

HAITI'S CONDEMNATION: History and Culture at the Crossroads

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HAITIAN REVOLUTIONARY STUDIES. By David P. Geggus. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002. Pp. xii + 334. \$49.95 cloth.)

RARA! VODOU, POWER, AND PERFORMANCE IN HAITI AND ITS DIASPORA. By Elizabeth McAlister. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. Pp. xviii + 259, plus 24-track CD. \$24.95 paper.)

HAITI: BEST NIGHTMARE ON EARTH. By Herbert Gold. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001. Pp.321. \$24.95 paper.)

As Haiti emerges from its recent bicentennial, the persistent underdevelopment combined with the absence of independent social and judicial institutions denote an increase in the level of repression and social division. Such social divergence has been intensified since the overthrow of (Baby Doc) Duvalier in 1986, and subsequent political turmoil throughout the 1990s. Understanding oppression in Haiti requires a multilevel analysis. It must include a macro-level analysis of economic and political structures as well as a micro-level analysis of internalized psychological images of hopelessness and despair. A comprehensive analysis of the responsibility emerges from an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the political with the psychological forces. In the current social and political context of Haiti, the country seems to be in a revolutionary mode of radical violence that negates the classic Hegelian notion of absolute freedom. In fact, today we are witnessing a complete rupture that is bent upon a new configuration of the *polis*. Thus, political instability, violent overthrows, successive coups and countercoups, persistent poverty, the state against the nation, all constitute trademarks of this economically collapsed but culturally rich Caribbean island. Interestingly, individual Haitians are relatively successful people abroad. Thus the question then becomes: what explanations do we offer for the continuous failure of a rogue state that refuses to meet its obligations to its citizenry? Certainly, while economic and social factors are quintessential to a

fundamental examination of this island's plight, the real focus must remain on the internal and external dynamics of a power structure and its produced consequences. Then and only then can we fully understand why collectively Haiti is condemned.

Has Haiti been cursed for its audacity? Why is it seemingly condemned to repeat its past while remaining unable to chart its future? These questions are just a few among many others that have preoccupied the hearts and minds of many who are interested in Haitian Studies. The history of Haiti has yet to be conclusively written in spite of many monographs, memoirs, collective volumes, and journal articles. On a positive note, one can reformulate the above questions in a more exploratory mode, such as: Why study Haiti's history, culture, and society? What do people need to know about the Haitian people, environment, and political culture to understand their perennial social ills? Can we use the Haitian revolution, its cultural dynamics, and historical significance to foresee its possible future condemnation? These are some of the powerful questions articulated in the three books under scrutiny in this review essay.

What happens to Haiti and Haitians in the twenty-first century is a question of overwhelming magnitude for this Caribbean nation and its diasporic communities around the globe. The future of Haiti arguably hinges on the capacity and ability of Haitians to solve their own political, social, and economic problems. Haiti's history represents this nation's greatest intangible legacy; no other slave society in the history of the modern world has ever established such a richly ambiguous system "for racial equality, the abolition of slavery, decolonization, and nationhood [that] first came to the Caribbean with the Haitian revolution" (5), as historian David P. Geggus points out. Postcolonial Haiti was defiant, bold, and diverse, a place to which free and enslaved persons from across the world migrated to capture the richness of Haitian history and culture.

Elizabeth McAlister also reminds us of the singularity of Haiti, where "many conditions are familiar: coup d'état, political instability, poverty, violent repression, and foreign domination have been features of Haitian life throughout its history" (160). Yet people from many classes, credos, and ethnicities have improved their chances in life by seizing the opportunities afforded by this nation's social, economic, and historical enterprise.

Herbert Gold humorously states, "In fact, Haiti was not bad to me. Haiti was mostly bad to Haitians" (4). All three books reviewed here lie within the traditional problematic paradigm that stresses Haiti's historical significance as an exotic and victimized anomaly. This paradigm relies on the definitional ambiguity of terms such *exotic*, *victimization*,

and *anomalous*, which can refer to a particular image of Haiti as a model and a non-model.

Since its founding in 1804, Haiti has been seen as a test case for many outsiders because of its independence, its black self-government, its anticolonial stance, and its support for freedom fighters everywhere. Both supporters and opponents of the newly independent black nation tended to paint a conflicting picture of the country, including both positive and negative extremes. Throughout the nineteenth century and up to the recent bicentennial, Haitians have cherished their history as a symbol of black independence and grandeur. Conversely, much of what is said and written about the nation by outsiders has included a substantial degree of racial bias. Thus most historical accounts of Haiti are highly tinted by the authors' prejudices. This only makes the need for impartial assessments of the history and the present cultural, social, economic conditions of Haiti, its colonial and postcolonial legacy, more compelling.

David Geggus observes that some Haitian historians exaggerated in analyzing the role and participation of the Swiss in the Haitian Revolution because they "blamed the slave insurrection on white counterrevolutionaries, they wanted to blame the French colonists for being the first slave-owners to arm slaves and thus the authors of their own ruin" (100). Power in the construction of the historical narrative had a substantial basis in the opinions and beliefs of the people. All political authority is to a certain extent a confidence game. No regime can stand for long without a set of legends, symbols, and beliefs that—with their supporting institutional arrangements—strengthen its claims to obedience on the part of its people. Here in this review essay, I want to look at the contexts of these multifaceted and interconnected strands in the complex Haitian manifestations of history, religion (Christianity and vodou), music, arts, culture, class, color, region—Kreyòl and French—and the many Haitian idiosyncrasies seen as a consequence of colonialism and the system of slavery that was integral to it.

Before assessing the three works in this essay individually, two important issues need to be raised in regard to the works as a whole. First, together—implicitly and explicitly—these three books reinforce the need for a field of study already in formation, namely Haitian Studies, which is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary in nature. This field has also crossed the Atlantic to influence the conceptual grounds of African Studies and Diasporic Studies in literature (negritude). The line of demarcation is not totally set, as Haitians have claimed their space in the social landscape of the continental United States, where they are becoming more visible in academia, the political arena (in which an increasing number of Haitian American officials serve), popular culture (rap musician Wyclef Jean), and literature, (novelist Edwidge Danticat), to name just a few domains.

No other topic epitomizes popularity in Latin America and Caribbean historiography more than the Haitian Revolution. There has been, however, a limited use of archival research in many of the scholarly works. In fact, many historians focusing on such a topic have failed to use the existing archival materials in constructing their narrative. In *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora*, Elizabeth McAlister documents the development of popular Haitian cultural manifestations integrated into religious beliefs throughout political and social history. Herbert Gold's *Haiti: Best Nightmare on Earth* is, by contrast, an autobiographical exploration of culture at the micro level, that weaves together primary sources and personal accounts to explore the intricate mores that have directed the behavior of the Haitian people for the last half century. His work expresses a sense of ambivalence and paradox, as captured in the titular expression "Best Nightmare." While some historians tend to provide a hierarchical view of the revolution, David Geggus' postmodern stance in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* has undoubtedly paved the way to the underexploited sources: namely the archival materials and secondary sources. His well-crafted narrative links a multilayered sequence of specks between various narrators and actors.

Despite the significant tradition of historiography on the Haitian Revolution, David Geggus, a historian from the University of Florida in Gainesville, maintains that "the most intractable question" remains unanswered: "How are we to imagine the attitudes and beliefs of those Africans and children of Africans of two centuries ago?" (42) David P. Geggus' *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* is composed of eleven considerably revised versions of previously published articles, in addition to two new articles, mainly chapters 7 and 12. The extensively revised and updated essays in this new volume address his fundamental question by investigating the origins, development, and consequences of the revolution in St. Domingue for the black and free colored populations. Geggus' objective is to confront the available scholarship on Haitian revolution history and its aftermath. As he cogently states, "too much in the historiography of the Haitian Revolution has gone without critical appraisal," impeding our understanding of "this greatest of all slave revolts" (80). Throughout the book, Geggus illustrates his point by critically examining previous histories as he constructs his own.

Examining the genesis of the insurrection, Geggus begins by reflecting on how scholars have accounted for slave rebellions in the Americas. He asserts that historians recognize ideological or economic factors as catalytic circumstances that could support armed struggle. Geggus maintains, however, that we lack basic knowledge about the dynamics of slave societies to make meaningful generalizations. In chapters 6 and 7, Geggus

debunks some misconceptions by investigating the ideologies that Saint Dominguan slaves fashioned for themselves, most particularly those related to the vodou religion.

Many historians, sociologists, and anthropologists studying the Haitian Revolution have recently portrayed vodou as an anti-white revolutionary ideology that inspired the slaves to revolt. But Geggus argues that this portrayal is a gross exaggeration: the "evidence for this has more often been found in the minds of historians than in the historical record" (91). To illustrate his point, in chapter 6, he analyzes the Bois Caïman ceremony, an August 1791 meeting of Maroon slaves in the northern plain that allegedly started the rebellion. Contrary to other scholars' views, Geggus, in examining the historical records, suggests that Boukman, the convener of the gathering, was not a religious leader, and neither were any of the other prominent figures of the revolution. Furthermore, the syncretism of vodou, particularly the ways it incorporated elements of white Christian beliefs, might have had a stabilizing rather than a destabilizing effect on Saint Dominguan slave society. While Geggus admits that vodou did spur rebel slaves to some extent, it had an ancillary role in the revolution. He states convincingly that "the Bois Caïman ceremony surely infused its participants with courage and a heightened sense of solidarity, but the number of slaves who took part cannot have been great" (92).

Part 4 of the book contains three critical chapters that debunk other myths about the Haitian Revolution and the dynamics of slaves and free colored people's contributions. Geggus contends that the Haitian Revolution was not just about slaves, because "although the destruction of slavery constitutes its core, only the simultaneous struggle of free and enslaved nonwhites explains its outcome" (95).

He investigates the complex relationships between slaves and free people of color through case studies outlined in three separate chapters. Chapter 7, "The 'Swiss' and the Problem of Slave/Free Colored Cooperation," is about the "Swiss" (a group of black soldiers who fought for the free people of color near Port-au-Prince). Chapter 8, "The 'Volte-Face' of Toussaint Louverture," focuses on an important turning point in the spring of 1794, when Toussaint Louverture chose to leave the Spanish army and rallied to the French republicans. Chapter 9, "Slave, Soldier, Rebel: The Strange Career of Jean Kina," recounts how the slave Jean Kina fought not to overthrow the slave regime but to defend it. These three chapters exemplify the range of reactions among nonwhite Saint Dominguans to the Haitian Revolution as it unfolded and, in the process, demonstrate the uneasy relationship between bids for racial equality and those for emancipation in Saint Domingue, a conflict that is outlined in the subsequent chapters. The final chapter of the book, "The Naming of Haiti," contemplates the significance of the adoption of the

original Amerindian word *Hayti* (from Taino, an Arawak language), as the name for the new republic in 1804 as a means to reduce the factionalism among the victorious nonwhite population. As Geggus states, "The choice of name raises interesting questions about ethnicity and identity and historical knowledge in the Caribbean, yet the circumstances surrounding its selection have gone entirely unrecorded" (207).

Geggus' *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* provides a critical account of the results of the Haitian revolution. The author tries to differentiate between the revolution's symbolic meaning and the substantive distinctions between it and other revolutions in the colonial period: namely, the 1776 American Revolution and the 1789 French Revolution. Geggus' analysis thus presents a tangle of perspectives and dimensions that some readers might find hard to unravel. His sobering account raises a challenge to historians and Haitianists alike who would extol the more positive influences of the revolution to provide the historical data to support that position. Geggus proposes, for example, that the repeated stories of liberation that sparked slave revolt were more often connected to metropolitan abolitionism than to Haiti's example, and, moreover, that slave resistance did not necessarily add to the progress of slave liberation.

Geggus informs us, on the one hand, that the Haitian Revolution's impact on ideas about racial diversity is more oblique than not. As he states, "appeals to 'blackness' seem to have been rare during the revolution" (209). On the other hand, he asserts that the Haitian Revolution did contribute to motivating political activism among free people of color in the nineteenth century.

In general, Geggus' book is extremely valuable and timely. It serves as a major contribution to the field of Haitian Studies, raising key questions and setting an agenda for future research. Though original in its substance and style, it captures the resonance of writers like C. L. R. James and Eugene Genovese. Geggus's analysis presents some troubling perspectives in this bicentennial year, however; it adds to ongoing debates about Haiti's current relation to the rest of the Caribbean community. After reading this book, several questions linger in my mind: Who "shares" the victory of the Haitian slaves of Saint Domingue? And in what ways are the implications (and enduring "bona fide" influences) of the slave revolution as conflicting and unclear today as they were in the past?

Another problem, Geggus points out, is that it is extremely difficult to reconstruct Haitian revolutionary history, because "even the best historians have tended to give a muddled account of the events . . . no single source accurately records the chronology of what happened. Only by considering a wide range of evidence can the puzzle be solved" (84). After reading Geggus' book, I am compelled to agree with him that the process of writing historical narratives may need a complete overhaul

to engage historians in the critical analysis process that can, perhaps, make history come alive. Meanwhile, as he suggests, “too much in the historiography of the Haitian Revolution has gone without critical appraisal” (80).

Geggus, in writing *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, is particularly concerned that historians cannot evaluate materials of historiography—documents such as personal letters, newspapers, government records, official correspondences, and speeches. Therefore, Haitian historians do not come across the natural questions that emerge: the disagreements, the discrepancies for which there may be no certain answers. Geggus thinks it is an enormous flaw that these disagreements, annoying questions, and other variations—what he calls “the most intractable questions facing historians of the Haitian Revolution,” are absent from the historiography, and as a result, remain excluded from the discourse.

But Geggus’ *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* is clearly based on the research literature. The author has done his homework, and his work is carefully documented. He allows the reader to enter into the process of writing and rewriting Haitian Revolutionary history as experienced by the actors and narrators, and the narrators include historians of varied experience and Haitianists of several levels and disciplines. Finally, Geggus offers specific ideas about how to better re-write Haitian history and un-silence the past.

Herbert Gold’s *Haiti: Best Nightmare on Earth* is the work of a novelist, yet provides some important cultural information about the era of the Duvalier regime terrorizing Haiti with their Tonton Macoutes—a despised militia of street gangs. Gold’s journey in Haiti was a defining moment in his existence. He witnessed firsthand how Haiti’s economy was shaken by AIDS and observed life moving from bad to worse under both the Duvalier regimes.

This story begins half a century ago, when a young American of Jewish ancestry from the state of Ohio sailed to the enchanted island of Haiti with a Fulbright scholarship. Haiti would become the “favorite place in the whole wide world” and the adopted home of this “wannabe” young writer. In an occasionally long-winded narrative spanning fifty years, Gold reveals the charm of Haiti. Over the years he developed many acquaintances, which made it possible for him to join the inner circle of Haitian society. On his initial voyage on an ocean liner bound for Central America, this adventurous young man made his first encounter with a member of Haiti’s aristocratic families, Jean Wiener. This first acquaintance with a member of the Haitian elite became his entry point to a long-lasting love affair with the tropical nation.

The book’s ironic title, *Haiti: Best Nightmare on Earth* is as much about Herbert Gold himself as it is about Haiti. The nightmare for Gold

consists of the burning of a *lougawou*, or werewolf, in the capital city of Port-au-Prince, and also of his scary altercation with the famous Tonton Macoutes. Herbert Gold resided in Haiti throughout the regimes of both Papa Doc and Baby Doc Duvalier and was at one time forbidden to re-enter the country to do any reporting. Soon after, during the last years of Baby Doc Duvalier's rule, when political violence and the HIV/AIDS scare began to jeopardize the fragile tourist industry, he was asked to work as the Haitian consul in San Francisco. He turned down the offer. Throughout the book, Gold's comments on the vagaries of Haitian politics, corruption and racism are both excruciating and informative, but what remains indelible is his loving care for the people and culture of a country "poor in all resources but the energies of imagination" (47). In addition to other things, Gold's impressionistic memoir unveils what it is like to be an outsider who feels absolutely at home in a black nation.

Gold's memoir includes an amalgamation of commentaries on vodou rituals, cockfights, machete-wielding law enforcement, underfed children, young boys being used by homosexual tourists, artists, rum-soaked diplomats, writers, carnivals, and the steady beat of drums. Gold's attachment to the island is obvious, but the book lacks a conceptual framework. Only a vague historical backdrop is presented, and Haiti's volatile political history is attended to only in the context of his particular familiarity with it. On this level it compares unfavorably with Amy Wilentz's *Rainy Season* (Simon and Schuster, 1989), which efficiently brings together personal comments with an exhaustive portrait of Haiti's history, politics, and culture.

Gold narrates his experiences of fifty years to walk his readers through this culture famous for its unique mix of violence, political chaos, social immorality, and the economic conditions that create what Gold called "a nightmare." Through the myriad characters that Gold met over these fifty years, which include prominent writers, dictators, corrupt politicians, academics, intellectuals, journalists, the lumpen, peasants, barmen, prostitutes, Roman Catholic priests, protestant pastors, and *houngans* (vodon priests), he was able to explore the culture at its micro and macro levels. This is not a history book by any standard. Gold is a storyteller, using the memoir genre to weave primary sources and personal accounts together to paint the cultural mores of the Haitian psyche.

Even though Gold makes no assertion of objectivity, this amazing account of a half century in Haiti captures outrageous ironies of the enchanted but tormented nation. It is ultimately an astonishing account that I would recommend to anyone whose heart has been captured by the people and culture of Haiti. The author obviously shares a deep affection and respect for Haiti, the people, and the culture. He has a sense of humor and does not feel the need to whitewash what he observes. If there were something more forthright than history, how

satisfying it would be! While this impoverished black Caribbean island nation serves as the basis for this book, the ability to achieve this balancing act depends greatly on the willingness and stability of history and culture. Gold is one of the leading Haitianists today, working to make life not only bearable but meaningful. It is through his enduring faith in mankind and his ability to record life with clear understanding that he becomes a modern storyteller who both experiences and discovers the secrecy of being.

Elizabeth McAlister's book analyzes Rara, a lively popular feast celebrated in Haiti, when people from all walks of life convene in the public arena, singing, playing traditional instruments, and performing dances and juggling acts while using the popular religion vodou as a backdrop to express their sociopolitical and economic concerns. This festival takes place in different towns and villages throughout the country each year. Using great skill and combining unusual methods for gathering data from different disciplines and fields of study, McAlister creates a powerful account that is not only informative, but that also helps us rediscover the centrality of Rara rituals and their manifestations in Haitian life and culture. McAlister's book serves as a testimony to the importance of vodou practices and their progressive characteristics during Haiti's most troubling political times.

McAlister's ethnography is designed to span the intersecting worlds of vodou, popular culture and music, Caribbean culture, and transnational immigration practices. In her carefully researched narrative, she demonstrates how innovative Rara musical groups and participants adapted a variety of strategies in public performance of vodou rituals for spirits, for African ancestors, and for the local "big men." McAlister's book derives from research carried out between the years of 1991–1995. The book is composed of seven chapters using various theoretical perspectives to analyze Rara and its complexities. Her methodological framework includes cultural anthropology, history, religious studies, and ethnomusicology to interlink a wealth of information and details. McAlister has recorded twenty-four Rara songs, which are available on the compact disc that accompanies the book.

The book assesses the combined power of vodou spirits and the recently dead to transmit coded messages with historical, gendered, and transnational dimensions. McAlister's main thesis is that there has been a general misunderstanding of such themes, a misinterpretation of rituals and of the many layers of meaning present in Rara as play, work, performance religion, and politics intertwined with Haiti's bloody history and perseverance in the face of such violence. This, however, is a considerable generalization, and the exact impact of Rara as a cultural phenomenon, influencing different regions at different times, may need

to be studied more carefully before we conclude that, "Rara both creates popular solidarity and conveys cognitive messages to dominant classes of the strength and power of the disenfranchised" (161).

In the chapter "Voices under Domination: Rara and the Politics of Insecurity," McAlister writes that, "Aristide made Kreyòl the language of official discourse becoming the first president to address the Haitian majority in their own language" (160). While I agree that President Jean-Bertrand Aristide has used Kreyòl extensively in public space during the 1990s, he was not the first Haitian president to use Kreyòl in public discourse. After the departure of Jean Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier, the newly ratified Haitian Constitution of 1987 (Chapter I, Article 5) recognized Kreyòl as an official language along with French, which had been the sole official language for 183 years since Haiti gained independence in 1804. Thus, following the military's rigged election in 1988, President-elect Leslie F. Manigat, during his short term in office in 1989, used Kreyòl in public discourse, when meeting with the media or in his weekly radio address on Saturdays, "koze anba tonèl" (popular talks). Arguably it is not the use of Kreyòl or the popular voice per se that gave Aristide his connection to popular culture, but rather the misuse of Kreyòl through proverbial clichés and displays of wit, in which he has the ability to intersperse French, English, Spanish, and Hebrew. Thus the double, triple, and quadruple entendre in his political discourse is his trademark in creating confusion in the minds and hearts of both Haitians and his guests of honor.

McAlister is able to express the fervor and enthusiasm Rara participants bring into their highly traditional cultural manifestation, which she sees as integrating politics, history, and religion with societal norms. In addressing "Rara as Popular Army: Hierarchy, Militarism and Warfare" (chapter 5), McAlister discusses the sophistication that exists in "the social organization of Rara as an articulation of power and rank based in military, state and royal metaphors" (136). She analyzes the power and hierarchy in the social organization of Rara bands as models of royal, military, and republican aspects of an imagined state. In analyzing the organizational structure of this popular cultural manifestation, she concludes that "the militarization of Haitian culture in general, and of these local societies in particular, is the result of a long-standing historical process" (140). As the Rara participants pursue its procession, receiving the Rara band is a mark of power and wealth. The meticulous description of the hierarchical structure of many Raras throughout the country demonstrates the author's familiarity with Rara as a social organization for political ends.

McAlister's anthropological analysis and cultural studies methodology has rekindled my concerns about Haiti's fate. I ask myself where

we—civil society, the political class, professional organizations, grassroots communities, and Haitians in the diaspora—are headed in the twenty-first century. McAlister's analysis of the current political and sociohistorical situation reveals a grim future for Haiti and the then eroding support for president Jean-Bertrand Aristide when she states, "Nothing is clear about Haiti's future, except that a long struggle remains to end the drug trade, to raise the majority above the poverty level, and to attain health care, basic literacy, and access to justice for all" (14). Herbert Gold also tries to demystify Aristide as a savior and messiah, his "kindest and gentlest sort of demagogic" attitude and the lack of public support when he writes that

The heroic—no, the messianic—view of Aristide suggested that Haitians were expecting that their leader could not only rewrite the tragic failures of history, ameliorate the diseases of Haitian economy and social structure, but also resolve all problems, save Haitians, redeem Haiti . . . For it really to happen, for this moment to be more than a spasm of frantic hope in the long disaster of Haitian history, Aristide's power would have to give way. The priest and the President would have to become the inspirer, not the Messiah. But Aristide had no intention of letting Haiti rise without his control. (307)

As we enter this new century trying to overcome two hundred years of inequities, will Haitians experience the worst of times like those, as described in David Geggus' *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, who were victims of the 1791–1804 revolution? Or are we headed to the best of times like those embodied in Herbert Gold's exotic memoirs of *The Best Nightmare on Earth*? From the three books under scrutiny for this review, it seems that Haiti has not learned from its past, or perhaps it has been condemned to repeat its past.

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