

# Haitians and the Power of Xenophobic Perceptions

Patrick Sylvain

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Patrick Sylvain, PhD, MFA, is a Haitian-American poet, writer, social and literary critic, and photographer who has published widely on Haiti and Haitian diaspora culture, politics, language, and religion. He is the author of several poetry books in English and Haitian, and his poems have been nominated for the prestigious Pushcart Prize.

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Donald Trump's rhetoric has had profound and harmful consequences for Haitian immigrants, amplifying racial and xenophobic tensions in both social and legal spheres. His infamous remarks about "shithole countries," including Haiti, have reproduced dangerous stereotypes that fuel anti-immigrant sentiment. For Haitian immigrants, this rhetoric has led to heightened discrimination, ostracization, and a hostile environment that permeates various communities. As Daniel Schorr observed in 1994, "Xenophobia, the fear of aliens, is not a very pleasant thing. And now it's being felt in another open society, America." Trump's words tap into this persistent fear, particularly in regions like Florida and Texas, where anti-immigrant sentiments have long found fertile ground. The ripple effects of his rhetoric make it challenging for Haitian immigrants to integrate into American society, as they navigate both overt and systemic forms of xenophobia.

Legally, Trump's policies have further marginalized Haitian immigrants, most notably his attempts to end Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians. This move directly endangered the legal standing of thousands, placing them at risk of deportation and further alienation. Schorr's comment that "politicians find pay dirt in antforeigner rhetoric" aptly applies to Trump, whose administration institutionalized prejudice, transforming his xenophobic words into concrete policies. The attempted revocation of TPS illustrated how rhetoric could evolve into tangible threats to the lives and livelihoods of immigrant communities.

Beyond policy, Trump's penchant for conspiracy theories and false narratives further dehumanizes Haitian immigrants. For example, the baseless rumor about Haitians eating pets in Ohio is emblematic of how lies are weaponized to stoke fear and justify exclusion. For segments of the American public already steeped in xenophobia, such stories confirm existing biases and contribute to a perception of immigrants as threats. Kevin Young's analysis of American hoaxes underscores this dynamic, noting that "the American character is filled not just with tall tales and sideshows but also with con men... and impostor prophets." Trump, in his blend of business, entertainment, and politics, has blurred the lines between truth and fiction, making it easier for harmful narratives to take hold. Although local authorities in Ohio quickly debunked the rumor,

its damage was already done. Even after false information is corrected, its initial impact lingers, as social media and sensationalist news outlets perpetuate these stories. The long-term effects are deeply felt by targeted communities, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and making it harder to counteract the damage.

For Haitian Americans and the broader Haitian diaspora, these attacks demand a multifaceted response. Advocacy is crucial in demanding accountability from authorities and the media for perpetuating harmful myths. Community leaders must emphasize the positive contributions of Haitian immigrants to American society, including their steadfast work ethic, educational attainment, and cultural richness. Combating misinformation directly can challenge the xenophobic narratives that seek to degrade them. We must be cognizant of the fact that Donald Trump is a master of deception, weaponizing lies to spread racist, xenophobic vitriol. At the September 12th Presidential debate, Trump proudly trafficked in a grotesque lie that Haitian immigrants were eating household pets—cats and dogs—in Springfield, Ohio. This fabrication is but the latest in his long history of demonizing Haiti and Haitians. Trump has consistently used Haiti as a convenient target for his racist narratives, stoking fear and hatred for political gain.

In his canonical book, *Self-Reliance*, Ralph Waldo Emerson critiques how people often fail to distinguish between perceptions, which are grounded in reality, and opinions, which are subject to personal bias and whims. He argues that perceptions are not matters of choice or personal preference—people don't *choose* to see things a certain way; rather, perceptions reflect objective reality. Emerson emphasizes the fatality of perception, stating that “perception is not whimsical, but fatal.” Meaning that a grounded perception is inescapable and bound to the truth of experience, regardless of personal desires or external influences. In contrast, opinions can be malleable, shaped by emotions, beliefs, or social pressures.

When Emerson claims that “thoughtless people contradict as readily the statement of perceptions as of opinions, or rather much more readily; for, they do not distinguish between perception and notion,” Donald Trump with his vitriolic MAGA followers come to mind. The phrase “thoughtless people” captures those who, in their intellectual laziness, confuse perception with subjective opinion. These individuals, according to Emerson, are quick to dismiss or contradict what others perceive as reality simply because they believe that perceptions, like opinions, are up for debate. This confusion leads to a dangerous disregard for truth, where the boundaries between fact and opinion blur. Donald Trump's xenophobic rhetoric about Haitians, such as the baseless claim that they consume pets, perfectly illustrates Emerson's critique. Trump's remarks rely not on factual perceptions but on unfounded opinions and fatal prejudices. When Trump and those who echo his rhetoric peddle such misinformation, they fail to engage with any reality or lived perception of Haitian immigrants. Instead, they present falsehoods as though they are perceptions, appealing to base fears and prejudices.

Trump's remarks show how the refusal to distinguish between perception and opinion can have serious consequences. By presenting his untruthful opinions as if they were facts, he manipulates public perception, leading to harmful stereotypes and perpetuating systemic racism

against Haitians. In this way, Emerson's insight into how people "fancy that I choose to see this or that thing" becomes highly relevant, as Trump weaponizes this very tendency to erode the line between objective truth and hateful opinion.

Trump's xenophobic narrative is far from new. Again, as Daniel Schorr aptly noted in 1994, "In Florida, where Haitians continue to slip through the anti-immigration blockade, Governor Lawton Chiles makes hay by demanding that the federal government pay for all immigration, legal and illegal." Trump's use of inflammatory language mirrors these broader patterns of systemic xenophobia, making it even harder for immigrants to access the resources and rights to which they are entitled, particularly in times of economic and social unrest. However, Trump's modern twist lies in his seamless use of social media and mass communication, making his divisive messages even more pervasive. He has tapped into the cultural current of deception and spectacle that, as Kevin Young explains, "regularly reveled in the contradictions of what famed showman P.T. Barnum called humbug." If Barnum epitomized the American hoaxer of the 19th century, Trump has become the ideal embodiment in the 21st, exploiting media to spread misinformation. While Barnum's hoaxes may have been harmless entertainment, Trump's misinformation has real-world consequences, particularly for vulnerable immigrant communities.

Trump's demonization of Haitians is part of a larger historical pattern. His comments—whether about "shithole countries," falsely linking Haitian immigrants to diseases, or accusing them of eating pets—evoke racist tropes that have long been used to vilify black and brown immigrants. In the 1980s, Haitians were banned from donating blood due to false associations with HIV/AIDS, a stigma Trump has resurrected. His inflammatory remarks at an October 2021 rally, claiming Haitian migrants "probably have AIDS," echoed this racist legacy, further dehumanizing a community already battling systemic prejudice.

Trump's words are not isolated incidents but part of a broader strategy to energize his base with racist lies. In December 2017, it was revealed that Trump, during a White House meeting, claimed that people coming from Haiti "all have AIDS" and that Nigerian immigrants would never "go back to their huts" in Africa. These remarks, along with his fabricated story about pet consumption, are calculated to feed into the most virulent strains of racist nativism. By associating Haitians with disease and barbarism, Trump reinforces centuries-old racist tropes that portray black and brown immigrants as vectors of illness and social decay.

Trump's demonization of Haitians took an even more grotesque turn in October 2021 when he falsely claimed, "Take a look at what's happening in Haiti. A tremendous problem with AIDS," perpetuating harmful, racist stereotypes without challenge. He continued, "many of those people will probably have AIDS and they're coming into our country and we don't do anything about it. We let everybody come in. It's like a death wish for our country." These comments, steeped in ignorance and hatred, draw on centuries-old racist tropes that frame black and brown bodies as threats to white societies. In Trump's rhetoric, the language of disease becomes a political tool—one designed to stoke fear, justify exclusionary policies, and deflect attention from the structural

violence Haiti has endured, particularly due to foreign interventions, including those led by the U.S.

Trump's rhetoric has contributed to the longstanding portrayal of Haiti as a site of disease and danger, a myth deeply rooted in fears following the Haitian Revolution—the only successful slave revolt in history. European and American anxieties over black self-rule led to the demonization of Haiti, and Trump's comments are a continuation of that historical thread. The deaths of French soldiers from yellow fever during the revolution fueled xenophobic fears of black bodies as inherently diseased. These fears were exacerbated by later concerns about syphilis, leprosy, and cholera, with the 2010 cholera outbreak further cementing the image of Haiti as a land of disease. Rather than recognizing the role of foreign interference in Haiti's suffering, political opportunists like Donald Trump weaponize these health crises to vilify Haitians, distracting from systemic failures and historical exploitation. Trump's rhetoric draws on this history to justify exclusionary policies and distract from the systemic failures and exploitation that have long plagued Haiti.

The fabricated claim about Haitians consuming pets fits within this historical framework of racial othering, where marginalized groups—particularly Black people—are depicted as dangerous or subhuman. Such claims evoke long-standing racist myths, reinforcing exclusionary policies and systemic inequalities. These baseless narratives are not just sensational; they serve a political purpose by stoking fear and reinforcing white nationalist sentiments among Trump's base. As Kevin Young notes, America's cultural history is steeped in deception, but Trump's deployment of these myths represents a dangerous evolution of this legacy. His rhetoric diverts attention from the real issues—systemic racism, political instability, and foreign interventions—that have destabilized Haiti.

In this context, it is critical to scrutinize the underlying motivations behind these falsehoods. Trump's claims about Haitians consuming pets are not merely an isolated racist slur—they are part of a broader strategy to demonize black and brown immigrants, sow division, and bolster white nationalist sentiments among his base. By evoking primal fears of contamination, disease, and barbarism, Trump is engaging in a dangerous politics of dehumanization, one that has historical precedents but equally dangerous contemporary implications. Thus, Donald Trump's violent and xenophobic rhetoric can be seen as a form of stochastic terrorism, inciting violence against Haitian immigrants. These accusations, as forms of linguistic terror, reinforce racist policies aimed at excluding and marginalizing vulnerable immigrant populations. At the same time, they distract from the deeper crises of inequality, foreign exploitation, and systemic neglect that have long afflicted Haiti.

The term "stochastic terrorism" is particularly useful in describing how inflammatory, dehumanizing language can incite unpredictable but targeted acts of violence. By evoking primal fears, such as those of disease and savagery, Trump's rhetoric doesn't just stir hatred; it creates an environment where individuals or groups may feel justified in committing acts of violence. The

broader systemic effect is the normalization of xenophobia and the emboldening of far-right groups.

The rhetoric surrounding Haitians consuming pets reveals the enduring power of racist mythologies, which have long been used to justify subjugation and exclusion. These myths, though baseless, find traction in political discourse because they resonate with long-standing prejudices and fears. Combating these harmful narratives requires not only debunking the lies but also addressing the broader structures of racism and inequality that allow such claims to persist. Perhaps existing laws should be leveraged to combat all forms of stochastic terror. Haiti's history is not one of danger and disease but of resilience in the face of oppression that the United States has been complicitous in its support of various dictatorial regimes. Any serious analysis must recognize the structural forces shaping Haiti's current realities, including the persistent need of capitalist countries, like the U.S., to exploit cheap, unskilled labor.

Ultimately, combating these harmful narratives requires more than debunking falsehoods. It necessitates addressing the underlying structures of racism and inequality that allow such myths to persist. Haiti's history is not one of disease and danger but of an un-fatigable resistance in the face of oppression. Let me reiterate, any serious analysis must recognize the structural forces—foreign exploitation, systemic racism, and economic inequality—that shape Haiti's current realities. The focus should be on dismantling these systemic barriers rather than perpetuating harmful, racist myths. In this light, Trump's rhetoric is not just a distraction but an insidious attack on the dignity and humanity of Haitian immigrants, one that must be confronted with urgency and sustained effort.

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