

---

## Democratic Insecurities: Violence, Trauma, and Intervention in Haiti.

Berkeley, University of California Press (“California Series in Public Anthropology”), 2010, 384 p., bibl.

**Adia Benton**

---



### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/17866>

DOI : [10.4000/etudesafriaines.17866](https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.17866)

ISSN : 1777-5353

### Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 3 octobre 2014

ISSN : 0008-0055

### Référence électronique

Adia Benton, « Democratic Insecurities: Violence, Trauma, and Intervention in Haiti. », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [En ligne], 215 | 2014, mis en ligne le 02 octobre 2016, consulté le 24 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/17866> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.17866>

---

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 24 septembre 2020.

© Cahiers d'Études africaines

---

# Democratic Insecurities: Violence, Trauma, and Intervention in Haiti.

Berkeley, University of California Press (“California Series in Public Anthropology”), 2010, 384 p., bibl.

Adia Benton

---

**JAMES, Erica Caple. — *Democratic Insecurities: Violence, Trauma, and Intervention in Haiti*. Berkeley, University of California Press (“California Series in Public Anthropology”), 2010, 384 p., bibl.**

- 1 In January 2010, the world watched as an earthquake destabilized an already fragile Haiti and a cadre of government and international actors mounted an effort to aid the country’s recovery. The aftermath of the earthquake, of course, was not the first time that the Haitian government and the international community intervened to repair, uplift and rehabilitate Haiti and its people in times of crisis. Indeed, crisis, unrest and insecurity are commonly understood to constitute the norm in Haiti. In *Democratic Insecurities*, Erica Caple James describes and analyzes interventions designed to address the psychological, economic, social and political effects arising from protracted insecurity in Haiti during her ethnographic fieldwork (1996-2000). Her examination of these interventions provide a lens through which to understand the complex social, cultural, political, economic and historical dimensions of what Haitians call ensekerite —“the seemingly random political and criminal violence that ebbed and flowed in waves amid ongoing economic, social, and environmental decline [...]” (p. 8). James consciously avoids that all-too-common assumption that ensekerite is merely a characteristic of state failure or dysfunction, arguing instead that it describes a condition “experienced as vulnerability, anxiety, and a heightened sense of risk at a sensory level, especially by those who were most vulnerable [...] and the embodied

uncertainty generated by political, criminal, economic, and also spiritual ruptures that many individuals and groups continue to experience [...]” (p. 8).

- 2 In the book, which is organized into seven chapters, James meticulously documents her interlocutors’ experiences of ensekerite and with institutional responses to the political and economic instability presumed to cause it. Owing to her unique range of data collection methods and analytical tools, James offers her reader a highly detailed and nuanced depiction of what she calls the aid and terror apparatuses—the institutional, discursive, infrastructural and geopolitical arrangements that form the foundation for development and humanitarian aid to Haiti (Chapters 1 and 2). James derives her data from US government bureaucratic management tools like “results frameworks” and grant proposals, interviews with program beneficiaries, officials, and field workers, and participant observation in community-based organizations, clinics and Port-au-Prince neighborhoods. In addition to being an anthropologist, James practices a form of movement and talk therapy called the Trager Approach, in which she manipulates areas of the body in pain to elicit “sensory biographies”. This technique enables her to analyze not only her clients’ verbal expressions of their suffering but also their embodied responses to and experiences of protracted ensekerite.
- 3 James addresses an impressive—if not, at times, overwhelming—range of social theory, including, but not limited to: exchange, reciprocity, and the gift; political economy (which includes addressing value, commodities, circulation, and consumption of trauma narratives); ontological security; witchcraft and the occult; neo-modernity; audit cultures; and bureaucracy. James carefully weaves these concepts together, showing the complex processes by which “[...] many of the efforts to rehabilitate the nation and its citizens, and to promote democracy and economic stability, inadvertently reinforced the practices of predation, corruption, and repression that they were intended to repair” (p. 7). Although she is not to first critical observer of humanitarianism and development aid to examine this paradox, James’ account is novel in that it explicitly demonstrates the ways in which the political economy of aid and the social relations embedded in the grant economy’ play an important role in (re)producing this paradox.
- 4 James injects a sorely needed examination of aid recipients’ subjective experiences with ensekerite and the projects developed to address it. All too often, conventional critiques of humanitarianism and development tend to highlight “subject positions” (as discursive phenomena) rather than experience and emotion that often characterize the condition of ensekerite and encounters with the development and humanitarian apparatus. Again, her methods prove to be useful in this regard. Incorporating therapeutic work into more conventional ethnographic methods allows James to explore in depth the interface of international development and humanitarian agendas with subjective experience of ensekerite (chapter 3), and the “processes by which individuals and families targeted from repression formulated new political subjectivities as apparatuses of terror and compassion intervened in their lives” (p. 1).
- 5 Among the kinds of political subjectivities James addresses is viktim, a specific category that “signif[ies] status as a class of political martyrs for Haitian democracy [...] [and] draw[s] attention to their particular needs for psychosocial rehabilitation and reparations” (p. 20). Situating her discussion of viktim within what she calls “the social life of aid” (chapter 5), James shows how the grant economy driving and sustaining humanitarian praxis helps to create and define “value”—of trauma narratives and

experiences, of certain kinds of political identities, of specific forms of governance and managerial techniques, of Haitians themselves. This grant economy lies at the intersection of economies of terror and economies of compassion—and the kinds of value transacted, accumulated, circulated, and produced through the many bureaucratic and narrative strategies deployed to identify, define and ameliorate suffering (pp. 30, 135). In these accounts, trauma narratives are transactional, in that aid programs and institutions assess and assign value to individuals' stories about their experiences with politically motivated violence. This is especially true in the context of groups providing therapy, support and advocacy for victims. While these therapeutic spaces offer the opportunity to access resources and to locate temporary reprieve from ensekrite (p. 135), they may also intensify local conflicts about the distribution of humanitarian and development aid (pp. 135, 205).

- 6 Of course, humanitarian and development aid agencies and the international organizations they support provide funding to intermediaries, usually community-based NGOs that operate primarily as bureaucracies, to design, implement and evaluate these interventions. Such bureaucracies operate in a “grant economy”, described by James as “a change in ownership of economic goods from a donor to a recipient [...]”. As anyone who has worked for a non-profit organization or their donors knows, and as James tells us, these “grants frequently entail greater formalization or rationalization of the relationship between givers and receivers, as well as the expectation that grant recipients will perform or fulfill explicit tasks or services over time, whether at the individuals organizational, or governmental level” (p. 179).
- 7 Although it should come as no surprise to seasoned readers that development and humanitarian aid are administered through bureaucratic institutions, James does offer a novel insight about how bureaucracy—and the techniques and tools that these types of institutions employ in the day-to-day—is interpreted by Haitians who run and manage these programs, and their beneficiaries. Shrouded in secrecy, and linked to existing networks of power and prestige, such institutions and practices are interpreted in terms that James calls “bureaucraft”. A portmanteau that suggests an intimate interpretive link between bureaucracy and witchcraft, the word refers to the “professional bureaucratic discourses and practices that arise from expert or secret’ knowledge [...] employed to reframe and transform the experiences of suffering thereby generating social, political, legal, economic, symbolic and spiritual power and capital for the recipient of aid [...]”. Although I believe James’ coined term reflects clever analysis of Haitians’ ambivalent relationship with humanitarian relief and development aid, it was not always clear to me how her description of bureaucraft expanded how we understand the elements of bureaucracy, which already entails two important components: secrecy and hierarchy—elements that are critical to her definition of bureaucraft.
- 8 This book will appeal to a broad range of scholarly disciplines concerned with humanitarian and development aid in fragile states. Although the book is accessibly written and evocative, undergraduate readers may require some guidance navigating, understanding and applying the wide range of concepts James introduces. In particular, an instructor for novice readers of ethnography—or qualitative social science, more broadly—should be prepared to introduce concepts related to relations of exchange, bureaucracy, rationality and witchcraft, political economy and commodities. For audiences attempting to understand the complex “apparatus”, or the system of

relations linking the discourses, institutions, administrative measures, and moral deliberations driving development and relief initiatives in Haiti in the 1990s, James provides a compelling, sympathetically written, complex and nuanced account.