Why Representations of Haiti Matter Now More Than Ever

By Gina Athena Ulysse

Soon after the earthquake, mainstream news coverage of the disaster reproduced long-standing narratives and stereotypes about Haitians. Indeed, the representations of Haiti that dominated the airwaves in the aftermath of the January 12 quake could virtually be traced back to those popular in the 19th century, especially after the Haitian Revolution, as well as to the 20th century during and after the U.S. occupation of 1915–34. Understanding the continuities of these narratives and their meaning matter now more than ever. The day when Haitians as a people and Haiti as a symbol are no longer representatives of or synonymous with poverty, backwardness, and evil is still yet to come.

As I have discussed elsewhere, Haitians as subjects of research and representation have often been portrayed historically as fractures, as fragments—bodies without minds, heads without bodies, or roving spirits.1 These disembodied beings or visceral fanatics have always been in need of an intermediary. They hardly ever spoke for themselves. In the academy, they are usually represented by the social scientist. And after January 12, enter the uninformed, socio-culturally limited, and ahistorical journalist.

The day after the quake, correspondent Susan Candiotti filed one of CNN's first on-the-ground reports. Clearly overwhelmed by the scenes of death, she commented on the indifference of

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those roaming the streets, many of them still covered in dust. "... In an almost chilling scene, you would see people in some instances sitting nearby [the dead bodies lining the streets], some of them with vacant stares in their eyes just sitting in the middle of the street," she said. "At times, you would see young children walking about as though seeing this horror didn’t bother them. And you had to wonder, is that because this country has suffered so much and through so many natural disasters over so many years?"

More than a week later, on January 22, CNN anchor Anderson Cooper appeared on the air with another correspondent, Karl Penhaul, reporting from Haiti. Penhaul related the story of a woman who survived the quake but lost her two young children. Surprised to see her force her way onto a bus to get out of Port-au-Prince, Penhaul said he asked her if she had buried her children before leaving. "And she simply said, 'I threw them—I threw them away,' " Penhaul said, interpreting the woman's reply, "Jete," to mean that she threw them out. The only word he apparently understood was jete (throw, fling, hurl). He did not mention the prepositions that came before or words that came after the verb, nor did it occur to him that the woman was saying she did not have the opportunity to bury them because they were thrown into a mass grave by others.

"Can you imagine a mother saying in any culture, 'I threw them away?'" the reporter said incredulously. Penhaul was also perturbed that the people he saw weren’t crying. "As I put to this lady," he continued, "you know, 'Why don’t you Haitians cry?' " Cooper tried to move the conversation toward a discussion of trauma and even mentioned the word shock, but only at the very end of the segment.

In media coverage of the quake and its aftermath, this dehumanization narrative—portraying traumatized Haitians as indifferent, even callous—took off on what I call the subhumanity strand, which was particularly trendy.

**Unfinished Business, a Proverb, and an Uprooting**

On July 8, 2009, Haitian journalist Joseph Guyler Delva published a short Reuters article titled "Bill Clinton Surprised by Discord in Haiti," which reported on the former president’s first trip to the country as UN special envoy. According to Delva, Clinton—who, we can surmise, takes his new UN position to heart, given his key role in furthering Haiti’s economic demise in recent years—found that "a lack of cooperation between Haitian politicians, aid groups and business leaders was hurting efforts to help the impoverished nation."

"The most surprising thing to me," Clinton was quoted as saying, "... is how little the investor community, all the elements of the government, including the legislative branch and the NGO community seem to have taught and absorbed each others’ lessons." Delva ended with some promising, yet contradictory words from Clinton, pledging his determination to bring the change that seemed to have come to the United States that January to the ever so fragile Haitian Republic. "If it is a question of money, that’s my problem," Clinton said, "but if it is not about money, that’s something Haitians need to resolve among themselves" (emphasis mine).

This assessment, though diplomatic, smacked of cultural illiteracy. Not only was it ahistorical in its disavowal of key features that created the Republic and remain at the country’s social core (plurality, discord, dissidence), but this comment also attempted to revise the history of imperialism—as if Haitians’ problems among themselves could be dissociated from money. As if it were possible for the UN special envoy, in his role as the moneyman, to avoid affecting local policy, especially given the role that foreign capital has historically played in creating, stoking, and augmenting discord among Haitians.

After the quake, Clinton became even more important as Haiti’s moneyman. And the discord, which he noted months before, would not only be exacerbated by the disaster but played out in predictable ways. Although the earthquake indiscriminately affected all Haitians, regardless of their socioeconomic status, its immediate aftermath made clear that, indeed, tout moun pa menm (not every human is the same), as the Haitian proverb goes.

This was especially evident during the initial rescue efforts, when valuable foreigners were saved first. Rescue teams ignored overpopulated slums coded as "red zones" or high-security risk areas. Children labeled "orphans" were whisked off to foreign lands. Disputes over payment for medical treatment in the United States suspended medical airlifts and endangered lives. The United Nations tear-gassed des-
It stems from the dominant idea in popular imagination that Haitians are irrational, devil-worshipping, progress-resistant, uneducated, accursed black natives overpopulating their God-forsaken island. There is, of course, a subtext here about race. Haiti and Haitians remain a manifestation of blackness in its worst form because, simply put, the unruly enfant terrible of the Americas defied all European odds and created a disorder of things colonial. Haiti had to become colonialism's bête noire if the sanctity of whiteness were to remain unquestioned.

Haiti's history would become its only defense against these portrayals, although in mainstream media that same history would be used against the republic by historical revisionists. The day after the quake, the televangelist Pat Robertson proclaimed that the catastrophe in Haiti was a result of the country's pact with the devil, a belief that many Protestant Haitians themselves accept as true. The "devil's pact" refers to the ceremony at Bois Caiman on Aupusi 14, 1791, said to have sparked the Haitian Revolution. On that day, it is said, rebel leader and Vodou priest Boukman Dutty presided over this ceremony in which those in attendance swore to kill all whites and burn their property. Cécile Fatiman, the presiding priestess, sacrificed a pig to honor the spirits. Robertson's re-reading of the ceremony, was yet another example of the racialization of Haitians that so often goes unspoken in mainstream accounts.

Perhaps nothing reinforces the truism in this old proverb than the government's inaction around the tent cities. The mass graves—crimes against humanity, which must not be forgotten—were early warnings of what would become official practice months after the quake. Indeed, the state was being called upon to do something it has never done: to have and show responsibility for the entire nation and not just a privileged few. Historically the lives that matter in Haiti have always been determined by socioeconomic status, and nothing made this more apparent than the graves; the state treats the dead as it does the living.1

The absence of the state has meant that the nation is forced to continually depend on the kindness of its diaspora (which acts as a social welfare system), NGOs, humanitarians, and—in some cases problematically—missionaries. In the aftermath of the quake, missionaries' help would become even more needed, even as some of them launched an attack on Vodou that can only be described as a spiritual delchoukaj (uprooting).

Those of us concerned with cultural heritage must take into account the fact that family temples, so crucial to the practice of Vodou, have been fractured and in some cases destroyed by seismic activity. Few people speak of these temples, or when they do, it is an soudin (in secret). The stigma is taking hold. There have also been incidents of anti-Vodou violence. This backlash is a mechanism of social control. The silence on this loss needs to be broken. Plans must be made to address the destruction of these familial archives. The temples need to be repaired.

Vodou is not merely going underground as it did when it was persecuted after the Revolution and during the U.S. occupation.2 It is being eradicated in part because the missionaries continue to play a significant role in providing much needed services for the desperate nation. This moment, which Pat Robertson claimed to be a blessing in disguise, sets the stage for more explicit rules of engagement: food, shelter, clothing, and education in exchange for one's soul. People are desperately converting. Incessant chants dominate the hills and tent cities. The sound of drums is fading in too many parts of the nation. At the fault lines something else is happening. A religious cleansing is in effect.

And Haiti's past continues to loom largely in the present.—G.A.U.
ter shape.” Never mind historical particularities. Brooks ignores the difference between being in bondage, killing for one’s independence, and becoming a geopolitical pariah, on the one hand, and being granted freedom centuries later at a peaceful ceremony where one actually gets to sing the new national anthem, on the other.

This discourse—powerful even in Haiti among religious conservatives—suggests that perhaps those who brought about the revolution should have waited until the great powers saw fit to grant Saint-Domingue its freedom. This aversion to the impact of history would be repeated over and over again. On January 23, CNN’s then chief international correspondent, Christiane Amanpour, did a short segment on Haiti in which she highlighted key moments in Haiti’s history. She began with the “bloody revolution,” skipped to decades of turmoil until President Woodrow Wilson sent in U.S. troops in 1915, then jumped to 1945, when Haitians leaders began a series of dictatorships culminating with the reign of Duvalier the father and the son. She then noted the ascension of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was ousted by a military coup in 1991, leading to the surge of Haitian boat people on the coast of Florida and so on.

These superficial glosses on Haitian history did not go uncontested. A reader identified as Danlex posted the following response on the CNN website, dated January 24 at 8:27 p.m. ET:

Given your penchant for balanced and incisive reporting, I am disappointed that this time around your report on Haiti’s history leaves much untold. It is shallow and does not help to put this country that has so long been misunderstood in proper perspective. For a start I would recommend that you read a recently published article by Sir Hilary Beckles pro-vice-chancellor and Principal of the Cave Hill Campus, UWI. The article is entitled The Hate and the Quake. Then, you can perhaps get France’s view on the whole issue and how would they if they have a conscience respond to Haiti's crisis now. But it is time that the world see Haiti as not merely a country befuddled by voodoo [sic] and illiteracy but a victim of a prolonged collusion of the World Powers of the day.

I realize that in focusing on this issue of representation, I am in a sense actually doing Haiti a disservice. After all, the emphasis on deconstructing symbols only reinscribes the dominant narrative, which already gets lots of airplay. So here my activist and academic goals clash. A deconstructive exercise alone cannot fill the lacuna of stories from Haitian perspectives with counter-narratives about the earthquake and its aftermath.
Those of us who study Haiti know this conundrum only too well. As scholars, advocates, or just plain concerned witnesses, we know, to put it crudely and in layman’s terms, that historically speaking, Haiti has an image problem. That remains Haiti’s burden. Sometimes I joke that when the first free black republic made its debut on the world stage, Haiti lacked proper representation. A point of clarification: It’s not that Haiti did not have a good agent, but that its representation at the time—newly freed blacks and people of color—and even still today was not considered legitimate and powerful. Indeed, we know that few colonists or metropolitanals considered the idea of a Haitian insurrection even possible.

In a chapter titled “An Unthinkable History,” in his Silencing the Past, Haitian anthropologist Michel Rolph-Trouillot writes:

In 1790, just a few months before the beginning of the insurrection that shook the French colony of Saint-Domingue and brought about the revolutionary birth of independent Haiti, colonist La Barre reassured his metropolitan wife of the peaceful state of life in the tropics. “There is no movement among our Negroes... They don’t even think of it,” he wrote. “They are very tranquil and obedient. A revolt among them is impossible.” And again: “We have nothing to fear on the part of the Negroes, they are tranquil and obedient.” And again: “The Negroes are very obedient and always will be. We sleep with doors and windows wide open. Freedom for them is a chimera.”

Chimera: a figment of the imagination, for example, a wildly unrealistic idea or hope or completely impractical plan or perhaps an underestimation. Both before and after the publication of Trouillot’s book, numerous scholars, including C.L.R. James, Mimi Sheller, Sibylle Fischer, and others have addressed the inconceivability of black freedom in the white imagination during the 19th century. One of the most notable examples was On the Equality of the Human Races (1885), by Joseph-Anténor Firmin, a Haitian anthropologist, journalist, and politician. Firmin wrote his tome as a riposte to An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races (1853–55), a founding text in scientific racism by Count Arthur de Gobineau. Firmin sought to debunk the dominant racist ideology of his time using a positivist approach, launching an argument that would be silenced for more than a century in France and the United States.

In the section of his book titled “The Role of the Black Race in the History of Civilization,” Firmin recounts the role that newly independent Haiti, which he called “the small nation made up of descendants of Africans,” played in the liberation of Latin America through its support of Simón Bolivar. “Besides this example,” he wrote, “which is one of the most beautiful actions for which the Black republic deserves the whole world’s esteem and admiration, we can say that that the declaration of independence of Haiti has positively influenced the entire Ethiopian race living outside Africa.” He went on and on. We could read Firmin’s work as exemplary of nationalist pride, or perhaps as a call for recognition that, indeed, Tous les hommes sont l’homme—roughly, All men are men, as Victor Hugo put it, quoted in the epigraph of Firmin’s final chapter. Or Tout moun se moun, as we would say in Kréyol.

In considering the issue of representation and the meaning of symbols, I believe it is imperative that we begin with a simple question: How did the enfant terrible of the region become its bête noire? Enfant terrible. Yes. Many of us we were taught that Haiti was an avant-garde in the region, second only to the United States, which had ousted the British. This small territory where enslaved Africans outnumbered their European masters dared to successfully defend itself against three European armies to claim its independence at a time when other nations in the region still trafficked in slaves. Freedom came at a price, the hefty sum of 150 millions francs and 60 subsequent years of international isolation. The seclusion fermented cultural practices in ways that rendered aspects of life in Haiti the most recognizable African in the hemisphere.

Haiti’s history would be silenced, disavowed, reconstructed, and rewritten as the “Haitian fear”—code for an unruly and barbaric blackness that threatened to export black revolution to neighboring islands and disrupt colonial power. Reading this moment, literary critic J. Michael Dash observes: “It is not surprising that Haiti’s symbolic presence in the Caribbean imagination has never been understood in terms of radical universalism [which it actually represented and sought to embody]. Rather, the ‘island disappears’ under images of racial revenge, mysterious singularity, and heroic uniqueness.”

The distortions that emerged in the aftermath of the successful revolution would have impact for years to come. Indeed, the “chimera” of black freedom, and the stereotypes of savagery that go with it, to this day remain central to how we talk about Haiti, represent Haiti, understand and represent Haiti and Haitians. This, of course, begs us to ask a bigger question concerning the role that these narratives play in more practical matters, in policy papers and so on. For indeed, there are certain narratives that allow us to remain impervious to each other by the way they reinforce the mechanics of Othering. Or as Trouillot puts it:

“The more Haiti appears weird, the easier it is to forget that it represents the longest neocolonial experiment in the history of the West.”

— Roughly