
This is a fascinating project, born out of a panel at the 2012 annual meeting of the Haitian Studies Association, at which Gina Athena Ulysse raised the issue of Haiti’s “narratives” and the perceived need for new versions of the stories the outside world told itself about the nation. The recurring issue of exceptionalism almost inevitably resurfaces as a source of vexation for foreign scholars seeking to understand the modes of and motivations for their diverse engagements with Haiti. Taking anthropology to be the “most significant source and pervasive vehicle” of the exceptionalist narrative, the volume uses that discipline as the “point of departure” for a series of essays that underscore the ways in which it and Haiti have historically, and even in the present, been “mutually constitutive” (p. 2). To think about Haiti, the editors contend, “has long been to think anthropologically, that is, to call humaneness and humanity into question” (p. 2). As such, the very terms of foreign scholarly engagement with Haiti are exceptional in themselves, in their inbuilt tendency to treat the nation, its people, and its culture, as irredeemably other, different, and unique.

Perhaps as a consequence of this longstanding exceptionalist “narrative” about Haiti, there is often a coyness about expressing just why any particular scholar is attracted to it as an object of study. No one wants to admit they are interested in Haiti because it is different, though no doubt for many that is part of what attracts them. Perhaps it comes down to a question of language: exceptional is a troublesome term that connotes absolute difference and permits the kinds of intellectual appropriations that lead Ulysse (and the editors) to call for new stories, new words, new engagements. Or else, Haiti’s attraction has more to do with differences of degree than of kind: Haiti is more this, less that.

The volume is unique, exceptional even, in its call for contributors to analyze their own reasons for working on Haiti, and its encouragement to “embrace … a practice of reflexivity,” even if, as the editors note, self-reflexivity has been a prevalent mode in landmark studies by, among others, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Deren, and Leslie G. Desmangles (p. 7). The question of why Haiti is a valid one, though no less so than the counter interrogation of why not? Why would anyone not be interested in a country such as Haiti, with its remarkable history, culture, and present-day realities? A lot of people are interested in Haiti because it is interesting.

The impressive group of interdisciplinary scholars grapples gamely with the question as it is posed to them, and they emerge collectively and individu-
ally as sensitive, committed, and passionate advocates for Haiti. For example, Mark Schuller writes of the “anthropological imagination” (p. 18), how Haiti provided “an important grounding” to his own understanding of the concept, and ends with some pointed questions concerning anthropologists’ responsibilities and the need for full and equal engagement with the Haitian population (p. 29). Jhon Picard Byron proposes an intellectual return to Jean Price-Mars, noting the ways in which the author of *Ainsi parla l’oncle* (1928) broke with the universal humanism of nineteenth-century predecessors such as Anténor Firmin in his “turning inwards” to Haitian culture as a means of understanding its particularities (p. 43). Kaiama Glover offers a thoughtful and illuminating essay in which her own “intellectual itinerary” is placed in subtle and revealing relation to Katherine Dunham’s ethnographic memoir *Island Possessed* (1969), which stands for Glover as “a model of the very bravest kind of reflexivity” (p. 95). Anthropology is for Dunham (and implicitly, Glover), a “disordering practice,” a way of upsetting fixed notions of the other. It is also, Glover says, “a practice of solipsistic enlightenment, [a] prerequisite for ethical humanist functioning within a global community” (p. 96), a phrase that constitutes ultimately a revealing commentary on this volume as a whole, which is solipsistic in very useful ways, in that it reminds us of the *self-ish* basis of much intellectual inquiry, and how any meaningful engagement with the other begins (and arguably ends) with the self, our own personal relations to time, history, people, and places. I am finally reminded of an American church group spotted on a flight to Port-au-Prince, each member sporting a t-shirt with the slogan “It’s not about me.” This fine volume is a timely reminder that in some ways, as much as we might pretend otherwise, the work we do in these fields, on other people and their cultures, is also, inevitably and always, about us.

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