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Introduction

Sovereignty and Ownership from Inside and Out

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The question “Who owns Haiti?” creates a stir when it is asked in public. It created such a stir when it was posed at a symposium entitled “Who ‘Owns’ Haiti? Sovereignty in a Fragile State, 2004–2014” held at George Washington University in the Elliott School of International Affairs. Soon after, the question was under discussion on radio airwaves in Port-au-Prince and among policy makers, analysts, scholars, Haitian Americans, and others who follow Haiti’s foreign and domestic affairs. Those who posited answers ranged from the deeply reflective to the simplistic and cynical. Among the latter were those who stated that “we own nothing.” Others insisted that of course Haitians own Haiti. Among the deeply reflective were those who pointed out the complexities inherent in the question that made clear and full answers difficult if not impossible. They pointed to uneven power relationships between Haiti and external forces and to the ability of Haitians throughout their history to resist and push back at the stronger powers that asserted themselves with a view toward “owning” Haiti and its people.

External assertions of Haiti’s sovereignty often come wrapped in a package that presents the Caribbean land as a country in turmoil. Images of protests, burning tires, or violence perpetrated by armed groups are powerful in part because they fit into an existing narrative propagated largely by non-Haitians about “the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.” This narrative draws on Haiti as a locale that is the “odd” abomination of everything else rather than an ordinary place (Trouillot 1990b). Through a lens of poverty and violence, “black impoverished masses” are tied to the causes of their own strife. Even the moniker of “the poorest country” belies a focus on Haiti in isolation. Causes are

not attached to descriptions of the country's underdevelopment and poverty, but rather this presentation of Haiti's economic, social, and political strife is seen as exclusively caused by internal factors. The truth of the matter, however, is that the Caribbean nation's travail has never been caused wholly by its own internal turmoil. In assessing "ownership" of Haiti, we are compelled to consider the overwhelming evidence that the root of the country's contemporary sovereignty dilemma is ultimately related not just to its own internal rumbling but also to roles foreign actors played.

This is not a novel analysis: Scholarship and writing on Haiti and by Haitians has in fact continually focused on the machinations of international actors in Haiti (Farmer 1994; Dupuy 2006; Schuller 2012; Gaillard 1981; Casimir 2001). From imperialism and economic extraction to the catastrophes of international aid, the roles of international actors are undeniable. While this edited volume sees Haiti as a specific and particular site, it does so while examining a larger set of international issues.

The chapters in this volume share a critical perspective of international actors but add a crucial reflection. What might we understand about Haiti by considering actions taken by the international community if we view those actions in terms of ownership? Haiti, despite its overwhelmingly negative portrayal, has always been a key target of foreign powers. From occupations to investment and tourism, Haiti is valuable, in both a material and an ideological sense. The desire to own it—in whatever forms that may take—has implications for how Haitians, particularly the majority of "non-elite" Haitians, experience the idea of a sovereign nation. Protests in the streets of Port-au-Prince illustrate the connectedness of all these players: They not only force the Haitian government to pay attention but also send ripples through the hallways of the U.S. Department of State, the White House, and Congress. Smallholding farmers and the urban poor speak through barricades and protests, peaceful demonstrations, and grassroots organizations. They are not unaware of the far-off policy makers who hamper their ability to sell crops at a competitive price, favor imported food, and hamper the electoral process.

This volume attempts to examine this convoluted set of relationships in all of its complexity. From the political meddling that sways election results to the way groups in Haiti assert alternative forms of sovereignty in daily life, this volume considers both infractions of Haiti's sovereignty and Haitians' multiple objections. Imagining Haiti's historic or contemporary lot as the exclusive result of internal turmoil not only accepts an exceedingly myopic analysis, it also denies the very reality of the Black Republic's more than 200-year history.

Given this history and in spite of an unyielding quest by Haitians to assert sovereign control over themselves and their land, ownership of that republic has continually been a matter of struggle and flux.

Since European adventurers first encountered what today is Haiti in the late 1400s, the idea of self-determination and a sovereign space has been fiercely contested. European arrival marked a set of claims about ownership that set the stage for the Haitian revolution. Hispaniola has never been truly isolated from global powers since the arrival of Christopher Columbus. After the demise of the indigenous Taino people at the hands of European conquerors and the diseases they introduced, French colonists eventually claimed ownership of the western third of the island area they called Saint-Domingue and forcibly repopulated it with enslaved Africans, whose ownership they also claimed. Eventually, in a profound act of resistance against the ownership of both land and people, those Africans and their descendants rose up to cast off their physical and colonial bondage.

Contemporary clashes over the ownership of Haiti and its political, economic, and social fabric take place against a backdrop of this most remarkable assertion of sovereignty when, over 200 years ago, Haitian independence was vociferously declared by those who made revolutionary change that was seen as “unimaginable” at the time (Trouillot 1990a). Haiti’s 1804 triumph over France forced the western world to truly consider the liberal ideals of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. Adding to this were Haitians’ assertions of two new sets of liberties: the humanity and freedom of previously enslaved Africans and the radical notion that self-rule by formerly enslaved people was both possible and just. The victors of that revolutionary struggle underscored these ideas when they expelled remaining Frenchmen, made foreign ownership of their land illegal, abolished the very notion of one human being owning another, and invoked a Taino name for their new nation: Ayiti. At the heart of the revolution were acts that expelled foreign influence. Similarly, Haiti’s leaders asserted themselves with the creation of their flag: a blue and red banner made by the removal of the symbolically laden white stripe of the French tricolor. Such fundamental symbols of nationhood—a name and a flag—powerfully reinforced the idea of a Haiti free from foreign control.

But almost immediately in the postcolonial period, concepts of sovereignty and ownership became contentious. There is no doubt that Haitians’ dominion, autonomy, authority and self-determination over their space has been assaulted and eroded since the initial glow of revolutionary triumph. In the moments following independence, political factions in the new republic conspired

to create multiple and contradictory systems of government. Despotic leaders, such as Henri Christophe, a father of Haiti's independence, invoked such titles as "emperor" and "king." Christophe reinstated forced labor and built the famous Citadelle Laferrière with the work of purportedly "free" Haitian laborers. He thus asserted his sovereignty through a monopoly of power and violence at the expense of the sovereignty and freedom of the individual.

International actors continued to impinge upon Haiti's self-dominion as they envied Haitian labor and natural resources, seeing them both as accessible and exploitable. The French intruded upon self-dominion not only in the form of merchants, diplomats, adventurers, and missionaries but also, as Amy Wilentz pointed out in her foreword to this volume, in the shape of debilitating economic retribution. Haiti's century-long payment of a post-independence indemnity to France was the path France required for recognition of the nation's sovereignty, one that robbed the country of desperately needed capital and incapacitated its future.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, new external actors, most notably the United States, became dominant forces over the small republic's political, social, and economic life. Complete external ownership of an independent nation and its people is a clear marker of such struggles. The U.S. military occupation from 1915 to 1934 is the most unconcealed example of a breach of Haiti's sovereignty (Bellegarde-Smith 1990). Road building and land clearing during the U.S. occupation were done by the despised *corvée* chain gangs. For many Haitians, this labor form meant that the individual freedoms of the revolution had yet again receded into the past (Renda 2001). If we measure contentment by popular protests and uprisings since that occupation, it becomes evident that increasingly Haitians conclude that the postcolonial promise of freedom, autonomy, and a better life is still incomplete. Interventions in 1994 and 2004 by UN-mandated and U.S.-supported multilateral forces (which prominently included Canadian and, in 2004, French soldiers) are more recent examples of overt, militarized violations of Haiti's space.

In the ten years since its 2004 bicentennial of independence—the time frame on which this volume focuses—Haiti has witnessed a series of events that have raised further questions about its ownership. The "international community"—a term for bilateral and multilateral entities that now totes a profoundly negative connotation in Haiti—has been at the center of a series of political and economic scandals that have unfolded much like dominoes toppling upon each other. Haiti's third century of independence, for example, began with its elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, forcibly flown out of

the country on a U.S.-chartered aircraft after internal strife yielded a coup d'état that international powers facilitated, most prominently the United States (Dupuy 2006).

France and Canada also played crucial roles in Aristide's controversial ouster. As the 2004 coup was still unfolding, French and Canadian troops were dispatched to Haiti to join U.S. troops in what quickly became a UN multilateral force. France's support of Aristide's removal was widely attributed to French hatred of the Haitian leader, who had insisted that the indemnity Haiti had paid to the former colonizer be returned with interest, a sum of some \$21 billion. The presence of Canadian troops in the 2004 multinational force was not surprising in view of the lead role Canada had taken in organizing the "Ottawa Initiative on Haiti" in early 2003. The initiative united U.S., French, and Canadian diplomats who took the lead in discussing Haiti's future, incredibly in the absence of any representatives of Haiti's government. While French involvement in the multilateral force epitomized an echo of colonialism, the presence of Canadian troops was a more recent engagement, swayed by a well-established and influential Haitian Diaspora population that lived principally in the province of Quebec.

Concurrent with the 2004 departure of Aristide, Haiti witnessed the transformation of the multilateral force into the UN Stabilization Mission for Haiti (MINUSTAH) that, while arguably maintaining a modicum of political stability, has also brought great harm to Haitians. In 2010 its soldiers introduced a deadly strain of cholera that by April 2014 had not only killed 8,562 Haitians and sickened more than 600,000 others but had also left a mark on the country into the foreseeable future as a killer lurking in its rivers and streams (Archibold and Sengupta 2014; Morrison and Charles 2015). In late 2015, the UN Security Council approved a resolution extending MINUSTAH to at least October 2016, assuring the continuity of international military presence for a total of more than a decade (United Nations Security Council 2015).

In response to the continual onslaught of international control, in the run-up to the presidential elections of 2010–2011, several candidates voiced the idea that if elected, they would seek to expand Haiti's sovereign space. Yet that election would come to be symbolic of the very foreign involvement these erstwhile national leaders argued against. By interfering with internal electoral processes, including the vote count, the U.S. government and the Organization of American States (OAS) lent their power—whether deliberately or not—to one particular candidate, Michel Martelly, setting the stage for his election in what many Haitians believe was a less-than-democratic outcome (Joseph 2014). Five

years later, these same international intruders found themselves attempting to convince the ill-reputed Martelly regime to hold long-delayed local, municipal and parliamentary elections. These external impositions in Haitian affairs may be made in the spirit of upholding Haitian constitutionality, but they are widely viewed in Haiti as yet another manifestation of heavy-handed outside interference.

The primacy of international actors in Haiti over the past ten years does not stop with the presence of foreign soldiers or intrusion into elections. As the chapters of this volume demonstrate, that influence extends to the country's political process, economic policies, and development strategies. It also extends to forms of social organization and religious practice, as individuals and institutions of different stripes have steadfastly sought access to or control over the land and its people in order to own Haiti, or at least certain aspects of it. While the motives of those seeking access to Haiti's space and people are not all necessarily sinister, they continually promote a set of practices based on material or discursive ownership. These include orphanages and charities that market Haiti's poverty for their own well-being and aggrandizement (Schwartz 2008) and businessmen who use its peoples' desperation to amass profits. External religious messengers regularly descend on Haiti to compete quite literally for Haitian souls. Who flying to Haiti from the United States has not witnessed well-meaning church groups sporting matching T-shirts bearing "Hope for Haiti" slogans?

What about the motives of scholars and researchers whose subtle imposition of seemingly unending studies *on* Haiti can treat the country and its people as little more than an experimental space? This question is particularly pertinent to the authors of this volume and many who will read it. Researchers' desires to write papers that will advance careers, matched by attempts to own ideas about Haiti in English-language publications, are far too often divorced from consideration of what is owed the Haitian collaborators who facilitated the studies and data collection in the first place.

The incessant onslaught of foreign individuals and organizations and their strategies, mandates, ideas, and actions are not always enacted in isolation from Haitian counterparts. Sometimes there are willing Haitian collaborators; other times there are not. On occasion, those who are unwilling to yield enact practices of subterfuge or cooptation, commonly known in Haiti as *mawonaj*, in order to maintain a semblance of ownership and protect their sovereign rights. Externally imposed development projects that introduce unwelcome practices gain support among well-paid Haitian technicians, enlist