

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

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Published: December 2010

From Douglass to Duvalier is an important new work, situated in the 'emerging field of Hemispheric American Studies', which presents new approaches to the role of Haiti in African-American consciousness.¹ This work moves through a number of chronologically ordered case studies which demonstrate U.S. – Haitian African American relations, between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. Polyné considers intra-racial interactions between these two groups to 'have been central to the spirit of the pan-American movement because of their long history of transnational engagements.'²

Overarching the entire volume is a distinct reformulation of the hegemonic U.S. model of pan-Americanism. This concept is considered as African-Americans (a term used here in its broadest sense, denoting those of African descent throughout the Americas) actually attempted to work through pan-Americanism's ideals, rather than using them as a smoke-screen for an imperialist agenda. Though the focus remains on U.S. - Haitian interactions, broader examples of this are mentioned. So, Haitian attempts to engender a mutually co-operative, non-interventionist movement are briefly demonstrated through their government's support of Latin American independence movements.

The volume begins, as others before it, in the late nineteenth century with Frederick Douglass. The personification and forerunner of black pan-Americanism ("an organizing concept encompassing movements and expressions for development and racial solidarity in intra-racial communities"³) and takes us up to the dictatorship of François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier and the role of Haitian exiles in the 1960s.

In between are a number of case studies which explore both inter-racial and intra-racial schemes of development and uplift, originating in the United States. Implemented on behalf of Haiti these schemes spanned cultural, economic and political spheres. They include: Claude Barnett's Associated Negro Press information network, which sought to aid business investment in Haiti through positive reporting and; the Moton Commission which explored potential trajectories of educational uplift in Haiti.

Polyné in a number of ways approaches topics popular in current historiography from a subverted angle. Briefly he uses the Haitian Revolution as an 'overture' to his study, mirroring the rituals of U.S. black and Haitian 'transnational exchanges of ideas', however he does not retread that oft-treaded ground for long.⁴ Neither does he reconsider African-Americans' abstract musings on Africa as a diasporic homeland. Rather, refreshingly he explores a set of case-studies which demonstrate the physical and psychological investments of African-Americans in the second half of their hyphenated identity.

However, he then goes onto pessimistically argue that it was this investment in national (racist U.S.) systems and identity that overrode intra-racial alliances between U.S. and Haitian blacks stifling if not dooming black pan-Americanism to failure.⁵ In support of this he demonstrates U.S. African-Americans' psychological investment (like the wider U.S. population) in U.S. paternalism. This aided, what Polyné highlights as, the problematic conflation in U.S. black consciousness of the history and objectives of the Haitian Revolution, with an ideal imagined Haiti as a 'city upon a hill', which requires their assistance to be

uplifted to 'finish the unfinished' revolution which would could Haiti *perfectly* representative of black achievement.⁶

This text also approaches the subject of 'silences' so memorably asserted by Laurent Dubois, with regard to Haiti's place in historical memory, from a novel angle. Rather than re-layering the idea of U.S. African Americans struggling to assert the importance of Haiti's revolution in the wake of Western discourses silencing of it as an unthinkable history. (As Kachun notes, so popular in current historiography that historians themselves are creating a 'historical mythology' of African American celebrations that there is not definitive evidence for.⁷) Polyné highlights U.S. African-American hesitations to recount this history, and silences about it when contemporary Haiti presented a less attractive option than other intra-racial symbols or national inter-racial opportunities.

Most notably the hesitation of the vast majority of U.S. African-Americans to criticise the marine invasion of Haiti in 1915, until they had a need to speak through the injustices of that regime to highlight their own unjust experiences in the 'Red Summer' and the need to fight to establish an anti-lynching bill.⁸ Similarly after the years of cultural, economic and personal intra-racial relationships between these two groups Polyné notes the somewhat disappointing 'deemphasising [of] the importance of Haiti' among U.S. African Americans.⁹ Polyné locates the origins of this deterioration, and the slow silencing of Haiti as a symbol of race pride, in the 1960s, as a result of the actions, and mainstream press accounts, of the Duvalier dictatorship.

Each case adds a layer which supports this fresh perspective and cements the foundational argument of the need for a broader understanding of the role of pan-Americanism in the consciousness of African-Americans.

¹ Millery Polyné, *From Douglass to Duvalier*, p.15

² Ibid, p.11: including emigration, diplomacy, mission, economic co-operatives and, anti-imperialist campaigns.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p.7

⁵ Ibid, p,24

⁶ Ibid, p.4: Quoting Ron Daniels scheme 'Cruising into History'. A weeklong salute to 1791 planned for August 2004 in the United States, aimed at promoting future economic and cultural development in Haiti which was 'shipwrecked' by the political unrest of Artistide's kidnap in February.

⁷ Mitch Kachun, 'Antebellum African Americans, Public Commemoration, and the Haitian Revolution: A Problem of Historical Mythmaking' in Jackson and Bacon (eds), *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution*, p.93-106

⁸ Millery Polyné, *From Douglass to Duvalier*, p.62

⁹ Ibid, p.186