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THE (UN)KINDNESS OF STRANGERS: WRITING HAITI IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Garrigus, John D. 2006. *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 396 pp. ISBN: 13:978-1-4039-7140-1.

Girard, Philippe. 2005. *Paradise Lost: Haiti's Tumultuous Journey from Pearl of the Caribbean to Third World Hotspot*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 230 pp. ISBN: 1-4039-6887-X.

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The question is asked by Robert and Nancy Heinl in *Written in Blood* “How does one explain Haiti? What is Haiti?” It is surprising that over two hundred years after Haiti became independent that such a question could still be asked. A mere glance at the title of their book tells why explaining Haiti has been so difficult for so many. For the Heinls the explanation is evident, it is about blood—blood spilt, bloody mindedness and even the curse of blood. Despite the book’s subtitle which purports to tell “The Story of the Haitian People” no ordinary story is being told but one that presents Haiti as a peculiar site of grotesque cruelty in the Americas. The title “written in blood” is a tendentious reading of Haitian history as, for the Heinls, Haiti is unique as a country where history repeats itself in the most disturbingly savage way imaginable. Here is how they answer their own question.

Haiti is the eldest daughter of France and Africa. [...] It is a place of beauty, romance, mystery, kindness, humor, selfishness, betrayal, cruelty, bloodshed, hunger and poverty. It is a closed and withdrawn society whose apartness, unlike any other in the New World, rejects its European roots. (p. 1)

The title also is an unwittingly accurate description of a certain kind of writing on Haiti—particularly accounts written by U.S. military men. Not only does Haitian history seem doomed to repeat itself, but American Marines writing on Haiti seem destined to repeat each other.

Written in Blood is reminiscent of works written by American marines stationed in Haiti during the U.S. Occupation (1915-1934), in particular the tellingly entitled *Cannibal Cousins* by John Houston Craige (c. 1934). The Heins echo Craige by justifying the Occupation because the U.S. could no longer tolerate Haiti's imminent collapse and utter disintegration, in a place and time where perceived American interests were at stake. The duty of the U.S. was to stop Haiti's bloody regression and to put an end to the tragic lunacy of Haitian politics. In other words, "the hour for the Marines had come" (p. 371). Not unpredictably, the Heins repeat their predecessor's praise for the forced labor program or the corvée during the American Occupation. The peasant revolt that followed is simply dismissed as short-lived. The African American writer James Weldon Johnson, who exposed the atrocities of the U.S. military at the time, is seen merely as an opportunist.

The Heins' lurid testimony comes at a particular moment in relations between the U.S. and Haiti. After the Kennedy administration had condemned the Duvalier government and American citizens were advised to leave Haiti, Duvalier in turn asked for the removal of the American military mission in Haiti led by Colonel Robert Heins. It is then not surprising that the Heins should put the emergence of the Duvalier presidency in terms of reverting to type. "The Americans had modernized everything but Haiti and the Haitians. By 1957 Haiti had retrogressed to normal. These were the fruits of the second independence" (p. 539). Haitian "normal" is, predictably, the thirst for blood and, for the Heins, Duvalier was the incarnation of the Haitian norm. Sinister, paranoid and "almost certainly an houngan," Duvalier, we are told, had a "need for violence" (p. 540).

Is in the chapter on the Duvalier years 1957-1971 where the full importance of the Heins' title "Written in Blood" is made evident. Paternalism and ethnocentrism are once more in evidence than when the Heins makes their assessment of Duvalierism. "He was unbelievably cruel while ruling a simple, kind, cheerful people... Black (as so many of the titans have been) and not a mulatre, and touched, too, with madness, knowing his people better than they knew themselves, Duvalier breathed and articulated the aspirations of his countrymen" (pp. 600-601). This brings to an end the original 1978 narrative by Robert and Nancy Heins. For the Heins, culture is destiny in Haiti and this questionable perspective persists in this "revised and expanded" edition offered by their son Michael as a dubious homage to his parents "who loved Haiti deeply."

Inspired by filial devotion, Michael Heins remains dismayingly faithful to the excitable, gossipy tone of his parents' original text. The scandals of the Baby Doc regime (1971-1986) are reported with great relish in a chapter which is drawn largely from magazine and newspaper articles.

The political drama heightens in 1986 when a weakened Baby Doc is confronted by a “sullen, hungry and angry” Jean Bertrand Aristide. However, the young Duvalier does not have “the blood lust” or “the fire in his belly” (pp. 658, 667) to continue in power. The period that follows the fall of duvalierism is bereft of any discernable analysis and relies on Michael Heintz’s breathless prose to account for the violent struggle for power that ensues between popular organizations and the market dominant elite. Just as the book begins it ends. Michael Heintz asks the rhetorical question “Are the Haitian people... doomed always to repeat history that is written in blood?” His predictable answer comes with the dismal observation “Somewhere today, in Haiti, Santo Domingo, New York or Paris is a Haitian who feels he alone can right things in his country... For the sake of his country, he will feel bound by the assize [*sic*] of arms to take up weapons to seize his country’s leadership” (p. 724).

Writing some ten years later than the Heintzs, Philippe Girard’s account of Haitian history and politics could also have been entitled “Written in Blood.” Instead, he chose an equally lurid but more wordy title *Paradise Lost, Haiti’s Tumultuous Journey from Pearl of the Caribbean to Third World Hotspot*. At least the Heintzs’ title had the advantage of concision. Girard’s heavy-handed wordiness is the hallmark of a text that takes writing on Haiti to a new low. If the Heintzs’ qualifications for writing on Haiti come from his stay in the country, Girard has had no such experience of everyday familiarity with his subject. Neither, judging but the book’s limited bibliography and scant footnotes, has he taken the time to do much research on his subject.

His qualifications seem more intuitive; he tells us he is a French-speaking Caribbean who has visited poor countries. He therefore is at once an insider and an outsider. However, his real perspective is a little more troubling and has much more to do with the fact that he is from the French Overseas Department of Guadeloupe who is writing for a U.S. audience which he wishes to placate. He is smug in his conviction that imperialism can only be benign and cannot resist pointing to the “success” of the French Departments “which have lived under the supposedly evil hand of French imperialism” and “are immensely richer than independent Haiti” (p. 9). This sarcastic aside reveals the kind of development he has in mind for Haiti. Had the war of independence not occurred Haiti, one supposes, would be like Martinique and Guadeloupe today, contentedly dependent on metropolitan largesse. Haitians are encouraged to forget the past. Girard offers a comic version of Haitian history which he calls a “great story” as the revolution began in “Gator Wood” (supposedly Bois Caiman) by slaves “drenched in blood, sweat and rain, surrounded by lightening and thunder” (pp. 35-36).

Girard’s message is twofold. On one hand, following the lead of

the Heins, he too sees culture as destiny in Haiti. Haitians apparently belong to a racist, xenophobic and self-destructive society which spawned from Haiti's past which we are told is "darker than a tropical night" (p. 4). Breezy generalizations regarding the Haitian "national character" abound. "Deceit in the face of superior force" (p. 24) is quintessentially Haitian as is their inability to imitate Americans and Europeans who "became rich through the patient, laborious accumulation of wealth over centuries of development" (p. 207). Consequently, the only hope for Haiti is to allow benign imperialism of the U.S. and France to bring modernity and development to the "car wreck" of a country. However, despite the mollicoddling from the altruistic and the well intentioned, Haiti's history is nothing but "dictatorship, deceit, plunder and racism" (p. 54).

Again and again, the reader is subjected to the author's tiresome commentary on Haitian hostility to white foreigners and their lack of gratitude for what foreign intervention has brought them. Haitians expect foreign countries, not Haitians, to pull the country out of poverty. We are told in the introduction "Slavery was horrible and unjustifiable; but, [...] it transformed Haiti's landscape for the better" (p. 33). It seems that Girard's own perhaps unfortunate experiences as a white foreigner in Haiti have left him deeply scarred. Even if this is not the case, the true agenda of this text is a defense of U.S. and French actions in the recent removal of Haiti's democratically elected president from power. Indeed, much of the latter half of the book is little more than thinly disguised Aristide bashing as "the stereotypical dictator in Woody Allen's *Bananas*" (p. 187) becomes "yet another corrupt, uncaring leader in Haiti's long presidential history" (p. 3). Girard is shrill in his scolding of Haitians for biting the hand that could feed them. Aristide's demand, on the bicentennial of Haitian independence, that France return the indemnity that was levied on Haiti in 1825 for recognition of its independence is seen as the ultimate in ingratitude.

Girard's second objective in this screed is less obviously stated but is related to his view of the kind of development that he thinks Haiti needs. As a free market purist, he feels that Haiti can solve its problems only by embracing free trade like all developed countries and turn itself into a "free-market democracy." He is so insistent on the need for free-market reform that he is even willing to forgive the Duvalier presidencies since "for all their faults," they were "ramparts against Cuban infiltration." Haiti has little choice says Girard but accept "the unfortunate reality" of "labor exploitation," "low wages" and "poor working conditions." He imagines in another fifty years that with the economic boom that will eventually result from the assembly industry, "Haiti will once again be known as the Pearl of the Caribbean" (p. 213)

Not only has this pandering to urban interest groups and the private sector not worked in the past but Girard does not seem to grasp the nature of the conflict that bedevils post-Duvalier Haiti. Ever since the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986, there is an endemic crisis in Haiti's political culture. The popular anti-Duvalier movement put the ideal of democratic reform within the reach of the previously dispossessed masses but it also ushered in an economic model that linked democracy with free-trade. Consequently, the central paradox of the present Haitian crisis derives from an explosive combination of laissez-faire capitalism, which favors a market-dominant elite, and democratic elections, which give power to the underprivileged. The mass of the population has been energized since 1986 by issues like constitutional reform in 1987 and the electoral process which the overwhelming vote for Jean Bertrand Aristide in December 1990. The problem posed to the wealthy minority has been how best to thwart these demands and to profit from a free-market model. Both sides are by now keenly aware of the stakes of the bloody contradictions of a free-market democracy in post-Duvalier Haiti.

It seems not a little surprising that the same press that has published the ranting of Philippe Girard could also put out John Garrigus' *Before Haiti*. The latter is an excellent study of Haiti's free people of color, the ancestors of the same urban elites into whose hands Girard would exclusively confide Haiti's future. The class of free people or *gens de couleur* who emerged within the plantation system, essentially descendants of freed slaves and white planters, competed in Saint Domingue with the *grand blancs* or large planters in lifestyle, sophistication and francophile tastes. It has even been claimed that by the outbreak of the revolution in 1791, a third of the land and at least as many slaves belonged to the free people of color. The emergence of a class of free coloreds in New World plantation societies was not exclusive to colonial Saint Domingue but Garrigus is interested in the French colonists' desire to alienate saint-Domingue's freeborn families whereas in similar situations in Jamaica and Brazil they were treated "as full members of the master class, as whites, in essence" (p. 4). His contention is that previous to 1763 ideas of white purity and mixed race degeneracy were never consistently applied. However, after France's defeat in the Seven years war New World French colonists used race to solidify their bond with the metropole in order to dismiss French fears that of a rift between colony and metropole. This new racial hierarchy even ranked wealthy colored planters as inferior to enslaved Africans, thereby soothing tensions between poor whites and rich planters but ultimately destabilizing plantation slavery in Saint Domingue and making the Haitian revolution possible.

Secondly, Garrigus argues that the Saint Domingue's free people of color fought back by using the ideals of the French revolu-

tion to campaign for full civic rights on the basis of their American or Creole identity. He bases his evidence for this on the little studied southern peninsula of Saint Domingue. Indeed, the book could easily have been entitled "Haiti's Creole South" given the central role played by this region in Garrigus' thesis. He refutes later mulatto historians who glorified the wealthy the *gens de couleur* as true revolutionaries who launched the Haitian revolution, inspired by their strong attachment to French values. Rather he sees the South as more American and Caribbean because of its location and relative isolation from the North and Cap Francais. Furthermore, this southern peninsula also differed from the rest of the colony in that "The conditions of frontier society ... encouraged cross-cultural mixing" (p. 17) and that the consciousness of a Creole identity is crucial to the conception of Haitian national identity as later articulated by the declaration of independence written by Louis Boisrond-Tonnerre, himself a product of the South.

Consequently, Garrigus' thesis takes us into the complicated identity politics of this period of revolutionary transformation. This is not a simple confrontation between France and Africa, or black and white but an insight into how a Creole consciousness emerges with its unexpected affiliations and strategic self-positioning in the shadow of plantation slavery. Garrigus also questions the historical convention of portraying Haiti's revolutionary and post-independence conflicts in terms of ethnic warfare between the black north and the mulatto south. It has often been noted that all of Haiti's black generals came from the North—Toussaint, Dessalines and Christophe—and that the civil war that followed Dessalines' assassination pitted North against South. However, for Garrigus the racial dichotomy is insufficient to explain the difference between these two regions. He points out that Saint Domingue's South did not experience "the constant influx of new African captives" in the north but "was far more Caribbean in its orientation". He continues "The South differed from the North not because it was more French... but because it was more 'American' in the broader sense of the term" (p. 17).

In his superb retelling of the Haitian revolution *Avengers of the New World*, Laurent Dubois (2004) speaks of the "relatively open society" that was the colony of Saint Domingue before the hardening of racial prejudice in the decades before the Haitian revolution. He cites the case of an impoverished Frenchman named Pierre Raimond who migrated to Haiti in the early eighteenth century and in 1726 married Marie Bagasse who was of mixed blood. She had three times the wealth of her French husband and unlike him she was educated enough to sign her name on her wedding contract. There was no indication that she was colored until documents from the 1760s onwards. It is precisely the implications of this case that Garrigus follows up in *Before Haiti*. The marriage of Raimond

and Bagasse (or Begasse in Garrigus' text) gives us an insight into the fact that, for Garrigus, "before 1763, the pragmatism of the frontier shaped racial attitudes in much of Saint Domingue" (p. 49)

Using previously neglected primary sources, Garrigus describes colonial society in the early eighteenth century as a dynamic frontier world as was first noted by the Pere Labat in his comments on the parish of Fonds des negres in 1701. Garrigus demonstrates that "Saint-Domingue remained a frontier society long after Labat went back to Guadeloupe, and the southern peninsula was the cutting edge of that frontier" (p. 22). Different from the easily dominated plantation societies of the Lesser Antilles, the mountainous topography of Saint Domingue made it notoriously difficult to govern from the seat of colonial administration in Cap Francais, especially so in the isolated southern peninsula. Garrigus gives us a richly detailed account of the emergence of Creole society in the new world which included buccaneers, pirates turned planters, English, Dutch and Spanish merchants and a thriving Jewish community which had strong links with "Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean" (pp. 37-38).

The changing racial climate in the 1770s and 1780s was provoked by emerging free colored wealth especially in the north which was troubling especially to many disillusioned French immigrants and *petits blancs*. This was further aggravated by the criticism directed by influential figures like the Abbe Raynal against those who embodied the colonial vice of racial mixing. Men of mixed race were characterized as weak, vain, unstable and physically and morally inferior to people of pure blood, whether European or African. The imposition of an ideology of whiteness could be seen in 1764 in the public sphere of Saint Domingue with the segregating of Cap Francais' new theatre, restrictions of occupations open to people of color, on types of dress and the increasing use of the term "affranchi," thereby labeling all people of color as ex-slaves. In their reaction against the view that men of mixed blood were inherently corrupt, wealthy men of color described themselves as a new breed, Americans. "As 'Americans,' people of color were new and natural people, not the degenerate product of two pure races, as their enemies asserted" (p. 238) as opposed to the French colonists who were seen as 'aristocrats'... clinging to irrational privileges" (p. 258).

Treatments of the Haitian revolution in the twentieth century have emphasized the black revolutionary narrative. Anti-Occupation nationalist and noiriste sentiments further emphasized this trend. Garrigus, without resorting to the mulatto legend of cultural and moral superiority created by Haitian historians, such as Beaubrun Ardouin, follows the lead of Laurent Dubois in seeing in the Haitian revolution the emergence of a new American identity in the new world. The rise of Napoleon and

the certainty that it was his intention to re-impose slavery created the possibility of an anti-French coalition of blacks and mulattos. Garrigus ends his account of Saint Domingue's Creole South by demonstrating the crucial role played by an "American" identity in shaping the Haitian nation. Louis Boironde Tonnerre, a product of the families of Haiti's southern peninsula became a key figure in the drafting the declaration of Haitian independence. Given the nature of his family background and the Creole society of the South from which he came, it is not surprising that Boisrond Tonnerre should portray Haitian identity as Creole and indigenous. Haitians, he declared, were "heirs of to a long tradition of indigenous struggle" and he may have helped choose the name of the new nation (p. 310). Ultimately, he is the perfect illustration of the peculiar nature of pre-revolutionary society in Haiti's southern peninsula and of Garrigus' persuasively argued contention that "some of the most important roots of Haitian revolutionary consciousness lay in these kinds of creole districts" (p. 312).

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