects of the Haitian Revolution not only on whites in different regions and political parties, but also on free and enslaved American blacks.¹

Scholarship on the impact of the Haitian Revolution in France, however, has been much less extensive. Whereas no less than twelve monographs treat the American reaction to the Haitian Revolution, there is only one, single-volume account of early French-Haitian relations. Groundbreaking work in the 1950s and 60s by Haitian scholars was virtually ignored in France, and only since the late 1990s have French scholars begun to turn to this topic.²


² For scholarship on the impact of the Haitian Revolution in France (and a fuller discussion of the points made in the next three paragraphs), see Sepinwall, "The Specter of Saint-Domingue: American and French Reactions
What accounts for this disparity in remembering Haiti? Elsewhere, I have considered several factors ranging from American foreign policy to institutional differences to the ways the histories of slavery and race have been treated in the United States and in France. Indeed, though these countries share slaveholding pasts, they have followed different paths in studying and remembering them. In the United States, a Civil War and a Civil Rights movement have made citizens acutely conscious of race, even if they have not always agreed about how to regard its historical legacy. Studies of race have become a staple of university history curricula.

In metropolitan France, however, the story looks different. Until very recently, both lay people and scholars shared what the late Yves Benot called a national amnesia (oubli) about the history of slavery. Textbooks do not cover the topic, and it barely appears even in university curricula. This lack of interest can be explained in part by the fact that both colonial expansion and the plantation system took place outside the hexagon, making slavery seem less central to France’s past. The more recent colonial traumas of Indochina and Algeria have also made the history of the first empire – and thus the history of slavery – seem a distant and less relevant part of national history. While a 2001 law (the loi Taubira) finally acknowledged the evils of to the Haitian Revolution,” in The Haitian Revolution: 200 Years After, eds. Norman Fiering and David Geggus (Providence: John Carter Brown Library, forthcoming 2007). The one monograph on early French-Haitian relations is Ghislain Gouraige, L’indépendance d’Haiti devant la France (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de L’Etat, 1955).

See Yves Benot, La Révolution française et la fin des colonies (Paris: La Découverte, 1987), ch. 10; and idem, La démence coloniale sous Napoléon (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), ch. 11.

French teachers can choose to cover slavery during civics education in middle school but are not required to do so, and many lack the requisite knowledge or interest (see "Esclavage: les devoirs de l’école," in L’Express [14 Mar. 2005], 82; “Interview avec Marcel Dorigny” at http://www.arte.tv.com/fr/histoire-societe/haiti/Interviews/490080.CmpC=490090.html; and Programme officiel du cycle central du collège, 4e and 5e requirements communicated to me by Dominique Rogers).
France's slaveholding past, it was seemingly eviscerated by the infamous law of February 2005, which mandated that schools teach about the "positive" value of French colonialism.\footnote{After a year of controversy, the offending section of this law was finally struck down in early 2006. See the Ligue des droits de l'Homme, Toulon, "La petition des historiens," \url{http://www.ldh-toulon.net/article.php?id_article=579} for extensive documentation on the law and the controversy over it.}

This longtime amnesia with regard to the history of slavery has been compounded by the fact that the concept of race is anathema in France. French universalism has traditionally produced a reluctance to differentiate between citizens, and the idea of race has been further discredited since the Shoah. Since the vast majority of French people (outside the Far Right) refuse to use the concept to classify people, whether for censuses or in public discourse, studying the place of race in French history seems not only illogical but also dangerous. This attitude, however well-intentioned, has resulted in an even greater inattention to France's colonial past. In contrast to the United States, books on the history of race have difficulty finding publishers in France because their topic appears scandalous.\footnote{When Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall published their edited collection, \textit{The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), a French scholar lamented to me that such a volume could never find a publisher in France, the very notion being an affront to republican identity. See also Claude Liauzu's admonition that, with regard to the history of racism, "American researchers have advanced much more than us," in "Introduction," \textit{Transmettre les passés: Nazisme, Vichy et conflits coloniaux: les responsabilités de l'Université,} eds. Claude Liauzu and Marie-Claire Hooek-Demarle (Paris: Syllèse, 2001), 14n3. For more on the absence of slavery from French national memory until very recently, see for example Christine Chivallon, "L'émergence récente de la mémoire de l'esclavage dans l'espace public: enjeux et significations," \textit{Cahiers d'histoire. Espaces Marx} 89:4 (2002): 41-60.}

The phenomenon of Atlantic history compounds the differences between the two historiographies. Spurred by the Harvard Atlantic World Seminar and by a flood of scholarship on transatlantic linkages, "Atlantic world" has become one of the hot fields in the American academe. It has not, however, been a
central paradigm in France, for reasons ranging from a belief that it is an Anglo-American model ill-suited to the French experience to a greater focus in France on domestic history and on the Mediterranean.\(^7\)

Finally, the greater amnesia about Haiti in France stems from the island's special place in national history. Unlike in the American case, the Haitian Revolution was a direct blow against France. Whereas for Americans, Haitian independence can serve as a useful site to study Atlantic connections or the founding fathers' ideas on race, in France it cannot be examined with the same detachment. On the contrary, the study of Haitian independence exposes both the hypocrisy of the French civilizing mission and the inconsistency of republican principles. As Francis Arzalier has asked, if the French Revolution was as liberating as national mythology implies, why would free and enslaved people of color have needed to revolt against it?\(^8\)

The topic chosen as the early modern history question for the 2004-2006 CAPES/Agrégation exams needs to be understood against this background. For these tests, the approximately eight thousand students each year who wish to be high school or university history teachers take an exam covering four periods of


history. Each is organized around a nationally designated topic changing every two years, and as one might imagine, the process of selecting each topic is deeply political, with the power to catapult book sales and careers. Though topics have the most direct impact on students preparing for the exam, they also exert a powerful influence on the direction of historiography nationally; university faculty must design and teach new courses treating them, and prominent scholars rush to publish study guides analyzing the state of the field.

Scholars who work on Atlantic history and on the Caribbean were delighted when the early modern question began to circulate, with its focus on transatlantic revolutions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This was not the first time the CAPES/Agrégation competition seemed poised to spark greater interest in Atlantic history; the 1996-1998 competition required would-be teachers to learn about Europeans and maritime spaces in the eighteenth century outside of the Mediterranean. Silvia Marzagalli has found, though, that that competition ended up spurring very little Atlantic-studies scholarship.

By 2004, there were signs of greater interest in the Atlantic. In 2001, a team led by Marcel Dorigny had organized an entire issue of Dix-huitième siècle on the theme of Atlantic history. In addition to the researchers working at French Atlantic studies centers, a cadre of young scholars from other universities had attended the Harvard Atlantic World Seminar and returned to France excited about the potential of the field.

Once the wording of the question became concrete, however, a key problem emerged: the jury had made its chronological limits 1773–1802, thus largely excluding the Haitian Revolution from students' coursework. The jury seemed willing to have

---


students compare the French Revolution to foreign uprisings but not to have them explore contradictions within the French Revolution and how they played out in Haiti. Scholars such as Dorigny and Benot protested vigorously, noting that ending in 1802 instead of extending the limit by two years to 1804 had the effect of excluding Haiti from the field of Atlantic revolutions. But the jury resisted, and the dates were not formally changed.\footnote{11}

Meanwhile, almost all of the study guides written for the exam as well as the bibliographies posted by universities on the internet fell short of offering a truly Atlantic perspective.\footnote{12} The

\footnote{11} The guides themselves were divided on the issue of chronology. Fabien Marius-Hatchi's chapter in Révoltes et révolutions en Europe (Russie comprise) et aux Amériques de 1773 à 1802, ed. Raymonde Monnier (Paris: Ellipses, 2004), for example, ended its analysis with Richepance's siege of Guadeloupe in 1802, appending only a passing reference to Haiti's declaration of independence in 1804. In the Bourdin and Chappey guide, Bernard Gainot argued that the end date for the colonies needs to stretch to 1804, but the guide's editors seemed to argue against this position (Révoltes et révolutions en Europe et aux Amérique, 1773–1802, ed. Philippe Bourdin and Jean-Luc Chappey [Paris: SEDES/CNED, 2005], cf. 240 and 10).

deficiency did not result exclusively from the hasty manner in which many manuals were compiled in order to be sold to students; on the contrary, they reflected deeper historiographical differences. The guides did not in fact reject Atlantic models altogether; most noted the seminal work in the 1950s and 60s of Jacques Godechot and R. R. Palmer and alluded to a revival of interest in this paradigm. Nevertheless, a number of authors brought it up only to reject it. In the guide edited by Philippe Bourdin and Jean-Luc Chappey, the authors recited a long list of criticisms of the Atlantic history model, from glorifying a "liberating America" to effacing local specificities and reducing the illustrious history of the French Revolution to a "paltry episode in the general history of the Western world." After asserting that Atlantic comparisons yield only superficial results, they then devoted most of their guide to discussing various aspects of the French Revolution.\(^{13}\)

Bourdin and Chappey were hardly anomalous. Though the question called for equal attention to Europe and the Americas, many guides focused chiefly on European revolts and revolutions. In books ranging from ten to twenty-four chapters, several were devoted to the French Revolution, a few to Europe, and one to the American Revolution. None of the manuals (with one exception, discussed below) allowed Haiti its own chapter. In the best guides, Haiti was covered in the course of a chapter on uprisings in the Caribbean; in the worst, it received no more than a few paragraphs. In addition to the way the guides were organized, their bibliographic coverage was heavily skewed toward France and Europe. The same was true for the online bibliographies, which offered detailed citations for the French

\(^{13}\)Bourdin and Chappey, eds., esp. 3-8.
Revolution and European revolts, some perfunctory classics on the American Revolution, but only a handful of references on the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{14}

Attention to Haiti in most guides and lists was particularly lacking. Bourdin and Chappey sandwiched the Antilles in the midst of a chapter beginning with Canada and ending with Latin America. Though they enlisted Bernard Gainot, one of the most accomplished scholars on the French Revolution and the colonies, to draft the pages on the Antilles, they framed his contribution in such a way that the Haitian Revolution became no more than a distant consequence of actions taken by the

\textsuperscript{14} See for instance the recommended list at the Université de Paris-VII (Denis Diderot), generally one of the better French campuses for the study of colonialism; it included some important works on the Caribbean but devoted most of its attention to the French Revolution (http://www.sigu7.jussieu.fr/telecharge/prepageo.pdf, 18-21). The bibliography first circulated by the Institut d'histoire de la Révolution française at Paris-I (Sorbonne) had little on the Caribbean (http://ihrf.univ-paris1.fr/bulletin/b12.htm, accessed January 2007). However, the expanded version by Jean-Clement Martin offered a fuller and more up-to-date selection of Caribbean-related materials, even if most items still dealt with Europe (http://ihrf.univ-paris1.fr/agreg/BiblioAgreg/CM.htm, accessed January 2007). The bibliography circulated by France's national history teachers' association (APHG), normally the standard reference for students preparing for the exam, had a solid section on slavery and the Caribbean, though it was much smaller than those on France or the United States (see Annie Duprat, "Révoltes et révolutions, en Europe (Russie comprise) et aux Amériques, de 1773 à 1802 [avec la collaboration de Bernard Gainot, Guillaume Garner, Sylvia Marzagalli et François-Joseph Ruggia]," Historiens et géographes 387 [2004]: 307-38, esp. 328-9). The online supplement to this bibliography (prepared by Duprat and Garner alone) was even more heavily weighted in favor of French and European revolts (http://www.aphg.asso.fr/pdf/biblio_duprat_garner.pdf). The bibliography posted by the bookstore Boutique d'Histoire was at first composed almost entirely of books on the French Revolution but was later altered as more CAPES guides were published (http://www.bhistoire.com/BibAg.htm; accessed Sept. 2006; site now discontinued. The link has been replaced with materials for the 2006-08 question).
French revolutionaries. The guide edited by Bourdin with Serge Bianchi was similar. Their chapter on the colonies came from Florence Gauthier; it was among the best on Haiti among the guides, alluding to French amnesia about the island and discussing stirrings for change there that predated 1789. Yet even that chapter was titled "The [French] Revolution Abolishes Slavery" ("La révolution [française] abolit l'esclavage"); once again, the Haitian Revolution was not acknowledged as autonomous, and Haitians became passive objects freed by Jacobin egalitarianism.

Fabien Marius-Hatchi’s chapter in Raymonde Monnier’s guide, which covered all of the French Antilles together, was similarly wanting with respect to Haiti. A graduate student working on Guadeloupe, the author was particularly eager to call attention to that island’s history, resulting in a minimal account of Haiti. Like other authors, Marius-Hatchi made the uprisings in the Caribbean only a product of the French Revolution and of processes begun by whites. His account completely ignored the efforts of gens de couleur like Julien Raimond, who pushed for

---

15 Their colonial chapter was introduced as covering "the role played by the French Revolution in the history of the colonies" (Bourdin and Chappey, eds., 234) and presented events in Saint-Domingue as produced entirely by metropolitan actors (251). Gainot’s portion of the chapter was jarringly at odds with this perspective, insisting that one must study "two-way circulation, since Antillean society was not passive and not content with reacting to stimuli from the metropole" (239).

16 Florence Gauthier, "La révolution abolit l'esclavage," in Bianchi and Bourdin, eds., 86-106. Cf. the guide Bianchi wrote on his own, Des révoltes aux révolutions, insisting that the "black revolution" could not have happened without "the development and echoes of the ‘white revolution’ of the rights of man" (84).

17 Fabien Marius-Hatchi, "Révoltes, insurrections et révolutions dans les colonies françaises des Antilles, 1773-1803," in Monnier, ed., 82-113. In a similar vein, see Poussou: "Everything began with a white revolt . . . The influence of the ideas of 1789 on the free people of color . . . was essential." (Poussou, "Le jeu complexe des révoltes et des révolutions à la fin du XVIIe siècle," in Le bouleversement, 65).

Still, the most unsettling chapter was that written by Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau in Jean-Pierre Poussou's guide. In the last two years, Pétré-Grenouilleau – who epitomizes a certain segment of the Right in France unwilling to apologize for colonialism – has become a target of controversy based on his book Les traites négrières: essai d'histoire globale. In this work, Pétré-Grenouilleau sought to restore to French memory the "other" slave trades: those run by Africans and Asians before Europeans launched the Atlantic trade. He emphasized the complicity of Africans in the Atlantic trade and gave several interviews decrying the Taubira law and similar efforts; to him, they contributed to an ahistorical view of "executioners who are solely white versus victims who are solely Black." Pétré-Grenouilleau's provocative remarks drew the ire of Antillais community groups who attacked him as a revisionist and a racist and even sued him for having minimized the horrors of slavery.\footnote{See summary at the Ligue des droits de l'Homme, Toulon, "L'affaire Pétré-Grenouilleau," \url{http://www.ldh-toulon.net/article.php?id_article=1468}.} These complaints scarcely resonated in mainstream French culture, however, as Pétré-Grenouilleau's book was acclaimed across the political spectrum and given the French Senate's award for best history book of 2005.\footnote{Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, Les traites négrières: essai d'histoire globale (Paris: Gallimard, 2004); see also idem, "Les détournements de l'histoire complexe et en partie occultée des traites négrières," Le Temps, 16 Mar. 2005; and interview with Pétré-Grenouilleau by Dominique de Laage in
Pétré-Grenouilleau's CAPES chapter was noticeably provocative. In it, he minimized the importance of the Haitian Revolution and disputed Benot's charge that French historians had been unjust toward the island. To him, slavery was more marginal in France than in the United States, so it was "logical enough" that scholars of the French Revolution had long disregarded it. His chapter began with a long discussion of white abolitionism before turning to slave resistance; he offered no detailed account of Haitian revolutionary figures and no analysis of the revolution there other than to call it "perhaps the most successful example of the application of French revolutionary ideals."\(^{21}\)

What is absent not just from Pétré-Grenouilleau's chapter but also from most other guides is the theoretical sophistication of the last twenty years of scholarship on Haiti, most especially the history-from-below approach of Carolyn Fick's *Making of Haiti*.\(^{22}\) Astonishingly, Fick was cited in only three of the fourteen guides I consulted and only two of the bibliographies; the work of David Geggus, the other leading figure in the field, was cited only in part.\(^{23}\) This exclusion is part of a more

---


\(^{23}\) Fick appears in Marcel Dorigny's, Robert Calvet's, and Pierre Benoist's guides and Annie Duprat's and Jean-Clément Martín's bibliographies. The guides citing Geggus listed either his French-language essays or his *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793-1798*.
fundamental problem: many of the guides had only limited coverage of scholarship not in French. Part of the reason for this stems from economics and concerns about foreign language proficiency. French university libraries receive far less funding than their American counterparts and are consequently loath to order books in foreign languages that their students may not be able to read. Yet the bibliographies' narrowness transcended language. Except for Marcel Dorigny's and Serge Bianchi's, no guide even mentioned the leading collection on the relations between the Haitian and French Revolutions produced in French by Haitian scholars after 1989.  

Two guides, however, did adopt a more Atlantic approach and thus point the way to a possible increase in attention to Haiti and to Atlantic history in general, at least among certain segments of French academia. The first was Marcel Dorigny's, which was a model of how to study Atlantic revolutions and a seminal essay masquerading as a study guide. Dorigny, like Gainot, is associated with the Société des Études Robespierristes and the Association pour l'Étude de la Colonisation Européenne, both of which have supported the colonial turn in French Revolution studies. Rather than focus mostly on Europe and on French-language works, Dorigny included an impressive annotated bibliography of works in many languages on the French, American, European, Caribbean, and Latin American

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), rather than his more recent Haitian Revolutionary Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002). Dorigny was the only one to cite the volume Geggus edited on The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

See Hector, ed., La Révolution française et Haïti (cited in note 8). A number of guides cited Laurent Dubois's French-language book Les esclaves de la République: l'histoire oubliée de la première émancipation, 1789-1794 (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1998), but his newer English-language work A Colony of Citizens was absent from every bibliography except Gainot's, while his Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004) was listed only in Benois's. It would have been possible for the guides to include such recent work, given that most of them were prepared in fall 2004 and included citations to other 2004 works.
revolutions. Instead of discussing individual revolutions serially, he urged students to focus on transatlantic circulations and networks. Most importantly, where most other guides made Haiti but a tiny detail, Dorigny placed its revolution on an equal footing with its more famous counterparts. In his view, the exam question demanded detailed analysis of three kinds of revolutions: the American revolutions of white colonists; the French Revolution and other European revolts influenced by it; and the antislavery uprisings in Saint-Domingue and other islands.25

The guide organized by Anne Jollet, the editor of Cahiers d'histoire/Espaces Marx, also provides an excellent model for writing about Atlantic revolutions. Though it lacked a chapter solely on Saint-Domingue, its chapter on "Blacks and people of color in revolt in the islands of French America" (written by Sébastien Jahan) gave a substantial narrative on Haiti, emphasizing the agency of slaves and free people of color and showing how their resistance predated the revolution in France. The rest of Jollet's guide treated Haitian history with respect, integrating it into comparative chapters on an equal basis.26

Other developments in French academia point the way toward an increased willingness to think transnationally and to include colonial history in national narratives. French graduates of the Harvard Seminar and others interested in Atlantic history, especially scholars in French American Studies departments, have organized several conferences and workshops in the last

---

25 Dorigny's guide (see note 11) had a different structure than other manuals and was not composed of whole chapters on particular revolutions. He nevertheless focused throughout on Saint-Domingue as one of the three main revolutions of the period, and he included a detailed chronology of events there (134-52; see also colonial events listed on 153-70).

26 See Jollet, Révoltes et révolutions. With Jollet as editor, Cahiers d'histoire. Espaces Marx published a special issue in 2002 on the memory of colonialism and a separate 2005 special issue on the CAPES question. Jollet also organized with Sébastien Jahan a 2005 forum on colonialism denial ("Le Négationnisme en histoire coloniale," planned before the February law was passed; information at http://www.pressafrique.com/m223.html).
year. In 2006, the CNRS began a project on slavery in the Atlantic, which includes specialists on Saint-Domingue. Meanwhile, outside of academe, the 2005 law on the "positive" aspects of colonialism has had a paradoxical effect. While at first it promised to have a chilling impact on discussions of colonialism, in the end it produced the opposite result, triggering conversations about France's colonial past that resonated far beyond academic circles. Furthermore, the suburban riots of November 2005 led the government to fast-track several initiatives related to the Taubira law in the hopes of alleviating the feelings of French citizens of North African and Caribbean descent that their histories were being ignored in schools.

For now, differences between French and American historiographies with respect to transnational work remain sharp. It is not clear whether interest in transnational scholarship will remain the province only of a few specialists or if it marks a wider willingness to depart from Franco-French approaches. Yet with these signs of change, Atlantic amnesia may be an endangered condition.

---