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Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, Kaiama L. Glover, Mark Schuller, and Jhon Picard Byron, eds., *The Haiti Exception: Anthropology and the Predicament of Narrative*. Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2016. vi + 225 pp. Index and notes. \$120 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1781382998.

Review by Laura Wagner, Duke University.

Haitian exceptionalism manifests in the most banal circumstances. A few weeks ago, I flew to Port-au-Prince, which meant participating in the particular ethnographic spectacle that is the departure gate of any Haiti-bound flight. Several groups of U.S. missionaries wore matching T-shirts bearing Bible verses, carrying their own pillows under arms encircled with silicone bracelets printed with Bible verses. Most were boisterous teenagers in long skirts or zip-off pants who practiced a few phrases of Haitian Creole (“*mèsi*,” “*pa gen pwoblèm*,” “*Jezi renmen w*”; “thank you,” “no problem,” “Jesus loves you”). They wondered aloud, worrisomely, whether Tylenol qualified as a pharmaceutical product to be declared at customs upon arrival. On the plane, the flight attendants gave standard pre-flight instructions in English, and then a Haitian flight attendant gave instructions in Creole. The latter contained a great deal of extra information intended for Haitian passengers only—for instance, a detailed description of how to lock the lavatory door (“so someone doesn’t come in and give you a ‘*gwo sezisman*,’” a big shock), and an admonition to dry one’s hands on paper towels, which were not then to be thrown on the floor. A middle-aged Haitian woman seated next to me bristled. “I’m going to call the airline,” she said. “Do they think we’re a bunch of dummies?”

That is Haiti in the popular imaginary: singularly doomed or singularly resilient, singularly needful of salvation or intervention or understanding, singularly in need of redemption or singularly redeeming, Haiti is at once the “poorest country in the Western hemisphere” and the “the world’s first Black republic.” It is, paradoxically, unlike everywhere else, yet a proxy and laboratory for everyone else. *The Haiti Exception* examines the “deeply peculiar phenomenon [of] Haiti’s popularity” (p. 1)—not to “denounce” but rather to “reflect usefully on our own positionings of Haiti in our own work as well as to interrogate specific moments of knowledge production *in* and *on* Haiti” (p. 6). If the volume has a patron saint, or perhaps an avenging spirit, it is Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and the various contributors are all, whether explicitly or implicitly, in dialogue with and paying tribute to the late Haitian anthropologist and historian, who meticulously diagnosed the dangers of Haitian exceptionalism and opened the door to the alternative narratives and theoretical frameworks that followed. *The Haiti Exception* features contributions from a formidable multi-disciplinary array of Haitian and foreign scholars and activists, among them anthropologists, historians, scholars of literature, and performance theorists, each of whom explores, rebukes, or tries to come to terms with one or more aspects of Haitian exceptionalism.

The first section, “Tracing Intellectual Histories,” features contributions by activist anthropologist Mark Schuller, anthropologist Jhon Picard Byron, literary scholar Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, and “anthrohistorian” Laurent Dubois. Each author explores the roles and evolutions of Haitian and non-Haitian anthropological thought, practice, and political engagement in the twentieth century. In “The Anthropological Uses of Haiti: A *Longue Durée* Approach,” Mark Schuller examines the ways in which,

over the past century or so, “Haiti has served as a testing ground, a laboratory, for general anthropological theories, not to mention for international aid, as the two are often linked” (p. 15). From the US occupation (1915–1934) onward, anthropological research has marched hand in hand with foreign intervention and international “development.” This mode of engagement proved profitable for anthropology, raising its profile and thereby encouraging anthropologists to embrace a “scientific,” positivist approach. Schuller then turns to Sidney Mintz and the two influential currents in activist anthropology that have emerged from his legacy. The first is Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s historically focused anthropology that ultimately critiqued and challenged Haiti’s perpetual relegation to the “savage slot”—a critique that has been renewed and expanded in recent years by scholars such as Gina Athena Ulysse who have passionately advocated for “new narratives” about Haiti. The second is the social justice-oriented anthropology exemplified by physician-anthropologist Paul Farmer whose work focuses on structural violence and suffering. In “Transforming Ethnology: Understanding the Stakes and Challenges of Price-Mars in the Development of Anthropology in Haiti,” Jhon Picard Byron traces the history of Haitian ethnology, the fraught relationships between Haitian anthropologists and the global field of anthropology, and his own intellectual trajectory. The piece represents in part his effort to rehabilitate the renowned ethnologist Jean Price-Mars, who, he argues, was co-opted and reduced by Duvalierist thinkers and politicians. “There is obviously much more to Price-Mars than the shambles that a tragic history of dictatorship has produced” (p. 37). Moreover, Byron argues, these nationalistic oversimplifications of Price-Mars’s work have had concrete, harmful effects on Haiti’s democratic transition.

Drawing inspiration from Vincent Brown’s documentary *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness*, Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken’s “On ‘being Jewish’, on ‘studying Haiti’ ... Herskovits, Métraux, Race, and Human Rights” examines the ambivalent engagements of anthropologists Melville Herskovits and Alfred Métraux with Haiti and the question of race, and how their Jewish heritage and concomitant concerns about human rights informed these engagements. She contends with “the fact that a ‘politics of knowledge’, especially where a human rights agenda is concerned, has privileged the Jewish experience over that of Afro-descended persons.” Though Herskovits and Métraux may have been informed by their own “understanding of the lived experience of racism” (p. 64), they are also white scholars who built their careers and reputations by studying Black life. Given this curious tradition of researchers and writers of Jewish heritage who have been drawn, for one reason or another, to Haiti, I found myself wishing Benedicty-Kokken’s piece were long enough to address what “being Jewish” and “studying Haiti” might mean in the contemporary moment, as notions of human rights and Jewish identity have evolved, as have the politics of outsider representation and the discipline of anthropology. In his gorgeously written “Haiti, Gender and Anthrohistory: A Mintzian Journey,” Laurent Dubois provides, first, a lucid discussion of the “border zone” (p. 75) that is “anthrohistory,” as indeed “the foundations of Caribbean history and anthropology are irredeemably transdisciplinary” (p. 76). Dubois then explores the intellectual trajectory of Trouillot’s mentor, Sidney Mintz, to illustrate the central importance of gender, long marginalized in historical and anthropological studies of the Caribbean. Dubois details how market women (particularly one woman named Nana Adrien) fundamentally shaped Mintz’s understanding of economic and social relations in Haiti—though Mintz missed the spiritual and affective truth that Adrien’s “nights spent on the floor of the market were not meant just to support her living family but a much larger family that included ancestors and the *lwa*” (p. 88). Dubois concludes that “to write the history and anthropology of Haiti is necessarily to write a women’s history” (p. 86).

The second section, “Interrogating the Enquiring Self,” features contributions from literary scholar Kaiama Glover, scholar of performance studies Barbara Browning, and art historian Carlo Célius, each of whom address, in different ways, intersections of the anthropological and the artistic. In “Written with Love: Intimacy and Relation in Katherine Dunham’s *Island Possessed*,” Glover traces her own scholarly trajectory and links it to that of Dunham. For Glover, Dunham’s ethnographic memoir is a brave affirmation of the role of passion and affect in ethnographic fieldwork. Dunham’s writing is sensual and unapologetically female; her identity as a researcher and a woman are mutually constitutive

and she is “perfectly willing to make use of her femininity and sexuality as they figure in the realization of her professional and personal objectives” (p. 102). This is not to impugn Dunham as uncommonly opportunistic (she was not), but rather to celebrate her transparency: before anthropologists were speaking of the “reflexive turn,” Dunham recognized that the line between “fieldwork” and “real life” was a false one. Glover discusses at length Dunham’s often volatile romance with Dumarsais Estimé, at the time a young black nationalist politician who would one day become president, but concludes that “from beginning to end, *Island Possessed* is a chronicle of Dunham’s love affair with Haiti” that allows Glover herself to “become more capable [...] of admitting my desiring self into my work” (p. 107).

Barbara Browning’s “Dance, Haiti and Lariam Dreams” is a rapturous meditation on contagion, infectiousness, penetration, and the violence of Othering—“the excessive, almost obscene intimacy implied in cross-cultural research” (p. 114). She weaves together the stories of several non-Haitian artist-researchers—conceptual artist Ralph Lemon, Katherine Dunham, and experimental filmmaker Maya Deren—and the “pathologizing gaze of anthropology” (p. 116) that they each employed but also struggled against. Browning’s piece is beautifully written, but felt to me like circling without landing—or perhaps it was intended to be a rumination, “stirring the waters of these somewhat disparate stories” (p. 116), rather than an explicit declaration. In “‘Haitian Art’ and Primitivism: Effects, Uses and Beyond,” Carlo Célius illustrates how artistic creation in Haiti has been consigned to the eternal “savage slot” of primitivism, which determines the “authenticity” of Haitian art. He takes as his point of departure a research seminar at which his own complex and multivalent discussion of Haitian artistic creation was “reduced to nothing more than a response to a Western call—nothing more than a response to Western expectations.... All that was said was that I had shown primitivist objects that belonged to an aesthetic of the ugly. Apparently, my presentation was deemed so inconsequential that it was pointless to recall its content” (p. 122). In short, his argument was not only heterodox, it was (to borrow Trouillot’s oft-cited characterization of the Haitian Revolution) so “unthinkable” as to be incomprehensible. Célius dissects how “primitivism” has been positioned as the Other in relation “fine arts” or “modern art,” and how this division has been continually reified. He locates the development of the notion of “fine arts” within the history of colonial expansion, when “civilized” European powers sought to assert their cultural, geographical, and physical domination over non-Europeans. That primitivism has come to represent the hallmark of authenticity and indeed Haitianness in Haitian art has meant, naturally, that primitivism has itself become a commodity. The renowned artist Hector Hyppolite’s reputation as an *oungan* (Vodou spiritual leader), lack of formal training, and seeming rise from obscurity confirmed his “authenticity” within the primitivist paradigm, but, as Célius argues, Hyppolite “was not simply ‘discovered’; he played a determining role in his own exposure. He was the source of his own legend” (p. 128). The idea of “primitivism” cannot and should not be separated from colonial discourse, structural and market factors, and racialized assumptions.

The third section, “On Nation-Building: Histories, Theories, Praxes” features contributions from anthropologist Deborah Thomas, literary scholar Valerie Kausen, and Michèle Pierre-Louis, former prime minister of Haiti and current director of the Fondasyon Konesans ak Libète (FOKAL) in Port-au-Prince. These essays focus broadly on state formation, state sovereignty, and non-state institutions like NGOs, and the ways in which these macro entities interact with everyday political life. In “Haiti, Politics and Sovereign (Mis)recognitions,” Thomas rethinks Haitian exceptionalism by reading Jamaica through Haiti, examining the histories of colonial and postcolonial state formation, peasant dispossession, state violence, and notions and expressions of sovereignty across the two Caribbean countries. Drawing from the scholarship of Trouillot and Michaeline Crichlow, she elegantly brings together two strands of anthropological research: the anthropology of the 1930s through 1950s that focused on peasant societies, and the anthropology of violence of the 2000s and 2010s. She concludes that in Haiti and Jamaica alike, “extraordinary state violence can emerge within the context of intense and shared nationalism as peasant production becomes ever more marginal to global capitalism, as the cultural politics of Africanisms become increasingly commodified and as power is increasingly

centralized within the state, despite the neoliberal trend toward shrinking the power of the state in favor of global markets” (p. 147).

In “Haitian Culture in the Informal Economies of Humanitarian Aid,” Kaussen discusses the ways in which expansive, but often ill-conceived, communication programs became central components of post-earthquake intervention upon displaced people. These purportedly therapeutic programs represent a form of neoliberal governmentality, which “let people ‘vent’ so they wouldn’t do so in more dangerous ways” (p. 162)—in which creating docile, participatory citizens represents a modern, secular twist on the colonial civilizing mission. Though Kaussen focuses on international organizations’ efforts to use Haitian cultural symbols and practices (such as *taptaps* and Haitian Creole-language soap operas), the piece is in some ways more about the logic and culture of international aid. In “Urban Poetics,” one of the most urgent essays in this volume, Michèle Pierre-Louis examines the city of Port-au-Prince in the post-earthquake moment—a disaster of such magnitude that might have prompted sweeping urban reform, but did not. A capital that has never fully escaped the constant external threats nor the internal hierarchies that have divided it since colonial days, Port-au-Prince is a city of notoriously poor infrastructure, swollen by migration from the countryside, a city that was neither designed nor intended to serve the majority of its population. Pierre-Louis takes as an example the case of Martissant, the poor Port-au-Prince neighborhood that “the media never failed to characterize as ‘lawless’” (p. 186). It is there that FOKAL has undertaken a project of urban renewal, transforming the long-neglected Parc Martissant into “a public space of great beauty that would transcend stigmatization and exclusion, while at the same time opening a space for a sustained dialogue with the population living in the Urban Development Zone around the park” (p. 188). As she details this process, Pierre-Louis concludes that Port-au-Prince and its *quartiers populaires* might, for all their precarity, in fact be a miracle of ingenuity by a people again and again displaced and systematically disenfranchised who have striven to create community and home.

Each of the contributors examines not only his or her discipline’s relationship with Haiti and with Haitian exceptionalism, but also his or her personal experience navigating this terrain. It is, for the most part, the right kind of self-examination, revealing the writers’ subjectivity, vulnerability, and even culpability without succumbing to self-indulgence. There is Schuller’s acknowledgment of “[his] own complicity in what could be called the research-foundation-industrial complex” (p. 27), Byron’s experience as a “child of 1986” who “allowed himself to be seduced by the political movements and intellectual debates of the moment” (p. 35) and his emergence as an ethnologist during Haiti’s halting democratic transition, and Dubois’s bracing admission that he has failed to highlight the roles of women in many of his historical writings. There is Benedicty-Kokken’s personal reflection on being a researcher of partial Jewish heritage in Haiti, Glover’s conscious embrace of her own love for Haiti, and Célius’s raw memory of having his scholarship distorted and misunderstood by white scholars. And there is Claudine Michel’s epilogue, which traces the history of Haitian studies via her own journey as a scholar, first a student at the Faculté d’Ethnologie and then as a member of the Haitian diaspora studying “home.” She leads the reader to rest at the volume’s conclusion at the *kalfou*, the crossroads where different methodologies, voices, and experiences intersect and await an uncertain future. These honest and searching self-examinations, with their imperfect conclusions, will be familiar and consoling to other scholars who have questioned the ethical implications of our involvement with Haiti, our indebtedness, our acknowledgement that, to paraphrase Schuller, “Haiti has been very good to [us]” (p. 18).

*The Haiti Exception* will be of interest to scholars of Haiti, most obviously to anthropologists, but also scholars of literature, performance, art, urban planning, and anyone interested in the interplay between academic research and international aid. Its multidisciplinary approach means, naturally, that not all chapters will be of equal interest to all readers, but the volume as a whole should be relevant to anyone who thinks about how narratives and stereotypes are created, maintained, reinforced, and subverted. Though it may appear to be a niche subject, the volume is remarkably readable and light on academic

jargon, and as such will be accessible to interested undergraduates and non-academic audiences. It is a pleasure to find contributions from established Haitian intellectuals like Byron, Célius, and Pierre-Louis whose work has not thus far been widely translated into English or consumed by Anglophone readers, and particular credit should be given to Glover and Benedicty-Kokken for their work not only as editors, but also for their literary and fluid translations of these chapters.

With some hesitation, I note that this volume is, at \$120, very expensive—prohibitively so for most students and many scholars. Of course, the book's price is not in the control of the editors or the contributors—many of whom have demonstrated a long-standing commitment to public scholarship—and the impacts of market forces on academic publishing are undeniable. Nonetheless, the price tag says a great deal about who the intended audience is: major research libraries and those with access to them. The seemingly indestructible narrative of Haitian exceptionalism that this volume explores so thoroughly is at its strongest and most pernicious outside of academia—among missionaries and television weatherwomen, parachute journalists and policymakers. These essays, especially those by Haitian authors, should be made *more* accessible, not less. The opportunity to experience Haitian scholarship should not be limited to a privileged few.

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