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Haiti and Ukraine: A Double Standard at Work

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Between February and December 2022, the United States' aid to Ukraine reached 48 billion dollars. The breakdown is as follow: \$9.9 billion (21%) for humanitarian aid, \$15.1 billion (31%) for financial aid, and \$22.9 billion (48%) for military weapons and equipment.

According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), more than 82,000 Ukrainians and "their immediate family members have been paroled into the United States under the U4U process." Under the U4U process, Ukrainians are permitted to stay within the United States for at least two years.

In the past 18 months, the United States has provided more than \$171 million in life-saving humanitarian assistance, and more than \$90 million in security support, to Haiti. However, it is also true that under the current U.S. administration more than 20,000 Haitians have been deported back to the island nation.

In my view, both Haiti and Ukraine are human tragedies, equally deserving our intervention, support, and sympathy. But it becomes problematic when one tragedy is presented as more worthy of attention and deserving of our money and sacrifices. There is a stark contrast between the corporate media's treatment of Haiti and Ukraine bordering on racism and collective persecution, enabling the systematized abuse of Haitians and denying them equal treatment, as the figures above illustrate.

This reflective piece is intended to bring attention to this normalized discrepancy and systematized discrimination against Haitians.

Haiti is emblematic of Diasporic Africans' resistance to slavery in the Americas/Caribbean and the systems of oppression it produced, much as Ethiopia is emblematic of Continental Africa's resistance to European colonization. Both nations were castigated by Western powers for championing the path to African freedom. Haiti for defeating French colonial rule in Saint-Domingue in 1804, and Ethiopia for defeating the Italian forces at the Battle of Adowa in 1896, and freeing herself from the grip of European despotism. Therefore, it comes as no surprise to see ordinary Africans from Dakar to Lagos, and Nairobi to Johannesburg calling for

an end to the current civil war in Ethiopia. This randomized continental consensus has not been seen since the fight against the Apartheid system.

Symbolism matters in human development: it strengthens group identity, buttresses 'religious' rituals, and conveys a sense of purpose in life. Haiti and Ethiopia symbolized freedom, the possibilities of successfully challenging European hegemony by Africans, and further opening new venues for imagined promises.

During the Antebellum period, it was customary for enslavers to perceive any African American anti-slavery resistance movements as part of the ghost of the Haitian Revolution. This is evident in reading accounts of Denmark Vesey's revolt in Charleston, South Carolina in 1822, Nat Turner's insurrection in Virginia nearly a decade later, and responses to David Walker's *Appeal* to freedom in 1829. These resistance movements were all perceived by guardians of Southern slavery as another Haitian nightmare. Evidence shows little change between yesterday and today. Corporate journalism often perpetuates the centuries-old account that advocates fear, paternalism, and racism against Haitian cultural identity.

Colonial policies toward Haiti were bent on ensuring its failure as the first Black state in the "New World." In part, this reflected one of the justifications for colonization vis-à-vis Continental and Diasporic Africans, the purported inability of the Black race to build viable political institutions. As such, ensuring Haiti's failure as a nation-state became a part of the 'White man's burden.'

Haiti successfully unchained itself from French slavery and secured its independence. By merit, it is the only successful revolt of enslaved people in the history of the world. Under the watch of the U.S., France siphoned millions (the equivalent of billions today) in fees, and in the name of reparations for France's economic and social "losses," as well as the accrued interest, from the island's treasury into the early 20th century.

Then, beginning in 1914, Haiti was re-occupied by the United States for 19 years. In recent years, the country has fared no better; it has been beset by both imperial forces and natural disasters. Twelve years ago, it was devastated by a 7.0 magnitude earthquake that killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced over a million people. However, the corporate media appears disinterested in this troubling history of extortion and exploitation in its discussions of the root causes of the Haitian immigration.

Julie Hollar has shown that in covering Haitian immigration to the U.S., the *Washington Post* selectively departs from its style of reporting on other immigration or conflict crises. The *Post* uses terms such "illegal immigrant"—a dehumanizing

and inaccurate slur according to the AP style guide - “illegal border crossings” and “surges,” to report about Haitians. Haitian suffering is normalized as a mundane feature of life for the residents of the island.

American and European consensus on Ukraine is clear: the more weapons and money to send the Ukrainians, the better. American and European consensus on Haiti is also consistent: the more NGOs to send the Haitians, the better.

Donor nations only see the Haitian crisis in the prism of an inefficient and corrupt government; their reports are littered with the overused technical jargon of bureaucratic sciences such as “total chaos,” “rampant gang violence,” “inefficient operation,” and “food shortages and resurgent epidemic.”

But what are the sources of this so-called Haitian inefficiency? In a nutshell, donor nations have established an aristocracy in Haiti ruled by Western NGOs and their surrogate humanitarian agencies, who are accountable only to their foreign sponsors, and their “Sustainable Development Roadmap” for Haitians. In response to their diminished status, Haitian bureaucrats created their own gangs to protect their interests. Between the two competing legitimacies, ordinary Haitians are left to either survive among the warring groups, or venture overseas.

Suffice it to say, government by NGOs is a feature of neo-colonialism. Guy Gran, the intellectual father of the idea, was wrong in claiming that NGOs are the pinnacle of development by a people, and in advocating their rule as a shortcut to a just world. NGOs should not replace citizenry. “Efficiency” should not be valued over democracy.

Media reports on Ukraine are resplendent in the language of freedom, resilience, and sympathy. Media reports on Haiti are awash in dire language blaming government corruption, inefficient institutions, and even voodoo practices. If we are to hold the corporate media to account as dependable sources of information, then we should make it clear that both the U.S. and France owe Haitian people more than they owe any other foreign nations. In *The Aftershocks of History*, Lauren Dubois recounts how Haiti's troubled present can only be understood by examining its complex past, and the hostility that its newfound freedom generated among the colonial powers surrounding the island nation. Recently, powerful *New York Times* reporting has brought to light one of the overlooked reasons of Haiti's debacle. Through the articles, "The Ransom: Invade Haiti, Wall Street Urged. The U.S. Obligated," and “The Ransom: How a French Bank Captured Haiti,” we learned of the collusion between private and public entities in the U.S. and France to rob the

Haitian nation. An open question remains: when will these entities return those assets to the Haitians?

The postscript of Lorgia García-Peña's book, *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction*, is called "Anti-Haitianism and the Global War on Blackness." To borrow a West African expression for clarity, it reads like a griot's script and sounds like the Kora. It tells vividly and sadly how here and there in the Caribbean, the structures of power lurk behind anti-Haitianism to ensure the continuous exploitation and destruction of Haitian bodies for the benefit of national and foreign corporations.

I remember attending a conference in Panama City in 2021, and while introducing the visitors to the good work of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation around the Panama Canal, our German co-host did not miss the opportunity to highlight the danger that Haitian border sacrilege poses to the Panamanians. His diatribe was echoing the corporate media narrative, in which Haitians are antithetical to national security.

On the political level, one cannot miss the fact that while American soldiers were dying at Kabul Airport to evacuate Afghan immigrants safely to the United States, U.S. border patrol agents on horseback were whipping Haitian migrants in Del Rio, Texas. To show its seriousness on national security, the Biden Administration was charting plans to repatriate the Haitians back to Haiti. The total disregard for the humanity of Haitians reached a new low, in which the Administration even weighed holding Haitian immigrants at Guantánamo, where it also detains al-Qaeda operatives.

I am sure that it is intellectually tempting to postulate that the two cases are not comparable. Such an opinion could be easily grounded in a self-serving selection of facts to construct one's house of truth. However, there is an old Wolof adage: "if there are different truths, it is because someone is lying". For if the Haitian situation had been recognized as a human tragedy of great proportion, demonizing the irreconcilable responses would not have been possible. Debunking this normalizing equation ought to be a common project for Continental and Diasporic Africans.

Stakeholders in African matters should construct their argument along these lines: Haiti is 600 miles off the coast of the U.S., and it is connected to the U.S. through geography, diaspora, and history. Simply put, Haiti is more connected to the U.S. than Ukraine. The U.S. does not owe a historic debt to Ukraine, but it does to Haiti. What the U.S. owes Ukrainians is political, but what it owes to Haitians is both

ethical and historical. But the corporate media chooses to make Haiti a foreign land and their suffering invisible and illegible. In a fair judgment both Ukraine and Haiti would enjoy the right under international law to seek protection and asylum in the U.S. But Ukrainians enjoy this right, while Haitians do not.

What can we learn from this discrepancy? How should African intellectuals react when corporate media becomes a mouthpiece for global inequality? How should they navigate these global hypocrisies, in which their fate is delegated to the hands of private investors and corporate imperial societies?

African scholarship ought to be a humanistic craft because of its rich and ostracized diasporas. It should examine marginality and how Blackness is translated into handicap in globalized human transactions. Black suffering has to be centralized as a secret site for respect and contemplation. In the current global exchange of ideas and people, it is rather showcased as a place of intermingling enjoyment and entertainment. There is a methodized ability to separate Black personhood from professional utility. Think about how we perceive Pelé, Mbappe, and/or LeBron James in sports? We are able to render these individuals' human stories invisible and use their professional talent as a site of entertainment. For example, one can love and celebrate Pelé's genius as a soccer player without even thinking about his plight growing up in São Paulo. French President Emmanuel Macron can publicize his friendship with Mbappe as a French national treasure without acknowledging the plight of Africans in the banlieues of France. I started my American journey in Cleveland, Ohio, which is a few miles away from Akron, LeBron James' beloved hometown. Therefore, I am aware of his personal stories, which are ignored in his framing as a global sports figure. The corporate media uses the same framework to weigh Haitians' humanities. In the absence of market interest in those subjects, individual Haitians are rendered invisible.

There are cracks in the global consensus in covering Black suffering, and Haiti is a case in point that demands our undivided attention. Recasting the meaning of Black lives in new popular imaginations is long overdue. Black lives should not only matter when George Floyd is executed in the high noon of social media. They should also matter when Haitian immigrants are rendered invisible, and Haiti normalized as an unfortunate act of fate.

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