those roaming the streets, many of them still covered in dust. “. . . In an almost chilling scene, you would see people in some instances sitting nearby [the dead bodies lining the streets], some of them with vacant stares in their eyes just sitting in the middle of the street,” she said. “At times, you would see young children walking about as though seeing this horror didn’t bother them. And you had to wonder, is that because this country has suffered so much and through so many natural disasters over so many years?”

More than a week later, on January 22, CNN anchor Anderson Cooper appeared on the air with another correspondent, Karl Penhaul, reporting from Haiti. Penhaul related the story of a woman who survived the quake but lost her two young children. Surprised to see her force her way onto a bus to get out of Port-au-Prince, Penhaul said he asked her if she had buried her children before leaving. “And she simply said, ‘I threw them—I threw them away,’” Penhaul said, interpreting the woman’s reply, “Jete,” to mean that she threw them out. The only word he apparently understood was jete (throw, fling, hurl). He did not mention the prepositions that came before or words that came after the verb, nor did it occur to him that the woman was saying she did not have the opportunity to bury them because they were thrown into a mass grave by others.

“Can you imagine a mother saying in any culture, ‘I threw them away?’” the reporter said incredulously. Penhaul was also perturbed that the people he saw weren’t crying. “As I put to this lady,” he continued, “‘you know, ‘Why don’t you Haitians cry?’” Cooper tried to move the conversation toward a discussion of trauma and even mentioned the word shock, but only at the very end of the segment.

In media coverage of the quake and its aftermath, this dehumanization narrative—portraying traumatized Haitians as indifferent, even callous—took off on what I call the subhumanity strand, which was particularly trendy.

Unfinished Business, a Proverb, and an Uprooting

On July 8, 2009, Haitian journalist Joseph Guyler Delva published a short Reuters article titled “Bill Clinton Surprised by Discord in Haiti,” which reported on the former president’s first trip to the country as UN special envoy. According to Delva, Clinton—who, we can surmise, takes his new UN position to heart, given his key role in furthering Haiti’s economic demise in recent years—found that “a lack of cooperation between Haitian politicians, aid groups and business leaders was hurting efforts to help the impoverished nation.”

“The most surprising thing to me,” Clinton was quoted as saying, “. . . is how little the investor community, all the elements of the government, including the legislative branch and the NGO community seem to have taught and absorbed each others’ lessons.” Delva ended with some promising, yet contradictory words from Clinton, pledging his determination to bring the change that seemed to have come to the United States that January to the ever so fragile Haitian Republic. “If it is a question of money, that’s my problem,” Clinton said, but if it is not about money, that’s something Haitians need to resolve among themselves” (emphasis mine).

This assessment, though diplomatic, smacked of cultural illiteracy. Not only was it ahistorical in its disavowal of key features that created the Republic and remain at the country’s social core (plurality, discord, dissidence), but this comment also attempted to revise the history of imperialism—as if Haitians’ problems among themselves could be dissociated from money. As if it were possible for the UN special envoy, in his role as the moneyman, to avoid affecting local policy, especially given the role that foreign capital has historically played in creating, stoking, and augmenting discord among Haitians.

After the quake, Clinton became even more important as Haiti’s moneyman. And the discord, which he noted months before, would not only be exacerbated by the disaster but played out in predictable ways. Although the earthquake indiscriminately affected all Haitians, regardless of their socioeconomic status, its immediate aftermath made clear that, indeed, tout moun pa menm (not every human is the same), as the Haitian proverb goes.

This was especially evident during the initial rescue efforts, when valuable foreigners were saved first. Rescue teams ignored overpopulated slums coded as “red zones” or high-security risk areas. Children labeled “orphans” were whisked off to foreign lands. Disputes over payment for medical treatment in the United States suspended medical airlifts and endangered lives. The United Nations tear-gassed des-
It stems from the dominant idea in popular imagination that Haitians are irrational, devil-worshiping, progress-resistant, uneducated, accursed black natives overpopulating their God-forsaken island. There is, of course, a subtext here about race. Haiti and Haitians remain a manifestation of blackness in its worst form because, simply put, the unruly enfant terrible of the Americas defied all European odds and created a disorder of things colonial. Haiti had to become colonialism’s hête noir if the sanctity of whiteness were to remain unquestioned.

Haiti’s history would become its only defense against these portrayals, although in mainstream media that same history would be used against the republic by historical revisionists. The day after the quake, the televangelist Pat Robertson proclaimed that the catastrophe in Haiti was a result of the country’s pact with the devil, a belief that many Protestant Haitians themselves accept as true. The “devil’s pact” refers to the ceremony at Bois Caïman on August 14, 1791, said to have sparked the Haitian Revolution. On that day, it is said, rebel leader and Vodou priest Boukman Dutty presided over this ceremony in which those in attendance swore to kill all whites and burn their property. Cécile Fatiman, the presiding priestess, sacrificed a pig to honor the spirits. Robertson’s re-reading of the ceremony, was yet another example of the racialization of Haitians that so often goes unspoken in mainstream accounts.

Those of us concerned with cultural heritage must take into account the fact that family temples, so crucial to the practice of Vodou, have been fractured and in some cases destroyed by seismic activity. Few people speak of these temples, or when they do, it is secret. The stigma is taking hold. There have also been incidents of anti-Vodou violence. This backlash is a mechanism of social control. The silence on this loss needs to be broken. Plans must be made to address the destruction of these familial archives. The temples need to be repaired.

Vodou is not merely going underground as it did when it was persecuted after the Revolution and during the U.S. occupation. It is being eradicated in part because the missionaries continue to play a significant role in providing much needed services for the desperate nation. This moment, which Pat Robertson claimed to be a blessing in disguise, sets the stage for more explicit rules of engagement: food, shelter, clothing, and education in exchange for one’s soul. People are desperately converting. Incessant chants dominate the hills and tent cities. The sound of drums is fading in too many parts of the nation. At the fault lines something else is happening. A religious cleansing is in effect.

And Haiti’s past continues to loom largely in the present.

—G.A.U.
Why Representations of Haiti Matter Now More Than Ever


Unfinished Business, a Proverb, and an Uprooting


Mexico’s Economic Collapse

1. This article is based on data from numerous official sources and daily press reporting from El Financiero and La Jornada, as well as from Cámara Nacional de la Industria de Transformación (Canacintra), Monitor de la Manufactura mexicana (various issues); James Martín Cypher, “La economía de Estados Unidos: ¿Hacia el precipicio o en caída libre? Ola Financiera no. 3 (May–August 2009): 41–49; Enrique Dussel Peters, “El aparato productivo mexicano,” Nueva Sociedad no. 220 (March/April 2009); and Norma Samaniégo, “La crisis, el empleo y los salarios en México,” Economía UNAM 6, no. 16 (September 2009).

Real World Latin America

A Contemporary Economics and Social Policy Reader edited by the Dollars & Sense Collective and NACLA

Latin America is undergoing profound economic and social transformations. Real World Latin America brings together the best recent reporting on the region from Dollars & Sense and NACLA Report on the Americas.

Thirty-eight well-researched and clearly written articles examine the hidden costs of development, struggles for human rights, international trade deals, the impacts of migration, growing environmental challenges, and the role of the United States in the region. Chapters on social movements and alternative forms of production document grassroots struggles in Argentine factory shop floors, Venezuelan cooperatives, Oaxacan schoolrooms, and elsewhere.

To purchase or learn more, visit nacla.org/rwla

Professors: To request an examination copy, visit dollarsandsense.org/examcopies or call 617-447-2177.
Published by Dollars & Sense July 2008 | $29.95