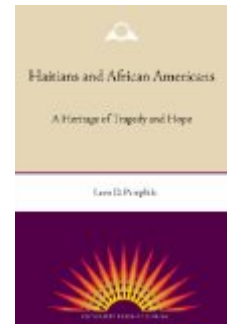


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Leon D. Pamphile. *Haitians and African Americans: A Heritage of Tragedy and Hope*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001. xviii + 238 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2119-5; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8130-2690-9.

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Haiti, Haitians, and Black America

For the past twenty-five years, the plight of Haiti and of Haitian refugees has edged into the American consciousness. In 1980, a remarkable Caribbean exodus to the United States took place, focusing media attention on the desperate attempt of thousands of island people seeking a better life in the United States. The Mariel Boatlift of that year brought 125,000 new Cuban exiles to South Florida, while a simultaneous migration of Haitian “boat people” packed onto rickety, barely seaworthy craft deposited some 60,000 black exiles on Florida beaches. Over the succeeding two decades, the Cuban and Haitian migrations continued, speeding up or slowing down depending on changing circumstances in Cuba and Haiti, or in American refugee policy. Thus, in the early 1990s, after a military coup against Haiti’s president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a new wave of Haitian refugees fearing violence and repression took to the seas. Under the Bush and Clinton administrations, the new boat people were intercepted at sea, confined for a time at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, and later returned to Haiti. Concerned about the intransigent military rule in Haiti, and also hoping to end the Haitian exile migration, in 1994 President Clinton sent U.S. Marines to Haiti, facilitating Aristide’s reinstatement as president. These events captured the attention of the press and the broadcast media, which flashed nightly images on American television screens of dangerously overcrowded sailboats, the scorching heat of the tent city at Guantanamo, and bayonet-ready marines in Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s capital city.

The concurrent migrations of Haitians and Cubans after 1980 had another consequence, as well. For anyone paying attention, it was obvious that the United States had two different immigration/refugee policies—one for Cubans and another for Haitians. America’s Cuban refugee policy, shaped during the hottest years of the Cold War, welcomed Cuban exiles escaping Castro’s communist dictatorship. During the 45-year period after 1959, about one million Cuban exiles entered the United States, a large percentage settling in South Florida. Florida citizens and politicians periodically complained about the economic and social consequences of the massive exile migration to the Miami area, but successive presidential administrations remained wedded to the Cold War paradigm, especially as the exile Cubans became an increasingly potent political force in Florida politics. But for the Haitians, it was a different story. Considered economic rather than political exiles, Haitians intercepted at sea were immediately returned to Haiti. Boat people who actually arrived in Florida were incarcerated at the Krome Detention Center west of Miami for months while their cases were reviewed. Eventually, many were permitted to stay, but the disparity in the treatment of exiles from two different Caribbean islands was difficult to ignore. The mostly white exiles from dictatorial Cuba got a free pass into the United States, but black exiles from dictatorial Haiti were told they were unwelcome. President Clinton made two administrative decisions that altered exile policy somewhat: first, Haitians intercepted at sea would be interviewed immediately to assess their eligibility for political refugee status; and second, Cubans

intercepted at sea were no longer granted immediate entry and would be returned to Cuba unless they were political exiles. However, any Cuban refugee who managed to get at least one foot on American soil would be granted residency status. There was no “one-foot policy” for the Haitians. The disparity between Haitians and Cubans remains a cornerstone of U.S. refugee policy in the Caribbean—a consequence, many have argued, of deeply held ideologies of anti-communism and racism. Leon Pamphile’s book, *Haitians and African Americans*, makes the case that American awareness of and interest in Haiti is not merely a recent phenomenon dating from the arrival of the “boat people” of the 1970s and 1980s. Rather, he contends that Haiti has been at various times a prominent issue, concern, or problem for the United States since the late eighteenth century. Pamphile focuses especially links between Haitians and black Americans. He writes that “Haitians and African Americans have remained connected throughout the centuries both by oppression and by a common struggle for freedom that make the peoples of the black diaspora what they are today” (p. 1). The book, then, seeks to document that large assertion about common bonds, shared heritage, and linked identity, persuasively in some respects and not so in others. Along the way, the author also serves up a quick but uneven capsule history of Haiti.

Columbus claimed the island of Hispaniola for Spain in 1492, making it the first Spanish colonial possession in the New World. In 1697, by the terms of the Treaty of Ryswick ending King William’s War (now known as the Nine-Years War), France acquired the western half of the island, initially known as Saint Domingue and later called Haiti. By the middle of the eighteenth century, plantation slavery dominated Haiti’s coffee and sugar agricultural economy and provided great wealth to French colonial landowners. The convergence of the American and French Revolutions at the end of the century undermined colonialism in Haiti. A massive slave uprising began in 1791; plantations were destroyed, thousands of whites and blacks were killed, and French colonists began an exodus to France and the United States. A decade of war, violence, and confusion followed, ending with the creation of the Haitian Republic in 1804. Pamphile makes much of the impact of the successful Haitian Revolution on African Americans, slave and free, who over succeeding decades found inspiration in the achievement of the black revolutionaries. His research in early nineteenth-century American black newspapers, the published sermons of black preachers, and the work of other black American writers documents the idea that

African Americans found a beacon of hope in the Haitian Revolution. The author contends that the Haitian revolutionaries boosted the morale and self-esteem of American blacks, undermined racist ideas of black inferiority and docility, and instilled “pride in their race and color” (p. 19). The idea of Haiti as a beacon of black freedom was reinforced by black and mulatto Haitians in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and especially New Orleans, many of them brought to the United States as slaves by their white Haitian masters during the Haitian slave uprisings of the 1790s. Black Haitians became community leaders, established schools and newspapers, and supported black freedom and rights. Black Americans, in short, “came to perceive Haiti as the guardian of liberty” (p. 8), while white abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison saw the Haitian Revolution as the “prototype” for eliminating slavery in the United States. By contrast, many white Americans, especially in the southern states, feared the export of Haiti’s black revolution to American slaves. Pamphile covers the basics here, but this part of the story is told more fully and more effectively in Alfred N. Hunt’s book, *Haiti’s Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (1988).[1]

In the nineteenth century, some American blacks held Haiti in such high esteem that they emigrated to the island nation. Angry about second-class citizenship in the United States, hundreds of free blacks migrated to Haiti in organized groups. Many American blacks opposed the American Colonization Society’s program of emigration to Africa, but were enthusiastic about settlement in Haiti. Pride in black nationalism as well as the promise of land grants and economic opportunity attracted blacks from Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and other cities. Haiti’s government encouraged emigration in hopes of strengthening the new nation’s economic development. In the 1820s, according to Pamphile, perhaps as many as 13,000 American blacks participated in several Haitian emigration schemes. This early emigration fervor tapered off quickly, however. The emigrants encountered problems, including cultural and language differences, but most distressing was Haiti’s continuing pattern of political instability, internal violence, and despotic leadership. The African American newcomers brought their Protestant Christianity and hoped to evangelize their new Haitian countrymen, but they did not anticipate the power of Haitian vodou, which had been grafted onto Catholicism and provided inspiration for the revolt against France and against slavery. A second wave of emigration to Haiti took place on the eve of the American Civil War, but similar problems of adjust-

ment and political instability undermined the movement and most migrants returned to the United States. Haiti remained a symbol of black hope and pride, but, as Pamphile concludes, “something more than the commonality of race and ethnicity was necessary for an effective emigration campaign” (p. 59).

As the nineteenth century came to a close, Haiti no longer inspired the level of pride and hope for the future that had so powerfully shaped black American thinking in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, some African American leaders continued to work for Haitian advancement. For example, in 1889, the legendary abolitionist Frederick Douglass was appointed as the American consul general to Haiti. In this position, which he held for two years, Douglass sought to protect Haiti from American economic imperialism, but he was distressed by the unending political instability of the country. Similarly, Booker T. Washington took an interest in Haiti, urging widespread agricultural and industrial education as a means of building the Haitian economy. The formal French education of the light-skinned Haitian elite, Washington believed, was poorly adapted to the country’s national needs and served merely to maintain a repressive social structure based on class and color. In many of his writings, W. E. B. DuBois defended Haiti and criticized American intervention in its affairs.

For most of the twentieth century, Haiti has been dominated and sometimes controlled by the United States. In 1915 President Woodrow Wilson sent U.S. Marines to Haiti, ostensibly to protect Americans and other foreigners from internal violence and political anarchy. The growing economic influence of Germany in Haiti, however, seems to have been a major prompt for American intervention. The military occupation lasted for two decades, stirred resentment in Haiti, and became a sensitive political issue in the U.S. Congress and for African American leaders.[2] James Weldon Johnson, head of the NAACP, took up the Haitian cause. In 1920 he spent three months in Haiti and wrote critical reports on the intervention for American magazines. Johnson exposed the brutality of the American military occupation and charged that “dollar diplomacy” lay behind intervention. In addition, W. E. B. DuBois, editor of the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*, condemned the intervention in its pages. By contrast, Booker T. Washington supported intervention as a means of elevating Haiti’s education system and quelling internal violence. Some African American organizations went one step further, advocating that American blacks consider emigrating to Haiti rather than to northern cities. Some southern whites agreed, Pam-

phile writes, hoping “for a full-scale exodus [to Haiti] of southern blacks” (p. 106).

One of the strengths of Pamphile’s book can be found in the detailed documentation of the role of the NAACP and its executive secretary James Weldon Johnson in Haitian affairs that began with intervention-documentation derived from research in the papers of the NAACP. Johnson used his influence with Haitian leaders to create a coalition of Haitian nationalist groups called *L’union patriotique*. Its goal was to end American occupation and promote Haitian economic advancement and self-government. He also pressured President Warren G. Harding to terminate the military occupation of Haiti, but without success. However, the NAACP continued to lobby Congressional leaders on this point. Subsequently, in 1921, the U.S. Senate launched a committee of inquiry on the Haitian invasion, which provided a forum for Haitian advocates such as Johnson. Ultimately, the Senate committee concluded in support of intervention. Pushed by the NAACP, now led by Walter F. White, and after Haitian student riots in 1929, President Herbert Hoover called for a new Congressional investigation. Its report led the president to call for an end to the U.S. occupation of Haiti, which finally came in 1934.

The 1920s and 1930s also witnessed the development of important cultural links between Haiti and some African American writers and intellectuals. This was the era when black cultural nationalism produced the Harlem Renaissance in the United States and a similar movement among Haitian writers and artists. African American writers, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Alain Locke, and W. E. B. DuBois, found inspiration in Haitian history, culture, and folklore. Haitian writers such as Jean Price-Mars and Jacques Roumain began discovering and writing about the significance of their own cultural heritage. Aside from the political involvement of NAACP leaders in early-twentieth-century Haitian affairs, Pamphile locates a significant cultural and literary connection between black America and black Haiti during this period.

In the decades after 1940, political instability and political repression persisted in Haiti. Nevertheless, the NAACP continued to play a major role in Haitian affairs, essentially becoming the country’s apologist, “a public relations agency for Haiti” (p. 194). Walter White, for whom Haiti had become “my second country” (p. 155), worked closely with Haitian leaders in the forties and fifties to promote political reform and economic development, even as the country fell deeper into dictator-

ship and repression. Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier came to power in 1957 through election fraud and established an oppressive family regime that lasted three decades. During this period, the exodus of Haitian boat people to Florida began, and Haiti once again surged into the consciousness of black and white Americans. Successive presidential administrations had trouble getting Haiti on the right course, and the black press in the United States, as well as the Congressional Black Caucus, took up the cause of the Haitian refugees. Since the 1950s, Pamphile concludes, "black America's perception of Haiti as the torchbearer of freedom was overshadowed by the darker image of a country foundering in a political and economic morass" (p. 195). In 1986 Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier's forced exile to France opened a brief period of new hope for the future, but Haiti soon reverted to its entrenched tradition of repression, political infighting, and assassination. Too recent for discussion in this book, in 2004 the United States once again intervened in Haiti's fractious political affairs by pressuring President Bertrand Aristide to resign, even providing the plane that took him to Africa, hoping that distance would minimize his continuing role in the violent pattern of Haitian politics.

Pamphile's book has some strong points. The second half of the book on the role of the NAACP in Haiti's twentieth-century history is especially good. Using original research from the records of the NAACP, the author demonstrates just how important the civil rights organization was in building and maintaining links between Haiti and the African American community. But in some other respects, the book has weaknesses. For instance, Pamphile's major argument that Haiti has been a source of pride, hope, and inspiration for black Americans is difficult to sustain over the entire course of two hundred years since Haitian independence in 1804. Haiti does seem to have offered that sense of black hope for about fifty years after independence. After all, black Haitians completed a successful revolution, abolished slavery, and created an independent black nation. In the United States, slavery, racism, and discrimination still prevailed. The black press, black preachers, and abolitionists all appealed to the heroic Haitian example. Thousands of American blacks emigrated to Haiti to fulfill dreams of freedom and economic opportunity. However, this sense of hope and aspiration dissipated in the late nineteenth century and pretty much disappeared altogether in the twentieth. Black Americans have not been lining up to emigrate to Haiti. In fact, the emigration has been moving in the opposite direction for at least three

decades. Migration to the United States has become the hope and dream of hundreds of thousands of Haitians. Pamphile at one point admits the obvious about Haiti—that "in its two centuries of independence, the nation has never known democracy" (p. 166). Haiti's biggest problem from its origin as a nation has been the continuing pattern of political violence, repression of civil liberties, coups and assassinations, and authoritarian dictatorship. That being the case, it is hard to accept the author's major premise that African Americans always found a source of pride and inspiration in Haiti. Haitian leaders since the nineteenth century have tried to connect with influential African Americans, and often did so successfully, but little evidence is presented to suggest that, in the twentieth century at least, the mass of African Americans had much interest in Haiti, or embraced it as a source of pride and hope.

Finally, for a book titled *Haitians and African Americans*, there is woefully little on the recent massive migration of Haitians to the United States, their settlement and adjustment patterns in American cities such as Miami and New York, or their relations with African American neighbors. For information and interpretation on those matters, the interested reader must turn to books and articles by scholars such as Alex Stepick, Nina Glick Schiller, Michel Laguerre, Susan Buchaman, Flore Zephir, and Jake Miller.[3]

Notes

[1] Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

[2] For fuller and more coherent accounts of the Haitian intervention, see Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1971); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Haiti and the United States: The Psychological Moment* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

[3] Alex Stepick, *Pride Against Prejudice: Haitians in the United States* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998); Alex Stepick and Alejandro Portes, "Flight into Despair: A Profile of Recent Haitian Refugees in South Florida," *International Migration Review* 20 (Summer 1986): pp. 329-350; Alex Stepick, "The Refugees Nobody Wants: Haitians in Miami," in *Miami Now! Immigration, Ethnicity and Social Change*, ed. Guillermo J. Grenier and Alex Stepick (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), pp. 57-82; Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Eugene Fournon, *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long-Distance Na-*

tionalism and the Search for Home (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Michel Laguerre, *American Odyssey: Haitians in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Susan Buchanan, "The Cultural Meaning of Social Class for Haitians in New York City," *Ethnic Groups* 5 (1983): pp. 7-30; Flore Zephir, *Haitian Immigrants in Black America: A Sociological and Sociolinguistic Portrait* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1996); Jake Miller, *The Plight of Haitian Refugees* (New York: Praeger, 1984).

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