

Ayiti se tè glise

Intersectionalities of History, Politics, and Culture

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Ayiti se tè glise. “Haiti is a slippery land.” This proverb is often used to refer to Haiti’s complexity in terms of its historic and present challenges. It also invites those who think they know the country on the surface to search deeper in order to discover the complexities inherent in its culture, history, and geography. Our experience of teaching about Haiti is that many students come to class with the baggage of Western mediatized images that associate the country with disaster, poverty, and negative concepts of Vodou. Therefore, in response, the contributing scholars to this volume recommend various concrete ways for instructors and students to extend their inquiry beyond simplistic representations that repeatedly cast Haiti as “the poorest country in the western hemisphere.”

This volume seeks to contextualize Haiti outside the stereotypes that have labeled it for over a century. We envision this island nation “in relation,” as Martinican theorist Edouard Glissant would say, to the rest of the Caribbean and, more broadly, to the extensive hemisphere of the Americas, and to the globe. As these chapters demonstrate, Haiti in relation with others—their histories and their cultures—is part of the “Tout-Monde,” which Glissant defines as “un monde qui [fait] bouger choses et gens” (a world that makes people and things move) (Glissant 1993 35). Glissant’s conception of “relation” is understood as “à l’opposé” (in opposition) to “enfermement” (closed; literally, imprisoned). “Relation est ici entendue comme *la quantité réalisée de toutes les différences du monde, sans qu’on puisse en excepter une seule*” [*Relation is here understood as the sum quality of all the differences of the world*] (Glissant 2009 42).¹ Haiti, part of Glissant’s Tout-Monde, is a dynamic place in a world in motion that promotes fruitful encoun-

ters among “les cultures humaines . . . mises en contact et en effervescence de réaction les unes avec les autres. . . .” [human cultures . . . put in contact with the effervescent reactions of one another. . . .] (Glissant 1997 23). Recognizing the importance of relationships and encounters with others as contributing to Haitian identity today is an essential goal in this volume. As Guadeloupean author Simone Schwarz-Bart notes, “encounters,” even the most painful, are the reasons for today’s vibrant creole cultures across the Caribbean: “*Nous sommes le fruit de la rencontre des mondes, géographiquement et historiquement. Des rencontres violentes, mais des rencontres tout de même. Nous sommes le monde en marche.*” [We are the fruit of the encounter of worlds, geographically and historically. Violent encounters, but encounters all the same. We are the world in motion.]

Positioning Haiti in the vibrant Tout-Monde, “*le monde en marche,*” our contributors reveal a country whose artistic and literary creators are contributing to a multi-faceted culture with a rich literary tradition in multiple languages. Also demonstrated is Haiti’s captivating cinematic oeuvre, promoted by filmmakers from the island nation and its diaspora. Haiti is not clouded in a void of silence, but is rather part of the world’s stage. To contextualize the country’s contributions and challenges, our contributors’ syllabi and classroom experiences offer valuable lessons about Haiti’s past and present as they relate to immigration, migration, locality, and globality. These are subjects that are pertinent not only to Haiti, but also to our common humanity in an era in which scholars and teachers are increasingly called upon to find ways to address the defining challenges of our age. These include neoliberalist views and practices, fascist rhetoric, and isolationist politics.

In order to place Haiti “in relation” to numerous sociocultural, political, and linguistic facets of today’s world, each chapter is comparable to a well-traveled proverb. Our goal in this format is to encourage the instructor and the student to explore Haiti through a particular topic or lens. Proverbs play a fundamental role in Haitian culture and daily life, and it seems as if there is one for every situation. Proverbs are utilized to encourage people as they face struggles and difficult situations as well as the joys and celebrations of daily life. They are also a way to teach lessons and offer wisdom from one generation to the next.

With the multiple Haitian space of relation in mind, we emphasize that the main objective of this volume is to map pathways for instructors to teach about Haiti and to help create new windows through which to see it because, as scholar and activist Gina Athena Ulysse affirms, “Haiti needs new narratives.”² Many of our contributors take up this challenge explicitly, pointing the way to new narratives that challenge and go beyond stereotypical, neo-colonial, imperialist, racist, and simplistic discourses about Haiti and Haitian culture.

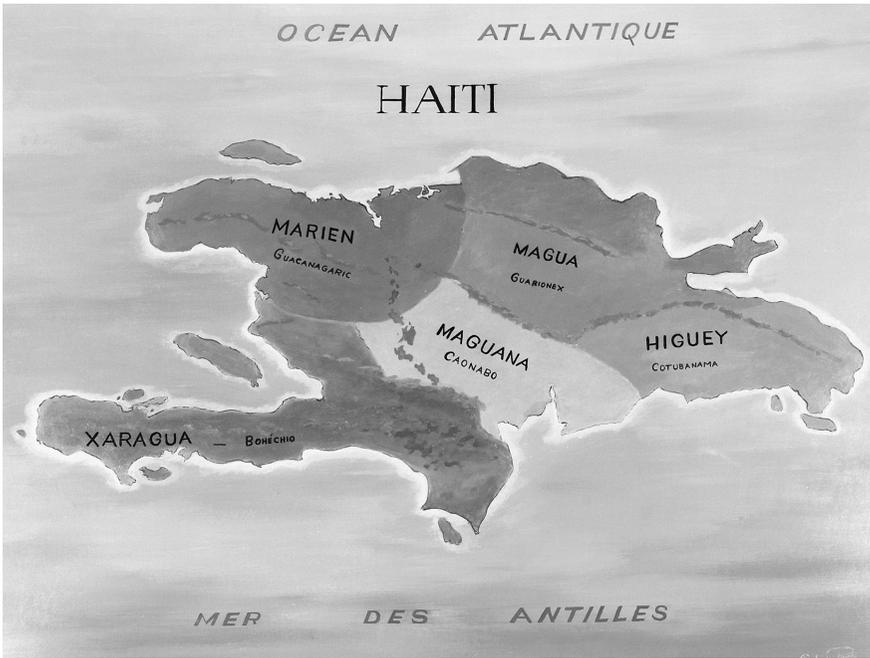


Figure 0.1.: Precolumbian map of Haiti. Ulrick Jean-Pierre, “Precolumbian Map of Haiti.” 1984. Oil on canvas. 36 × 36 inches. Collection of the late Dr. and Mrs. Yves Jérôme.

Over the past two decades, we have seen a wealth of research and scholarship centered on teaching and learning, as well as a focus on the importance of intellectual exchange across disciplines through critical pedagogy. Scholars in the field of Caribbean Studies have worked assiduously to defend the idea that teaching is “significant intellectual work in the academy” (121).³ If we understand how our intellectual work informs teaching “in relation,” it becomes a means of helping students develop critical thinking in order to express their passions and goals for the world in which they live. Such inquiry helps students engage in their communities, understand others, and recognize that they are also “other” as they consider their own privilege, power, and positionality. Relational pedagogy reinforces what bell hooks notes in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* must happen in the classroom space: that is, it must become “the most radical space of possibility . . . a communal place that enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community” (8). In our effort to create “the most radical space of possibility,” celebrating the relations between disciplines, points of view, geographical locations, and philosophical treatises and theories that are evoked when studying

Haiti, this volume contains work by some of the most forward-thinking scholars of Haitian, Latin American, American, and Caribbean Studies.

One of our contributors' primary goals is to dispel Haiti's contemporary stereotype as the "poorest country in the Western Hemisphere," a subject explicitly evoked and challenged in poet Danielle Legros Georges's "Poem for the Poorest Country in the Western Hemisphere": "Oh poorest country, this is not your name/You should be called beacon, and flame" (Georges). Therefore, chapters in this volume depict a multi-faceted Haiti and provide spaces for students and instructors to hold engaging dialogues about the island nation, from its birth in 1804 to the present. As our scholars note, often Haiti is either venerated as the first Black Republic, or pitied for the current challenges it faces in terms of poverty and geographical catastrophes. When its history does surface in texts, it is often mythologized, taking on aspects of the surreal. Expressing this idea, historian Philippe Zacaïr notes that Haiti is "only respected in books as opposed to real life."⁴ In response, the chapters in this volume focus on how to teach about Haiti and its complex history and culture from transdisciplinary perspectives that are grounded in "real life." They provide best practices and practical suggestions for teaching about Haiti from multiple angles, including art, theater, linguistics, literature, cultural studies, film, gender, and history, with the goal of offering students more nuanced views of the nation as a whole.

This volume is geared towards students and instructors in Caribbean Studies, Francophone Studies, Cultural Studies, literature, history, and art who are seeking new, transnational, multidisciplinary ways to engage with Haiti. The growing interest in Haiti is reflected in the large number of books published over the last decade, particularly since the 2010 earthquake. These include, but are by no means limited to, *Haiti and the Haitian Diaspora in the Wider Caribbean*, edited by Philippe Zacaïr (2010); *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865*, by Marlene Daut (2015); *Humanitarian Aftershocks in Haiti*, by Mark Schuller (2016); *Istwa Across the Water: Haitian History, Memory, and the Cultural Imagination*, by Toni Pressley-Sanon (2017); *Contrary Destinies: A Century of America's Occupation, Deoccupation and Reoccupation of Haiti* by Léon Pamphile (2017); *Between Two Worlds: Jean-Price Mars, Haiti and Africa*, edited by Celucien L. Joseph, Jean-Eddy Saint Paul, and Glodel Mezilas (2018); and *Who Owns Haiti: People, Power and Sovereignty*, edited by Robert Maguire and Scott Freeman (2017). Our volume—the first to focus on teaching about Haiti—builds on works such as these, giving instructors across a spectrum of departments who are interested in teaching about Haiti the resources, methodologies, and strategies to do so.