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Haitians, African Americans, and the Politics of Freedom

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Millery Polyné, *From Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti, and Pan Americanism, 1870-1964* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010).

Haiti's importance as a symbol of freedom in the African Diaspora did not end after the abolition of slavery in the Americas. For former slaves in the United States organizing for citizenship, the so-called "black republic" acquired a renewed significance after emancipation, one that was threatened by U.S. imperial encroachments on Haitian sovereignty in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The connection between U.S. African American citizenship and Haitian sovereignty was not lost on activists within either country. Their collaborative efforts to achieve political and economic self-determination in the period beginning immediately after the abolition of slavery in the United States and extending to the eve of Civil Rights legislation is the subject of *From Douglass to Duvalier*. Like other recent titles that trace trans-national connections within and outside the Caribbean (Guridy 2010; Luis-Brown 2008), Polyné's represents a significant departure from an older genre of scholarship on U.S.-Caribbean relations that focused almost entirely on state institutions and formal diplomacy. Rather than ignoring these official channels, Polyné analyzes them alongside a variety of trans-national networks and organizations formed by intellectuals, educators, journalists, businesspeople, activists, and artists. The result is a lucid analysis of an understudied chunk of Haitian history that dialogues nicely with ongoing scholarly currents in Caribbean historiography.

In the period the book covers, anti-Haitian racism flourished throughout the Atlantic and African Americans faced political exclusion in the United States. These overlapped most clearly during the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), when Haitians and U.S. African Americans lived in societies marked by racism and legally-defined political disenfranchisement enforced by violence. In this context, Haitians' and U.S. African Americans' ability to mobilize at all, much less in any collaborative way, must not be taken for granted. Articulating the ways they framed their projects helps explain why they were able to organize in a political system that was designed to exclude them. Although Haitians and U.S. African Americans based their relationships on solidarity against racism and political disenfranchisement, Polyné refuses to gloss these collaborations strictly as instances of pan-Africanism since many activists, especially in the United States, had no intention of forming a black nation-state (Polyné 8). U.S.-centered notions of pan-Americanism are similarly problematic because its supporters "constantly used racial primitivism and underdevelopment to justify U.S.

expansionism and imperialism” despite the egalitarianism embedded in the discourse itself (9). For Haitians, U.S. African Americans, and others in the Caribbean, the solution was to combine elements of pan-Africanism and pan-Americanism in what Polyné calls “black pan-Americanism.” This allowed them to organize on equal terms with people of color in the Americas without challenging democracy, capitalism, or the primacy of their respective governments (11). Haitians’ and U.S. African Americans’ appropriation of the language and idioms of the dominant system in order to challenge its inequalities represents a transnational iteration of a phenomenon that has been well documented in a variety of national contexts throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (De la Fuente 2001).

As Polyné illustrates, black pan-Americanism provided a rallying point for Haitians and U.S. African Americans, though its political efficacy was never guaranteed. If the benefit of the discursive framework was that it opened a political space for activists, its major limitation was its inability to dialogue with radical politics, whether in promotion or criticism. During the final years of the U.S. occupation of Haiti, an official delegation of U.S. African Americans was sent to Haiti to recommend improvements to the country’s education system. The Commission and its warm reception in Haiti reflect a perfect example of black pan-Americanism. The fact that it was rendered toothless by the U.S. government’s unwillingness to dedicate funds or attention shows the severe obstacles to lasting change through such necessarily-moderate politics. The limits of black pan-Americanism also appear in the period after the U.S. occupation of Haiti, when Haiti’s political terrain became more polarized and numerous radical ideologies flourished (Smith 2009). Despite some initial support for François Duvalier after his 1957 election, Polyné argues that the relationship between U.S. African Americans and Haitians largely cooled. Unfortunately, any criticisms that U.S. African Americans could have leveled at the violence of Duvalier’s dictatorship could not find an outlet using the longstanding networks forged by black pan-American discourse since it “offered no room in which to overtly condemn foreign black leadership” (Polyné 125). Furthermore, sensational stories in the international press about Duvalier’s savagery eroded U.S. African Americans’ willingness to tout Haiti as a proud symbol of black self-government (185-6).

This is not to say that dialogue ceased between the United States and Haiti during or after the rule of the Duvaliers. Haitian exiles found refuge and spaces in which to organize against Duvalier throughout the Americas—one of their strategies was to lobby to cut off U.S. aid to Haiti (180). Polyné skillfully shows Duvalier’s use of pan-American language to elicit increasing fiscal and military support from the United States (182). In short, the dictator took a long-standing discursive framework that was aimed at liberation and used it to outfit a military

force that raped, tortured, and murdered the people of Haiti. By recognizing this, Polyné furthers the work of the late Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1990) by providing a more textured explanation of Duvalier's longevity than the regime's sheer violence or the U.S. State Department's knee-jerk response to Communism. Chronologically, the book ends when black pan-Americanism was minimal between Haitians and African Americans. However, the Duvalier years represent an ebb, not an annihilation of these transnational political linkages. As the book's introduction shows, U.S. African Americans' interest in the bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution in 2004, as well as their petitions for the U.S. government to preserve the rule of president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, indicate that the relationship between Haitians and U.S. African Americans managed to recover after the period of Duvalier rule.

While black pan-Americanism's very existence emerged from the specific political exigencies that Haitians and African Americans faced, it was continually shaped by larger political contexts, showing that nation-states never lost their salience, even amongst activists who refused to be limited by them. Nor did the discursive egalitarianism of black pan-Americanism prevent tensions from emerging between Haitians and African Americans. The clearest example of these processes appears in Polyné's analysis of Frederick Douglass, the U.S. African American who was born into slavery before becoming an ardent abolitionist and Haitian diplomat. While slavery thrived in the United States, Douglass opposed U.S. attempts to annex Haiti. During Reconstruction, Douglass' dual faith in the U.S. federal government and the benefits of racial uplift made him a proponent of annexation plans. He disavowed the position again as Jim Crow crystallized in the U.S. South. In another example from the period after World War II, the dynamism of pan-Americanism and the tensions within it became apparent again. Walter White, the former head of the NAACP, adopted the idiom of neighborliness to frame his attempts to promote black-owned tourist and agricultural companies in Haiti, an overt reference to the Good Neighbor policy—at the time the framework used by the White House to describe U.S. relations with the rest of the Americas (149). The need to promote an image of Haiti as a safe haven for U.S. tourists and capital motivated White and other U.S. African Americans to ignore stark economic inequalities in Haiti and miss opportunities to aid the country's inhabitants after hurricane Hazel, a contradiction identified by Haitians like Jacques Roumain (124).

During the past decade, transnational scholarship on Haiti has exploded. Many new works have focused on either the revolutionary period or the contemporary diaspora with impressive analyses of the subtle ways that events in

Haiti have influenced cultural, political, and racial ideologies beyond its borders.¹ Polyné's focus on the direct interactions of Haitians and U.S. African Americans between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries places the book within a much smaller and vitally important body of Haitian scholarship (Sheller 2000; Hector 1993; Matibag 2003). As with other works that focus on the transnational linkages formed by middle-class activists in the Caribbean, one wonders what other types of connections may have existed among unlettered and lower-class populations in both countries, especially as Haitian migration to the United States increased over the course of the twentieth century. Ultimately, Polyné demonstrates that activists and the scholars who study them may transcend the limitations of the nation-state and withering racism without ignoring their power.

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¹ For analyses of the trans-national effects of the Haitian Revolution, see Fischer 2004, Geggus and Fiering 2009, Buck-Morss 2009 and White 2010. Recent studies of Haitian migration include Mooney 2009 and Zacaïre 2010.

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