Chapter 5

The Moody Republic and the Men in Her Life: François Duvalier, African-Americans, and Haitian Exiles

Millery Polyné

The Republic of Haiti is a beautiful woman waiting to be wooed. Unfortunately, her political behavior tends to scare away potential sweethearts, and on this fact alone rests the tale of the republic’s chronic economic woes

Evans, 1959a, p. 9

This chapter explores the complex relations between African Americans, Haitian exiles, and the Haitian state during the early period of the Duvalier regime in Haiti. It examines how competing visions of Haitian development, Pan-Americanism and US-Haitian relations were debated and shaped within and between these communities in response to Duvalier’s rule. While the Haitian exile groups were invariably anti-Duvalierist and pursued a vigorous campaign against the Haitian leader within the United States, African American responses to Duvalier were not so clear-cut. Indeed, in the early years of his rule, many within African American media, business and intellectual circles expressed public support for Duvalier and, by extension, criticism for those Haitian exiles who sought his downfall. Although some members of the black press were among the first to “raise the red flag” (Pamphile, 2001, p. 168) on state tyranny in Haiti, other significant voices defended the Duvalier administration as “the brightest hope for the future” of the country (Chicago Defender, 1959). These competing
viewpoints were often played out in the pages of the black press as the various interests sought to promote their particular political agendas and to influence the shape of US policy toward the Haitian state. However as the excesses of Duvalier’s rule became more apparent, it was increasingly difficult to sustain a supportive position. By 1964, when Duvalier formalized his position as President for Life, the diversity of positions articulated by the interested African American community in the early years of Duvalier’s presidency was replaced by a notable silence.

An early example of the conflicting views over Haiti can be found in the pages of the *New York Age*, one of the most influential African American newspapers in the period. In 1959, Haitian exile Camille Lhérisson, former secretary of state for Public Health and Education under the Magloire administration, used the paper to voice his displeasure with the Friends of Haiti, a US-based philanthropic group that supported Haitian nongovernmental organizations despite the abuses carried out under Duvalier’s regime. As secretary general of the Democratic League of Haiti (DLH), part of a constellation of anti-Duvalierist political factions that had emerged in key sites of Haitian migration, Lhérisson argued that any help from the Friends group would be fruitless “until an atmosphere of democracy and human liberty was restored to the Republic” (Evans, 1959b; Pamphile, 2001, p. 167). In January 1959, Lhérisson warned *New York Age* readers not to be fooled by Duvalier’s “new found love for the United States,” noting that “unspeakable tortures and humiliations” were still being inflicted upon the elderly, women, and children by the Cagoulards, the “infamous night prowling secret police” (1959). Furthermore, he cautioned Washington to “think carefully before making any further decisions to prop up a regime…which is due to fall momentarily” (ibid.). In this view, the potential $6 million grant-in-aid offered by President Dwight Eisenhower’s administration, coupled with support from US advocacy groups, served only to perpetuate a Haitian authoritarianism firmly rooted in the country’s postindependence period. Exiles such as Lhérisson therefore attempted to establish the Duvalier government as lawless, “authoritarian,” “nihilistic,” and—in the era of the Cold War—pro-communist—to push a political agenda