



The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution

Malick W. Ghachem

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The Haitian Revolution (1789-1804) was an epochal event that galvanized slaves and terrified planters throughout the Atlantic world. Rather than view this tumultuous period solely as a radical rupture with slavery, Malick W. Ghachem's innovative study shows that emancipation in Haiti was also a long-term product of its colonial legal history. The key to this interpretation lies in the Code Noir, the law that regulated master-slave relations in the French empire. The Code's rules for the freeing and punishment of slaves were at the center of intense eighteenth-century debates over the threats that masters, and not just freedmen and slaves, posed to the plantation order. Ghachem takes us deep into this volatile colonial past, digging beyond the letter of the law and vividly reenacting such episodes as the extraordinary prosecution of a master for torturing and killing his slaves. This book brings us face-to-face with the revolutionary invocation of Old Regime law by administrators seeking stability, but also by free people of color and slaves demanding citizenship and an end to brutality. The result is a subtle yet dramatic portrait of the strategic stakes of colonial governance in the land that would become Haiti.

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