American culture maintained a complicated relationship with Haiti from its revolutionary beginnings onward. In this study, Peter P. Reed reveals how Americans embodied and re-enacted their connections to Haiti through a wide array of performance forms. In the wake of Haiti’s slave revolts in the 1790s, generations of actors, theatre professionals, spectators, and commentators looked to Haiti as a source of both inspiring freedom and vexing disorder. French colonial refugees, university students, Black theatre stars, blackface minstrels, abolitionists, and even writers such as Herman Melville all reinvented and restaged Haiti in distinctive ways. Reed demonstrates how Haiti’s example of Black freedom and national independence helped redefine American popular culture, as actors and audiences repeatedly invoked and suppressed Haiti’s revolutionary narratives, characters, and themes. Ultimately, Haiti shaped generations of performances, transforming America’s understandings of race, power, freedom, and violence in ways that still reverberate today.

Peter P. Reed is Associate Professor of Early American Literature at the University of Mississippi. He is the author of Rogue Performances (2009) as well as essays on Black Atlantic performance, theatre culture, and Haiti’s impact on American culture.
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Staging Haiti in Nineteenth-Century America

Revolution, Race and Popular Performance

Peter P. Reed

University of Mississippi
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On January 12, 2010, a few months after I began the initial research for this project, Port-au-Prince was struck by the most violent earthquake the island had seen since the eighteenth century. It was, as others have observed, both a natural and a man-made disaster, one of many that Haitians have endured over the years. From the 1790s onward, Haiti has often been regarded as a site of disaster, and tragedy has often been the lens through which outsiders view Haiti. This project, while exploring such perspectives, also acknowledges that the cultures and the lived experiences of Haitians have always exceeded such limited themes. This particular effort to comprehend aspects of Haiti’s impact on the world has learned from and admires the ongoing efforts of Haitian teachers, students, and activists I have been privileged to meet, all working to share Haiti’s rich culture and history and to improve the health, education, and cultural lives of Haitians. In its own small way, this book hopes to contribute to that work, adding to our understanding and appreciation of Haiti’s complex and diverse contributions to world culture.

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