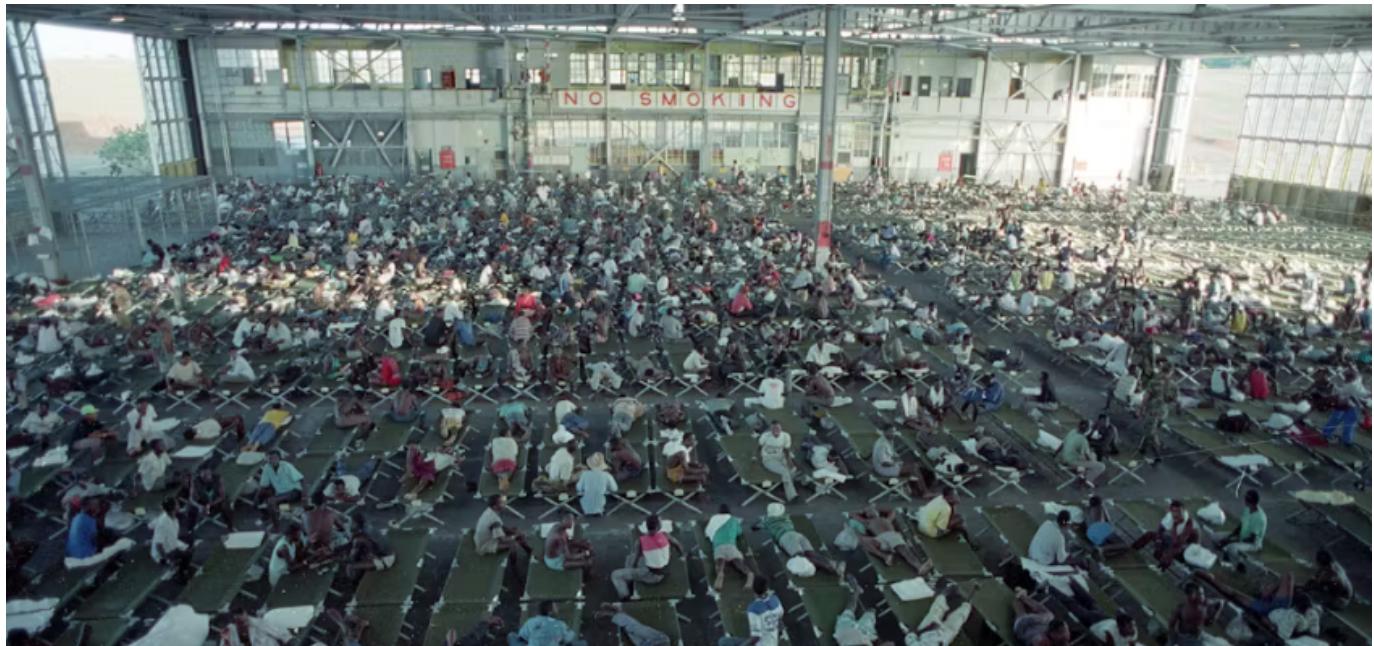


# Eating pets or devouring sovereignty? Notes on anti-Haitian racism

written by Jemima Pierre  
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Haitian refugees in the McCalla hangar in Guantanamo Bay Naval Base on Dec. 5, 1991.

*Calling Haitian migrants “pet eaters” is racist and dehumanizing. So is the continued attack on Haitian sovereignty by the U.S. and its global allies.*

The anti-Haitian utterances by the Republican presidential ticket unleashed an avalanche of racist memes and jokes about Haitians, Haitian migrants, and U.S. citizens of Haitian descent. It began with Ohio senator and Vice Presidential candidate JD Vance’s tweet claiming – falsely – that “Haitian illegal immigrants” were “draining social services and generally causing chaos all over Springfield, Ohio.” Vance continued the lie by asserting, “Reports now show that people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn’t be in this country.” Donald Trump was quick to follow up and double down on Vance’s slanderous comments. In the televised presidential debate with Kamala Harris, Trump insinuated that Haitian migrants were “eating the pets, eating the dogs, eating the cats” of Ohio’s citizens.

Soon, hundreds of thousands of people in the U.S. and around the world gleefully joined in, contributing to a racist pile-on that has seen a violent backlash against Springfield’s Haitian population. Bomb threats have caused the closure of local schools, Springfield’s city hall, and other locations. Families have been attacked. Many Haitians have been afraid to leave their homes. Others have fled the small Ohio town. It did not matter that the story was fake: it had started when a racist white woman, Erika Lee, posted a false story about her friend’s Haitian neighbors supposedly stealing and eating cats, and was deliberately amplified by a [nazi group](#) in Ohio in an effort to demonize Haitians.

The nazi efforts to demonize Haitians clearly worked. And it worked, in part, because it was buoyed by a long-standing, everyday racist anti-Haitian ideology in the United States – and in the West. In fact, while Ohio’s Haitian migrants have since received sympathetic attention from the corporate media (who have run stories about Haitian migrants as ideal factory workers and dignified individuals

with a proud history), it is more typical of this same media to attack, slander, and demonize Haiti and Haitian people.

With so many people expressing surprise and disdain about the racist vitriol against Haitian migrants in the U.S., one could be forgiven for not knowing that this is not the first, or second, or third time that Haitian migrants have been slandered with racist vitriol. Slandering Haiti has been a pastime for the white west since the late 1700s, when enslaved Africans rose up to fight their white enslavers and won, disrupting white supremacy and changing the definition of “freedom” and the “human” in the process.

During the early years of Haiti’s existence, Haitians were disparaged as “barbaric,” “savages,” and “cannibals.” The *New York Times* was notorious for casting Haiti as a wasteland of Black savagery. During the first U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), it quoted the administrative commander of the U.S. military forces, H.S. Knapp who said: “if Haiti were now left to herself there would be a slipping back into barbarism.” This is language describing Haiti from a 1915 editorial: “a weary list of toy kings, emperors, presidents, of revolutions, exiles, suicides, slaughters, corruption, a civilization...which has been sinking, and is brutal and permeated with magical rites.” Here is a January 4, 1921 headline from that same “paper of record:” “Natives in Haiti Ate a Marine Officer.” In a 1920 *National Geographic* article titled “Haiti and Its Regeneration by the United States,” the author writes of “the sacrifice of children and animals to the mumbo jumbos of local wizards.” And on and on.

The vilification of Haitian people in the western press, and from politicians and laypeople, has continued unabated. In the 1980s, Haitian migrants fleeing the U.S.-backed Duvalier dictatorship and arriving in South Florida were described as dirty “boat people,” a notorious stereotype that had an inordinate impact on Haitian migrant school children. In 1983, Haitian people were accused of being “HIV/AIDS carriers” and listed by Center for Disease Control as the only racial/ethnic group (of

the “4-H Club”) at risk of AIDS: homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, and Haitians. Indeed, it is this vicious lie that Haitians were AIDS carriers that, in the early 1990s, the U.S. used to turn its naval base at Guantanamo Bay into an open air prison for Haitian asylum seekers while denying them due process.

In 1994, then-Congressman Joe Biden, had this to say about Haiti: “If Haiti—a God-awful thing to say—if Haiti just quietly sunk into the Caribbean or rose up 300 feet, it wouldn’t matter a whole lot to our interests.”

Over the years, Haitian people have been castigated as having made a “deal with the devil” because their religious practices were supposedly responsible for the 2010 earthquake that killed more than 200,000 people. They were called “bandits” when fighting the first U.S. occupation of their country and “gangs” when protesting the Core Group-installed Prime Minister in 2021 and 2022. Haitians are now seen primarily as “gang members,” and, as recently as spring of 2024, as “cannibals.” In a way, the current smear that Haitian migrants in Springfield, Ohio are “dog and cat eaters,” *pales* in comparison to the western media frenzy, over the past three years, around the claim that Haiti is a cesspool of violence with “gang” members cannibalizing people.

In today’s political environment, the outrage over the racist lie that Haitian migrants in Springfield, Ohio are stealing and eating people’s pets has been filtered through partisan presidential politics. All responses purportedly on behalf of Haitian people have therefore focused on racism as a unique feature of the Republican party and white conservatives and fascists since it was JD Vance and Donald Trump that catapulted the “eating pets” lie into the national spotlight. As such, it is not surprising to see the corporate media actually conducting actual journalism – questioning the racist claims against Haitian migrants in Ohio, sending reporters to speak with local communities, etc. Meanwhile, Democratic Party operatives have treated the racist charges against the Haitian migrants as a godsend, using the

controversy to point to Republicans as the always-already-unrepentant white supremacists.

But what should we call Biden's actions in September 2021? After right-wingers protested that the Texas-Mexico border was being "invaded" by "hordes" of Haitian asylum seekers, Biden authorized the deployment of hundreds of agents from Homeland Security, the Coast Guard, and the Department of Defense. Within days, the Biden administration went on to deport thousands of these migrants without internationally mandated due process. This action by the Biden regime was [so extreme](#) that a reporter from the Jamaican newspaper, *The Gleaner* called it, "one of the swiftest, large-scale expulsions of migrants and refugees from the United States in decades." In fact, during his first term, Biden has deported more Haitian people than the two terms of "deporter-in-chief" Obama and Trump's one term. How is Joe Biden's record of deporting Haitian asylum seekers (often without due process), which is worse than Obama's two terms and Trump's one term, any less racist than the racist lie about Haitian people eating pets? The [pictures](#) of the dehumanizing treatment of Haitian asylum seekers being chased by white patrols on horseback should remain etched in our memories of the Biden presidency.

But do you know what is *most* racist and dehumanizing? The U.S. usurped Haitian sovereignty through non-stop meddling, intervention, and occupation.

As the republicans are demonizing Haitians as "pet thieves" and "cat eaters," the U.S., under the democratic Biden regime, is thieving Haiti's autonomy and devouring Haiti's sovereignty by leading a whole-scale foreign military invasion of Haiti and planning for long term occupation. In the days since the racist pet-eating rumor surfaced, U.S. military planes flew in police and soldiers from Jamaica and Belize to add to the 400 Kenyan soldiers already in Haiti as the Blackface cover for its [invasion and occupation](#). This comes after the U.S. has already begun building a security perimeter around the international airport in the capital city, a project that

has displaced thousands of families. At the same time, the U.S. has circulated a [draft resolution](#) to the UN Security Council about turning its mercenary mission in Haiti into a full-fledged UN “peacekeeping” operation. In other words, [MINU.S.TAH](#) 2.0.

Where is the outrage about the intensification of the U.S. occupation of Haiti? Where is the outrage over the ongoing occupation by the [Core Group](#) of Haiti; over the full destruction of the Haitian state only to install an entire puppet government willing to do the bidding of the U.S., including approving foreign military occupation? Where is the outrage over a U.S.-led foreign military occupation where the mercenaries brought to occupy the land have [absolute immunity](#) over their actions in Haiti? Where is the outrage over the racist assumptions and tropes guiding white western violation and occupation of Haiti – that Haitians are violent and dumb people who cannot be allowed to rule themselves?

I would argue that the lack of outrage – or the lack of acknowledgment – of the U.S.’s illegal, continuing, and violent occupation of Haiti is precisely because the world has accepted as normal that Haitian sovereignty can be dismissed. In fact, the white west has been explicit in their views that Haitians do not deserve sovereignty. For example, former Canadian Denis Paridis, who participated in the 2003 “Ottawa Initiative” that led to the 2004 coup d’etat against Haiti’s democratically elected president, justified the west’s actions by asking of Haiti: “Is state sovereignty immutable?” And, [according](#) to Haitian-Canadian activist, Jean Saint-Vil, the Deputy General of the Organization of American States, Luigi Einuadi, lamented that “The real problem with Haiti is that the ‘International Community’ is so screwed up and divided that they are actually letting Haitians run Haiti.”

It is not only JD Vance and Trump and their Republican friends who have been racist towards Haiti and the Haitian people. It is all the other people who – either by their silence or active complicity – have consented to the ongoing U.S. meddling and push for a full occupation of Haiti. It is those who parrot the racist descriptions of the

white media about Haiti being ungovernable. It is those who declare that “something has to be done” because of the “gang problem” in Haiti, as if gang membership is in Haitian DNA. It is those who focus their racist vitriol on poor Black Haitian people while remaining silent on the nonBlack oligarchs in Haiti who collude with U.S. and western governments to fuel violence in the country. It is those who do not understand that the crisis of Haiti is one of U.S./western imperialism and that the imperialists – the U.S., Core Group, and UN operatives – are the biggest gangsters and the most ferocious cannibals operating in the country.

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