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Book Review

Haitians, the People That Will Not Go Away

by

François Pierre-Louis Jr. **[AQ: 1]**

Matthew J. Smith *Liberty, Fraternity, Exile: Haiti and Jamaica after Emancipation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

Toni Pressley-Sanon *Istwa across the Water: Haitian History, Memory, and the Cultural Imagination*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017.

Victor Figueroa *Prophetic Visions of the Past: Pan-Caribbean Representations of the Haitian Revolution*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015.

Matthew J. Smith's thesis in *Liberty, Fraternity and Exile*—that “the creation of Caribbean identity is found not only in the comparative lives of nations of the region but also in the shared experiences of those who cross the straits and borders that separate the ‘exiled pieces of land,’ carriers of histories seldom acknowledged” (330)—is the perfect introduction to my review of three recent books on Haiti. What we learn from him is that the Caribbean sea could not separate Haitians and Jamaicans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries even though they did not share a language or history. Given the economic, social, and political mayhem taking place in Haiti today, it is hard to believe that at one time Jamaica not only looked up to Haiti as a model but fostered family and political ties with the newly independent country through commercial exchanges, migration, and kinship.

The fact that Haiti was the only place in the Caribbean region with self-government in 1804 positioned it to become a leader for slave societies in the region that were seeking their independence. Instead of adopting the narrative of writers from the metropole who have projected a historical rivalry and competition between Haiti and Jamaica, Smith shows the interconnection and solidarity that existed between them. Emancipated blacks in Jamaica had shared a bonded history, ideas, and experiences with newly independent Haiti, and connections developed between the two peoples after Jamaica was emancipated. The Haitian government after independence ruled over the whole island of Hispaniola. Only a sliver of water separated Jamaica and Hispaniola, and with the advent of the steam engine in the mid-1800s the time it took a vessel to cross that water was considerably shortened. Therefore, it was easier for a family living in Jérémie in western Haiti to visit Port Antonio or Kingston than Port-au-Prince.

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England did not boycott Haiti after independence and allowed Jamaica and its other colonies to trade with it. As a result, Jamaica became the choice destination for presidents that were overthrown in Haiti. Smith describes the constant movement of exiled individuals and their supporters between Haiti and Jamaica, which not only welcomed the exiles but was an ideal place for presidents-in-waiting and disgruntled leaders to build new movements to overthrow a sitting president. According to Smith, the political turmoil that Haiti experienced in the nineteenth century after the assassination of Dessalines, which saw the newly independent nation divided into two countries, a republic with Petion in the South and a kingdom with Christophe in the North, was not entirely the doing of Haitian leaders who could not get along. Jamaican businessmen and politicians played a major role in fanning the fire of discord among Haitian leaders because they profited from the turmoil. Many of them were arms dealers, and their vessels provided transportation for the weapons that fomented the dozens of revolutions that took place in this period. Jean-Pierre Boyer, Haiti's fourth leader, who reunited the island, was well respected in Jamaica and France, since he had agreed to pay France for the recognition of Haiti's independence. He was one of the first leaders to land in Jamaica as an exile after he was overthrown. We learn from Smith that upon his arrival in Jamaica, he held a lavish breakfast for "leading Kingston merchants and politicians . . . keen to make the most of this connection with the ex-president in order to build commercial ties with Haiti" (64). After Boyer, a long list of ephemeral Haitian presidents took the same exile path to Jamaica.

Although Haiti was in constant turmoil in the nineteenth century except for the 25 years of Boyer's government, Jamaicans never lost their respect for what Haitians had been able to accomplish when they created a free black republic, the only country in the world in which whites could not impose their will. For emancipated Jamaicans, Haitians could do no wrong. It did not matter how much trouble their leaders were or how unfortunate their experience of natural disasters, it was imperative to welcome them because they had given blacks everywhere a revolution that restored their humanity. While in the nineteenth century Jamaica was in solidarity with Haiti, today it sees Haiti as a place to be avoided at all costs. A close reading of Smith makes one realize that nothing much has changed in the political scene in Haiti. The country remains divided and ungovernable as it was in the nineteenth century because of class struggle and competition among members of the elite to maintain their power over the masses. Although Smith does not say so, it is clear throughout the book that this is the root cause of the constant conflict in Haiti.

Toni Pressley-Sanon's *Istwa across the Water* reminds us that "the old world and the new [are] both . . . physical and metaphysical sites of origin for contemporary Haiti" (3). Despite the assaults on Vodou by the Catholic and Protestant Churches and Western government since the colonial era, not only has it thrived but Haitians have demonstrated how resilient they can be in preserving their culture. We know a lot about the slave trade, the inhumane treatment of the African captives, and the way slavery enriched the West, primarily the Dutch, whose ships transported the Africans to the United States, and how the wealth of the United States was created on the backs of slaves. What we know the least about is how the kidnapped Africans preserved and re-created their traditions. This is where this book makes a difference.

Pressley-Sanon traces various words of the Vodou culture of Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil to Africa. She notes that an important part of writing historical narrative is "the historians' imperative to decide what is relevant and irrelevant, what to include and what to exclude" (46). There is no such thing as a neutral historical narrative. Since Vodou was always seen by the West as evil, the Western narrative of the practices and rituals could not be sympathetic to the religion or its faithful. Pressley-Sanon restores Vodou to its rightful place among world religions. The Iwas worshipped in Haiti can be traced

to Africa and in the context of the transatlantic slave trade produced a special relationship between the living and the dead: "As people of both sides of the Atlantic died to one way of being as a result of their contact with the transatlantic slave trade, they were also born to another way" (11). This rebirth gave us the Haitian Revolution and new meanings of the lwas. Comparing various representations of the lwas such as Erzulie, Legba, and Gede, Pressley-Sanon notes that the Legba of Kpassezoumein Dahomey is more human than his earthen representation: "He has the body of a man and sits with his hands resting on his knees. His phallus is disproportionately large and painted bright red as though engorged" (97). In contrast, in Haiti Legba is depicted as very old and lame as a result of the hardships that he has suffered as a god of the diaspora: "As sevite [worshippers] have undergone the trauma of captivity, exile, and servitude, so too has he" (98). In Haiti and other countries where Africans were sent, their resiliency took various forms. Slaves managed to hold onto the lwas by changing their representations. One example of this resiliency is expressed by the Atis Rezistans group in Haiti, whose representation of the lwas raises fundamental issues of class, power, and foreign domination that Haitian governments have been unable to address. Pressley-Sanon concludes: "The belief systems that began in Africa and made their way into the diaspora keep open the lines of communication that systems of power that are built on the suppression of the body, mind, and spirit try to disrupt" (144). Vodou is not only about lwas and symbols; it is fundamentally the *nanm* (spirit) of all those that were forced to separate from their homeland and vowed not to forget it. The book provides a good historical account of the link between memory and cultural imagination, but it would have been stronger had the author addressed how the Duvalier regime used the cultural imagination in Vodou to maintain a repressive regime and force a new narrative on the religion.

As does Smith, Victor Figueroa wants to move away from the premade narrative and model of the Haitian Revolution that many Western historians have produced. He argues that the revolution is a fascinating, moving epic that has not yet been fairly accounted for, often being presented as full of violence and brutality instead of as one of the greatest modern human achievements. Through a review of the work of Caribbean and Latino writers, Figueroa offers the reader a pan-Caribbean narrative of the revolution. Because their narratives of the revolution reflect their biases, these writers have given some revolutionary heroes more attention than others. Although Toussaint Louverture is the most venerated, the revolution could not have happened without Dessalines, Christophe, and many others. Dessalines has received relatively little attention in Caribbean accounts, whether because the narrative on him is associated with the brutality of the revolution or because he understood the slavery system and how to get rid of it better. Figueroa suggests that for these Caribbean writers the revolution was not one event but a series of events: "Some accounts of the revolution choose to end with the death of Toussaint, while others prefer to begin their account with a fictionalized rendering of Dessalines' life as a slave" (30).

From C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Alejandro Carpentier, and Edouard Glissant to Dennis Walcott, respected Caribbean writers cannot forget the impact of the revolution on the region and the world, but the way they depict it depends on their own understandings of the relationship that should be established between the independent republic and the metropole. Although one may not agree with their depiction of the revolution, by recounting it they not only keep it alive but also affirm that the Haitian people will not go away. Figueroa's attempt to cover the work of a number of Caribbean and Latino writers in a single volume does not do justice to the ideological and cultural differences that many of them express.

One lesson of these three books is that, while the Haitian Revolution is celebrated in Latin America and the Caribbean, there is no consensus among these writers on its

centrality in shaping modern Caribbean and Latin American society. It is nonetheless refreshing and uplifting to read three books on Haiti by non-Haitian writers in which Haiti's religion, culture, and history are celebrated for creating conditions that change the narrative on slavery and colonialism.