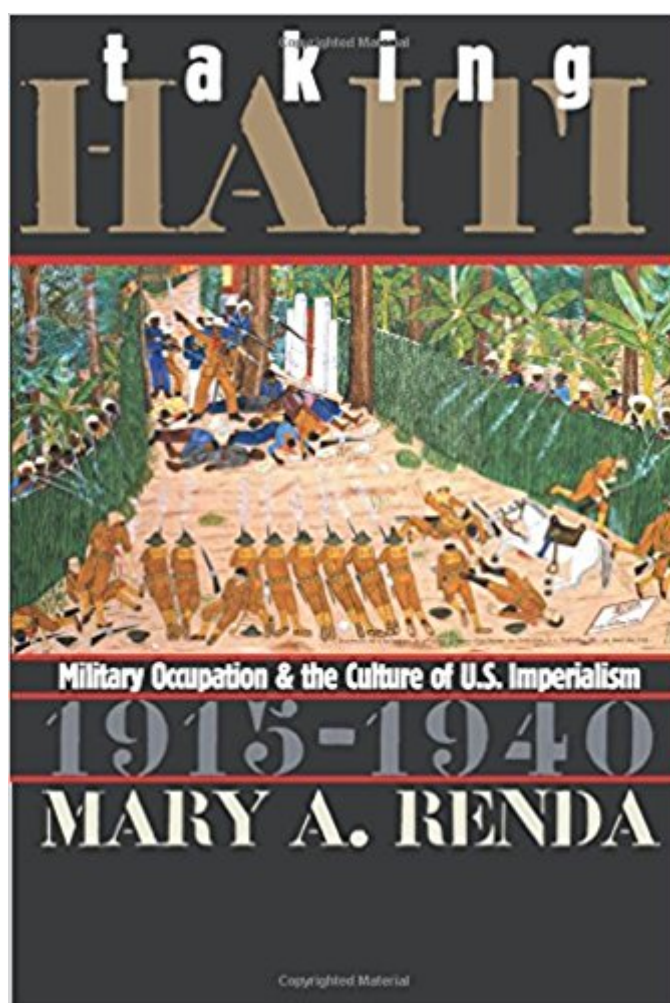


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# Taking Haiti: Military Occupation And The Culture Of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940



## Synopsis

The U.S. invasion of Haiti in July 1915 marked the start of a military occupation that lasted for nineteen years--and fed an American fascination with Haiti that flourished even longer. Exploring the cultural dimensions of U.S. contact with Haiti during the occupation and its aftermath, Mary Renda shows that what Americans thought and wrote about Haiti during those years contributed in crucial and unexpected ways to an emerging culture of U.S. imperialism. At the heart of this emerging culture, Renda argues, was American paternalism, which saw Haitians as wards of the United States. She explores the ways in which diverse Americans--including activists, intellectuals, artists, missionaries, marines, and politicians--responded to paternalist constructs, shaping new versions of American culture along the way. Her analysis draws on a rich record of U.S. discourses on Haiti, including the writings of policymakers; the diaries, letters, songs, and memoirs of marines stationed in Haiti; and literary works by such writers as Eugene O'Neill, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. Pathbreaking and provocative, *Taking Haiti* illuminates the complex interplay between culture and acts of violence in the making of the American empire.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In July 1915, U.S. armed forces occupied Haiti, where they remained until 1934. Renda (history and women's studies, Mt. Holyoke Coll.) explores the intellectual underpinnings of the U.S. military and political actions and how the occupation affected American intellectuals and artists. Supporting the economic and military reasons for the occupation was a sense of paternalism and racism. Haitians

were seen as a backward, inferior people needing the white man's benevolent protection. This protection turned at times to violence, as U.S. marines suppressed Haitian uprisings during the occupation. In turn, the exotic nature of Haiti as a whole, and the lure of its voodoo tradition in particular, shaped individual Marines along with black and white American thinkers, writers, and artists: Orson Welles, Eugene O'Neill, James Weldon, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston produced wonderful works of art inspired by Haiti. Renda uses a wide collection of materials from diaries, memoirs, letters, books, plays, and the arts to produce an excellent cultural study of the development of American imperialism. Recommended for all libraries. Stephen L. Hupp, West Virginia Univ., Parkersburg Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Renda draws from a wide variety of texts--marines' memoirs, missionary reports, pulp fiction, official documents, African American and Haitian literature--to suggest the multiple meanings of the United States occupation of Haiti. (Emily S. Rosenberg, Macalester College)"Taking Haiti" provides a superb analysis of the complex cultural meanings of the Haitian occupation as well as its aftermath on the North American mainland. (Gail Bederman, University of Notre Dame)Renda uses a wide collection of materials from diaries, memoirs, letters, books, plays, and the arts to produce an excellent cultural study of the development of American imperialism. Recommended for all libraries. ("Library Journal")Renda's interpretation of Haiti as 'America's Africa' combines an empathetic analysis of the American military presence with a provocative discussion of interventionist paternalism's impact on America's identity. (Dennis E. Showalter, Colorado College)

Paternalism is the central theme of Mary Renda's analysis of the US involvement in Haiti during the early part of the 20th century, an imperialistic foray in to what most Americans (including the thousands of US Marines sent there) considered to be a "backward," undeveloped land of childlike inhabitants. Renda asks two questions in this well-written book: "who did US American men think they were in Haiti and how did the people of the United States imagine themselves when they read about their nation's occupation there?" (9) She structures her study in two parts, in order to answer each of these concerns. Statesmen, diplomats and soldiers of the U.S. involved in the invasion and occupation of Haiti in the second decade of the 20th century brought with them a piece of cultural baggage known as paternalism. By observing and reacting to Haiti with this frame of reference, U.S. Americans almost universally saw their duty as occupiers as being in the role of parent to the native Haitians, to bring to the island and its people the benefits of what U.S. Americans regarded as order, stability, secure commerce and modern, rational customs. "Paternalism," she notes, "was the

cultural flagship of the United States in Haiti." (15) As agents of U.S. cultural conscription, Marines tried to remake Haiti in to something of their own image of American society primarily through coercive means, though this largely failed due to Haitian resistance. Nevertheless, attitudes toward race, gender and sexuality the soldiers brought with them was the lens through which they viewed this island to be tamed. The racism of the Marines made them see the native Haitians as either ignorant "children," or savages not worthy to rule themselves. Through this paternalistic discourse, policy makers "appealed to the marine's sense of manhood," (303) which made the later look on their roles as that of fathers to children. This of course did not apply to the rebels they were expected to kill. "Seeing people of African heritage as children," Renda concludes, "enabled marines to imagine themselves acting on protective and disciplining motivations. Seeing them as targets, however, did not." (156) Renda argues in chapters 5 and 6 that the Marines' occupation in Haiti had a pronounced effect upon U.S. citizens at home; it was a military intervention that remade U.S. America. She writes that the US imperialism "could...intervene in domestic cultural politics," (185) and she attempts to support this claim by pointing to the popularity of the journalism of American writer James Weldon Johnson, Eugene O'Neill's hit play about a Caribbean leader entitled *The Emperor Jones*, a novel, film, and cruise line travels to the island in the 1920s. With regard to these claims, Renda is unconvincing. It is difficult to agree with her conclusion that Haiti was "no sideshow" (15) given other larger and more significant U.S. ventures abroad including World War I, the administration of the Panama Canal, and continued U.S. involvement in the Pacific Islands. Renda acknowledges this issue herself by quoting NAACP President Moorfield Story: "It is very hard to get the people to consider anything except the war [in Europe.]" (189) Additionally, Renda offers no convincing evidence as to how many Americans actually read Johnson's work or cruised the islands; the mere fact that critics acclaimed O'Neill's play is hardly proof of a significant intervention in cultural politics. Despite these limitations, *Taking Haiti* is an excellent study of the imperialism of the U.S. in which Renda identifies clearly the racial, sexual and gender apparatus that came along with the marines, all under the cloak of interventionist paternalism, the "cultural fabric" of Haitian occupation. (303)

Renda's book illuminates the early stages of America's invisible empire: providing an excellent account of paternalism and the racial undercurrents that swell beneath the surface. While I believe she is a little too harsh in her assesment of the Wilson administration, the ideological premise and the conclusion in which she arrives is dead on. A must read for anyone with an interest in U.S. foreign policy and caribbean history. The final chapters are a bit tedious (but that could be my lack of

interest in U.S. cultural exoticism) and the "gender" angle is a bit over-amplified for my taste. Otheriwse a great book.

I got as far as page four in the acknowledgments when I read " I feel happily indebted Michele Barale pushed me to explore the queer dimensions of my topic". I had to reread the book's title again. This is suppose to be about the Marine Corps occupation of Haiti, not about a personal journey into your world of Queerness.

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