

Haiti and the United States

National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination

J. Michael Dash
Senior Lecturer in French
University of the West Indies

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To Miss Lauren Who
'Jes Grew'

Preface

Images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent. Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented.

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

Fiction never lies.

V. S. Naipaul, *The Killings in Trinidad*

The United States invaded Haiti in an aggressive, military fashion in 1915 and initiated an intense relationship between the two republics that exists up to the present. Even though 1915 meant the violent entry of the United States into the Haitian experience and vice versa, the preceding decades reveal an awareness of the United States among Haitian intellectuals. The latter were, admittedly, more concerned with European culture but towards the end of the nineteenth century there is clear concern with American expansionism. After 1915, with the increased visibility of Americans in Haiti, attitudes to the United States are more widespread and clearly defined. There was also great interest shown in Haiti by American writers, travellers and later anthropologists. This study sets out to trace the growth and nature of this contact in both Haitian and American writers. This includes the sensationalism of the Occupation period, the link with Afro-American writers, the more informed work of American anthropologists and the Duvalier dictatorship which until recently shocked and titillated Americans. With the fall of the Duvalier dynasty the relationship between Americans and Haitians is more intense than ever before.

This study is an attempt to eavesdrop on an intense and often heated dialogue that has been sustained between Haiti and the United States – two New World Republics whose origins are remarkably similar but whose destinies are startlingly different. This passionate exchange is traced not in official documents or diplomatic correspondence but in works of fiction, travel books and imaginative literature in general. Attitudes and stereotypes that are either cautiously handled or camouflaged by claims of

objectivity in historical or socio-political works, emerge with a disarming honesty in less high-minded documents. The simplistic paternalism of a marine's memoirs, the supercilious chauvinism of a nineteenth century Haitian visitor to the United States, the taste for the outlandish among negrophile Americans reveal an unofficial truth about Haitian-American relations and go a far way towards creating stereotypes that have an influence on national policy and official reactions.

The main contention here is that a study of these narratives offers a useful perspective on Haitian-American relations which is not always available through traditional methods of historical investigation. Both Haitian and American attitudes cannot always be understood unless we are aware of the imaginative and even linguistic constraints within which they operate. The fictions of a given period are a key to the emotional underpinnings for an official policy, a framework within which even historical narrative can be explained. In blurring the difference between fiction and non-fiction, in treating fiction with the seriousness normally reserved for non-fiction, this study attempts to capture the hidden discourse behind official attitudes. The travel writer's choice of anecdote, the novelist's description of protagonists, the poet's terminology not only affect the way we think and feel but, even when new situations present themselves, we are tempted to recall and dwell on stereotypes which have never really vanished. They remain deeply embedded in the unconscious and give shape and direction to fresh experiences that flood the mind.

The aim is not so much to provide an exhaustive history of literary contacts between Haiti and the United States nor to supply an endless inventory of books in which Americans discuss Haiti and vice versa. Some attempt to do precisely this can be found in the following articles: Y. Gindine, 'Images of the American in Haitian Literature during the Occupation', *Caribbean Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1974); M. Fabre, 'Le revue indigène et le mouvement nouveau noir', *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1977); L.-F. Hoffmann, 'Les Etats-Unis et les Américains dans les lettres haïtiennes', *Etudes Littéraires*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1980) and in Fleischmann, *Ideologie und Wirklichkeit in der Literatur Haitis* (1969). Instead, this is an attempt to show how polarizing stereotypes in imaginative literature are developed which make historical and political realities intelligible. In the case of Haiti and the United

States it means producing myths which make the other's existence more manageable, less threatening.

In attempting to classify and analyse the imaginative rhetoric that penetrated intellectual, moral, and aesthetic values, this book owes much to the fact that modern literary theory has undermined the notion of the individual author and demonstrated the importance of context and convention to the existence of the text. The individual work simply becomes one articulation of a prevailing discourse. It is this discourse which is the ultimate object of the close reading of texts. The legitimacy of this kind of investigation depends on Michel Foucault's theory of discourse as explained in *The Order of Things*, even though this approach is not followed in a doctrinaire fashion. Recent works have demonstrated how Foucault's ideas can be applied to the study of literature and racial stereotyping: Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Christopher Miller's *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*. Both books examine the use of stereotypes to keep the Orient and Africa respectively at a safe distance and, even more importantly, the capacity of these images to acquire a greater authority than reality itself.

Paul Fussell has shown in *The Great War and Modern Memory* that the imaginative persistence of a system of stark dichotomies dividing cultures makes the hope of synthesis impossible. There is no dialectic possible in a rigid system of images that emphasizes differences between 'We' on this side and the enemy over there. Literature for Fussell reveals how reality emerges as a moral landscape which is divided into known and unknown, safe and unsafe, clean and unclean. What is true of post-war European Literature is also evident in the way Americans depicted Haitians and vice versa. In the case of Haiti and the United States, literary representation allows insight into that manichean discourse, the binary vision of racial and cultural incompatibility used by both societies to define and defend themselves in the face of the other's disturbing presence.

J. M. D.

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This book has taken four years to be conceived, researched and written. It was never intended as a virtuoso exercise in literary criticism. The original hope was that a study of this kind could, in its modest way, contribute to the demystification of the relationship between Haiti and the United States. This hope struggles to survive as the mythification of Haiti continues unabated.

Chronology

Year	Historical Event	Publications in the United States	Publications in Haiti
1776	Declaration of American Independence		
1779	Haitians join Americans in the Battle of Savannah		
1804	Haitian Independence		
1805		T. Branagan, <i>Avenia</i>	
1824	Emigration of American Freedmen to Haiti		
1825	France recognizes Haiti		
1852		H. B. Stowe, <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>	
1855		W. W. Brown, <i>St. Domingo: Its Revolution and Its Patriots</i>	
1861	Redpath's promotion of Emigration to Haiti		
1862	America recognizes Haiti		
1873			D. Delorme, <i>Réflexions diverses sur Haiti</i>
1888		J. Whittier, <i>Anti-Slavery Poems</i>	
1889	F. Douglass and Mole St. Nicolas Affair		
1896			F. Marcelin, <i>Choses Haitiennes</i>
1907			J. N. Léger, <i>Haiti: son histoire et ses détracteurs</i>
1915	American Occupation		
1919	'Caco' rebellion and death of C. Peralte		
1920	J. W. Johnson visits Haiti for NAACP	E. O'Neill, <i>Emperor Jones</i>	<i>L'Union Patriotique</i> launched
1925		B. Niles, <i>Black Haiti</i>	
1929		W. Seabrook, <i>Magic Island</i>	D. Bellegarde, <i>L'Occupation Américaine d'Haiti</i>
1930	S. Vincent elected; Forbes Commission; Visit of Langston Hughes		L. H. Durand, <i>Trois Poèmes</i> ; F. Burr-Reynaud, <i>Anathèmes</i>
1931	D. Bellegarde is Haiti's minister to the US; Walter White visits Haiti	F. Wirkus, <i>The White King of La Gonave</i>	

Year	Historical Event	Publications in the United States	Publications in Haiti
1932		L. Hughes, <i>Popo and Fifina</i>	L. Laleau, <i>Le Choc</i> ; <i>La Relève</i> launched
1933			S. Alexis, <i>Le Nègre masqué</i>
1934	Roosevelt's 'Good Neighbour' policy; End of Occupation	J. H. Craige, <i>Cannibal Cousins</i>	Haitian Communist Party, <i>Analyse schématique</i>
1935			M. Casséus, <i>Viejo</i>
1936	J. Roumain exiled after imprisonment		
1937		M. Herskovits, <i>Life in a Haitian Valley</i>	
1938		Z. N. Hurston, <i>Tell My Horse</i>	
1939	Roumain visits the US	A. Bontemps, <i>Drums at Dusk</i> ; H. Courlander, <i>Haiti Singing</i>	J. Roumain, <i>Les griefs de l'homme noir</i>
1940			R. Piquion, <i>Un chant nouveau</i>
1941	E. Lescot elected; 'Campagne anti-superstitieuse' in Haiti		
1942	Creation of SHADA		
1943	US project to train Haitian teachers		
1944	Centre d'art opened; death of Roumain; A. Césaire in Haiti	G. Myrdal, <i>An American Dilemma</i>	Roumain, <i>Gouverneurs de la rosée</i>
1945		J. Leyburn, <i>The Haitian People</i>	J. B. Cinéas, <i>L'héritage sacré</i> ; R. Depestre, <i>Étincelles</i>
1946	A. Breton in Haiti; Lescot overthrown		
1947	Maya Deren in Haiti		
1949	E. Wilson in Haiti		
1957	F. Duvalier elected		Alexis, <i>Les arbres musiciens</i>
1959	Castro in Cuba denounces Duvalier		
1960	Depestre in Cuba		
1961	Alexis killed by army		
1963	Kennedy assassinated in the US; Duvalier 'denounces the US'		E. Roumer, <i>Le caïman étoilé</i>
1964	Duvalier elected president for life; Relations with US resume		
1966		G. Greene, <i>The Comedians</i>	
1967			Depestre, <i>un arc-en-ciel l'occident chrétien</i>

Year	Historical Event	Publications in the United States	Publications in Haiti
1970		Diederich and Burt, <i>Papa Doc</i>	
1971	Death of Duvalier and succession of Jean-Claude	R. Rotberg, <i>The Politics of Squalor</i>	
1972	Arrival of 'boat people' in Florida	I. Reed, <i>Mumbo Jumbo</i>	
1975			F. Etienne, <i>Dézafi</i>
1978		R. Heinl, <i>Written in Blood</i>	
1979	President Carter critical of Haitian Dictatorship. Jean-Claude allows political activity		Colimon, <i>Le chant des sirènes</i>
1980	US paroles illegal Haitian immigrants		J. C. Charles, <i>Le corps noir</i>
1986	Jean-Claude Duvalier leaves Haiti in a US Air Force jet	R. Banks, <i>Continental Drift</i>	

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1

Through the Eyes of the Other: Stereotypes of the Nineteenth Century

PATRIARCHAL ATTITUDES

Le noir me paraît être la race femme dans la famille humaine, comme le blanc est la race mâle.

Gustave d'Eichtal, *Lettres sur la race noire*, 1839

'The Orient was almost a European invention' asserts Edward Said in his remarkable study of Western attitudes to the East (*Orientalism*, 1978). His provocative thesis is that Europe has produced a discourse, a rigid grid of stereotypes that allows a particular image of the Orient to filter into Western consciousness. These images of the East are neither simply picturesque nor innocent but an imaginative strategy which reinforces Western notions of superiority and defines the Orient as a commodity to be dominated or possessed. The idea of a geo-political awareness that is essentially imaginative provides a model for locating the element of mythification in relations between other countries. For instance, American attitudes to Haiti can be seen in terms of the creation of self-serving or rather self-aggrandizing images designed to tame the alien or threatening world on the outside. These images acquire a cumulative force over time and consistently resurface in order to define and reconstruct Haiti in terms which emphasize its difference or 'Otherness'.

Like the Orient, Haiti emerges as an inexhaustible symbol designed to satisfy material as well as psychological needs. Images of mystery, decadence, romance and adventure are not arbitrary in either case but constitute a special code, a system of antithetical values which establishes radical, ineradicable distinctions between the Subject and the Other, West and East, the United States and

Haiti. This systematic network of images eventually hardens into unshakeable dogma that is based on the notion of the 'Other' as the negative of the Subject, a zone of absence, a screen onto which the Subject projects his repressions. The 'Other' is denied its own subjectivity and simply exists so that the Subject can define itself. For instance Said's concern is to demonstrate that the Orient is fixed irrevocably in a prevailing discourse that privileges Western reason, lucidity and order over irrationality, mysticism and chaos. The 'Other' consequently is associated with a mentality, an atmosphere, a set of consistent characteristics which constitutes its essence.

An essentialist discourse derived from oppositions between light and dark, clean and unclean, good and evil can be identified in what Said terms 'textual attitudes'. In this regard Michel Foucault's concept of the world as a text is important. The word allows for a certain perceptive capacity, certain imaginative possibilities to exist. Stereotypes then form a kind of syntax, an orderliness that makes the world intelligible. The capacity of the word to reveal or delude is reflected in Foucault's assertion that 'Quixote reads the world in order to prove his books'.¹ The literary text describes, dramatizes and stabilizes the stereotypes that rationalize our view of the world. Indeed, the literary word can acquire a power greater than reality itself as we see in Quixote's quest for meaning in an alien and elusive universe. Thus flocks, inns and windmills become, because his imagination feeds on heroic images drawn from tales of romance and chivalry, armies, castles and knights. Imaginative literature must not be dismissed as self-indulgent fantasies or half-truths but should be seen as a repository for the organizing discourse that allows the Subject to perceive the 'Other' in a particular way. It is, perhaps, no accident that some writers, aware of the dangers of 'textualizing' the world, should create characters such as Emma Bovary and Don Quixote, who are tragically misled because what they have read makes it impossible to have an objective knowledge of the world around them.²

'Haiti was almost an invention of the United States' is a tempting version of Said's formulation. From the beginning, relations between Haiti and the United States were coloured by a tendency by the latter to project its fantasies and insecurities onto the recently independent black state. Haiti seems to have always had the lure of the extreme case, whether it was virgin terrain, a

garden of earthly delights where the black race could begin again or the closest and most histrionic examples of Africa's continental darkness. These alternating stereotypes of a void to be filled or a flamboyant, inexcusable blackness constitute a binary model of differences that fixed the relationship between the United States and Haiti, between the diametrically opposed poles of mind and body, culture and nature, male and female. Haiti is imaginatively and culturally reconstructed as the 'Other', the negative or feminine and marginalized in a symbolic order devised by the United States. From the nineteenth century what beckons or revolts Americans is Haiti's impenetrable mystery, its irredeemable strangeness, its unpredictable 'Otherness'. Haitians are meant to be marvelled at, studied, converted, rehabilitated and ultimately controlled.

The constant scepticism that characterized American attitudes to Haiti in the nineteenth century is not unrelated to the way in which racist thinking expressed itself at the time. In particular, the use of sexual polarizations to identify the differences between black and white, provides insight into the imaginative underpinning of stereotypes associated with Haiti. It has been shown that the single most influential work on racial theories in the nineteenth century Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853) consistently uses male and female metaphors to describe the hierarchy of races.³ For instance the black and Jewish races are feminine as opposed to male whiteness. Gobineau's work represents a figurative and linguistic context for prevailing racist rhetoric. Another example of this kind of sexual stereotyping of racial essence is apparent in the feminization of the Caribbean by metropolitan French writers from the eighteenth century. The well-known lament 'Adieu Foulards, Adieu Madras' celebrates the amorous helplessness of the Caribbean female at the point when her virile French lover is leaving her. The oppressive durability of these images of gentleness and dependency is quite remarkable and must be seen as the literary representation that defined the Caribbean in a posture of sexual surrender, awaiting the valorizing presence of the white, male colonizer.⁴

An English version of Gobineau's text was available in the United States as early as 1856 and entitled *The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of Races*. It could well have lent 'scientific' support to racial stereotyping in the United States in terms that emphasized

the female dimension of blackness. The notorious benevolence of another influential nineteenth-century work Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provides useful evidence of the 'textualizing' of the black race in the United States. In her novel the negro race is characterized by such virtues as 'simplicity of affection' and 'docility of heart'. She envisaged Africa as a 'far-off mystic land', a pastoral haven where this genius could flourish in an unhampered way. If allowed to develop according to its own peculiarities and limitations . . .

The negro race, no longer despised and downtrodden will perhaps, show forth some of the latest and most significant revelations of human life. Certainly they will, in their gentleness, their lowly docility of heart, their aptitude to repose on a superior mind and rest on a higher power, their childlike simplicity of affection, and facility for forgiveness.⁵

It is difficult to imagine how this view of unprotesting submissiveness could be reconciled with the dramatic display of unrefined and violent behaviour exhibited during the Haitian war of Independence. The mulatto character George Harris does refer to Haiti but in dismissive terms. He theorizes that 'The race that formed the character of the Haytiens was a worn out, effeminate one'.⁶

Patriarchal condescension alternated with another sexual image of the volatile and unpredictable black race. The disarmingly earnest rhetoric of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is often supplanted by images of a race prone to a lack of inhibition, self-control and restraint. In the same way that Gobineau believed in the sensual proclivity of the inferior races, blackness is the realm of passion for some American commentators in the nineteenth century. The fear of the power of this forbidden world and the need to exorcise this threatening dimension of delirium and anarchy is at the heart of the Rev. Josiah Priest's *Bible Defence of Slavery* (1851). In a discourse that fixes the black race in the realm of the corporeal, Priest focuses on the latter's suitability to physical labour – 'The extraordinary protrusion of the head', 'the leg nearly in the middle of the foot'.⁷ Not submissively feminine by any means, the black race is to be dominated, shut away or excluded since 'The baleful fire of unchaste amour rages through the negro's blood'. Prone to hysteria and irresponsible behaviour, the black race

could be subdued only by the confinement and supervision of slavery.

Whether the stereotype is benign or convulsive, supine or histrionic, the black race exists negatively. Its identity is reduced to the biological and seems fixed on the other edge of human culture. As a barrier against the turbulent, unknown world outside the black man is the frontier or border between known and unknown, order and chaos. Perhaps, because he is imaginatively situated on the edge, he can be ambiguously represented. He can either merge with the surrounding darkness as Josiah Priest's demonic version suggests or can be the shield that protects the world of order from the outer chaos. Whether virgin or whore, the black race's 'Otherness' is predetermined and 'textualized' by the middle of the nineteenth century. In confronting Haiti and the issue of a successful revolt of black slaves, the United States made use of the stereotypes that had been generated by its own experience of blackness. In order to deal with the disturbing and threatening existence of a state founded by ex-slaves, Americans resorted to the discourse that had already stabilized the way the black race would be perceived. Relations between the United States and Haiti were the political articulation of such a discourse and to this extent, it could be claimed that the United States almost invented Haiti imaginatively in the nineteenth century. Literary representations of Haiti are the key to the racial dichotomy that governs moral, aesthetic and intellectual views of Haiti. They do not emerge in a vacuum but reinforce and are in turn made more durable because of being tied to a particular set of political and economic circumstances.

The United States, the oldest republic in the Western Hemisphere, and Haiti, the first black republic, have strikingly similar origins. Historical parallels and continuities are inevitable since both countries gained their independence through a protracted war against a European power. A graphic illustration of shared political ideals can be seen in 1779 when over a thousand Haitian soldiers sailed from Cap Français with a contingent of French troops to fight with the Americans against British forces in the Battle of Savannah. Twelve years later the Haitian war of independence stimulated a demand for arms and ammunition which American merchants eagerly satisfied.

The impulse to celebrate the Haitian struggle for independence as an heroic and exemplary act is evident in the nineteenth