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Journal of Haitian Studies

Special Issues of the Journal of Haitian Studies are dedicated to:

Dedicated to Katherine Dunham
June 22, 1909 - May 21, 2006
Anthropologist, scholar, activist, Vodouist, and master-dancer
For seventy years of generous and devoted love for Haiti and its People

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Decked Out with an Attitude

On my writing desk, there is a picture of myself standing on sun-dried grass at what was then called the Duvalier Airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I am dressed in a red sleeveless leisure suit that Mother, a couturière, had created—she always made some of our clothes. A long brown sling purse rests against my right hip. Both hands are folded gingerly on top of the hard leather in front of one of the four white lace-trimmed pockets that decorate the tunic. My visible white socks are encased in a pair of sturdy brown leather shoes that Papa brought from Evanston, IL. There are three of us siblings. All girls. Whenever Father visited, he returned with gifts (especially shoes and jewelry) that soon became symbols of differentiation among our peers. Around my neck, a thin gold chain with a small medallion falls in between the unevenly starched Peter Pan collar. Father had also brought that for me. Except for the time when he forgot, he always brings three of everything, one for each of us. My hair is neatly coiffed, separated in sections that form three large braids: one on each side and a big one on top. Two fluffy white double bows and colorful barrettes hold my hair down on each side. The emotions on my face are a combination of undeniable disinterest and suspicion. On the back of the photo, his elongated script reads:

Très bien Gina... Mais il faut que tu parles avec ton papa sur la cassette. Ok, Ton papa.

Well done Gina... but you must speak to your father on the tape. Ok. Your father.

I keep the photograph there on my desk because it contains the earliest family documentation of my confrontations with Papa’s patriarchal power.

Over the years, I have fought to reclaim memories that verify my defiance, as these make me even more cognizant of the hidden transcripts that underlie what I would later recognize as my staunch feminist practices and ideals. However, it is the photos (we have tons), letters (written by Father to his mother) which my older sister found years ago, and nostalgic remembrances among the siblings that are indisputable evidence of how we grew up in Haiti, a patriarchal republic, outmaneuvered by masculine power, despite an “absentee” father who had migrated to the U.S. Indeed, his presence was always felt. His remittances paid for our education, our clothes, food, and healthcare. His inconsistency and especially our numerous illnesses contributed to our waverable social standing.

After several failed attempts on Father’s part to gain permanent residency for us as a family, we all received residency status. As is customary of U.S. Immigration, on occasions Mother had been offered a green card that she rejected as she refused to leave us behind. On March 3, 1978, we boarded an American Airlines jet and finally landed at JFK Airport. We arrived in NYC to live with a man who had not been physically present in our daily lives for nearly a decade. Needless to say, there would be confrontations. Indeed, the power battles were frequent and exaggerated by the language barrier and other intergenerational culture clashes.

While this piece concerns the lives of five individuals (my mother, father, two sisters, and me), I focus on my experience and consciously avoid commenting on theirs; they have their own perspective on these events. In spite of my aversion to discussing their viewpoints and feelings, I am only too aware that I will be (re)constructing all of our lives. Yet, I write this in my father’s name knowing the broader complications that this entails. I take full responsibility for the views I present here and acknowledge them solely as mine.

In this auto-ethnographic montage, I revisit the development of my feminist consciousness as a young Haitian teen in the United States in the aftermath of migration. I interpret my struggles with my parents’ patriarchal authority as oppositional to their attempt to protect their investments in us as their social capital. Indeed, it was through some of my earliest confrontations with both parents that I first learned how power is configured and the limits of gendered opposition. My responses to some of these constraints serve to highlight the significance of self-definition as a primary tenet of U.S. black feminism. In using auto-ethnography, I also show how tales of migration could benefit from feminist approaches such as reflexivity. As the latter seeks to deconstruct the visceral, which is usually relegated to the arts, yet remains embedded in the structural, I use it here to create what I call an “alter(ed)native” form of inquiry that considers a fuller subject.
As I have done elsewhere (1999, 2002a, 2007), my approach here is influenced by reflexive and experimental feminist anthropologists (Behar 1990, 1993, Reed-Danahay 1997, Hurston 1990, Trinh 1989) whose ethnographic storytelling criss-crosses the boundaries of the personal and the social. Such an approach is of significance to Haitian studies in general and gender studies within the field in particular as dominant narratives tend to follow strict disciplinary lines and claim universal subjects and totalizing paradigms. For that reason, more interdisciplinary work is needed to capture the nuances that have historically characterized Haiti’s conditions and its peoples’ experiences. Thus, in content and form, I shift back and forth through time and space to inconsistently write in the present and the past. I use snapshots of ethnographically charged moments to create a montage that raises numerous theoretically rich issues that remain unexplored as this is part of a much larger project and my goal here is to use narrative analysis to reveal the contradictions and convergences in subjectivities and sentiments that are germane to occupying the cusps or borderzones (Anzaldua 1987) of displacement.

I focus on home because it is where the most primary of social institutions are organized (Straight 2005). As the domestic realm remains a site of struggle for females, it is an important setting in which to consider how subjectivity is made. My decision to re-examine this space is also inspired by U.S. black feminists Joy James and Tricia Rose. In Longing to Tell, Rose presents oral narratives by a number of black women, “in such a way that they illuminate the lives and social forces that shape them” (2005:9). Rose insists on telling different stories precisely “to prevent a monolithic objectifying reading of all black women” (ibid.). In the same vein, I deploy the personal to write against a monolithic Haitian woman. For James, such disclosure is inherently ambiguous as it holds both the potential danger of becoming a commodity and being turned into public spectacle while providing “an essential narrative, an ethical text that deprivatizes pain to border-cross into public activism” (1996:153).

The work of Haitian scholar and novelist Myriam Chancy intersects with the above theorists and brings a culturally specific component to my thinking with her framing of the purported silence of Haitian women. Chancy has argued that Haitian women’s lives have been defined by fear. That fear, she writes, “is born not only through violence but through all possible forms of repression... in the novels she analyzed] women writers expose the source of those fears, putting an end to the silencing that has shaped their lives in order to give voice to their various oppressions” (1997:167). Since all fears and oppressions are not equal, the struggles of women in city slums in Haiti must be distinguished from those who are sequestered in battles behind wrought iron gates. Further comparison simply cannot be made with others who have made new homes lòbdò dlo, on the other side of the water. Differences in class, color, religion, sexuality, nationality, and other indices of location and position influence context to produce multiplicities of lived experience. Many of these have hardly been recognized since access to expression is classed. Yet such differences beg for recognition so we do not fall into the pretense that they do not exist, as feminist poet Audre Lorde stresses (1984:112). Indeed, many of our stories have been disavowed (Fischer 2004). Others have been told though not within theoretical frameworks of our choosing. The consequences of such dissonance are perhaps best expressed by Czech novelist and essayist Milan Kundera, who writes that finding himself compared to Russian writers once produced a “strange anguish [that] stirred in me: that displacement into a context that was not mine felt like a deportation” (2007:32).

On What Not to Wear to Church

It is not surprising that my break with the church as an institution came about as a result of a battle over what to wear. I was baptized, attended Anne Marie Javouhey, a Catholic school run by the Sisters of St. Joseph de Cluny. The order came to Haiti and established schools in 1864, when France finally officially recognized the first black republic sixty years after the revolution. At Anne Marie Javouhey, motivated by the nuns’ creative punishments, I learned to perfect my script as well as how to needlepoint. The three Ulysse sisters were particularly intellectually motivated. In our respective classes, we were always ranked first or second. This was the school where I prepared for and had my first communion and confirmation. I was just another fanatical Catholic who dreamt of joining the nunnery. My eagerness at catechism and dedication gave me the much coveted position of actually carrying the chalice to the priest during my communion service. I hardly remember this, of course, but there are numerous photos.

Until migration, attending church was a weekly event that I scarcely reflected on. We had a uniform to wear, a navy blue skirt and white cotton blouse that became more decorative as we grew older. Church was simply where we went every Sunday morning as a family. This included mother, sisters, cousins, and my youngest uncle who acted as our surrogate father. In the U.S., this ritual continued until I hit my mid-teens. These rebellious years were quite frustrating on multiple levels for us (the children) as well as the parents who both feared and were losing control over us. They were competing against a cultural context that was much bigger than they were in our small Haitian community in Montclair, New Jersey. Church became just another arena where our behavior was heavily policed. While I scarcely
recall exactly when the rift began, I do have a sense of the context. More
Haitians from neighboring towns of East Orange, Newark and others began
to attend the same morning service. The congregation increased in such
volume that we had a white priest who did sermons in Kreyol. I was losing
interest more and more in attending church.

One Sunday, I was late getting prepared. This, of course, annoyed
Mother who wanted us to look like proper young girls at church. While
the other sisters liked dressing up, I simply hated it and often refused. I
remember a verbal match with Mother over what I should wear. I wanted
to dress for comfort (pants and a shirt) and Mother expected me to follow
her example. I did not care what other people thought of me and said so.
This did not please her at all. She proceeded to chastise me for acting out
and talking back. As it had become customary, my sassiness was blamed
on our migration and the fact that in the U.S. children no longer respected
their parents. They no longer did as they were told because parents could
not discipline them in the same way they could in Haiti. I must add that it’s
not that I wasn’t stubborn in Haiti. Indeed, as I have written in my poetry,
my recollections of childhood are full of reminories of punishment (Ulysses
2002b). But in the U.S., my opposition took on a particular character. I was
bolder, especially since their disciplinary methods were no longer physically
severe. The battle ended with me saying, “Since God has seen me naked,
I don’t understand why I have to dress up for Him.” To understand the
significance of my talking back, it is important to note that I grew up in a
household and broader social environment where obedience was understood
in terms of acquiescence. “Oui papa,” and “oui maman” were the appropriate
responses to parental directives.

The pressure to dress up was not about God but about our social
standing in a community that thrived on what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as
distinction—that is, the practice of demarcating and performing difference
[precisely] to reject being identified with what represents the greatest threat
(1984:479-480). Thus, the aim is to not be like everyone else, especially
within a predominantly black society where as a dark-skinned young female,
my clothing and comportment are essential indicators of my position. As
I have argued elsewhere, for black females, self-presentation is predicated
upon “the mediation of historical class and color codes that are based upon
and understood primarily within the context of what is most visible, one’s
phenotype and appearance” (Ulysses 2007). That said, Mother’s concerns
were with safeguarding our position. Like her contemporaries, she was
responding to the fear of what others might say if I showed up looking like
ti moun san fann, ti moun san manman, a child without family, a child
without a mother. The fact is that people talk, and how a child presents

herself is viewed as a direct reflection of her parents. In our small circle,
my parents wanted to maintain some modicum of control over a process
that had resulted in eroding their sense of power over us and displaced us
all, albeit unevenly. Their anxiety was about our status within this new
community; hence their attempts to reign in our behavior. While I was
behaving rather badly, waging my own little war abroad, women were
making changes in Haiti.

Without question, women’s collective grassroots action was instrumental
in the eventual ousting of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986. They were at the
forefront of social movements and their organic political activities caused
changes that led to the first democratice election held in Haiti in 1990. Patrick
Bellegarde-Smith elaborates. He writes, “On April 3, 1986, two days after
the creation of several women’s organizations, 30,000 women demonstrated
in Port-au-Prince to memorialize the thousands of female victims of the
According to Carolle Charles, women had organized food riots, school
stoppages and mobilized grassroots movements. Their demands ensured
their inclusion in the State’s political agenda (1995). While they made these
gains, however, they also suffered from tremendous backlash. In too many
instances, they were severely punished, as rape became a preferred method
of “discipline and punishment” (Bell 2001; Rey 1999). Many of those who
could undertook crossing the Caribbean Sea in all sorts of dangerous ways
in search of refuge that was too often denied.

Talking About Sex in English

Back then—and in some cases, still now—the worst thing that a good
unmarried Haitian girl could do to lower middle class parents was to come
home pregnant. When I first brought a boyfriend home who was visiting from
abroad—I was fighting my own battles with the boyfriend—he wanted me
to have his babies and could not comprehend why I desired a doctorate. He
didn’t last. I was most astounded, however, by my father’s anxieties around
the fact that we were having sex. My father was most concerned about me
causing “the family” any embarrassment. We were in the car driving to the
train station to pick up the boyfriend. We left the house together not having
said very much. We were on the highway when Father began to speak.
Severe lines strained his forehead as he began:

Gina gen de bagay... Ou konprann... Le yo pase... yo...
axiden... men si gen lot bagay ki deja la lan plas.... Bagay
sa yo pa axiden.
Gina... there are things... you know... that when they happen... they are accidents... but... if other things are already in place, these things are not accidents.

Father’s words were so restrained that they were coming out in staccato. I turned my body to face him. My mouth dropped when I quickly realized what he was actually saying to me. I was so angry that my words flew out of my mouth in synch. “Oh no!” I cried out. “This is not and cannot be the safe sex talk....” Indeed, we never had such a conversation. “What, are you kidding me... you cannot be serious... you think I should get married... just so I don’t get pregnant and make you look bad... don’t you?” “There is the pill... you know.” With every comment, my voice rose several decibels higher. Part of my excitement was the sheer shock that we were actually having this conversation. Yet, the gentleness in his voice did not obscure the fact that there was manipulation going on aimed at satisfying a particular end. “This is a joke right.... This has got to be a joke,” I finally blurted out. Astounded by his reaction, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Ok. Don’t say I did not warn you.” For him that was the end of the conversation. Nothing else was said on this matter. In the car, I reminded him of my desire to earn a doctorate before anything else—that included children.

While this interaction was packed with copious socio-cultural dynamics, I wish to focus on two specific areas. The first concerns the significance of and value ascribed to female sexuality in Haiti. This is to provide a broader point of reference to understand my father’s concerns with my having sex outside of marriage. The second is what this conversation reveals about the role of the English language as my new source of power.

In the Haiti where I grew up, female sexuality was treated mostly as the property of men and the women who upheld this system by policing other women. Its value varied according to class and other factors. Among the urban elites, daughters were often commodities traded in strategic marriages or familial mergers (Burnham 2006; Trouillot 1990). In our liminal class position, the sexual codes we were taught to live by were quite simple and were never spoken directly. But we knew the comments that differentiated good girls who were pure and bad ones who were not. Even worse were the women who became long-term mistresses of married men who would not leave their wives. As in many families, we too had secret tales of such plasaj or metres attire—that is, common law unions or mistresses depending on the man’s marital status. Such stories were hardly passed on to us, the young. They were only shared in whispers on those long nights of family storytelling that usually start with the current moment and go all the way back to the days when Pétion-Ville and Port-au-Prince were destinations of Hollywood greats such as Gina Lolabrigida, Elizabeth Taylor, and Richard Burton during the 1950s. That is when we found out who had been after whom and who had stolen who from whom (Ulysse 2006).

Back then and until we migrated, the worst thing a woman could be called is a bouzen (prostitute/whore). The connotation of this term was of looseness, unbridled sexuality, and possibilities for barter. Nonetheless, stories could be told about an individual that took on a life of their own and how one came to have a label was hardly an issue. Reputations were made and destroyed. The more fragile one’s social position, the less likely she was to rise above such talk. Parents did their part to ensure that their names were not stained. Methods varied depending on one’s social milieu. In urban settings, girls were often kept under scrutiny. In rural areas, virginity testing served as a protective mechanism, while at the same time budding romances were encouraged to ensure family mergers would be successful. The most vulnerable of women were those with the greatest economic need and whose performance of silence (Ulysse 2007) was crucial to their survival.

The political economy of sexuality is a tale of the power of class privilege. With unemployment at about seventy-five percent and the egregious ratio of male to female employment, the situation is dire in the formal sector. For women, jobs can scarcely be obtained without exchange of sexual favors. Sexual harassment is unrecognized and goes unpunished. The first case brought to a Haitian court occurred in 1999. Madame Edouard Alexis, the wife of the Prime Minister, insisted on bringing the suit to make the point of indicating that there is no such justice for women. Therefore, financial security—being able to afford not to work—is key to one’s ability to safeguard one’s sexual availability. Women who can afford not to work remain commodities in their coveted marriage market. Many desperately need these interactions. Charles writes, “many poor Haitian women define their bodies as a resource, an asset, a form of capital that can reap benefits if well invested. Hence their assertion “kom se kavo tem”—my body is my piece of land (2001:170). Restaveks (children domestic servants) are also often unnoticed victims. Such sexual exploitation rarely warrants questions since blame is always placed on the female (Hatloy 2005, Racine-Toussaint 1999). While men are free to roam and spread their seed, women are expected to observe stricter codes of conduct.

The double standard informed our greater cultural context. Thus, it is not surprising that Father was “concerned” about my deviation from the rules. All three of us girls had managed not to disappoint our parents. Although I was well over legal age, he still hoped to be spared embarrassment. This was clear to me. My raging response was precisely because his concern...
was not whether or not I loved the boyfriend but that I would stain Father's name. In a way, we were engaged in a sparring match. This was a test of his waning power to influence me as the dutiful daughter. Knowing this, I responded with the only power I possessed: the language that assured the cultural divide we would now permanently occupy. This was my way of saying, I may be your child but you can no longer tell me what to do. And he knew it.

Indeed, language was critical in creating a space that cultivated my self-making as a feminist. More context is necessary to explicate the significance of this moment. First, it must be noted that while father spoke to me in Kreyol, my entire response to him was in English. This is worthy of further exploration. Twenty years later, as I write this, I am certain that back then and even now I could not have responded to him the way I did then in Kreyol or in French, as those have always been languages of my subordination. They were the tongues through which I learned to perform silence. In the aftermath of migration, I made a radical departure from most things Haitian and certainly all things French. The latter came from a black nationalist phase. I was able to sustain this as I had vowed to myself at the age of eleven that I would not return to Haiti until things changed. While family members returned for visits to Haiti, I abstained. In between trips, their longings for home were satisfied through various forms of consumption, especially music. In addition, weekly trips to Brooklyn to connect with extended family members and friends kept these bonds vibrant.

When we first moved to New Jersey, our English as a Second Language (ESL) schoolteacher encouraged us to practice total immersion in all things “American.” An English-speaking world, they insisted, would foster our mastery of the language and open more aspects of the culture to us. While the parents panicked, I threw myself into various parts of the new culture wholeheartedly, especially when it came to the arts. I was particularly responsive to the second British music invasion of the 1980s. We were more fluent than both parents. English simply became a source of power over the years. While I did and still do math in French, everything else is in English. This would prove to be a hindrance years later when I acted as translator for a Haitian Refugee Asylum Project. My limits reflected my distance from Haiti. In dialogues with would-be refugees where accurate translation actually determined what happened to young lives, my limited fluency revealed many aspects of this country that I did not know and never knew (Ulysse 2005:175-180). English was empowering precisely because the parents could not claim it the same way I did. It was a tool to be used as I tried to find my way here while their hearts were fixed on returning there sometime in the distant future. I did not have the same connection

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and held no such longing to return. In that sense, English was not only my present but also my future. It was also the language through which I could not only talk back and act grown, which bell hooks (1989) argues is central to U.S. black feminism, but gain mastery that facilitated a break from their ways and undermined their sense of control. That linguistic lacuna was a space where I could re-make myself.

On my quest for self-definition, the communities open to me, however, were few. Like other Caribbean immigrants to the United States, my parents feared we would eschew our education and become derelicts. We were routinely monitored (especially our speech, comportment, dress and music) to be model black citizens (i.e. not like, but better than the “Black Americans”). Indeed, historically Caribbean immigrants have sought to distinguish themselves from African-Americans. They cultivate their “West Indianness” or Caribbean identities in ways to position themselves as model minorities in the U.S. (Robotham 2002; Rahier and Hintzen 2003). This process is difficult for non-English speakers whose negotiations are limited until they master the language.

As Alex Stepick writes, in the early 1980s, Haitians in the United States encountered tremendous prejudice and suffered accusations that became synonymous with their identities. He documents stories of shame and even suicide by students in Miami recognized as Haitian (1998). Zéphir, on the other hand, found that upper class Haitians tended to overemphasize their French identity. She writes, “From being members of a privileged segment of Haitian society, they have involuntarily joined the ranks of America’s most poorly regarded groups, namely the Blacks, with whom negative attributes have been traditionally associated. Therefore, bilingual Haitians seek strategies to remedy this situation, which is, in their view, untenable. One such a strategy is to emphatically utilize a resource that is held in high esteem by Americans: their ‘Frenchness’” (1997:397-8). In recent years, however, especially among the youth, there has been a shift away from French to more African elements in Haitian culture that resulted in a new narrative of Haitian pride.

In her book Rara, Elizabeth McAlister tracks this development in popular culture movements including mizik rasin (roots music) in Haiti and the Haitian Diaspora. She argues that the growing acceptance for this new mizik rasin must be viewed within the context of new musical trends that occurred in the black Diaspora. This was evident in the globalization of hip-hop, reggae, dancehall, and zouk music. According to her, the mizik rasin that took off in the mid 1980s reflected a “return to roots” and was a reclamation of the very Africanness that is often repudiated by Haitians.
seeking to distance themselves from “Haiti as a subordinate and primitive culture” (2002:190-191). For Haitian-Americans in the United States, McAlister stresses this embrace of blackness through Africa also signified a rejection of U.S.-specific racializations (2002:203). With the advent of the hip-hop trio The Fugees and Wyclef Jean, young Haitians in New York and Miami were proudly displaying Haitian flags and reclaiming the same identity they were taught to despise, as Jamaican poet Michelle Cliff (1980) writes regarding her blackness.

Indeed, throughout the years, Wyclef Jean has single handedly worked to foster Haitian pride with his unabashed waving of the flag, consistent shout outs to his nation in international settings including award shows, and his new not-for-profit foundation. His solitary impact on re-making a diaspora Haitianess is best expressed by young Haitians who now speak of their identities in terms of avan ou apre Wyclef, that is before or after Jean hit the scene. As students in my “Haiti: Myth and Realities 06’ course pointed out, they know Haiti only through stereotypes. They have been so inundated with Hollywood’s vodoo that they could not distinguish it from Haiti’s vodou. They viewed the island mainly as a site of political instability and abject poverty. Claude Moise, a young Haitian-American student, stressed that North American popular culture is bereft of positive images of Haitians. All the students agreed that Wyclef Jean was the sole individual with constructive views of Haiti in the U.S. popular imagination. Jean’s message, however, is not without its contradictions. The paradox in his pride is a consistent ahistoricity that ignores the impact of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1996) refers to as past in the present. In Dave Chappelle’s Block Party (2006), he brings the comedian’s attempt to create a space of positive blackness to an arresting point. After a rendition of his single “If I Were President” with students from the Central State University marching band, Jean shares his brand of bootstrap philosophy: “It’s good to see so many black people in college. You know what I am saying… Don’t blame the white man for nothing. Get yours. I came to this country, I ain’t know how to speak English, I made something of myself. I went to the library…. The white man ain’t responsible for shit. They got libraries in the hood…if they don’t, contact your Congressman…” (Chappelle 2006). His message echoes the ideology of many black immigrants who seek distinction as model citizens to emphasize their difference from U.S. born blacks.14

While in high school, I was well versed in this belief as I had learned to practice this distance. There were multiple reasons for this. Being a good girl was one of them. In addition, my years in middle school and in high school were brutal as I was teased, pushed, mocked for my accent, and constantly bullied by my African American peers who critiqued my performance of blackness.15 My friends were mostly misfits, others who did not fit in. They were hippies, performing arts students, and other immigrants. My taste in music also reflected this choice. Yet, within these groups, I was often an anomaly: a shy black Haitian girl who was not black enough by urban standards, not cool enough by suburban standards, and not French enough by Haitian standards. And I nursed public dreams of being a rock’n’roll singer. While no one, certainly not my immediate family and communities, had a point of reference for me, in this liminality, I had found a space for opposition that allowed me to consider another ideal.

Localizing my Feminism

In claiming a feminist identity, I consider how the trajectories informed who I have become. In making this reference to movement, I evoke Stuart Hall’s call to de-essentialize cultural identity in general and diasporic identity in particular, which is too often perceived as fixed and unchanging. Hall argues that “identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we come from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are constituted within, not outside representation” (1996:4). Indeed, images of tough women (such as Tina Turner, Pat Benatar and Joan Jett on MTV) standing up to men offered me a model, albeit one infused with limits as the prominence of the value ascribed to whiteness and class based privileges was a constant reminder that we all can’t be rock stars. Yet these symbols of freedom were instrumental to my recognizing that there were other ways to be a non-compliant woman. I grew up with the knowledge that women in my culture were the poto-mitan of their families (N’Zengou-Tayo 1998). I was choosing another way. To localize my feminism, I appropriate Paul Gilroy’s concept of roots/routes to refrain from making a simple return to my “so-called roots and come-to-terms-with-my-routes” (quoted in Hall).

Undeniably, it is not that I could not have emerged a feminist in Haiti, rather migration and the challenges that later ensued as I came of age tackling cultural conflicts in attempts to adapt to a new culture caused friction that culminated in a particular entry into feminism. Indeed, as I became a feminist in the U.S., feminist movements were re-emerging in Haiti out of a specific set of concerns. While my political interests initially evolved out of the personal, the domestic realm from which they stemmed no longer dictated the parameters of my activism. Nonetheless, my daily struggles were quite distinct from that of my former compatriots. We lived in different societies and occupied various socio-economic spaces that
determined our realities. Perhaps no better story exemplifies this than a brief encounter between a street waif and myself during one of my trips to Haiti in the mid 1990s. This anecdote allows me to locate specific characteristics of my feminism, particularly as these relate to my identity as a *diaspora* Haitian. Furthermore, they show how my positioning is tightly bound with, and is ultimately informed by, class and other privileges of living abroad.

We were walking around *Palais National*, the presidential palace area. I insisted on seeing for myself what was happening on the streets in the capital. As is always the case when I visit Haiti, different rules applied. In her essay “Going Home,” Katia Ulysse writes: “In Haiti, I would not surrender to the habits I practiced on U.S. soil: I would never smoke in public; I would not look my elders in the eyes; I would not laugh too loud” (2003:132). Additionally, outside of our family’s compound, I did not dare to venture out alone. Everyone always made sure that male cousins accompanied the girls when we went out. This infuriated me as I have conducted research in areas of Kingston, Jamaica where safety is just as, if not even more, in jeopardy. Yet, I admit I was not culturally sensitized to negotiate Port-au-Prince since I had not lived in Haiti for over twenty years.

“*Ti gason!*” a little voice piped. “Little boy.” I heard the words even before my foot hit the sidewalk. Two of my cousins were walking ahead of me, one with his swagger, the other one much more relaxed. I was behind them following. The third cousin was behind me. I slowed down. The cousins noticed. We stopped. “*Gina ou ve anyen?* Gina, do you want anything?” The oldest one asked. “*Yes!*” I replied quickly. On these outings, which I always looked forward to, I welcomed any opportunity to be out there. I got to enjoy things I would not find when I returned home such as street food, candies, arts and crafts. This time we stopped for sugar cane.

“*Ti gason!*” the small voice said again. The men hanging around began to add their comments about different concepts of beauty. The discussion was on girls without hair. I was not interested. I had been there before and have written rather extensively about the policing of gendered ideals and the social meaning of short hair especially for dark skinned black females (Ulysse 1999, 2002a). As I have discussed elsewhere, in the streets in other Caribbean contexts, females who confound gendered class and color codes or attempt to disrupt social orders become open for any and every one to comment on (Ulysse 2007). For example, a couple of days earlier, I was sent on an errand with a cousin. I jumped out of the car and was about to enter the supermarket when a departing customer began to shake his head upon seeing me. His disapproval of my hairstyle was confirmed when he shockingly asked me, “Why did you go and do something like that?” Regrettfully, he asked, “You would have been a pretty girl.” I shot him a smile and retorted without even thinking, “I am still prettier than you will ever be.” By then, his audacity and that of other men preoccupied with my short hair in Haiti and in Jamaica over the years had rendered me indifferent. But on this day, I was perplexed as I looked directly at my unexpected adversary.

Leaning on a wagon filled with piles of unpeeled cane and peels was a young girl in a dress several sizes too small. Her parted plaits were held down by multi-colored kissing doves barrettes.

“*Pou ki sa ou di sa?*” Why did you say that? I asked her.

“Because you have no hair.” She said with a timid smile.

“No that can’t be the reason... you mean because I shaved off my hair?”

“Yes! You are a little boy.” She insisted.

“We told you!” My cousins piped in. “You should have seen how long her hair was.” They both began to speak simultaneously in defense of my femininity and womanhood. “We don’t understand why she did it.” By now they were all standing together posturing and engaging in conversation with the other young men who were hanging about. The vendor handed me a plastic bag with small pieces of stripped cane. I said thank you, then turned back to my interlocutor. “Let me tell you something.” I handed her the sugar cane. She said thank you and began to chew.

“It is my hair and I can do whatever I want with it.”

She looked at me intently, paying attention to every single word. I was handed another bag. I held on to it and began my sermon.

“Girls can do whatever they want to do. If they want to wear their hair short, that is their choice. I did not like the hair I had so I cut it off. I use less shampoo and I don’t have to comb it and have less to wash in the morning. You know that you can do what you want with yourself... right?”

“Yes!” she said.

“Ok!” I said and began to walk away.

Both of my feet were on the sidewalk. I had not taken a full step when she loudly crooned with more sass than I ever mustered to my father: “*D-y-a-s-p-o-r-a*” then quickly dashed out of sight. I smiled especially for the way she had enunciated every single letter of this word. Her delivery in slow motion, like a *stup* or kiss of the teeth, intended to leave me with an impression. It was meant to mark me anew. It was a necessary reminder. She succeeded in re-inscribing me with this term that reflects our realities. She was right. In terms of the sheer amount of social contact, I have spent
more time in my country of residence than my birth country. While I may want to claim a Haitian identity, the fact is that I now belong to its diaspora. To use local vernacular, I am a dyaspora, as they say in Haiti. More importantly, in calling me so, she sought to remind me of our class differences that renders me the privilege of performing my gender à la garçon as they say in a country where gender discrimination laws are not applied and crimes not prosecuted. My failure to consider this was just an example of dyas oblivious.

Dyasporic Dilemmas and Dreams

Dyaspora or dyas for short is used to describe anyone who is recognized as Haitian but who obviously currently lives abroad. Indeed, we are so easily identifiable. Our foreignness is visible, especially to those who live on the island, who can quickly decipher it as it is writ large in our bodies, our styles, our comportment, and the ways that we generally behave. It is also there in our too frequent insistence that we know just what is best for the country, as is evident in the 2005 presidential election and its aftermath.

In Haiti, the term dyas has some negative connotations as it is used to establish distinction between those who live on the island and those who make their lives elsewhere (whether Africa, Europe or North America). Until U.S. East Coast Haitians reclaimed the word, it was laden with shame for those onto which it had been ascribed. Indeed, in too many instances, dyaspora was used as capital not only to demarcate distance but also to qualify those on the island as more authentic. In the introduction to the Butterfly’s Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora, Edwidge Danticat (1999) writes about this tension. She recalls personal experiences of expressing opposing political views and being called dyaspora by family members living in Haiti. This quickly silenced her as it was a way of saying, “What do you know? You don’t live here.” She further elaborates that members of the diaspora “would be classified—justifiably or not—as arrogant, insensitive, overbearing and pretentious people who were eager to reap the benefits of good jobs and political positions in times of stability in a country that they fled during difficult times” (1999:XV). The charge of dilettantism is not without merit as permanent residency and citizenship allows the dyas freedom of movement, for there is always a place to go back to if things don’t work out. Individuals have gone back only to find that not only have they changed, but Haiti also has changed. Nothing is the same.

In the anthology, Danticat continues to explain how journalist Jean Dominique (himself exiled from his beloved homeland multiple times until his assassination in Haiti) eventually squelched her dyaspora dilemma.

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He comforted her, “There is no reason to be ashamed of being dyaspora. There are more than a million of you. You are not alone” (1999:XV). In reverent acknowledgement of Dominique’s own situation, Danticat extended the definition to include “exiles, émigrés, refugees, migrants, immigrants, naturalized citizens, half-generation, first generation, American, Haitian, Haitian-American... living in the U.S. and elsewhere” (1999:XV). The fact that over a million Haitians reside outside the island led to the virtual formation and official recognition of Haiti’s Tenth Department. Haiti’s nine geographical districts were augmented to include an additional space that stretched the physical parameters of the nation.

This new department was designated in 1991 when then president Jean-Bertrand Aristide recognized the persistent role and impact of Haitians abroad in the lives of those on the island. Aristide sought to give to those of us abroad an official claim on our native country. Over the years, this quasi-connection to what Salman Rushdie (1992) aptly refers to as “an imaginary homeland” has been a lifeline as well as a noose. And, as anthropologist Michel Laguerre has rightly argued, the Haitian Diaspora has played notable roles in dealings both at home and abroad. Indeed, agitation on the part of diasporic Haitians has had ripple effects on what happens on the island. This presents a dilemma that warrants further inquiry into how to define Diaspora transnational citizenship, what exactly is a dyas’ claim on the nation, and perhaps most importantly, how do we reconcile it with the complexities in our dyasporic dreams, especially for the presidency.

A Slight Detour: Public Laments for the Presidency

The longings for home that did not cease when we willingly sought to or were forced into exile have manifested in various attempts to (re)connect. The Diaspora’s role in political affairs and elections remains a point of contention. The presidential elections of February 2005 brought this issue to the fore once again. This is worthy of discussion as it forces us to engage Schiller and Fourow’s concept of long distance nationalism (2001) and definitions of citizenship. This moment also highlighted the persistence of patriarchy in governmental politics, the continuous invisibility of women, and erasures of class-based differences at home and abroad.

In the aftermath of the 2004 coup that displaced Jean Bertrand Aristide again and sent him into exile, this time in South Africa, the interim Prime Minister of Haiti was none other than a dyas who had been living in Florida. Backed by the United States, Gerald Latortue arrived in Port-au-Prince, a “transnational puppet” according to many, without any local credibility. His imposition onto the nation was but one more in a series of instances
when the U.S. has played a hands-on role in Haitian political affairs. How did this come to be? Laguerre offers analysis that highlights the historical function of the diaspora in homeland politics. According to him, one of the fundamental features of the Haitian political system is the central role of the diaspora in engineering coups d'état—with the help of one or more foreign governments—in overthrowing the sitting government... This historical feature of the political system continues to this day to feed the mechanisms of governmental succession" (2005:207). Indeed, to date, only two Haitian presidents (Pascale Ertha Trouillot and René Preval) have left office through the electoral process. Others have either been forcibly removed or chose self-exile. Diasporic capital of one form or another usually supports their departure. Forms of this capital vary to include the funds necessary to stage the coup and/or the armed rebels who actually participate in their making. What is clear is that the Diaspora has historically had a say in homeland politics, especially covertly.

Recent attempts at more overt and legitimate participation became an issue that played out in what Laguerre calls the virtual diasporic public sphere. In the 2005 elections aimed at legitimizing the displacement of Aristide, several dyas actively campaigned for the presidency. The number of would be candidates eventually dwindled to 54 and was reduced to 35 as election date drew closer. Among the final candidates there was one female, Judith Roy (Democratic Convergence), a former mayoral candidate for Port-au-Prince whose slogan read, "Vote fanm nan" (vote for the woman). The two dyas candidates were Samir Mourra, a businessman who headed the Mobilization for Haiti's Progress (MHP), and Dumarsais Simeus (Tet Ensann), a Texas billionaire with close ties to the George Bush administration. His slogan urged the populace to consider "yon lo fay chemen ak milyonè d" (another path with the millionaire). Both Mourra and Simeus are naturalized U.S. citizens.

According to article 13 of the Haitian Constitution, Haitian nationality is lost once an individual is naturalized as a citizen of another nation. Article 135 stresses that presidential candidates must never have renounced their nationality. Constitutionally, as foreign nationals, Mourra and Simeus were barred from seeking the presidency. Yet they persisted in their right as Haitians to participate in elections in spite of the Constitution. Outrage and demand for respect of the Constitution fueled debates and pitted the current government against the state. In a ping-pong match of decisions from the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) and the Supreme Court, both Simeus and Mourra found themselves off and on and off the ballot again. The Supreme Court became involved when Simeus sued the government to recognize his candidacy, claiming they could not prove he had renounced his Haitian nationality. Haitian journalist and Reuters reporter Joseph Guyler Delva wrote, "Two Haitian-born U.S. citizens should be barred from presidential elections expected next month, a panel appointed by Haiti's interim government said. The recommendation, which clashes with a ruling by Haiti's highest court, said candidates Dumarsais Simeus and Samir Mourra should not be allowed to run for the Haitian presidency because they hold U.S. passports" (2005). This issue took on an especially contentious tone on email lists and listervs, including the well-known Corbett list where dyaspora and local Haitians and Haitianists participate in dialogue incognito. The attempts to get on the ballot could be read as another example of dyas power flexing its material capital in the homeland.

It appears that local constituencies not only fought back, but won.

And then there were 33 candidates.

Following the elections held in February 2006, René Preval (LESPWA) was eventually declared president even after explicit attempts from the opposition to sabotage the primary results (Dupuy 2006). Simeus began a series of summits focusing on the Haitian Diaspora's role in Haiti. One was held in Port-au-Prince. Another was hosted by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) in Washington D.C. on July 25, 2006 under the title "Haiti's Diaspora: Can it solve Haiti's enduring social conflict?" Description of the event on the website read as follows: "Haiti's Diaspora represents a rich resource of human energy and talent. Last year [2005], remittances from Haitians living abroad exceeded $1 billion dollars and constituted 24 percent of Haiti's GDP. In addition to promoting the economy, could the Diaspora also assist the Preval government in resolving Haiti's enduring social conflict?" Speakers included Dumas Simeus, François Pierre Louis, a sociologist from CUNY and Jean Claude Martineau, poet, author and historian. The gender imbalance at the summit was due to the fact that the female expert invited, a representative of CARE, had an "important meeting" in Haiti. The dominant theme of this event was best expressed by Mr. Simeus' recurring mantra that Haiti's way out of poverty is "Access, access, access to venture capital and open markets!" He is also the founder of Haiti's only investment bank, PromoCapital, a joint Haitian-American venture. Another issue placed on the table was the Haitian Constitution, especially article 13, which concerns voting rights and representation of Diaspora Haitians.

After attending this dialogue, I learned that in Port-au-Prince the same day, Preval's government was convening with international donors to discuss Haiti's fate. The irony or coincidence of the timing of these concurrent events, as Laguerre noted above, beg further meditation. Indeed, what
exactly should a *dyas*’ role be in Haiti? What is it about this “repeating island,” to borrow Benitez-Rojo’s term (1997), that keeps so many of its “displaced” so desperate to maintain ties?

In her short story “A Girl Named Esperance,” about an essay contest winner who gets to sing the national anthem at the *Palais National* on Independence Day, Katia Ulysse adds to the perplexity. She writes, “They had gathered at the Palace to remember what no one could forget anyhow: the Independence of a nation the size of an oyster’s pearl, which in spite of numerous scarps and lacerations continued to emit a certain luster so immutable that its harshest critics cannot stop wondering what it is about the tiny, scuffed-up little place that makes it so irresistible” (2006:5).

In our younger years, Father used to lament the fact that he did not have a son. “Gàd sa bondye fen? Look what God has done to me!” He expressed betrayal by the Almighty. His disappointment is part of our family’s lore so much that stories about his reaction to our births indicate the value he, then, ascribed to girls. He wanted male heirs to inherit his family’s responsibilities and to carry on his name. Luckily, he did not harbor any secret political aspirations for his girls. We certainly do not want to or could not even be president.

I, for one, took on another nationality in part to honor my routes and stake claim to a hyphenated *dyaspora* identity that cannot encapsulate the complexities of living in-between while negotiating comforts abroad with longings for one’s *pays natal*. Paradoxically, the three of us have kept or intend to keep some version of Papa’s surname. Migration is undoubtedly responsible for my decision. And my staunch feminist consciousness, which in part turned Father and me into fierce rivals, continues to have everything to do with it.

**Notes**

1. He did not migrate for political reasons. During the late sixties and early seventies, individuals and entire families migrated in search of greater opportunities. As was customary then, the plan was for Father to work, raise the necessary capital and then send for us.

2. Behar (1995) writes about her father’s response to her writing about their family as a way to explicate who owns the right to tell which family stories.

3. This ethnography is something of a counter-narrative articulated from what I call an *alter(ed)native* perspective to the conventionalities of the dominant discourse within anthropology. It is *alter* as in other and *native* as I was born in the Caribbean and am ascribed that identity as a native. It is *alter(ed) because of how*

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my approach to writing has been modified both by my training in graduate school as well as my experience as a field researcher. My self (as text) is central to this perspective that I use to ‘flip the script’ on dominant discourses concerning the mythic “Other” and their worldview. In that sense, I use reflexivity as a maestro to connect everyone and everything gathered within a researcher’s perception at the crossroads of observation (Ulysse 2007).

4. At a panel “Shifting Gaze Paradigm Shifts: (Re)telling Haitian’s (Unknown)” at the Haitian Studies Association in 2006, I argued that there must be a shift in both where and how Haitian Studies directs and constructs its objects of study given the dominance of the compartmentalized frameworks that remain bound to disciplinary boundaries. I believe that the field needs to consider new interdisciplinary approaches to highlight the current renaissance (it is already in progress), and move away from narratives of incarceration. My point of focus in using an *alter(ed)native* approach is to illuminate Haitian’s present by breaking the silence (as Trouillot urges) on stories that have been told yet remain unknown or disavowed (to use Fischer’s formulation) as they are eclipsed by metanarratives that reinforce aspects of both Haitian discourse and discourses about Haiti.


6. Had we remained in Brooklyn, I believe my parents’ fears would have been less intense because the Haitian community is much larger. We would have been under more scrutiny. In our town, there were Jamaicans, Trinidadians and other Caribbean and Latin American immigrants. The number of Haitian families was small enough that we could count them on two hands.

6. "I thank Joy James for making this point.

7. That isn’t to say that this term has lost its power to ruin a woman’s reputation in some circles (McAlister 2002). Rather, in recent years various local feminist challenges have forced the issue of a woman’s right to her sexuality, at least on the popular culture agenda.


10. It must be noted that on the East Coast, that divide has also been bridged on numerous occasions. In the moments where skin color has trumped nationality, African-Americans, Dominicans, Jamaicans, Haitians, Puerto-Ricans, and others joined forces to confront waves of state violence as exerted by members of New York City’s police force.


12. Here I adopt definitions of diaspora put forth by Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg. They note, "Diaspora refers to the doubled relationship of our dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places—their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with ‘back home’" (1996:14).
In recent years, the dyas arrives on the island with the privileges of living abroad and proceeds to disrupt an otherwise rigid local social order. Indeed, my short hair, to my interlocutors, only confirmed local boundaries of gender. But this hairdo, as the young girl rightly assessed, was also laden with the class privilege that being a dyas automatically gives me. Indeed, it is not as if this hairstyle was uncommon in Haiti. Rather, whoever wore it (did so for specific reasons) had their place within the local structure.

In 1997, I took part in *Vakans pou demen miyo* (Vacation for a Better Tomorrow), a summer program held to encourage young professionals from the diaspora to factor Haiti in their future plans. Participants in this effort included a few of us who had been born on the island, a significant number of first-generation immigrants, among whom there were a few presidential hopefuls (I revisit this point in the conclusion), as well as students from local universities. Indeed, the value given to the dyas with our foreign degrees and education was quite apparent. At a cocktail party organized to introduce students to the business community, those of us who were consistently engaged by the hosts were from abroad. This caused tremendous tension. All we had in common was Haiti, no matter how abstract or concrete our different perceptions of the country and the prevailing situation.


Congresswoman Maxine Waters, a member of the Congressional Black Caucus, made the following statement: "Gerard Latourte is a mere puppet installed by the supporters of the coup d'état that ousted the democratically-elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. He is totally controlled by Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Roger Noriega, the former chief of staff for Senator Jesse Helms and the Haiti-later who has used his hold power at the OAS and the State Department to carry out the policy of right-wing conservative American and Haitian business elites. The opposition in Haiti, led by the group of 184 and the so-called rebels who were thugs and criminals in exile, were organized by these rich Haitian business elites to play their role in the ouster of President Aristide." [www.haitiaction.org/News/CBC4_3_4.html](http://www.haitiaction.org/News/CBC4_3_4.html). In the media, Latourte's government was dubbed a puppet regime (Lavender 2004).

Laguerre describes the diasporic public sphere as a space that permeates the spatiality of the transnation, uses various means of expression from gossip to diasporic media (ethnic television, ethnic newspapers, ethnic radio) to public gatherings and discussions as well as the internet (web sites, chat rooms, emails). It has both online and off-line dimensions that feed each other, that sustain and expand the sphere of interaction from the local to the global formally and informally, and that differentiate the diasporic public sphere from other public spheres (2005:207).


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