

## [White Folks and Christians in Haiti](#)

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The first thing I noticed were the missionaries. I was taken back by their presence moments after arriving at the gate where I would soon depart on American Airlines Flight 949 for the [Caribbean Studies Association](#) (CSA) Annual Conference being held in Port-au-Prince. There were dozens of missionaries. All of them were white. All of them were southern. All of them were Protestant. They wore those identities with pride on shirts emblazoned with church names, state logos, and toothless platitudes like “Rebuild Haiti.”

I watched them, a number of emotions bubbling to the surface. Resentment. Pity. Alienation. Mostly alienation. I *knew* them—better yet, I knew the distance between us. They live in restricted suburbs, attend segregation academies, and worship in all-white churches. They have—they want—no contact with African Americans. Yet here they were preparing to descend upon Haiti. Planning to stay for a few days, a week at most. Purporting to care about black people in Haiti, just not at home.

[picture2.png](#)



Missionaries at Toussaint Louverture International Airport (Photo by Author)

They were certainly not the first. This impulse to “save” Haitians emerged in the nineteenth-century, at a time when U.S. imperialism and Protestant foreign missions grew in tandem. Often the two went hand-in-hand. For example, in January 1889, the editor of the *Kansas City Gazette* predicted that the

best way to resolve an ongoing struggle between two different political factions in Haiti was “for white folks and Christians to step in and put an end to the dirty muddle.” He even insisted that Haitians “want a regiment or two of Yankee or British soldiers amongst them to keep the peace, then ship in a lot of soap and compell (sic) them to get clean.” After all, he concluded, “you can never civilize them so long as they are so utterly filthy.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Sitting at that gate, I thought about how much had remained the same. Across time, it seems that the script has been clear. Wring hands over the latest disaster in Haiti. Continue to ignore racial inequality at home. Respond with self-righteousness. Make sure to emphasize the inherent flaws of Haitians. Racialize them. Provide aid that fits a narrative of Anglo-American superiority. Even better, provide aid that supports U.S. capitalism or foreign policy. [Rinse and repeat.](#)

Does that have to be the script, though? Or can we trash it? Certainly, there have been attempts. In response to the *Gazette*, African American journalist Henry W. Rolfe tried to put a mirror to white America. “It seems to us,” an editorial in his *American Citizen* began, “that the white folks and Christians have a broad field for missionary operations here at home.” In fact, “a more dirty (sic), savage and muddled state of affairs never existed than is to be found in Christian America.” That should have been clear in a moment when white southerners used relentless violence to overthrow Reconstruction and lay the foundations of Jim Crow. While calling attention to widespread anti-black terrorism at home, Rolfe pointed out that “white folks and Christians” [would] never civilize the Haytians with a Bible in one hand and a shot gun in the other.” To him, it should was obvious that the “Negros of Hayti, [were] not stuck on Yankee and British religion.”<sup>[2]</sup>

[picture1.jpg](#)

**White Folks and Christians in Hayti.**

The “Kansas City Gazette” editorially says:

“Every day the wires are burdened with news from Hayti. The thing is getting tiresome, and it is about time for white folks and Christians to step in and put an end to the dirty muddle. There seems to be two parties,

American Citizen, January 25, 1889

Rolfe must have questioned whether he was shouting into the wind—white folks and Christians would continue to descend upon Haiti; they would initiate a [brutal occupation](#) of it two decades later. I wonder whether we have the courage to hear him now. It should be obvious that there remains more than enough work for reform-minded Americans to do at home; that condescension is a poor foundation for a better relationship between the two oldest republics in the Western Hemisphere; that aid with strings or cultural baggage attached is not aid worth giving. Just last week, Nashville Public Radio ran a [report](#) on the American Red Cross’s work—or lack thereof—in Haiti. Among other things, it shows that the organization spent a quarter of the donations received after the 2010 earthquake on internal expenses and gave most of the rest to other nonprofits who then covered their own overhead. The evidence about what it means to “rebuild” (that is the current euphemism for “civilize”) Haiti is glaring. But who is paying attention? Who is watching the Red Cross? The missionaries?

In *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives*, Haitian-American artist, activist, and anthropologist [Gina Athena Ulysse](#) raises a similar question about foreign journalists covering Haiti: “Who is studying you, studying us?”<sup>[3]</sup> I could not escape that question as I sat at Toussaint Louverture International Airport awaiting my return flight to Miami from Port-au-Prince. After attending a [beautiful CSA Conference](#) in which new narratives of Haiti were, in fact, at the forefront, I was confronted with a wave of old narratives about civilization, intervention, and aid. Once again, I was faced with a swarm of missionaries. This time, most were from an Ohio-based non-profit. But everything else was the same. The whiteness. The cheap slogans. The inheritance, consciously or not, of a long, misguided inclination to “step in and put an end to the dirty muddle.”

[1] "White Folks and Christians in Hayti," *American Citizen*, January 25, 1889.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Gina Athena Ulysse, *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: A Post-Quake Chronicle* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015), xxvi.

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