Practitioners of U.S. diplomatic history have not been quick to welcome postmodernism onto their turf, even as it has flourished in other fields of study. As a group, we have tended to find postmodern language obscure and its logic difficult. Its influence has nevertheless penetrated our space in related forms, such as gender and cultural studies: witness Kristin L. Hoganson’s *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine Wars*, or Susan Jeffords’ *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Beginning as far back as 1967 with Akira Iriye’s pioneering *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations*, cultural studies have also been moving into international terrain, as in Andrew J. Rotter’s recent *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947–1964*, or Mark Bradley’s *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950*.¹

In *Taking Haiti*, Mary Renda seeks to expand this bridgehead by applying a fully postmodern cultural analysis to a specific historical episode, the U.S. military intervention in Haiti from 1915 to 1934. She defines culture as “the process of signification through which people ... structure both social relationships and the material world” to “engage in the ongoing production of meaning” (p. 24). Such culture, she says, is not fixed, but fluid, constantly evolving. The interactions between Haiti and the United States changed both cultures significantly, Renda believes.

Eschewing a detailed narrative of the nineteen-year occupation of Haiti, Renda focuses first on the interaction of the U.S. Marines and Haiti, then on the cultural impact of Haiti on the United States. “How does a man imagine himself when he is about to pull a trigger?” she asks (p. 3). Her sources throw

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light on the subjective experience of the men in the field. They include a rich mix of Marines’ diaries, letters and memoirs, official reports, journalistic accounts, pulp fiction, travel books, and Haitian writing on the occupation.

Who were the Marines? Coming from diverse backgrounds, a part of their common identity was their claim to manhood—a fluid concept in 1915, Renda says. Middle-class men began to fear the softening influence of a tame, over-civilized, industrial society. Working-class men had evolved a “rough” concept of manhood in bars and pool halls, espoused by the Marines, who “lived hard, drank hard, fought hard.” Marine indoctrination cultivated a sense of separation from civilian worlds; men were taught to find their sense of worth in their status as Marines. Thus, Marine encounters with the Haitian people involved a struggle for manhood, identity, and power.

Paternalist discourse was a prime cultural mechanism by which the occupation was made acceptable, and Renda deconstructs at length the statements of occupation authorities from Woodrow Wilson and his secretaries of state to Haitian gendarmerie commander Smedley Butler and his subordinates. Paternalism was an expression of superiority and control expressed in parent-child terms: a form of domination masked as benevolence. It enabled Marines in Haiti to see themselves as benefactors of an immature people, while encouraging citizens back home to view Haiti as being within the proper scope of U.S. concern. Paternalism was joined with exoticism and a sensationalized image of Haiti that made the occupation all the more appealing to the national imagination. The potent mix of paternalism and exoticism created a contradiction: on the one hand, an emphasis on the proximity and familial relation supposed to exist between the parental and child-like peoples; on the other, the assumption of a vast cultural distance between the U.S. and Haiti.

The U.S. occupation rested on violence, and Americans’ cultural distance from Haiti made violence easier. If Haitian women were seen as sexually promiscuous, then rape became more easily trivialized. Guerrilla resistance to U.S. rule could be stigmatized as mere banditry: Marines were told that they were protecting peaceful “good” Haitians from dangerous “bad” Haitians in their campaign against native defiance. Objections to Marine control became black challenges to white supremacy and masculinity; they created tensions that could not be fully managed by paternalist guidelines.

This sampling of a few of Renda’s observations is illustrative rather than comprehensive; one must read the book to grasp all that she attempts to do. The same is true of my comments on the second section of her book, which deals with Haiti’s impact on the United States between about 1920 and 1940. Considering its small size, blackness, and material backwardness, that impact was remarkable. Occurring during World War I, the U.S. incursion into Haiti at first attracted little attention outside that country. Once the war ended, however, it moved quickly into the limelight. Black author and journalist James Weldon Johnson went to Haiti in 1920 and wrote a series of articles for the Nation, an influential journal, attacking the occupation. He persuaded the
Republican party to take it up as an issue in the 1920 presidential campaign, contrasting Wilson’s idealistic rhetoric about world peace with the record of the Caco War in Haiti, in which the Marines killed thousands of Haitians. Once safely in office, the Warren Harding administration left the occupation in place, but Haiti had emerged into public view.

Once there, it spurred the imagination of a generation of writers. The figure of Henri Christophe, a leader in Haiti’s bloody struggle against French slave-based colonial rule who made himself emperor, inspired Eugene O’Neill’s hit play The Emperor Jones, John Vandercook’s Black Majesty, and other works and became an icon of Haiti’s supposedly exotic and barbaric past. Exoticism quickly degenerated into sensationalism, as ex-Marines and others wrote lurid tales of voodoo sacrifice, sex gone mad, “living dead” zombies, and black magic. Countless stories appeared along these lines, while the “zombie” became a generalized concept.

A presumably more serious view of Haiti was projected by a cohort of travel writers, some of whose books, such as William Seabrook’s The Magic Island, were bestsellers. Renda makes an extensive analysis of Seabrook’s work, plus those of three other sojourners in Haiti. All four, while differing widely, “laid claim to an exotic Haiti figured largely in terms of race and sexuality” (p. 231). Black writers were especially interested in the Haitian occupation, which they saw as a racist challenge to black achievement. Haiti’s successful revolt against French rule suggested future possibilities for black activism in the United States, while the country’s indigenous native culture was a source of fascination. In one form or another, Haiti inspired an outpouring of artistic expression in the United States, and Renda’s examination of that outpouring is one of her book’s valuable contributions.

While Renda is justified in seeing the Haitian experience as both revealing and significant, she tends to overstate her conclusions. She believes that the occupation and its cultural impact gave Americans “opportunities to reimagine their own nation and their own lives” (p. 20), “facilitate[d] the domestic renegotiation of racial and gender issues in ways that other interventions did not” (p. 36), “led to the destabilization of the American identity as it had been known” (p. 300), and “helped to redefine America as an empire and no longer a ‘mere’ republic” (p. 305). Conversely, the Haitian experience served to shake the structure of gendered, racial, and sexual meanings on which a hegemonic conception of U.S. national identity had rested. How does one respond to such large claims? Some are merely unproveable. Is it possible to know, for example, how much the impact of the Haitian occupation contributed to reshaping gender and sexuality among Americans? Others are distinctly doubtful. Renda virtually ignores the entire period from 1898 to 1915 in asserting that it was largely in Haiti that America redefined itself as an empire. A flood of contem-

porary utterances after 1898 made that very point; the nation had engaged itself in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and Philippines, while going on almost at once to extend its hegemony over the Caribbean region. If the Haitian experience involved the United States in a nonwhite society and led to identity issues, so did the Philippine War and the great turn-of-the-century debate over imperialism.

While it is not a central theme, readers will note a strain of economic determinism as regards the motivation and effects of the occupation. Renda implies, for example, that U.S. domestic prosperity rested on the economic exploitation of semicolonial areas such as Haiti (p. 306), a view now held by few economic historians.

While much of Taking Haiti is easily read, some parts are distinctly less so. We read that white people in the United States used Haiti to “articulate racialized psychological discourses of self-hood” (p. 56). A documentary source “promised to illuminate a sexualized space of interiority” in its author (p. 230). At times, the text is thick with such statements. But the effort is worth making, as Renda has interesting things to tell us, most of them only sketched in this review.

Renda acknowledges that the Haitian occupation was not simply a cultural event: “[I]t was also a matter of strategy, politics, economics, and policy” (p. 22). How are we to integrate all of these? In a recent review, H. W. Brands concludes: “The new diplomatic historians . . . are correct to argue that culture provides the context in which policy decisions are made. But context is not content, and, for the content of decisions, the tools of the traditionalists still work best.” Some may not agree. Each of us will have to decide what use to make of these newer insights, but clearly they have carved a place in our discipline.

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