

VOODOO, ZOMBIES, AND MERMAIDS: U.S. NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF HAITI*

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ABSTRACT. Newspaper articles in the United States paint a picture of Haiti as a failed state, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. These articles place the blame of the country's problems entirely on Haiti itself, with little regard for the outside forces that also contributed to the country's present-day state. This study is a critical geopolitical analysis of Haitian representation in U.S. newspapers. I empirically examine a year's worth of articles from 2004 written in five major U.S. newspapers. From these articles I analyze both the words used to describe Haiti and the emerging media frames. Critical studies have shown that representation in the media can greatly impact the conventional wisdom surrounding a place and legitimize social inequalities. By understanding the images used to describe Haiti, I hope to develop a means of rethinking popular perceptions of the country. I argue that only then can the problems of Haiti be more effectively addressed and a new dialogue created, one that encompasses the entire story of this Caribbean country. *Keywords:* Caribbean, content analysis, geopolitics, Haiti, media, newspapers.

On 14 March 2004 the *New York Times* ran an article entitled "Life Is Hard and Short in Haiti's Bleak Villages" (Weiner 2004). In the lead paragraph is the statement that "diplomats call Haiti 'a failed state,' a nation done in by dictators and disasters." This notion of Haiti as a failed state, unable to properly govern itself, done in by itself and acts of nature, is a common frame that can be found on the pages of U.S. newspapers. When one examines the history of Haiti, one finds a nation caught in the crossfire of geopolitics, its fate resting mostly on the fickle interests of the United States, Canada, and France. Yet the press shows little regard for the role outsiders have played in helping to create the so-called failed state (Lawless 1992; Klak 1994; Sack 1997; Farmer 2006).

A growing collection of geopolitical studies has critically examined place images in newspapers and magazines (K. Dodds 1993; Sharp 1993; Klak 1994; Myers, Klak, and Koehl 1996; Larsen forthcoming). Although both Thomas Klak and Soren Larsen chose Caribbean locations for their studies, Haiti has never been the subject of a critical geopolitical study of media that concentrates solely on representations of it in the daily media (Yin 2003). In this article I present the results of both qualitative and quantitative content analyses of more than 700 articles on Haiti in six major U.S. newspapers. My research revealed that the coverage in 2004 rarely acknowledged the connections of the past and the broader relationship of Haiti to the rest of the world. I do not mean to privilege an academic account over a journalistic

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