

Respè ak Respekte (Respect and Enforce): History, Urban Planning and the Tensions of Humanitarianism in Haiti

“The Idea of Africa: From the Haitian Revolution to the Liberation of South Africa”

Panel Discussion
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Thirty-five seconds. The devastating 7.0 earthquake that shook the foundation of Haiti’s capitol, Port-au-Prince, and neighboring cities such as Léogâne and Jacmel on January 12, 2010 lasted less than a minute, but it has fundamentally altered the lives of millions of Haitians and the way millions imagine and interact with that nation. The “Quake” in Haiti has generated hefty aid packages, billions in pledges and inspired a myriad of exposés and editorials across the globe on strategies to rebuild Haiti. Relief efforts, five and ten point plans, “recovery operations” and so-called “blueprints” are important, uplifting responses to such a traumatic event. Yet, will these blueprints unveil a “new Haiti”? It is unlikely, not simply because these strategies tend to be more reactionary than visionary, but because these plans continue to replicate capitalist modes of development that have produced structural underdevelopment and inequality in the Caribbean and other sites where local populations suffer from the adversity of post-coloniality and neoliberalism. Moreover, my hesitation about recovery tactics stem from the emergence and implementation of reconstruction plans that fail to discuss power and politics in Haiti at the local, national and international level, and how Haiti’s history informs these dynamics.

Close to five years after the earthquake, while the nation is still faced with a protracted United Nations military occupation, many Haitians (in Haiti and in the North American diaspora) call into question the efficacy of foreign disaster relief, local/national governance and entrenched non-governmental organizations. These questions concerning sovereignty, human rights, economic development and security are critical to Haiti’s uplift, but also resonate with many developing post-colonial nations in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. It is with these important issues in mind that the University of Rochester symposium, “The Idea of Africa: From the Haitian Revolution to the Liberation of South Africa”, is leading the way in critically thinking about African-descended peoples’ engagement with the aforementioned social, political and economic forces that inform the 21st century.

As one of the foremost symbols of “Africanness” in the Americas and radical abolitionism in 19th century, Haiti’s historic and contemporary life serves as an important complement to a critical interrogation of the African continent and the legacy of colonialism and anti-racist protest. Therefore, three leading scholars have agreed to present their work on Haiti that properly contextualizes the recent efforts to rebuild the country and the proliferation of the term “a new Haiti” over the past four years. *Millery Polyné* is an Associate Professor and Associate Dean of Faculty and Academic Affairs at New York University’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study. He is the author of *From Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti and Pan Americanism, 1870-1964* (University Press of Florida, 2010) and *The Idea of*

Haiti: Rethinking Crisis and Development (University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Polyné's work seeks to historicize the multiple ideas of Haiti since independence (1804) and attempts to disrupt and contextualize the idea of the eternal Haitian crisis so as to potentially encourage more critical and comparative scholarship and popular writings on the Haitian republic. *Harley Etienne* is an Assistant Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. His work examines the role of land tenure policy and land rights in the post-earthquake recovery. Etienne asserts that the relationship between the country's formal institutions (that is, legal and educational systems) and Haiti's "social organization [and] capacity for social service provision" are relegated to secondary or tertiary roles in national planning strategies. Hence, in an effort to push the boundaries of the field, Etienne emphasizes that a broad, interdisciplinary spectrum of professionals—law, social work, civil engineers, public policy advocates—engage in a comprehensive and unified dialogue to produce durable urban and rural regeneration and offset popular pressures to rush the rebuilding process. *Greg Beckett* is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Bowdoin College. His work on Haiti has appeared in leading periodicals such as *Small Axe*, *Social and Economic Studies*, and the *Journal of Haitian Studies*. Beckett brings an insightful perspective on the proliferation of non-governmental organizations and international aid programs in Haiti. Framed in the context of humanitarian imperialism Beckett examines the significance of respect, self-respect and disrespect within the moral and political landscape of post-earthquake Haitian politics.

This panel serves as a critical reminder to those who care about post-colonial development that Haiti has been fixed in alterity by hegemonic forces, specifically U.S., French and Latin American governments during the post-1804 period through the 20th century. These nations have largely understood the country as a New World embarrassment ill-equipped for the intellectual, governmental and cultural challenges critical to the advancement of modernity. This idea of Haiti, similar to yet distinctive from the analyses of V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Idea of Africa* (Indiana University Press, 1994) and Walter Mignolo's *The Idea of Latin America* (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), is entrenched in the sphere of deviance, which has become more pronounced in the wake of Haitian reconstruction strategies, media coverage, and even with the reporting (or lack thereof) of the "minimal" damage and casualties in the February 2010 earthquake in Chile that registered 8.8 on the Richter scale. The media's and political analyst's comparison of Haiti and Chile speaks to the reverberations of race and its history within the Americas, in addition to the perceptions of adaptability to Western notions of development and progress. Thus, if the narratives of Haiti continue to be mired in the discourse of deviance, how does that inform international relief efforts in the short term and removal and reconstruction plans in the long term? What is the idea of Haiti and how does it inform competing visions of a new Haiti? What are Haitian responses to this idea and how do they challenge or reinforce it?

As scholar Gina Ulysse asserts, Haiti is in need of new narratives that challenges enduring tropes, recovers and rethinks local, national and transnational histories and memories, and highlights the creative activism, cultural production and innovation emerging from Haitian peoples before and after the earthquake.