

12-7-2018

Haiti and the Uses of America: Post-U.S. Occupation Promises, by Chantalle F. Verna

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Recommended Citation

Casey, M. (2018). *Haiti and the Uses of America: Post-U.S. Occupation Promises*, by Chantalle F. Verna. *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 92(3-4), 328-329.

Available at: https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/15759

Chantalle F. Verna, *Haiti and the Uses of America: Post-U.S. Occupation Promises*.

New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017. xiii + 234 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

In *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950), Aimé Césaire drew a distinction between the coercion, violence, and racism of imperialism and the other forms of international “exchange” that serve as “oxygen” for any society. While scholars of U.S.-Haitian relations often focus on the former, Chantalle F. Verna views the two countries through a wider optic. The field’s almost singular emphasis on protest movements blinds us to moments of political calm and more functional cultural and educational exchange programs, development projects, and Pan-American ventures that marked these relations in the twentieth century. Besides unearthing a layer of Haitian foreign relations, *Haiti and the Uses of America* illustrates the political continuities during and after the occupation and across otherwise starkly different postoccupation presidencies. It presents a series of interactions that—to borrow Césaire’s language—fall somewhere between “colonialism” and “oxygen” and offer a unique reading of Haitian history that raises new research questions about empire, occupation, and development.

Verna contextualizes U.S.-Haitian twentieth-century collaborations within nineteenth-century Haitians’ efforts to gaze abroad. Neither Toussaint Louverture’s courting of European experts to keep the plantations of Saint-Domingue running, nor Henri Christophe’s relationships with abolitionists, nor elite Haitians’ practice of obtaining a French education have prevented detailed and critical studies of these individuals and groups. Those same types of actions, when they occurred in the context of the U.S. occupation have been more readily ignored in favor of moments of anti-occupation resistance; this is to the detriment of our understanding of state and society during occupations.

Verna ably demonstrates that the contentious high politics and anti-imperial activism that dominate analyses of the U.S. Occupation (1915–34) functioned alongside a contingent of upwardly mobile Haitians who took advantage of the educational opportunities and new bureaucratic positions offered by the imperial imposition. The stakes of this analysis go well beyond the empirical details. For example, Verna highlights the careers of people like Maurice Dartigue, who attended Columbia University on an official scholarship after graduating from the U.S.-created agricultural school at Damien—which was the site of a famous anti-occupation strike in 1929. She analyzes the strike in detail while exploring the school’s role in society beyond the moment that catapulted it to nationalist fame. She also shows that many of those who subscribed to the *Indigéniste* cultural nationalist movement readily used occupation resources to promote

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© MATTHEW CASEY, 2018 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09203016

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their cross-class goals. These observations challenge previous interpretations of Damien and *Indigénisme* strictly as loci of protest. If we consider that Haitian activists debated whether to challenge the fact of occupation or just the nature of it, then Verna's analysis brings us closer to this ambivalence.

Haiti and the Uses of America demonstrates the sociopolitical continuities of the occupation and its aftermath. After the Marines withdrew, Haitians continued to take advantage of collaborative opportunities under the auspices of the United States and the United Nations. In fact, the development efforts of the Rockefeller Foundation were carried out in partnership with Jean Price-Mars—a previous, prominent critic of the Occupation. This, and other less-prominent collaborations explain why post-Occupation President Sténio Vincent receives a more favorable—though not uncritical—treatment by Verna as one of many Haitians trying to reconcile nationalism with collaboration. These continuities are equally striking in that they survived different political regimes in Haiti. For example, Dumarsais Estimé, who rode a revolutionary wave into the Haitian presidency in 1946, continued his predecessor's U.N.-led agricultural development efforts, representing a developmental continuity amid political rupture.

Throughout the book, Verna details moments of (post)colonial collaboration without failing to be critical. For example, she points out that postwar Pan-Americanism provided educational opportunities for Haitian individuals and institutions, including important feminist activists. However, the lopsided power differentials circumscribed Haitians' ability to speak out against U.S. racism. Although individuals could tap into resources to build cultural, financial, and human capital and shape collaborations at the local level, U.S. race prejudice “impeded the realization of postwar international planning ideals” (p. 136).

The insights of *Haiti and the Uses of America* raise new questions about Haiti in the past and present. How did Haitians' role in postwar Pan-Americanism compare to their participation in earlier, more contentious versions that criticized U.S. imperialism? How does this history of Haitian–U.S. developmental collaboration influence contemporary claims about Haiti being a republic of NGOs? Finally, in connecting the U.S. occupation to the U.N. development projects that came later, Verna provides an unbroken line from the early twentieth-century occupation to the present one. What would we learn if scholars were more open to the ambiguities of the first occupation and more receptive to the anti-occupation voices of the present? After reading Verna, these become impossible to ignore.

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