

THE HAITI READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS



*Laurent Dubois, Kaiama L. Glover, Nadève Ménard,
Millery Polyné, and Chantalle F. Verna, editors*

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For our children,
especially the youngest of the bunch,
Serenity Macaya Verna

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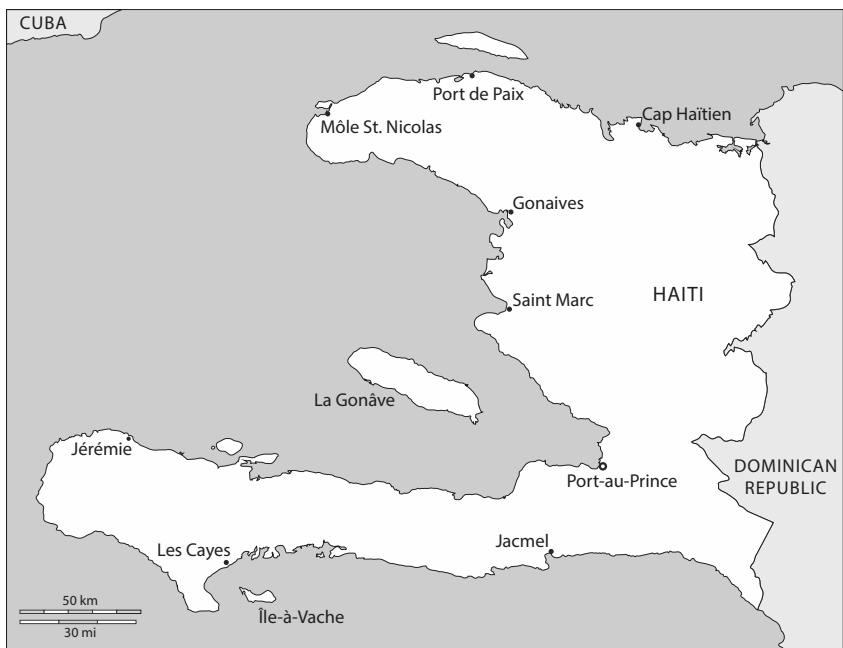
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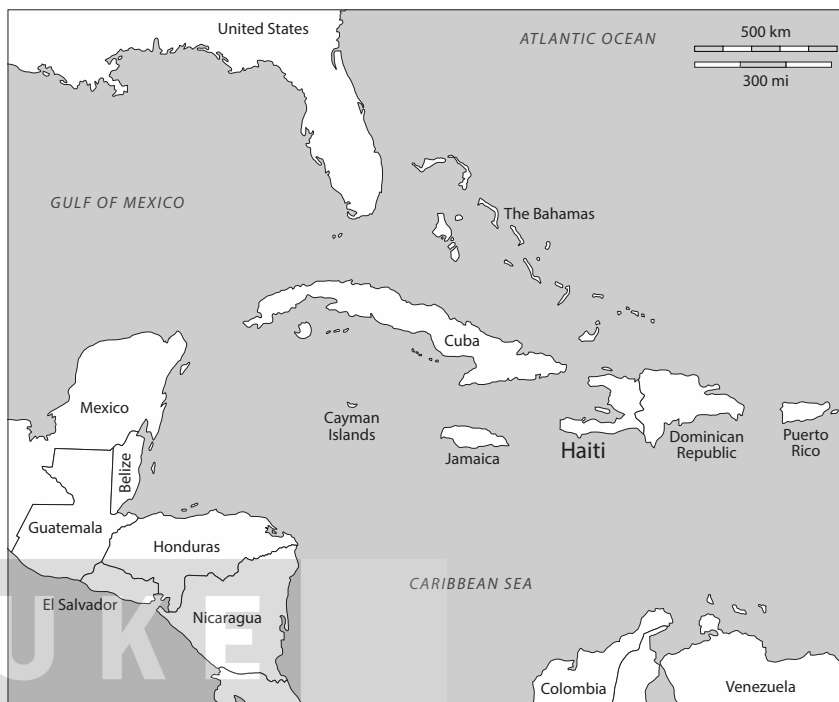
Introduction

At times it can seem as if Haiti is on everyone's mind—at least for a news cycle or two. Yet despite periods of intensive interest in Haiti, there is, overall, a surprising lack of knowledge about the specifics of the country's history and culture in the United States. And the way Haiti is viewed by natives and foreigners runs a wide gamut: for Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, Haiti is the place where “Négritude rose up for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity,” but for many in the United States the country is characterized by the endlessly repeated taglines and memes about its extreme poverty and perceived inhabitability or seen primarily as a site of political turmoil and backward cultural practices. For many Haitians, meanwhile, Haiti is a place from which to escape by any means, even at the risk of death. For many others, Haiti is the ultimate “manman cheri,” the place of true home, the one to which they will always return.

Haiti's presence in both the Caribbean and global imaginary has long been colossal. Whether celebrated for its revolution and victory over Napoleon Bonaparte's army or disparaged for its poverty and political instability, Haiti is a highly symbolic nation. Yet few beyond Haitians and Haitianists, specialists of the country, venture beyond the symbols. One way to understand the limited knowledge about Haiti is as a consequence of isolating linguistic barriers. That is, while the United States is currently the most powerful external force shaping Haiti's political and economic reality, the country's literary and intellectual production since independence in 1804—along with its juridical and political life—is predominantly francophone. Yet French is in fact a minority language in Haiti, as the majority of the population speaks exclusively Haitian Creole—a language accessible to relatively few non-Haitians. As a result, even while select U.S. Americans are deeply connected to and interested in Haiti, few have more than a cursory knowledge of the country's historical and cultural realities. Those who seek to learn about Haiti find themselves almost entirely reliant on the writings of non-Haitians or Haitian writers residing in diaspora. And while a sizable portion of writing about the country by non-Haitians is certainly well informed and based on a long engagement with Haiti, an overwhelmingly negative narrative has also been constructed around the island nation. Indeed, few places have been on the receiving end of as much hostility, distortion, and fantasy on the part of outsiders.



Map of Haiti



Map of Caribbean

The Haiti Reader seeks primarily to introduce a broad audience of anglophone readers to Haiti via the cultural productions of Haitians themselves. Having selected representative works from the nation's scholarly, literary, religious, visual, musical, and political culture, we hope to make plain the extent to which Haitians have long understood themselves as part of an extra-insular, progressive human community. We have sought to identify and translate key texts—poems, novels, political tracts, essays, legislation, songs, testimonies, folktales—that illuminate Haiti's history and culture. We have prioritized the presentation of material from Haitian writers and thinkers, much of it translated into English for the first time here, and have included only a very few writings by foreign observers, which are generally easier to access. Our process of selection has also been guided by a desire to offer a kind of counternarrative, highlighting some lesser-known aspects of Haitian life and culture. But overall we aim to offer as full a representation as possible of well-known as well as lesser-known periods in Haiti's past. The volume opens and closes with two transformative moments in Haitian history: the creation of the Haitian state in 1804 and the 2010 earthquake. In addition, we explore both widely known episodes in Haiti's history, such as the U.S. military occupation and Duvalier dictatorship, and such often-overlooked periods as the “long” nineteenth century and the decades immediately following Haiti's “second independence” (i.e., the end of the U.S. occupation) in 1934.

Given Haiti's far-reaching and complex entanglements with North America, Europe, other parts of the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa, this reader is necessarily national and transnational in scope. As such, it will stand as a challenge to the way Haitians have, despite their determining role in New World political history and geography, found themselves isolated and unwelcomed outside (and often even inside) their own island—bounded and unwanted, faced with countless obstacles to inhabiting the wider world. Our collection looks closely at the extent to which regional aesthetic canons ghettoize Haiti's literary production and exacerbate the nation's sociopolitical isolation. Less widely circulated than works from other parts of the (franco-phone) Americas, Haitian writing has indeed had far less access to the most fundamental prerequisite for circulation: translation. *The Haiti Reader* takes steps toward addressing that exclusion by showcasing excerpts from a wide range of literary works by Haitian writers, many of them relatively unknown to anglophone audiences.

Even though Haitian thinkers have had vital engagement with issues of race and racism, nationalism, cultural formation, colonialism, postcolonialism, and political theory, Haitian thought remains largely on the margins of broader debates and canons. To take but one example among many, the pioneering work of Anténor Firmin—who in the late nineteenth century attacked the scientific racism of reigning anthropology in a work that presaged the later approach of Franz Boas—was not translated into English until 2002

and remains largely excluded from understandings of the history of anthropological thought. In effect, for the past two centuries, Haitian intellectuals like Firmin have been in dialogue with theoretical currents in Europe and the Americas and have sought to both confirm and challenge broader interpretive frameworks by drawing on their country's historical experience. Our book pays particular attention to the work of such intellectuals, providing those who read what follows with a clearer sense of Haiti's nation-building efforts and engagement with the world from the nineteenth century to the present day.

Our strategy in composing *The Haiti Reader* is premised on an acknowledgment of Haiti's marginalization and the consequent importance of situating the country and its cultural contributions squarely in the heart of the Americas. Recent scholarship on Haiti reveals its significant imbrication in cultural, ideological, and radical social movements in the Western Hemisphere and beyond—including abolitionism, Pan-Americanism, Pan-Africanism, internationalism, Indigenism, Négritude, and decolonization. The Haitian Constitution of 1816, for example, granted citizenship to all Africans and Indians seeking residence in Haiti. This proved to be a powerful legal decree given the intensification of slavery in the Caribbean and the United States, and the potential of enslaved peoples (sailors, maids, cooks, etc.) to step onto free Haitian soil. As such, the Haitian Constitution had significant implications with respect to broader New World discourses on property rights, citizenship, sovereignty, and freedom.

At the same time, *The Haiti Reader* explicitly addresses and reflects the various borders within the country. Haiti's rather ambivalent status as a "francophone" nation, for example, raises important questions concerning who "gets to" write—and so to represent—this country and its inhabitants: from the working- and middle-class Haitian diasporans who actively impart remittances and humanitarian aid through hometown associations, to the privileged border-crossing members of the intellectual and merchant elite class and the individuals and communities that are the subjects and consumers of their works and products. Our goal throughout the *Reader* is therefore to place in dialogue—and at times in tension—texts from different places within Haitian society, drawing on aspects of vernacular culture, particularly popular and religious music, to reflect the multiplicity and diversity of perspectives within the country itself.

The Haiti Reader is composed of eight chronological parts. Each section begins with a contextualizing introduction. We then present three kinds of documents in each section: visual materials; contemporary texts, including laws and political documents, essays, poems, and literary texts; and excerpts from scholarly works contextualizing the particular period and presenting broader approaches to thinking about Haitian history and culture. Unless otherwise noted, all ellipses are ours, added to indicate omitted material.

Our selections are not—could not be—exhaustive, and we have made many difficult choices while deciding what to include. Certain of these omissions were a matter of logistics: in several instances where we wished to feature certain authors or texts, the difficulty or expense of obtaining the rights to reproduce them here proved prohibitive. We have also had to be selective in fixing our temporal parameters. The *Reader* is almost exclusively focused on postindependence Haiti, offering little material on colonial Saint-Domingue or the Haitian Revolution. Readers interested in material on the Haitian Revolution can refer to Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1787–1804: A History in Documents* (2006). In addition, there are fields of interest whose surface we have barely scratched. One of the more significant is queer Haitian Studies, most recently and compellingly advanced in the work of scholars like Dasha A. Chapman, Erin L. Durban-Albrecht, and Mario LaMothe in their pioneering issue of *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, “Nou Mache Ansanm (We Walk Together): Queer Haitian Performance and Affiliation.” Indeed, there could be many other versions of a reader based on Haiti and its history, and we hope future scholars will continue the task of translating and publishing a broader array of works by Haitian writers and thinkers. Our hope for this text is that it will help readers discover certain topics and writers so that they can then delve into them more deeply. We offer it as an invitation into the vast corpus—an extensive archipelago—of Haitian thought, whose marvels and diversity we have sought to illuminate in the pages that follow.

We would like to add a few words on language here. We have focused particularly on making sure that the voices of Haitian writers who are not well known to anglophone readers can be made accessible, and a majority of the featured texts are translated here for the first time. We have sought to offer translations that allow anglophone readers to enjoy these texts while maintaining the style and energy of the original—including, in some cases, original terms in Creole and French. This being said, the fact that *The Haiti Reader* is presented in English somewhat obscures Haitian linguistic reality. Although Haitian Creole was only granted official language status with the 1987 Constitution, both French and Haitian Creole have been integral parts of the country’s linguistic fabric dating from the colonial period, even if historically they have followed different paths. While French was brought to the island by European colonizers and imposed as the language of authority, Haitian Creole was forged by the merging of various languages and peoples within the new society. Both languages underwent many internal transformations as well as shifts in their relationship to each other over the centuries. Today, in addition to the two official languages, English and Spanish are also widely spoken within certain segments of Haitian society, and in various regions of the country. It is impossible for us to render such linguistic complexity with translations into one target language. Nonetheless, we want to

remind our readers that the majority of texts presented here were translated either from Haitian Creole or from French. Several creative texts make use of both languages. Traditional distinctions that view Creole as an oral language mainly used by the poor and disenfranchised, and French as a written language mainly used in formal situations or by the elite, require nuance today more than ever. We have done our best to communicate this linguistic complexity through our introductions and translations, and we urge those who are able to read the texts in their original languages to seek out the originals and do so where possible as a next step to a greater understanding of Haiti's languages and culture.

In addition to the five main editors, we also worked with contributing editors who generously offered us selections and translations from their own work. In this sense *The Haiti Reader* is the result of a true *konbit* (cooperative, communal labor). It channels the much larger and energetic field of Haitian studies, and we hope, contributes to ever-expanding research and discussion about Haiti and its many connections to the human experience worldwide.

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