Review: Rendering Revolution

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Project

Rendering Revolution: Sartorial Approaches to Haitian History

Project Leads

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Project URL

https://renderingrevolution.ht/

Project Reviewer

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Project Overview

Siobhan Meï and Jonathan Square

Rendering Revolution: Sartorial Approaches to Haitian History is a queer, bilingual, feminist experiment in digital interdisciplinary scholarship that uses the lens of fashion and material culture to trace the aesthetic, social, and political reverberations of the Haitian Revolution as a world-historical moment. By focusing on stories of self-fashioning that rarely receive attention in colonial archives, Rendering Revolution explores the many ways in which modern identities (and concepts such as human rights) were formed in relation to the legacy of slavery in the Americas. Drawing on Black feminist thought and transnational queer methodologies, Rendering Revolution generates a transhistorical, undisciplined digital archive that illustrates the importance of material culture in constructing diverse (and often competing) visions of freedom in the Atlantic world.

Our project uses Instagram as a platform for engaging in public-facing scholarship on colonial Haiti (Saint Domingue). Instagram's emphasis on visual content as its central form of data currency is reflected in the tiled presentation of content that serves as the "feed" of a given account. The "tiled" or "pieced" visual design of Instagram allows for a vibrant collage experience for visitors to our account who will see, for example, a new materialist analysis of a runaway slave advertisement from Haiti's colonial newsletter Les Affiches Américaines, directly next to (with no transition) an interview with contemporary fashion designer and visual artist, Marielle Plaisir. Our account on Instagram permits a stitching of content and an emphasis on the plurality and imperfection of seams — those nearly invisible sites of connection among pieces of information.

Rendering Revolution was founded by historian Jonathan Square and literary scholar Siobhan Meï in the fall of 2019, with an official project launch in spring of 2020. At its inception, Rendering Revolution was a response to Gina Athena Ulyssse's powerful call in 2015 for new narratives about Haiti. We both had prior experience using social media to publish public-facing short-form research and had both found fulfillment in engaging

with new audiences (not simply academic circles) in this way. We thus shared a mutual interest in exploring what the possibilities (and limitations) of social media might be in circulating stories about Haiti and Haitian history that would challenge the restrictive and often racist representations of the nation and its people in North American public media. So, we began imagining how we might use the widely popular social media platforms of Instagram and Facebook to explore "new narratives" of the Haitian Revolution in the *longue durée* and through the prism of material culture, specifically fashion and dress.

The team consists of a diverse group of scholars, artists, designers, and translators who work from Haiti, the US, Costa Rica, and France. One of the central missions of the project is to make the content we publish (and excerpts of the largely French and Spanish-language colonial archives we examine) available in English and Haitian Creole, and thus much of our funding is dedicated to remunerating and recognizing expert translators who work between and among these languages. We also work directly with Haitian artists and artists of Haitian descent to document the long and diverse visual artistic legacy of the Haitian Revolution as it continues to inform aesthetics and politics in both Haiti and the diaspora.

The audience for our project (which includes celebrated artists and authors such as Joanne Petit-Frère, Leah Gordon, James Noel, Didier William, and Josué Azor) is wide-ranging. We seek primarily to be in conversation with Haitian people and people of Haitian descent, however we also hope our work reaches a broader group of students, curators, artists, designers, educators, and researchers (we have nearly 1300 followers on Instagram and over 1,500 followers on Facebook).

Our project has been cited in several publications (including articles in *Atlantic Studies* and *sx:salon*), and we have had the honor of presenting the project at several annual conferences including the Haitian Studies Association, Latin American Studies Association, the Costume Institute of the African Diaspora, and DH Unbound. We have received funding for the project from the Mount Holyoke College Alumnae Association and the Massachusetts Society of Professors. We hope to take Rendering Revolution, which has lived primarily via social media, into an exhibition in a brick-and-mortar gallery space.

Project Review

Charlotte Hammond

Rendering Revolution is an innovative and impressively interdisciplinary digital resource that traces the aesthetic, political, and social entanglements of the Haitian Revolution and its global legacies as a modern world-making project. In its exploration of material culture, specifically dress and fashion, this educational tool illuminates how sartorial acts of resistance and self-making have embodied Black agency across the Americas. According to fashion historian Jonathan Square and literary scholar Siobhan Meï, who co-founded the project in 2019, Rendering Revolution generates a "transhistorical, undisciplined digital archive that illustrates the importance of material culture in constructing diverse (and often competing) visions of freedom in the Atlantic

world." Engaging the archive through Black feminist thought and Black queer frameworks, Rendering Revolution consciously avoids beginning with the largely masculinist narratives of well-known heroes of the revolution: Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, or Henry Christophe. In 2020, the initial vignettes on the Instagram feed center those, Haitian women in particular, whose roles and perspectives have been marginalized and silenced. The first post presented a short history of seamstress Catherine Flon who is said to have sewn the first Haitian flag in 1803.

Rendering Revolution opens (1080 x 1080 px) windows on the rich and complex culture of Haiti by drawing on both historical and contemporary visual culture. Eighteenth century paintings by European observers such as Italian artist Agostino Brunias are juxtaposed with the work of contemporary Haitian artists and designers from different parts of the world, including Daveed Baptiste, Barbara Prézeau Stephenson, and Tessa Mars. This digital material invokes narratives rendering Haitian Revolution in the present day. Each visual artifact posted is meticulously researched by a diverse team of scholars, artists, designers, and translators based in Haiti, the US, Costa Rica, and France. The accompanying bilingual history is rendered in both Haitian Kreyòl and English, demonstrating a firm commitment to the importance of decolonizing and decentering Eurocentric languages and ensuring public access to knowledge.

Rendering Revolution foregrounds Kreyòl, the sovereign Haitian people's national language of resistance and identity, over the language of Haiti's former colonizers, French, which remains an official language of the state, despite Haitian independence since 1804. In pursuing their goal to be in conversation with Haitian people and people of Haitian descent, Rendering Revolution is itself a project of translation. It draws on a vast range of works by African diasporic authors, as well as images from the Western canon, like Toulouse Lautrec's *La Comtesse noire* (1881), and reads them from the perspective of Haiti's history.

Using commercial social media platforms for digital humanities scholarship inevitably raises concerns about sustainability and dependency on a third-party that is simultaneously monetizing engagement. While Instagram is the main platform for the project, the Rendering Revolution site provides an exceptional additional toolkit for further research on the importance of dress, fashion and materiality in a Haitian context. The expansive range of links to archival collections, documents, material references, artist websites, exhibitions, biographies of individual historical figures, key events, portraits, literature, and interviews forms a go-to digital resource, key for provoking and sustaining future dialogues across disciplines and beyond.

According to the project curators, the next iteration of this digital repository will be a physical exhibition which will no doubt bring translational challenges, scholarly debate, and increased public understanding. Rendering Revolution was initiated as a response to Gina Athena Ulysse's 2015 call for new narratives about Haiti. This patchwork of discussions could not be more necessary today as the promise of universal freedom and racial equality won by the Haitian Revolution is more than ever undermined by brutal gang violence, impunity, and the inaction of a Haitian government supported by the United States.