Haitian Linguistic and Cultural Practices: Critical Meaning-Making Spaces for Haitian Learners

Marie L. Cerat

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Recommended Citation
HAITIAN LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL PRACTICES: CRITICAL MEANING-MAKING SPACES FOR HAITIAN LEARNERS

By

MARIE LILY CERAT

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2017
Haitian linguistic and cultural practices:  
Critical meaning-making spaces for Haitian learners

by

Marie Lily Cerat

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date

Professor Ofelia García, Ph.D.
Chair of Examining Committee

Date

Professor Anthony Picciano, Ph.D.
Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee

Ofelia García, Ph.D.

Stephen Brier, Ph.D.

Nicholas Michelli, Ed.D.

Jean Y. Plaisir, Ed.D.

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract
Haitian linguistic and cultural practices: Critical meaning-making spaces for Haitian learners

by
Marie Lily Cerat

Advisor: Dr. Ofelia García

This dissertation is concerned with the effects of the exclusion of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices in the education of Haitian learners. Through qualitative data collection and analysis, a set of texts and narratives in the Haitian Creole language, Rara and Vèvè practices were inventoried, reviewed and described. Moreover, a series of focus groups and ethnographic interviews were conducted with Haitian adolescents and Haitian parents with school age children living in New York. These interviews revealed that Haitians deeply value their cultural knowledge, and view them as resources for knowledge preservation and knowledge production. Textual analysis also shows that Haitians and their practices are misunderstood and negatively perceived in society.

We conclude that Haitian linguistic and cultural practices represent significant learning sites for Haitian learners. And, the inclusion of Haitian cultural heritage, knowledge and epistemology in the schooling experiences of Haitian students has the potential to improve their academic production and performance through increased self-esteem, pride and confidence, as well as increase familial engagement.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my only child and daughter Taïna (Tayou) Cerat Ligondé. Tayou, undoubtedly, your unconditional love and an unequalled ability to understand and accept me as I am have made me a better person. Over the years, I have often shared with you that my life acquired greater meaning because of you. It is true. Your wisdom and thoughtfulness from a very young age never stopped to amaze me. Although you don’t quite seem to remember, but a turning point came that day, when sitting across from you at the dinner table at 176 Clarkson in Brooklyn, you told me: “When I grow up, I want to be just like you.” Those words have continued to ring in my ears for all of the 25, 26 years since. Realizing that I could not let you down was a life defining moment for me. As imperfect as was the life that I tried to create for the two of us, I want you to know that every action and inaction, every utterance and silence were made to protect you, express my unconditional love, and be as good a role model as I could be. Finally, it is my hope that I have been a decent example, and given you some tools that you can use for your own journey. In case I’ve failed to provide you anything useful, I remain confident knowing you as well as I do that you will create and craft your own.
Acknowledgments

Writing this dissertation was a labor of love, but one that would not have come to fruition without the light, guidance and support of many invisibles and visibles. That I decide to first acknowledge the invisibles: the Haitian spirits and Haitian ancestors that inspired and guided me through this process should come as no surprise to the community. Mèsi lwa yo, mèsi zansét yo! I am equally grateful that the invisibles have placed visibles like my partner Stephen Michael (Steve) Deats and best friend Menès Dejoie in my life path. These two count among the many angels that walk among us. As I struggled to the finish line, there were moments without their words and gestures of encouragement I might not have stayed the course. In the last stretch, Steve became my emotional and physical caretaker. As for Menès, nearly every day he endured long drawn out exposés about all sorts of ideas that pestered me. Thank goodness for his psychology training! Menès always listened patiently, even to my most far-fetched ideas. To Steve and Menès, my heartiest thanks.

Now, I am eternally indebted to my dissertation committee: Dr. Ofelia García, Dr. Stephen (Steve) Brier, and Dr. Nicholas (Nick) Michelli of the Urban Education Program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), and Dr. Jean Y. Plaisir, my Haitian expert on the committee from the Borough of Manhattan Community College of CUNY. Ofelia García was my intellectual idol, long before I entered the Urban Education doctoral program. I remember as a New York City bilingual education teacher listening in awe to Ofelia making the case for the rights of minority language students to be provided with schooling opportunities that maintain their home/community language. This work is ultimately the result of the influence of one of the best in bilingual
education: Professor Ofelia García.

All of Cohort 11 knows the enormous place that Steve Brier occupies in my heart. A brilliant and compassionate intellectual, Steve challenged me, nurtured and supported my intellectual development. He always had time to meet, discuss, clarify ideas and advise on research paths. Moreover, my profound appreciation for the significance of context or this attachment to history as an essential portal to quality scholarship (storytelling) is all due to Steve. Lest I forget that I am a better writer because of him. It’s a learning experience to study where Steve places periods, virgules, and choice of words. I am thankful for having found a mentor in Steve.

Nick Michelli stands as a beacon in my achieving this dissertation. Nick was instrumental in shaping the questions that this research project would answer. It’s all in the sorts of research questions that you ask, Nick often reminds. I salute your clairvoyance, Nick! Furthermore, I am grateful for your participation in the student-led weekly dissertation seminars. Your guidance, suggestions and comments were invaluable. I could not have gotten here without you.

Jean, family and friends in the Haitian community know that I refer to you as my Haitianist intellectual mentor. So much is owed to you for this degree. Words are not enough to express my gratitude for your intellectual generosity, your staunch support and help in my academic emancipation, your advice and feedback on all my work through this whole process. The only way to repay you is to promise to play similar roles for future young Haitian scholars in the community. Mèsi anpil anpil, frè mwen!

Now to my Urban Ed family Cohort 11, specifically my colleagues and friends Dr. Sharon J. Hardy and Dr. Audra M. Watson, this dissertation would not have
materialized without your support. Seriously. Before anchoring myself and finishing this research project, I wondered and wandered for quite a while. Yet, I will never forget Audra’s reaction in September of 2016—as we gathered under the leadership of Sharon for the dissertation peer support group with goals of assisting those of us still trailing behind. When I excitedly announced to the group that I was preparing to read Don Quixote as part of my ambitious desire to take on a couple of classics that I’ve missed, Audra looked at me and said: “No, you’re not.” But when she added: “You’ll be writing your dissertation,” she injected a dose of reality that I badly needed. No more scapegoating. In all, I am grateful for the love, compassion, generosity, and sacrifice that these two women, Audra and Sharon, have made in helping me to tackle this behemoth of a creature that a dissertation represents. I am also equally grateful and appreciative of the insights and support of Angelica Ortega, Stacey Campo and Dr. Lisa Auslander. At this time, I would be remiss if I did not thank Christine Saieh. This “goddess” foresaw that I belonged in the Urban Ed Program long before I saw the match. Thanks, Christine!

In truth, without community support, pursuing an endeavor such as a doctorate degree can be a daunting task. There are many other influential individuals that should be listed in that thank you litany, but are not mentioned here fault of space. Because you are not named does not mean that I have forgotten you. More could be said about the late radical scholar Jean Anyon whose spirit was undoubtedly one of those fierce feminist ancestral voices that spoke to me. Ayibobo for Jean Anyon, who has left us to return to her own Ginen! Wayne Koestenbaum of the English Program deserves more than a line here. Wayne has been in my corner since my days at City College, and walked one of my first recommendation letters to its destination at the Graduate Center. Thanks, Wayne. A
big thank you goes to Claudine Michel (sè mwen/zanmi mwen) from the University of California, Santa Barbara, for planting the seed of pursuing a doctorate degree while we chatted in the courtyard of the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras in 2006. To Ninaj Raoul, my community organizing comrade for the past 25 years, thank you for both your work and support.

Lastly, my twenty-first century exploration into Haitian linguistic and cultural practices must have been written in the stars, though I had not seen it coming. Receiving a doctoral degree is indeed a personal accomplishment and a testimony to hard work and discipline. But in my case, it is chiefly the result of being inhabited by a burning desire to better know and understand the cultures (Taino, African, Creole, Haitian, Caribbean, French, American, etc.) that have shaped who I am. Moreover, this pursuit was equally fueled by a profound yearning to give voice to the voiceless and pauperized Haitian masses and peasants, folks like my late illiterate mother Emma and all those who came before and after her, victims of European slavery and colonization as well as the Haitian post-colonial elite that has usurped Haiti’s grand struggle for freedom and human rights. You are the source of my sensibility and consciousness. This work is your work.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>Haiti, Haitians and their practices in context</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>Theoretical framework: Interpretive bodies of knowledge</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>Methodology and research design</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>Texts and narratives in Haitian Creole: A semiotic analysis</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>The Haitian practice of Rara: A semiotic analysis</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7</td>
<td>The Haitian practice of Vèvè: A semiotic analysis</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8</td>
<td>Haitian voices on the meanings of Haitian practices</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9</td>
<td>Discussion, implications and recommendations</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illustrations

List of Tables
Table 3.1  Post-colonial concepts table 59
Table 8.1  Haitian adolescent participants 221
Table 8.2  Haitian parent participants 222

List of Figures
Figure 2.1  1552 Engraving of the native Taino of Ayiti 18
Figure 2.2  The tchatcha, a Haitian musical instrument and sacred object 22
Figure 2.3  The ason, a sacred object in the Haitian Vodou practice 23
Figure 2.4  Adinkra symbol *Gye Nyame* of the Akan people 45
Figure 2.5  Gúdúgúdú drum of the Yoruba people 48
Figure 6.1  Photograph of Rara band in Leogane, Haiti 135
Figure 6.2  Photograph of a queen conch shell 147
Figure 6.3  Photograph of monument to the Marooned Negro 150
Figure 6.4  Photograph of Rara band in the countryside, Haiti 178
Figure 6.5  Photograph of painted Vodou drums, Leogane, Haiti 180
Figure 7.1  Vèvè for the spirit *Legba Atibon*, keeper of the gates 181
Figure 7.2  Vèvè for the spirit *Ogou Feray*, god of iron 185
Figure 7.3  Vèvè for *Marasa*, spirit of twins 187
Figure 7.4  The Akan people Adinkra symbol *Sankofa* 194
Figure 7.5  Vèvè for the spirit *Èzili*, goddess of love 195
Figure 7.6  The Akan people Adinkra symbol *Akofena* 195
Figure 7.7  A vèvè for the spirit *Granbwa Ile*, spirit of the forests 204
| Figure 7.8  | A vèvè for the spirit *Granbwa Ile*, spirit of the forests | 210 |
| Figure 7.9  | Vèvè for the spirit *Bawon Simityè*, a spirit of death | 212 |
| Figure 8.1  | The Haitian flag | 234 |
| Figure 8.2  | Vèvè for the spirit *Èzili*, goddess of love in metal | 236 |
Culture, here, is not [simply] cults and customs, but the structures of meaning through which men give shape to their experience; and politics is not coups and constitutions, but one of the principal arenas in which such structures unfold. […] Therefore analytical style—of aim and of the methodological issues the pursuit of such an aim entails […] necessitates] questions of definition, verification, causality, representativeness, objectivity, measurement, communication […] which all boil down to one question: how to frame an analysis of meaning—the conceptual structures individuals use to construe experience—which will be at once circumstantial enough to carry conviction and abstract enough to forward theory.

--Geertz, 1973, pp. 312-313
Chapter 1

Introduction

Language and culture serve as unique vehicles through which the dynamic flux between our being and becoming is operationalized. “We use language to get recognized as taking on a certain identity or role; that is, to build [and affirm] an identity…” argues the American discourse analysis scholar James Paul Gee (Gee, 2011, p. 31). We are our language, with all our complexities, thus suggests Gee. That is, language provides a means to identify the sum of the person that we are or view ourselves as being: man or woman, rural or urban, and so on. Similarly, our culture—which also includes our language(s) and linguistic habits—equally offers windows to our “conceptual world… [and helps us] converse” with one another, contends Geertz (1973). For instance, when a person self-identifies as Haitian, s/he is affirming him/herself with a particular socio-historical experience (i.e., the embodied colonial and slavery legacy, contestation and resistance to the slavery and colonial experience, his/her Haitian Creole language, culture and identity, etc.), as well as asserting connections to particular philosophical and cultural elements (e.g., African-based traditions, a worldview shared with/implanted in African doings, and so on) that enter or compose the collective Haitian identity. Our linguistic and cultural practices are interwoven, and enormously significant for our identity. They represent the means through which our stories and histories find their voices and significations. They are vital sources for the thoughts, words, and actions that help us to create and convey meaning about ourselves, connect with others in the immediate environment, as well as with those from external communities or the larger world (Gee, 2011; Geertz, 1973; Paris, 2012).
Being or identifying as Haitian denotes what is commonly agreed in popular Haitian parlance that: *Se kreyòl nou ye*, “We are Creoles.” Asserting that creole identity—evident in an undated Vodou religious prayer such as *Anonse*\(^2\) connotes or suggests that the enslaved ancestors of the Haitians understood early on the amalgamation, complexity, as well as the significance and uniqueness of that Creole identity. This Creole identity that was created/constructed during the austere colonial-slavery experience, carries the weight of both colonization and decolonization, as well as the dichotomy of enslavement and freedom. Ultimately, it is an identity that reflects the courage, valor and unbrokenness of the human spirit. It is also through that identity that Haitians garner meanings about themselves, connect with one another in their immediate world, as well as interface and transact with those from the larger world community. Yet, it is that very identity that is being fundamentally alienated in the American schooling experiences of the Haitian students speaking out in this research project. The cultural and linguistic alienation that they are subjected to during those formative years has caused/and is inflicting great damage.

The creolophone context and reality of these Haitian children—i.e., daily language, culture, and home/community practices—are excluded from their schooling experiences in the United States. Haitian immigrant children and families that reside and call the United States home are dreamers and believers in the grand American democratic promise of equity and equality, and this nation’s commitment to affirming and

---

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Haitian Creole and French to the English language are mine.

2 The Haitian Vodou prayer *Anonse* contains the line *Kreyòl mande chanjman*, “Creoles demand change.” The prayer is unquestionably ancient, and seemed to have foreshadowed the “no-return” slave revolt in 1791, and the eventual total liberation of the enslaved Africans and the land in the 1804 Haitian Independence that introduced the first Black Republic in the world and the only country ever created by former slaves.
proctecting diversity. Yet, these Haitian children’s creole identity and creole cultural heritage are rejected by the anglophone schooling milieu. This situation prevents Haitian student from developing into confident, healthy, well-rounded and learned individuals. A quality education must offer students opportunities to build on, reinforce and strengthen their intellectual ability, as well as support and buttress their social and emotional development. However, for the vast majority of Haitian children the educational experience in their American schools has morphed into an ideological nightmare. Haitian adolescent participants in this research study expressed feeling embarrassed to speak their Haitian Creole language in school. One youth declared during a focus group session that one day when she tried to speak Haitian Creole with a friend at school, the friend replied: “Speak English... because we’re in public,” which left her confused, and embarrassed for both her and the friend.

Similarly, the Haitian Vodou belief system, which contains many significant philosophical elements that encompass the Haitian experience and worldview—is never introduced as do other world religions such as Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and so on, in textbooks or teaching materials. On the contrary, through society’s negative message about Haitians and their linguistic and cultural practices, these students are forced to distance themselves from family and community members who live these customs in their daily life. These conditions and contradictions—absence or exclusion of these children and their families’ ways of knowing—create a sense of alienation in Haitian children about the value of their language, culture, family and community.

To educate children in a linguistically and culturally alienating context deprives them of the opportunity to appreciate their languages and cultures, in essence, their
personhood. It also prevents students to effectively communicate their thoughts and ideas and emotions, and to find the support of significant others in their families, such as grandparents and parents who are repositories of cultural knowledges that can support children’s educational experiences.

The exclusion of the language and culture—significant critical meaning-making sites—of Haitian children in their education is at the root of my interest to understand the sociopolitical and historical forces at play for the continued absence of these students’ home/community ways of knowing as part of their educational experiences. Moreover, I try to understand how educationally exclusionary practices maintain class structures within our society. If it is schools’ role to instill democratic values in students, to strive to make society more “perfect,” and equalize society, they cannot afford to ignore the linguistic and cultural rights of learners and their families. In other words, schools must provide all children, including Haitian learners, with experiences that nurture their ways of knowing, foster a culture of equity and equality, as well as include curricular and pedagogical practices that validate the cultural heritage of students.

Schools are principal sites involved in the intellectual and social preparation of citizens. They should provide all students, including Haitian students, with opportunities to validate and affirm their linguistic and cultural identities, essential and constitutive elements in the construction of their personhood/humanity. If schools via curricular and pedagogical practices allow learners, including Haitian students, to access and make use of their linguistic and cultural heritage, they would enable students to engage deeply in the learning process via a language they fully understand; utilize cultural tools to make richer connections, bridge and attain deeper meanings from learning experiences; access,
retrieve and use prior knowledge developed through home, family and community experiences, which would facilitate the process of building and acquiring new knowledge; and, connect old and new knowledge for critical reflection and creative solutions that can help improve and transform their lives and communities.

Educational decision-makers continue to interfere with legal mandates, and ignore the research data on the cognitive and social value of using students’ linguistic and cultural resources as part of their learning experience (Bialystok, 2001; Peal & Lambert, 1962; García, 2009; García & Kleifgen, 2010; Delpit, 1995; Yosso, 2005). Education is supposed to be concerned with the preparation of well-learned, productive and enlightened citizens. Meanwhile in the face of political and institutional resistance, the “attainment gap” (Buttarro, Battle, & Pastrana, 2010; Anyon, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008), or the academic underachievement, or the absence of quality and expected academic production and performance of minority learners, including Haitian students, persists in a local and national narrative of deficit, which places the blame on students, their families and communities.

Schools rarely plan for, and implement programs, which ensure that students are provided with teaching and learning opportunities that respond to their academic, linguistic and cultural needs. One blatant and recent example was highlighted in a 2011

---

3 Efforts to address the academic needs of minority students in the African-American community started with the U.S. Supreme court decision of Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas in 1954 (See, Clark, 1965; Taylor, 2001; Podair, 2002). Further openings would be made for Spanish speaking students who came to school with a home/community language other than English with the congressional Bilingual Education Act of 1968, the 1975 U.S. Supreme court decision of Lau v. Nichols that followed, and included other local mandates such as the 1972 New York State Commissioner Regulations Part 154 (CR Part 154), and so on. All of these legal initiatives are routinely ignored, leaving minoritized language minoritized students and families wonting of the ongoing failure and deficit about the dire educational conditions of these children.
When Tilden High School was phased out in June 2011, under the Bloomberg-Klein mayoral education reform, 44 of the cohort of 60 Haitian students did not graduate. These 44 Haitian students were left with no prospect of going to college, and/or building an adequate life for themselves (Flanbwayan Report, 2011). American society and its schools are not living up to its democratic and egalitarian ideals professed in a narrative of educational equity and equality for all.

The inclusion of the linguistic and cultural practices of Haitian Creole-speaking learners in their schooling experiences matters. It is a democratic matter, a “linguistic human rights” (Skuttnab-Kangas, 2006) matter, a social justice matter that rests on the fundamental rights of all persons: men, women and children to exist and live in dignity regardless of language, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. To respect, accept, recognize, and decisively include Haitian practices in the education of Haitian learners would ensure the healthy development of these children’s intellect and sense of self, as

---

4 Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project, henceforth referred to as Flanbwayan, is a 12-year old community-based group in Brooklyn, New York. It is a youth-membership group that assists Haitian newcomer high schoolers in negotiating the bureaucracy of the New York City Department of Education High School Enrollment process. It also provides youth services that range from academic support to advocacy training. For the full 2011 report of Flanbwayan on the Haitian students at Tilden High School, visit: http://www.flanbwayan.org/index.php/what-we-do/publications.

5 “The election of Michael Bloomberg, the advent of mayoral control, and the appointment of Chancellor Joel Klein launched a set of complex and often controversial changes in the New York City school system, in everything from politics and governance to promotion policies and classrooms assessments […] high school reform was high on the list of intractable problems. […] Amid the many changes in policy and practices implemented by the new DOE [the New York City Board of Education was renamed the Department of Education, which is often referred to as NYCDOE or DOE] some (like the standardizing K-8 curricula or charter schools) have had relatively less impact on the high schools. Others (like school closing) have had a disproportionately high effect on high schools. […] the DOE pledged to close down low-performing high school and open two hundred new small schools to take their place…” (See, Leslie Santee Siskin’s “Changing Contexts and the Challenge of High School Reform in New York City” in Education Reform in New York City: Ambitious Change in the Nation’s Most Complex School System (2011), Jennifer A. O’Day, Catherine S. Bitter and Louis M. Gomez (Eds.).
well as nurture their pride and social adjustment.

This research study sheds light on the linguistic and cultural practices of Haitian learners, as well as argues for the inclusion of these students’ linguistic and cultural heritage in their schooling experiences. It is also intended to provide a space for Haitian youngsters (as well as Haitian parents) to reflect on, and interpret the exclusion and/or inclusion of their language and culture in education. Moreover, the study illustrates that the home/community language and culture of Haitian learners represent critical educational assets and resources that can sustain academic and social success.

**Background to the research questions**

The overarching concern that led to this research study was the need to address the continued failure of Haitian students by the American school system. With this study, we identify and describe the linguistic and cultural practices that could support quality teaching and effective learning for Haitian students; and, demonstrate how the cultural heritage of Haitian youngsters could strengthen their educational experiences. To begin, we posed the following research questions.

**The research questions**

1. What are the linguistic and cultural practices of Haitians that are pervasive and what are the meanings of these practices?
2. What are the meanings of these practices for Haitian parents in the United States?
3. What are the meanings of these practices for Haitian adolescents in the United States?
A biographical profile of the researcher

Born and raised in Haiti, a country with complex colonial past and post-colonial present, I experienced early in life how societal exclusion is constructed around issues of language, culture, economic status, and other perceived differences. My creolophone home/community and reality—i.e., the African-based linguistic, cultural, and communal practices—conflicted with the francophone or French-influenced schooling milieu modeled after the former colonial patron. Enrolled at age five at the *Sisters of Saint Anne*, a French-Canadian all girls’ school was supposed to provide me—and many other poor and promising children—with a headstart that would translate into greater access to the society’s resources, however meager. But, my Haitian Creole language as well as the Vodou belief system and practices of my family and community that had been most significant in my formative years were banned every time I crossed the school gate. These conditions and contradictions created in me a sense of alienation, a feeling of shame about my language and culture, even my family. This caused a long period of confusion for the better part of my childhood and adolescence.

As an educator in the New York City public education system, I have observed how Haitian children are similarly deprived of the opportunity to learn in their home/community language, access critical resources embedded in their cultural heritage, and appreciate and respect their language and culture. This situation results in many Haitian learners feeling shameful about their cultural heritage, and hampers their ability to learn as well as to effectively communicate their ideas and emotions, and find the support of significant others such as grandparents, parents and families in their educational experiences.
It is partly those personal and professional experiences\(^6\) that have fueled my research interest and curiosity to understand the power of language and culture, as well as the relational and historical forces that continue to exclude these students’ home/community language and culture as part of their schooling experiences, and thereby, maintain the unequal class structures within our society.

It is also that consciousness and sensibility that paved the way for my communal engagement in the New York Haitian community soon after I arrived from Haiti in 1981. Becoming involved with the now defunct sociopolitical group *Mouvman Otonòm Kiltirèl Ayiti-Monn* (MOKAM) played a significant role in increasing my understanding of the politics of language, the weight of cultural alienation, the source of the racial and economic injustice of marginalized peoples like the Haitian immigrants. Inside MOKAM, I participated in organizing community activities on the Haitian Creole language and culture in New York from the late 1980s to the present. Such pioneering work on Haitian Creole language and culture helped me shed the sense of alienation and shame about my heritage, develop community organizing skills and techniques to engage others in a movement for the promotion and protection of Haitian Creole language and culture. MOKAM and its allies became instrumental in creating spaces for reflection on the perspectives and challenges faced by Haitian Creole speakers in the United States, as well

---

\(^6\) My entire professional career is in public education, K-16. Most recently, I spent the academic year 2015-2016, working as an English and Social Studies teacher at P.S. 189, a K-8 public school in Brooklyn. My students were mostly Haitians from the Dual and Bilingual programs of the school. Most were born in Haiti, and arrived in the years following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. I began my educational career in 1989, as a paraprofessional at *The Rikers Island Educational Facility*, a New York City public educational program located inside one of the City’s main jails. The academic program at Rikers was designed to provide educational services, specifically General Education Development preparation courses for teenage legal offenders awaiting trial and sentencing.
as in Haiti. MOKAM was an influential advocate for the maintenance of the home/community language of Haitian learners in their education.

This community engagement grew beyond MOKAM. In 1992, I co-founded Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees (HWHR) with Ninaj Raoul. The group was created to assist Haitian refugees fleeing the political violence unleashed with the September 1991 coup d’état in Haiti that overthrew President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—the liberation theology influenced priest that became popular with the Haitian masses because of his sermons in Haitian Creole that commented on the oppressive and infrahuman conditions of the Haitian masses. While HWHR was chiefly instituted to respond to the needs of these Haitian refugees who began settling in the area in the early to mid-1990s, the group now in its 25th year of existence expanded, and today continues to provide educational services, and organizing leadership training to help members advocate on their own behalf for civil, educational, social, immigration, and labor/economic justice.

Over the years, I have collaborated with numerous New York-based Haitian community groups, including Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project, Queens Empowerment Center, Haitians United for Progress (HAUP), and served on the executive and/or advisory boards of the Haitian Educators League for Progress; the Haitian Cultural Exchange; La Troupe Makandal; and Verite sou Tanbou. What connected/connects me with all these local Haitian groups, starting with MOKAM, are their understandings of what the Haitian language and culture represent in the lives of Haitians. By creating educational, informational forums and activities about Haitian linguistic and cultural practices, these groups have contributed in raising the status of the Haitian language and culture both in the United States and in Haiti. Through their work,
they helped, and continue to build and foster cross-cultural understandings that have diminished xenophobia, stereotypes, fear or misunderstandings directed towards Haitians by other groups. My connection and work with these groups, members of the Haitian community in New York at large, and allies of the community have inspired and given me hope for the future of the Haitian Creole language and culture for its people. This study is indeed part of that beacon of hope.

A profile of the Haitian community in New York

When the Haitian anthropologist Michel S. Laguerre (1984) selected New York City to conduct one of the first and most comprehensive studies on Haitian immigrants in the United States, he noted:

The boroughs of Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens were selected for this study because of the large number of Haitian immigrants who live there. New York City has the largest concentration of individuals of Haitian extraction in the United States, roughly 450,000 […] In New York, more than any other American city, Haitians display their cultural distinctiveness through a network of churches, private businesses, and voluntary associations. It is not surprising to hear individuals speaking Creole in the subway between Manhattan and Brooklyn; to find migrants congregating in a voodoo priest’s home to perform voodoo ceremonies on Saturday evenings; to hear Haitian music and news during “Haitian hours” on four radio stations based in New York; and to learn every week in the Haitian-American-owned newspapers that a Haitian political or cultural event is being held somewhere in the city. These are some of the factors that make
New York City the appropriate place in which to conduct this kind of study. (p. 31)

The strong and vibrant Haitian presence that drew Laguerre to New York City (NYC) in 1984 to fulfill his research goal is one of the main reasons for selecting the City more than 30 years later to conduct this research study project. NYC has long ceded its place as the chief U.S. Haitian enclave to Miami (Joseph, 2010; Pierre-Louis, 2011; ACS, 2009), due to the latter’s tropical breezes, warmer coastlines, and proximity to Haiti\(^7\), yet the city still remains a major U.S. Haitian diasporic community (Joseph, 2010; Zéphir, 2010; Fouron & Glick-Schiller, 2001; Pierre-Louis, 2011). The 2015 American Community Survey (ACS) estimates a total of 115,000 Haitians in New York, showing a drop in the population from the 2009 ACS estimates, which reported the Haitian population at 191,000\(^8\). These numbers are generally and largely contested by Haitian community practitioners, who argue that these figures do not take into account undocumented Haitian immigrants (Joseph, 2010; Zéphir, 2010; Fouron & Glick-Schiller, 2001; Pierre-Louis, 2011).

New York City nonetheless continues to attract a large number of Haitian immigrants. Moreover, the Haitian community in New York itself has been held up as an exemplary social, cultural and political organizing model for other Haitian enclaves across the United States (Pierre-Louis, 2011; Laguerre, 1984; Joseph 2010). In 1990, the organizing force of the Haitian community came on full display when the Centers for

---

\(^7\) Haitians in the city of Miami often brag that they have a shorter plane ride to Haiti. In fact, Miami is 689 miles to Haiti, whereas New York is 1,505 miles.

\(^8\) Florida is estimated as having “376,000.” See, the U.S. Census record [https://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acsbr09-18.pdf](https://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acsbr09-18.pdf)
Disease Control (CDC) branded Haitians as one of the four carrier groups for the Human Immuno-deficiency Virus (HIV). After the CDC issued an official public ban on blood donors of Haitian ethnicity in 1989, Haitian community leaders and practitioners organized a protest that gathered an estimated 100,000 Haitian immigrants and their allies to march across the Brooklyn Bridge to the steps of City Hall in downtown Manhattan to denounce the CDC as a racist institution. This historic march was a major political action by the NYC Haitian community, and is billed as one of the largest demonstrations in U.S. history. If the CDC continued its policy, unspoken and implicitly, it was nonetheless forced to officially and publically retract that position on the very day of that protest, 20 April 1990.

To create a profile of the Haitian community in New York, I drew on existing research literature, Laguerre (1984), Pierre-Louis (2011), Joseph (2010), among others, but also on my lengthy grassroots community organizing experiences in the City\(^9\). The borough of Brooklyn in New York City is the only U.S. community where Haitians have gathered annually for the past 25 years at Prospect Park to commemorate\(^{10}\) Bwa Kayiman, the Vodou ceremonial event that launched the last uprising of the enslaved Africans and their descendants on French colonial Saint Domingue on the night of August 14-15 in 1791 (Trouillot, 1995; Buck Morss, 2009; Dubois, 2004).

---

\(^9\) A more detailed biographical profile of the researcher follows this section.

\(^{10}\) Initially started in the late 1980s by the Haitian Vodou priest and sculptor Deenps (Granbwa) Bazile, this annual commemoration has now been occurring for nearly 30 years, and draws hundreds of people (Haitians and non-Haitians) around the city, making the gathering on the most diverse and multicultural events in Brooklyn. Over the years, the cultural celebration has garnered wide support from other local cultural organizations, including the Center for Traditional Music and Dance. The image below shows a community participant drawing or tracing a vèvè on the ground for the Haitian Vodou spirit Gran Bwa, at the 2012 Bwa Kayiman public celebration at Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York.
In 2014, when the newly elected Mayor Bill de Blasio formed an informal community body to assist in vetting his in-coming commissioners and other highly placed members of his Administration, one of the sought-after voices came from the Haitian community. Elsie Accilien, the executive director of the community-based group *Haitian-Americans United for Progress, Inc.* (HAUP) was invited to join the group of community leaders. In 2007, Mathieu Eugene became the first Haitian member of the New York City Council, representing the 40th Council District in Brooklyn. Michælle Solages was installed as the first Haitian-American member of the New York State Assembly in 2012 as representative for District 22 on Long Island. In 2014, two other Haitian-Americans would follow Solages to the Assembly legislative body: the Brooklyn born and raised Rodnyse Bichotte, who represents the 42nd Assembly District in Brooklyn, and Kimberly Jean-Pierre, the Assemblyperson for the 11th District of Long Island. Carrié Solages, a brother of New York State Assemblywoman Solages, and a lawyer, serves on the Nassau County legislature. In 2016, the attorney Clyde Vanel would become the fourth Haitian-American to win a seat in the New York State Assembly for the 33rd Assembly District of Queens, New York.

The visibility of Haitians around the city and state has grown tremendously. There are Haitians living in all the boroughs of New York City, as well as working in all sectors, public and private. But there still remain great obstacles for the Haitian community to overcome. In effect, the continued political and institutional resistance to providing Haitian students with an educational experience that includes these children’s

---

11 HAUP is a not-for-profit community based organization that helps low-income families and individuals to live healthy and productive lives. HAUP was initially founded in 1975 to promote the welfare of Haitian refugees and immigrants (the social media facebook page of the organizations. Retrieved August 26, 2015.
linguistic and cultural practices remains a major hurdle to the progress and advancement of the Haitian community overall.

Thus, there lies the significance of this research study on Haitian linguistic and cultural practices, and the importance of including Haitian linguistic and cultural knowledge in the education of Haitian children. In providing and buttressing further research-based evidence to substantiate the value of including Haitian cultural heritage in the education of Haitian learners, this study is informing and provoking educational policy makers and institutional leaders into action; that is, to adopt curricular and pedagogical practices that would do justice to Haitian students, their families and community by including their Haitian cultural heritage and resources as part of these students’ schooling experience.
Chapter 2

Haiti, Haitians and their practices in context

Introduction

To better grasp the argument advanced here for the inclusion of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices in the education of Haitian learners requires an overview of the historical course of Haiti and its people. This chapter chiefly discusses the presence of the various groups that met on the island, and have impacted the development of Haitian history, language and culture. It begins with the Spanish invasion of the land of the indigenous Tainos who inhabited the island, and the importation of the first African captives on colonial Hispaniola by Spain. Further, it examines the exchanges that occurred between the two enslaved groups (Taino and African) for the brief period that the Taino survived. The chapter also provides a background for the presence of both colonial Spain and France on the territory. In the later sections, it offers a broad historical background and picture of the struggle for freedom by the enslaved Africans on French colonial Saint Domingue, the social, political and economic challenges in the aftermath of the Revolution, as well as the critical influences of the enslaved Africans ancestors on the development the history, language and culture of Haiti. The chapter concludes by reasserting the meaning of these linguistic and cultural practices and reasons for their inclusion in schooling experiences.

The beginnings

Ayiti¹² and its indigenous Taino inhabitants—an ancestor of the Haitians—became one of the first colonial casualties in the New World when the Spanish-financed

---

¹² Ayiti is the original Taino name for the entire island. The name change to Hispaniola by the Spanish conquistador Christopher Columbus when he arrived in the region in 1492 represented one of the many colonial acts of violence. By
envoy/conquistador Christopher Columbus landed in the region in 1492. Soon after the brutal conquest of the autochthonous Taino people and their land, Columbus changed the name of Ayiti to Hispaniola, claiming the territory in the name of Spain. Between the violent invasion, deterrioralization/dispossession, imposition of the invaders’ Spanish language, forced labor and corporal cruelties, the Spanish colonial agents exterminated the entire Taino population on the island in less than 30 years or as early as 1522 (Rouse, 1992, Alegría, 1997; Cummins, 1997).

The writings of Bartolome de las Casas, “an adventurer, who later repented, joined the priesthood, and became known as the Protector of the Indians” (Rouse, 1992, p. 156) reports many of the abuses suffered by the Tainos at the hands of Spanish colonial authorities. De las Casas’s work even mentions Anacaona, the female Taino chief, who ruled the cacique of Xaragua (present day Leogane in Haiti). A renowned sanba—talented oral poetess—or “rhetor” (Kress, 2010), Chief Anacaona was also

---

13 The Taino were an indigenous “[e]thnic group that inhabited the Bahamian Archipelago, most of the greater Antilles [Cuba, Haiti, and Puerto Rico], and the northern part of the Lesser Antilles in the time of Columbus’s time. (See, The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus (1992) by Irving Rouse, Yale University Press).

14 Spanish colonial agents immediately subjected the Tainos to forced labor mining for gold and harvesting tobacco.

15 Bartolomé de Las Casas, (b. August 1474, Sevilla?—d. July 17, 1566, Madrid), early Spanish historian and Dominican missionary in the Americas, who was the first to expose the oppression of the Indian by the European…www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/330804/Bartolome-de-Las-Casas

16 The province of Xaragua [today identified as Leogane] was ruled by Anacaona and was one of the last independent holdout during the Spanish conquest of Hispaniola, until the execution of Anacaona by the Spanish. (Source: www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1674665/Anacaona).

17 Sanba is a Haitian Creole term to designate poet(s) and poetic talent. While the etymological origin of the word is unclear, it is interesting that there’s a musical tradition and danse in Brazil referred to as Samba as well.
noted for her exceptional performances in *areito*\(^\text{18}\) ceremonies. In 1503, she would be hanged by Spanish colonial agents for her ongoing resistance to the Spanish conquest, and some eighty district chiefs gathered in her *bohíó* (home) for a meeting were burned alive by Spanish soldiers upon the orders of Nicolás de Ovando\(^\text{19}\) (Rouse, 1992, p. 154). Chief and *Sanba* Anacaona continues to be revered in oral, historical and literary narratives in the region’s political, cultural and artistic memory (Rouse, 1992; Métellus, 1986). In Haiti and in the larger Caribbean imaginary, Anacaona endures, and embodies ideals of courage and leadership for valiantly defending her territory and people against the Spanish invaders, as well as celebrated for her poetic gift and beauty.

*Figure 2.1 A 1552 Engraving by Theodor de Bry on the abuses of the native Taino, based on the report of Bartolome de las Casas.\(^\text{20}\).*

\(^{18}\) The *areitos* were “Taino ceremony celebrating the deeds of ancestors” (See, *The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus* (1992) by Irving Rouse, Yale University Press)

\(^{19}\) Fray Nicolás de Ovando y Cáceres (Brozas, Extremadura, 1460 - Madrid, 29 May 1511) was a Spanish soldier from a noble family and a knight of the Order of Alcántara. He was Governor of the Indies (Hispaniola) from 1502 until 1509. His administration is perhaps best known for its brutal treatment of the native Taíno population of Hispaniola.

\(^{20}\) This 1552 engraving by Theodor de Bry, depicting the atrocities done to the Taino by Spanish colonial agents in the New World is based on the story of Bartolome de las Casas *Narratio Regionum indicarum per Hispanos Quosdam devastatarum verissima*. The work is part of the public domain in its country of origin
The engraving above (figure 2.1) is one of a series of etchings created by the sixteenth century artist Theodor De Bry, depicting the atrocities done to the Taino by Spanish colonial authorities in the New World. His engravings on the Tainos were based on stories told and written by Bartolome de las Casas that decried the brutality of Spanish colonial agents against the Taino.

**The Taino and African encounter on the island of Ayiti**

Another significant and defining moment in Haitian history is the encounter of the Tainos with the Africans on the island. By 1503, eleven years into the conquest, Spain began the importation and enslavement of Africans on *Ayiti* to supplement the dying Taino slave labor force (Rouse, 1992; Plaisir, 2010; Dubois, 2012). “Spaniards compensated for the decline […] by increasing the importation of […] Black slaves from Africa” Rouse notes (1992, p. 158). Such historical accounts confirm that the Tainos, however briefly, coexisted with the African slaves. Plaisir (2010) observes:

Africans worked side by side with the Arawak natives [of the region, including the Tainos] in the tobacco field and the gold mines that the Spaniards were exploiting […] Both groups of subjugated peoples also collaborated together to devise escape strategies, known as marooning, and developed coping mechanisms in order to survive all manners of violence and brutality from their common European oppressors. (pp. 26-27).

Clearly, the Tainos and other enslaved groups worked alongside one another on the island for at least two and a half decades. “By 1524 they [the Tainos] had ceased to exist as a
separate population,” writes Rouse (1992), adding that: “[p]arts of their biological, cultural, and linguistic heritages have nevertheless survived…” (p. 169). Arguably, during that short coexistence, the Tainos and the Africans probably shared various resources (i.e., biological, linguistic, cultural, political, geographical, etc.) among them, including survival tactics and techniques. After all, the Tainos knew the landscape of the island better than the Africans. It is unquestionable that contact between the Tainos and Africans in that overlapping period was sufficient for numerous influential exchanges. Although the Taino influence on Haitian linguistic and cultural practices is rarely acknowledged.

Taino influences on Haitian practices

However minute, threads and traits of the Taino language, culture, ways of being and existing in the universe can still be gleaned in Haitian linguistic and cultural practices. Excavating rarely told stories about the Haiti-located Tainos recuperates the memory of these indigenous people from obscurity. Moreover, telling these stories foreground the significance of the Tainos on the development of Haitian language, culture and history. Further, the accuracy of this investigation into Haitian linguistic and cultural practices as critical meaning-making spaces for Haitian learners requires an exploration of the Taino influences on Haitian customs. For Taino linguistic and cultural elements represent an important composite of the Haitian identity.

In effect, the ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel (2006) pointedly observes that: “[A]ny historical account of Caribbean music and culture must commence with the practices of the Amerindians” (p. 3). In other words, to fully comprehend and discuss
music and culture (as well as language) from any countries in the Caribbean\textsuperscript{21}—the archipelago that constitutes the group of islands found along the American continental shores—one must start with the indigenous populations that inhabited the region. And indeed, there is evidence of Taino influences on Haitian linguistic and cultural practices. To start with, descriptions of the Taino’s “dance court” (Rouse, 1992) or dedicated performance spaces where ceremonial dances and rites were held shares a striking resemblance to the \textit{peristil}, the Haitian Vodou temple.

Rouse notes, “rituals were performed there [the Taino dance courts] before and after battles and upon the marriage or death of a chief, and so were ceremonies (\textit{areito}) celebrating the deeds of ancestors. The dancers were accompanied by singing, drumming, and rattling” (Rouse, 1992, pp. 14-15, citing Lovén, 1935, pp. 492-497). Likewise, the Haitian Vodou temple is a designated place where ritualistic activities and events occur with drumming, singing, and dancing. Taino ceremonial practices of food offerings to their \textit{zemis}, the term used to refer to their deities as well as ancestors, and other associated symbolic items and customs, suggest that the Tainos held “ceremony[ies]… [with] dancing… [where] the audience sang the praises of the zemis…” (p. 14). This is reminiscent of Haitian Vodou ceremonies. The \textit{areito} ceremony itself held to celebrate the deeds of ancestors echoes the post-funerary Haitian Vodou ritual of “\textit{wete mò nan dlo/anba dlo}, removing the dead from the water or from under the water” for a more tranquil passage to the other side (Rigaud, 1953).

Moreover, the presence of the Haitian instrument \textit{tchatcha} (pictured below in figure 2.2) and found in all genres of Haitian music from Vodou, Rara to \textit{Konpa} (the

\textsuperscript{21} The region takes its name from the indigenous Carib people (extinct) encountered in the area by Christopher Columbus.
secular popular music of Haiti) sounds similar to the “rattling” object mentioned by Lovén (1935) and cited by Rouse (1992). The *tchatcha* is made with a small calabash gourd. After cleaning the flesh and seeds out, it is dried. Then a small amount of stones and/or grains are inserted into the gourd to produce the rattling sound. Lastly, it is outfitted with a wooden handle. Although the *tchatcha* is played in secular music, when used in *Petwo* ceremony rituals, it acquires sacred value. Even the *ason* (figure 2.3 below), a strictly sacred object that is given to Vodou priests and priestesses at the time of initiation bear resemblance to “the rattling” object or instrument of the Taino. The *ason* is made from a different calabash gourd that grows with a neck. It is decorated with colorful glass beads (and plastic beads at times) and bones from a snake vertebrate, as depicted in the image.

![Figure 2.2 The traditional Haitian musical instrument tchatcha. Photo Steve Deats.](image)

---

22 Petwo is one of the two major rites in Haitian Vodou. The Petwo rite is also referred to as “Kongo-Petwo, for it retains syncretic elements from the Kongo-Angola region.” The other major rite is the Rada “whose music and structure are retained quite faithfully from the Fon/Ewe and Yoruba of Dahomey and Nigeria” (Fleurant, 2006, p. 47). See Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel (eds.) *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, & Reality* (2006).
Likewise, the *lanbi* (the queen conch), a large edible mollusk or marine sea snail found *only* in the Caribbean and along the coastal waters of northern South America and the Florida Keys\(^\text{23}\) with its multiple usages in Haiti is a Taino inheritance. The *lanbi* meat is a Haitian culinary delicacy. Moreover, its shell is used as a Haitian musical instrument in Haitian Vodou and Rara music, and can even be found at times as a sacred object on Vodou altars. Archeological findings indicate that the Taino diet indeed consisted of a lot of fish and seafood, including shellfish, and that shells figure prominently among identified Taino artifacts (Rouse, 1992).

There are a significant number of Haitian Creole words that have Taino etymological origins (Rouse, 1992; Highfield, 1997; Plaisir, 2010). *Lanbi* is one such word. Other words\(^\text{24}\) credited to the Taino language that have been appropriated or entered into the Haitian Creole language are: *kannòt canoa* (canoe), *kounouk conuco* (small hut/a hut), *patat* *batata* (sweet potato), *kasav* *casabe* (cassava), *babako barbacoa/barabakoa* (large quantity of food), *mabi mabi* (fermented drink), *nas nasa* (fish mesh or net), *tabak/siga tabako/tabaku* (tobacco), *kanari canaris* (earthenware

\(\text{\footnotesize \textsuperscript{23}}\) U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, October 2016) Retrieved from the Internet on October 17, 2016

\(\text{\footnotesize \textsuperscript{24}}\) To distinguish the words, Haitian Creole words are listed first and italicized, followed by the Taino words that are bolded, and the English is provided in parentheses. A fair number of the Taino words were collected from Irving Rouse’s 1992 *The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus*....
water vessel), *koukouy* **cucubano** (lighting bug), *kayiman* **kaima** (caiman), *kay kaya* (island/island home), *mayi* **mahis/mahis** (corn/maize/cornmeal), and *papay* **papaya** (papaya), among others.

Among the most well known Taino words (by Haitians) contributed to the Haitian language is *Ayiti* (Haiti), which means “land of mountains.” Another important Haitian expression attributed to the Taino language is *Ayibobo*. The term is likened to the Taino’s *Ayabombe* (Plaisir, 2010). The *Ayibobo* word functions in Vodou ceremonies similarly to the ways Hallelujah or Amen is employed in Christian gatherings. In sum, there are clearly Taino linguistic and cultural elements that have entered, shaped and contributed to what would become Haitian practices. And, Haitian men, women and children need to know that foundational part of their ancestry. Knowing that layer of history, teaching that side of history helps confront, redress, correct, and illuminate the presence and contributions of the indigenous/autochtonous inhabitants who lived on that side of our world before the European invasion. The next section expands on the impact of European colonization and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade on the island of *Ayiti*.

**The island of Ayiti: A crucible of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade**

Colonial Spain continued the importation and enslavement of Africans on *Ayiti*, and maintained sole and total control of the entire island for nearly 140 years, before the incursion of France. Spain and France would fight for nearly 70 years over control of the territory (1625/1630 to 1697), until the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697—a colonially brokered peace deal signed in the Dutch Republic—divided the island between the two colonial powers. Spain was probably rewarded the bigger share, two-thirds of the territory, for having been the first invader. Wasting no time, France simply renamed its
one-third share Saint Domingue, adopting/translating the Spanish name Santo Domingo that was given to the capital of Hispaniola. While France would be given the smallest share of land, French colonial Saint Domingue became one of the largest slave societies in the New World. Historical records estimate that between 10 and 12 million Africans were transported to, and enslaved in the New World in the span of the four centuries that the practice and system of slavery lasted in the area. French colonial Saint Domingue alone received nearly a million African slaves, surpassing the number of slaves that ended up in the United States.

In Black in Latin America, a historical travelogue investigating the depth and breadth of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade across Latin America, the African-American historian Henry Louis Gates (2011) notes:

The Trans-Atlantic Database estimates that 770,000 slaves were brought to Haiti over the course of the slave trade. (Some historians place the figure higher, closer to one million, estimating the numbers that came illegally.) Gazing idly out my car window in Port-au-Prince, I shook my head in amazement as I recalled that number. This small nation—a country that takes up about one-third of the island of Hispaniola, about the size of Maryland—absorbed perhaps 350,000 more slaves than the total number that came to the United States. (p. 150)

Granted that slavery under any condition is slavery, and thus, oppressive and inhumane. French colonial Saint Domingue (present day Haiti) was considered one of the most oppressive and inhumane spaces in the New World (James, 1963; Trouillot, 1995; Dubois, 2004). In fact, Boukman—the slave and Vodou priest—who led the Vodou
ceremony at *Bwa Kayiman* that launched the *insuppressible* anti-slavery, anti-colonial, and revolutionary struggle in 1791 on French colonial Saint Domingue, was born in British colonial Jamaica, but sent to Saint Domingue for *taming* (Dorsainvil, 1942).

The large slave population on Saint Domingue coupled with the horrific condition of the slaves—non-stop forced labor in sugarcane plantations, inhumane treatment, physical atrocities and abuses—went on to create enormous wealth for France. Even earning French colonial Saint Domingue the reputation of being “the most profitable bit of land in the world” (Dubois, 2012, p. 4) in its days.

At the same time, the slaves always resisted. Numerous slaves continuously revolted and ran away to defy the atrocious conditions. *Makandal*, a run away slave and a precursor of *Boukman* led one of the earliest and notable slave revolts on Saint Domingue. From around 1751 to 1758, before his capture, *Makandal* and his associates killed nearly 6,000 slave owners and destroyed countless plantations and refineries (Heinl & Heinl, 1978; Dubois, 2004; McAlister, 2002).

**An overview of the Haitian revolutionary struggle, independence and its aftermath**

While European colonial slave powers, ideologues and agents blindly and ruthlessly continued the propagation of the inhumanity of Africans as well as the terrorization of the enslaved Africans in the New World, French colonial Saint Domingue was turning into a crucible of the Trans-Atlantic slave experience (James, 1963; Trouillot, 1995; Fouron, 2010; Dubois, 2004; Buck-Morss, 2009). Thirty years to the *Makandal* revolt (1751-1758), *Boukman* would initiate the decisive insurrection in August of 1791, which would deliver thirteen years later, an independent *Ayiti* free of slavery as the first black Republic in the world founded and governed by former slaves.
In liberating and declaring the French colonial territory of Saint Domingue free of slavery and independent in 1804, these enslaved Africans and their descendants dislodged centuries of European ideological distortions, which included notions that: “Blacks were inferior and therefore enslaved; black slaves behaved badly and were therefore inferior” (Trouillot, 1995, p. 77). The revolutionary struggle and success of the Saint Domingue slaves was truly remarkable. Slaves facing up to their masters, defeating the system of slavery and establishing their own country proved intolerable to Europeans and the West, and required the harshest of responses.

Ensuing silences, omissions, usurpations and alienations of the Haitian independence by the Western world would launch an unstoppable effort to disenfranchise Haiti and Haitians. Falsely constructed beliefs that blacks were inferior proliferated. Demonizing Haitians and their practices became a crusade of the West. Obscuring of works such as the 1885, 662-page of the Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin’s *The Equality of the Human Races* (2002) in response to the French writer Arthur de Gobineau’s scientifically racist essay *On the Inequality of the Human Races* written and published between 1853 and 1855, were all part of the West’s new strategy to limit blacks, as well as to stifle, suffocate, silence and undo the Haitian revolution and independence.

In *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009), the philosopher and political scientist Susan Buck-Morss’s quest to comprehend the silence of the Haitian Revolution and Independence by one of Europe’s most “prolific” thinkers and philosophers of the time, Hegel, she remarks:
Either Hegel was the blindest of all the blind philosophers of freedom in Enlightenment Europe, surpassing Locke and Rousseau by far in his ability to block out reality right in front of his nose (the *print* right in front of his face at the breakfast table); or Hegel knew—knew about real slaves revolting successfully against real masters, and he elaborated his dialectic of lordship and bondage deliberately within this contemporary context. (p. 50, emphasis in original)

That the German philosopher Hegel\(^2\) failed to reference the 1804 Haitian anti-slavery Revolution in *The Phenomenology of Mind* that he wrote around 1805-06, published in 1807 as a dialectical treatise on lordship and bondage is indeed unthinkable. True, what occurred on Saint Domingue between 1791 and 1804 was without comparison, and the world did tremble. Enslaved Africans, long described and portrayed as less than human, incapable of thinking and reasoning, had challenged and triumphed over the world’s recognized “greatest” army of its time: France’s Napoleonic war machine. Consequently, Western colonial powers and ideologues knew they had to develop mechanisms to block Haiti in its course and its possible influences on other slave societies. Thus ensues the historic perpetuation of excluding, silencing and obscuring Haitian language, culture and history as part of the world body of knowledge and experience.

In *Silencing the Past* (1995), the Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot observes:

\(^2\) It would be equally interesting to explore whether Hegel’s *Lectures on Religion* delivered between 1821 and 1831 were influenced by stories and reports on how the Vodou religion of the slaves played a significant role in their understanding and conception of spirituality and humanity, and was one unifying element in the slaves’ struggle for freedom.
The international recognition of Haitian independence was even more difficult to gain than military victory over the forces of Napoleon. It took more time and more resources, more than half a century of diplomatic struggles. France imposed a heavy indemnity on the Haitian state in order to formally acknowledge its own defeat. The United States and the Vatican, notably, recognized Haitian independence only in the second half of the nineteenth century. Diplomatic rejection was only one symptom of an underlying denial. The very deeds of the revolution were incompatible with major tenets of dominant Western ideologies. (p. 95)

Accepting the imminent end of the slave trade as practiced in the New World, with the Saint Domingue slaves’ historic defeat of colonial France, would remain like the proverbial “thorn on the side” of colonial imperial Europe. In fact, the Western world was not prepared to do away with the system of slavery. The system—entirely anchored for more than 300 years in the conquest, seizure, colonization (and annihilation) of indigenous peoples and their lands, and human bondage, was the source of vast wealth for European colonial imperial nations, including the United States, the northern neighbor of the new black Republic.

The Haitian Revolution represented a political, social, and economic problem (even humanitarian) that the West needed to deal with swiftly. In the years that followed the historic Haitian achievement, the West turned Haiti into the political, economic and social pariah of the world. Less than 20 years after the founding of the young country, Haiti had to pay an indemnity in the amount of 150 million francs “$3 billion in today’s currency” to France for damage to colonial properties (Dubois, 2012, p. 7). Furthermore,
for more than sixty years, Haiti was diplomatically isolated by its neighbor the United States, and even The Vatican.

Yet, the existence of Haiti and Haitians continued to challenge the denials of the West. In effect, these former African slaves helped to awaken the world’s consciousness to the notion that the human races were equal. These former African slaves—the progenitors of the Haitians—demonstrated that humanity was universal, regardless of race, creed, and culture, in essence, all that makes us human. Moreover, they showed that the idea of and desire for freedom lurks in the heart of every human being, and that humans oppressing other humans, was the ultimate form of violence and violation of our very humanity.

The events on Saint Domingue in 1804 surpassed the United States 1776 declaration that “all men are created equal.” Jefferson’s phrase only guaranteed these rights and equality to the rich white males of U.S. society, while keeping its system of slavery undisturbed for nearly a century after its famed declaration. The Haitian revolutionary cry of liberty, equality and fraternity for all echoed the voices of the French Jacobins, citizens of the very nation that was suppressing them. Moreover, the Haitian cry for freedom and the rights of every human being long predated the world’s declaration of universal human rights. The Saint Domingue slaves’ struggle “was a people’s war”, writes the Caribbean scholar C.L.R. James in his seminal work *The Black Jacobins* (1963). Human rights—a moral concept for the respect and protection of all human existence—in its truest and most concrete form and realization was born on the island of *Ayiti*. (To deny Haitian learners and other African diasporan students of this inspiring historical experience, by omitting it in textbooks and instructional events, amount to a
violation of human rights and dignity, a violation of the “linguistic [and cultural] human
rights” (Skuttnab-Kangas, 2006) of these children.

There is no doubt that Haitians and Haiti have yet to fulfill the grand promise,
potential and possibilities envisioned in their original fight for liberation and human
rights. The Haitian people also recognize that the minority French-educated mulatto
elite—whose alliance was needed for the revolutionary war from 1791 to 1804—usurped
their victory and mortgaged the stability of the new nation for their own interest,
privilege and benefit. The constant plotting of the French-educated mulatto against their
darker brothers and sisters facilitated the capture and deportation of Toussaint
Louverture—one of the main architects of the Saint Domingue slave uprising—to France
in 1802. Louverture died in a French oubliette in the Fort de Joux located in the sub-
alpine Jura Mountains in April 1803. Upon his capture, the defiant Louverture
pronounced these words that must have fortified the revolutionary slaves, and have also
remained a source of pride for Haitians: “En me renversant, on n’a abattu à Saint
Domingue que le tronc de l’arbre de la Liberté des noirs; il repoussera par les racines
parce qu’elles sont profondes et nombreuses, In overthrowing me, only the trunk of the
tree of the Liberty of the negroes was cut down in Saint Domingue; it will grow back
because the roots are deep and numerous.” In other words, there was no turning back. A
gifted tactician and strategist, Toussaint Louverture had been the principal unifying force
of the revolutionaries. In effect, his arrest and exile did not derail the commitment of the
freedom fighters. Toussaint was “certain that slavery could never be restored” on the
territory (James, 1963, p. 290).
Indeed, as argues Anténor Firmin (2002) in *The Equality of the Human Races*, Jean-Jacques Dessalines—the right-hand man and principal officer of Toussaint Louverture—with his revolutionary army would confirm the famed words of Louverture. The slaves’ cry of *Liberty or Death*, with Dessalines as their new leader continued to ring and roll across the mountains of *Ayiti* until the system of slavery was totally overturned and abolished. The establishment of Haiti as a free, independent, and the first black Republic in the world in 1804 owes its existence to Toussaint Louverture, and particularly Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

Firmin (2012), a Haitian anthropologist, writes:

Jean Jacques Dessalines shines high in the historical firmament. Completely illiterate, this man was endowed with a limitless energy and a military talent which even his most adamant adversaries have never questioned. Entrusted with the difficult but glorious mission of leading the revolutionary movement gave birth to Haitian independence, Dessalines carried out his mission with admirable tact, always deserving of the trust of his people. He was truly the man for the situation. Where others would have softened and shown an ill-advised sentimentality, he remained inflexible before an enemy who was oblivious to the humanity of the African legions, giving them tit for tat, outrage for outrage. (pp. 368)

The illiterate Jean-Jacques Dessalines is hailed by Haitians as the architect of the Haitian nation, and remains the most revered founding father of Haiti, named *Père de la Patrie*, Father of the Nation. The Battle of Vertières on 18 November 1803,
which clinched the final victory of the revolutionary slaves over France’s Napoleonic forces was planned and strategized by Dessalines.

Naturally, Dessalines earned and became the first leader of the new black Republic, proclaiming himself Emperor of Haiti. Complaints about the austerity of the Dessalines administration in the nascent nation for demanding verification of land deeds and titles, claiming land in the name of the Haitian state, and imposing rigid labor law on the population made him many enemies. While the country did experience an agricultural renaissance and prosperity under Dessalines, the new leader was not favored by the French-educated mulatto elite, which resisted the rule of their darker brother. On 17 October 1806, Dessalines was assassinated in a plot organized by Alexandre Pétion, “the son of a white man and a free woman of color” and a former high-ranking officer in the Revolutionary army (now baptized) as the first Haitian army (Dubois, 2012, p. 55).

With the assassination of Dessalines in 1806, the nation plunged into historical chaos. By 1807, division between Pétion and Henry Christophe, two prominent mulatto officers from the Revolutionary Army, split the Haitian nation into two separate states. Christophe, one of the most visionary Haitian leaders, ruled the north from 1807 until his suicide in 1820. By 1811, however, four years into his administration, he proclaimed himself king. He was nonetheless recognized as an able and attentive administrator. Despite the lack of qualified educators in the country, Christophe ordered the creation of schools and recruited teachers from overseas. He also initiated and published three important Haitian legal guides for civil, military and rural codes, which helped to ensure order and brought great
prosperity to the territory. While undated and unconfirmed, the Haitian Vodou song:
*Kouzen, si ou pa mete lekòl m ap fè jandam arete ou,* Cousin, if you don’t enroll me in school I’ll have the gendarme arrest you” might have been constructed during the reign of Christophe. Families that did not register their children in schools were arrested under his administration. Among Christophe’s grand projects for Haiti were *La Citadelle La Ferrière,* built between 1805 and 1820 and the *Sans-Souci Palace.*

In 1982, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) listed *La Citadelle La Ferrière,* one of the largest fortresses in the Americas, as a World Heritage monument. On the other hand, Alexandre Pétion governed the rest of the country from 1807 until his death in 1818. While Pétion is also credited for championing education, his administration was far less grandiose and impactful than Christophe’s.

Corruption and continuous infighting between the Haitian mulatto and darker-skin elites for control over the meager resources of a new nation already besieged by huge debts such as the imposed indemnity by France, funds to fortify and protect the territory, including international isolation from world powers such as the United States—its closest neighbor would not recognize or establish diplomatic relations with Haiti until 1862—further plunged the country and its people into anarchy and poverty. The final payment toward the indemnity or so-called “debt to France” would not arrive until the presidency of Lysius Salomon in 1893. The Haitian scholar Georges Fouron (2010) compellingly argues: “The debt had been a financial yoke that deflected the country’s scanty resources toward compensating
the former slaves owners for their brutality. It added insult to injury since Haitian independence had been acquired at great human cost and sacrifice” (p. 34).

Mostly ruled by former military leaders that had fought in the Revolutionary War, these Haitian heads of state sought more and more autocratic control. Historians of Haiti largely agree that Jean-Pierre-Boyer, a mulatto and former revolutionary war hero, who ruled Haiti for 25 years (1818-1843), and unified the island by fighting off the Spaniard occupiers from Santo Domingo in 1822, solidified the authoritarian political atmosphere that would grip the nation for years to come. Following the quarter of a century rule of Boyer, Haiti and Haitians would experience a series of farcical and ephemeral presidencies, all with more and more autocratic tendencies. Amid the ensuing political, social and economic chaos that followed Boyer, from 1843 until the arrival of the U.S. occupying forces in 1914, three administrations warrant recognition for attempting to bring order, stability and prosperity to the nation: Fabre Géffrard (1859-1867); Florvil Hyppolite (1889-1896) and Antoine Simon (1908-1911). These three leaders undertook domestic programs that contributed in ameliorating the conditions of the Haitian people.

Thus, one hundred and eight years and twenty-seven heads of state following the assassination of Dessalines (1806-1914), ongoing political infighting for control—with the prying eyes and “thieving intentions” of the international community never too far—costs the country years of social and economic degradations and the imperialist intervention of the United States. The Haitian proverb: *Dan pouri gen fòs sou bannann mi* (literal translation: Rotten teeth have power over ripe plantains) or the weak take advantage of those who are still weaker”
applies here when one considers how the United States forcefully entered Haiti.

Dubois (2012) writes:

In December 1914, the USS Machias dropped anchor in the harbor of Port-au-Prince and a detachment of U.S. marines disembarked. They proceeded to carry out what can only be described as an international armed robbery. Entering the Banque Nationale d’Haïti, they removed from the vaults $500,000 worth of gold belonging to the Haitian government—the equivalent of $11 million today. Then in broad daylight, they took the gold back to the harbor, loaded it onto their gunboat, and shipped it to New York. Louis Borno, the Haitian minister of foreign relations, denounced the seizure as a “criminal act,” but no one—neither bank employees, state officials, nor Haitian soldiers and policemen—dared step in to stop it. (p. 204)

What opened the door for a U.S. Occupation of Haiti for about 20 years seems to be the result of an amalgamation of political, social and economic instability. But, it also points to the United States’s need to fulfill the 1823 Monroe doctrine, the U.S. foreign policy plan to control the affairs of countries throughout the Americas. Using the assassination of President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam as a pretext, the United States officially began a military occupation of the first black Republic in July 1915. The U.S. marines would remain on the Haitian soil until 1934, and after taking control of all the country’s institutions: banks, customs, schools, and so on. What became the modern Haitian army and participated in the oppression of the Haitian people, and even the 1918 Haitian constitution were the work of the U.S. occupying forces (Dubois, 2012; Fouron, 2010; Dorsainville, 1942).
The Haitian masses also know that the domination, oppression and marginalization of the population by Haiti’s mulatto elite, along with the elite’s collusion with France and the United States paved the way for the rise of numerous dictators, including François (Papa Doc) Duvalier and his son Jean Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier in the latter part of the twentieth century. Together, the Duvalier father and son duo ruled the country with an iron fist for 30 years, plundering the nation’s public coffers and plunging the Haitian people in deeper and deeper poverty\(^{26}\), all while having the support of the United States. Whereas Haitians have had a long presence on the American soil, the exodus of Haitians from their homeland throughout the 1960s, 1980s, and beyond was, and has always been motivated by more than economics, as many observers remark (Laguerre, 1984; Dubois, 2004; Fouron & Glick Schiller, 2001). The massive surge in Haitian migration to the United States in the second half of the twentieth century, argues Laguerre (1984), started when François (Papa Doc) Duvalier ascended to the Haitian presidency in 1957, declaring himself president for life two years after being elected into office. Duvalier established one of the harshest despotic governments in the region (Laguerre, 1984; Dubois, 2004; Dupuy, 1997; Fouron & Glick Schiller, 2001). The Duvalier reign continued for 29 years, when the system’s ideologues and enforcers transitioned power to Duvalier’s 19-year old son, Jean Claude (Baby Doc), upon the father’s death in 1971. In the end, contend many Haitianist scholars, it was the combination of the authoritarian Duvalier regime (father and son) coupled with increased economic regression of the developing Haiti that helped to carry the largest waves of

---

\(^{26}\) François (Papa Doc) Duvalier was elected president in 1957. By 1959, he declared himself president for life. When he died in 1971, his ideologues ensured that power was transitioned to his son Jean Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier. Baby Doc was ousted in a coup d’état in On February 6, 1986.
Haitians to U.S. shores during those decades.

Besides the Haitian intellectuals who opposed the Duvaliers, and escaped death at the hands of the regime to enter the involuntary world of the exiled in the United States, scores of Haitians sought visitor and commercial visas to reach America, knowingly joining the world of the undocumented. As conditions worsened in the 1980s and 1990s, thousands more risked their lives aboard rickety vessels bound for Miami, seeking America’s Floridian shorelines for political respite. The majority of the Haitians who were fleeing Haiti in those years by risking their lives in unworthy sea vessels were escaping political violence with hopes of finding refuge in the home of their neighbor to the North where political freedom in the blooming American democracy showed and offered opportunities for a more dignified existence. It cannot be lost in the narrative that the chief reason Haitians have been leaving their homeland in the last five, six decades was, and continues to be connected to the political economy structures of Haiti. While there is no question that those who made/make it to the United States also came/come with dreams of improving their economic life, it remains true that the promise of free speech, human and civil rights in the United States were what attracted, and continue to attract the Haitian migrants, primarily attempting to escape the volatile and volcanic political landscape that have come to define Haiti.

On the other hand, the hope for a new Haiti envisioned by Haitians with the rise to power in 1990 of the catholic priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide was dashed by a violent coup d’état in September of 1991 that deposed Aristide. Influenced by liberation theology, a political movement within the Catholic Church that began in mid-twentieth century in Latin America and interpreted Jesus Christ’s teachings as a liberation language
for the poor’s conditions, Aristide communicated a message of liberation to Haiti’s poor in Haitian Creole that gained him enormous popularity among the Haitian masses, but not with the Haitian governing elite or their international masters. Ousted in a coup less than a year after his installation, Aristide would be returned to power in 1994 as constant popular organizing and demonstrations, both in Haiti and its diasporic communities, forced the international community to ensure his return to power. Though reelected for a second term in 2000, he was again deposed in a second coup d’état that exiled him to South Africa. In 2011, Aristide was able to return to Haiti, but has remained quiet, focusing his effort in building an academic institution rather than getting explicitly involved in politics.

**Haiti: An eternal paradox**

It is in fact surprising that the United States hasn’t experienced huge waves of Haitian migrants since the January 12, 2010 earthquake that struck Haiti. A cursory glance at the country shows Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti and one of the cities most affected by the quake to have maintained its ghettoized, overcrowded, chaotic, poorly planned nature, a lost Haitian city. Port-au-Prince is bursting at the seams with an extremely poor and an underemployed/unemployed population that is numbered at about 1½ to 2 million people. It is seven years since the earthquake, but there are still no real signs of the much debated and anticipated “rebuilding” songs sang by local leaders and international partners in the areas of housing or infrastructural developments or education. The virtual or computer-generated architectural plans for turning Port-au-Prince and Haiti into a modernized, twenty-first century Caribbean jewel have already become unrecognizable under heavy coats of dust.
To many, Haiti’s remarkable historical beginning and its current state illustrate the epitome of a paradox. Haitians themselves constantly wonder privately and publically about what has gone wrong. Right or wrong, the Haitian masses equally show a deep understanding of the obstacles to their building a democratic space free of the slave-master dialectic, free of abject exploitation and inhumane treatment, or an equitable society. They are deeply aware that the missed opportunity or lukewarm support from international “friends” to “rebuild” Haiti following the 2010 earthquake is not accidental nor solely the result of Haitian self-sabotage. In fact, Haitians frequently argue that the stunted growth of the country is primarily due to the silence, prolonged isolation and castigation leveled against them and their experience, as well as their exploitation by the crass Haitian elite/colonial replacement in complicity with its multinational colonial masters, then and now. Ultimately, the Haitian masses recognize that their condition is a punishment imposed by world powers for their act of liberation, or, the human rights example they set forth or represented to the world (Dubois, 2012; Trouillot, 1995; Fouron, 2010; James, 1963). The claim that the Haitian Revolution and Independence at the turn of the nineteenth century was and remains and stands as the precursor to the modern philosophy and praxis of human rights is entirely arguable. Yet, such a significant and inspiring historical achievement for humanity as a whole remains absent in history textbooks and classroom instructions. The next section discusses the African influence on the development of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices.

27 Elsie, one of the young women and high schoolers, who participated in the focus group events commented on the absence of Haitian language and culture in her schooling and the lack of a comprehensive and truthful presentation of history, stated: You never see / study / the history of slavery in Haiti / It’s not just up to us in our country Haiti / They should acknowledge that also / First Black African that got our Independence /.
The significance of the African influences on Haitian practices

African influences are more overt, evident and pronounced on Haitian practices than the Tainos’ for obvious and accepted historical records and explanations. The various African ethnicities that began arriving in 1503 to replace the Tainos would become the sole source of slave labor in French colonial Saint Domingue, as with most of the slave societies in the New World until late into the nineteenth century (Gates, 2011; James, 1963; Dubois, 2012). It is thus natural that African linguistic and cultural practices would form the essential core of Haitian customs.

Besides the historical evidence that substantiates the large number of enslaved Africans on Saint Domingue, it is also widely accepted by Black Atlantic scholars in various disciplines that Haitian linguistic and cultural practices largely reflect African influences (Dubois, 2012; DeGraff, 2005; Zéphir, 2010; Spears, 2010). For instance, linguists, sociolinguists, language researchers, among others have identified Ewe, Fongbe, Mandingo, Kikongo, Yoruba, Lingala, Hausa and Ga as some of the African language sources for Haitian Creole. African words, terms and terminologies are most evident in activities that were entirely under the charge of the slaves. Haitian Vodou ceremonies, and cooking, particularly the cooking that was done by the slaves, and in most cases for the slaves themselves, offer a vast corpus of words with African linguistic and cultural connections.

---

28 The word “miwa” found in a stanza of the Vodou set of prayers named Lapriyè Djò could be from the Swahili language spoken in Southeast Africa, including Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Miwa in Swahili means sugarcane or cane. The presence of the word in the prayer could lead to a couple of assumptions: 1) the enslaved on Saint Domingue may have origins that range far beyond West Africa with such a Swahili word, 2) the slaves created oral, musical and memorable stories/histories about their conditions in the sugarcane plantations, and, 3) Vodou songs and practices are a rich field to understand and locate evidence of the slaves’ resistance to their conditions.
The names for many Haitian Vodou *lwa* or spirits are African. Some examples are: *Ogou*, the name for the Haitian Vodou warrior spirit or god of iron, is Yoruba in origin. The Haitian *Ogou* shares similar characteristics with the Yoruba deity Gun, the genie of metal workers, politics and war. The *Bosou* spirits have their origin in Dahomey (present-day Benin), and derive from the Fon and Ewe peoples and languages found across Togoland. The bull is the symbolic representation for the Bosou spirits. *Ayida Wèdo*, the female *lwa* serpent and her male counterpart *Danbala Wèdo*, who reign at the head of the Haitian Vodou pantheon, are found in the Fonbe language or with the Fon people. *Ayida Wèdo* can also be symbolically represented with the rainbow. Again, we find the Fonbe language influence on *dosou dosa*, words that are attached to the name of the Vodou *Marasa lwa*, the spirit of twin children. In Fonbe, *dosu* is the term used for the first born after a set of twins, and *dosa* is utilized for the child that follows twin brothers. The Yoruba *Ile* forms part of the name of the Haitian spirit *Granbwa Ile*. Ile is the Yoruba creational site. *Badè*, the spirit of wind and thunder, and part of the trio of spirits: *Badè, Sogbo/Sobo and Agawou*, come from the Fonbe people and language, and means fetish. Moreover, most Haitian Vodou drum rhythms carry African names. We find *Ibo* (from southern Nigeria), *Kongo* (from the Congo), *Nago* (from Yoruba, particularly coastal Nigeria), *Rada* (from Dahomey/Benin), among several others (Rigaud, 1985; Wilcken, 1992; Bellegarde-Smith & Michel, 2006).

There are numerous terms in everyday Haitian Creole speech that are attributed to the African languages that collided with the French colonial slavery society of Saint Domingue. The presence of the African languages-based words in Haitian Creole (including Taino words and others linguistic influences) illustrates what García (2009)
theorizes as “translanguaging” to explain the process through which speakers in a multilingual environment appropriate words and terms from the various language resources in their milieu to make meaning and express their views and ideas.

There are numerous African terms in Haitian Creole. We find words such as griyo29, the Haitian fried pork dish and an item in the country’s national dish, is evidently connected to the West African storyteller or griot. Taso, the Haitian fried goat or beef dish, refers back to a Senegalese or West African musical poetic practice (Pennycook, 2006). Akra, a Haitian fritter made with grated and spiced malanga (a small tropical variety of yams), is phonetically read and rendered like Accra, the capital of the West African country of Ghana where Ewe and Ga-speaking people are found30. Rara, the name for the Haitian popular musical performative practice, is Yoruba and means sound or noise (Courlander, 1973; Euba, 1990). Mawoule, the Haitian Creole term used to designate the Haitian “cowboy”, the men who drive (walk on foot) cattle to market, migrated from the Mandingo, and means he who sets out on a journey.31 Djèdjè in Haitian Creole, to speak or act in an incoherent manner, is connected to the Yoruba language. The word bounda for buttocks translanguaged from the Lingala vunda, as well as manba, peanut butter, came from the Lingala mwanba. The Haitian Creole nati is from the Kikongo that means native/a native of has retained the same meaning in both its origin language and the Haitian language. Even the Haitian Creole Dye or Dje or more commonly used Bondye/Bondje (Good God) to express the Haitian concept of God,

29 African words found in Haitian cuisine such as griyo, taso, akra that refer to African practices not connected to food indicate that the enslaved Africans or the Haitian Creole creators were attempting to maintain certain African cultural practices under the guise of cooking and eating amid the hostile French colonial-slavery of Saint-Domingue.

30 Akra derives from the word nkran, meaning ants and found in the Larteh and Ga languages in Ghana.

31 The expression: Mawule also exist in the Ewe language. It means God is/God exists.
presents an interesting and fascinating possible linguistic and cultural link to the *Gye Nyame* one of the *Adinkra* symbols found with the Akan people of Ghana. The *Gye Nyame* symbol in the Akan language and culture translates the *omnipotence and immortality of God*, and also has the meaning: “Except God”. Haitian Vodou believers/practitioners always use the expression “*Dye devan or Bondye devan lesen dèyè*, God or Good God in front, the spirits behind” to acknowledge and recognize the power and omnipotence of the Creator spirit from which the Haitian *lwa* or spirits, and all that exist—visible and invisible originate. Figure 2.4 shows the *Adinkra* symbol *Gye Nyame* of the Akan people in Ghana.

![Adinkra symbol Gye Nyame](image)

*Figure 2.4 The Adinkra symbol Gye Nyame from the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa.*

**Evidence of an embodied African linguistic and cultural memory with Haitians**

One recent, notable and interesting case of the Haitian Creole nomenclature process gives evidence of an embodied African linguistic and cultural memory with the Haitians. To discuss the catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010, the French phrase *tremblement de terre* (earthquake), which is not new to Haitian Creole speakers was used. There even exists in Haitian Creole the expression *tè a tranble* (the earth shakes/shook). While Haiti-based and diaspora Haitian intelligentsia were utilizing the French terms *tremblement de terre* or *séisme* to speak about the earthquake, the
Haitian masses opted for the onomatopoetic word *goudougoudou* to name the earthquake or earthquake phenomenon\(^3\).

That the Haitian people selected *goudougoudou*—extending the meaning of a known word used to define strident sound or noise—to name and describe the earthquake is fascinating, particularly because the Yoruba term “gúdúgúdú” (Euba, 1990), which carries such obvious graphic resemblance is immediately evident. It follows that the Yoruba word *gúdúgúdú* is used to describe a family of tension drums of great significance in Yoruba *Dùndún* drumming tradition. The Haitian *goudougoudou* and the Yoruba gúdúgúdú obviously have close graphic and phonetic resemblance. And it is instructive here to establish and deepen that connection as we examine and investigate Haitian linguistic and cultural practices (African-based) as critical meaning-making sites for Haitian learners.

To explain the origin and structural elements of the Yoruba *gúdúgúdú* drum, Euba (1990) interviewed several Yoruba *Dùndún* master-drummers, and relates the following:

“A version of the myths of origin [of *gúdúgúdú* drums] obtained from an Ilé-Ifè drummer has it that the *dùndún* drums, including *gúdúgúdú* drums, were brought to Ilé-Ifè from heaven by the founders of Ilé-Ifè” (p. 38). Let us emphasize here that the word *Ile* is attached to the name of the Haitian Vodou spirit *Granbwa*\(^3\). The name of the spirit *Granbwa Ile* has in fact helped to locate the geographic and ethnic origin of some of the African slaves on Saint Domingue and to establish/connect certain Haitian cultural

\(^3\) While the term *goudougoudou* was not so commonly used before the earthquake, we have found it in a 1995 poem by Georges Castera titled “Tanbou kreyòl” and initially published in 1995 in the revue *Rèl*. A few verses of the text follow: “Tanbou mache di/ sa-m pa ka pote/ ma kapote-li/ sa-m pa ka/ sa-m pa ka/ ma ka/ trakatap/ katap ka/ trakatap katap ka/ GOUDOU GOUDOU GOUDOU/ Plop/ Plop/ Plop” (Miami: À Contre-courant, 1995).

\(^3\) One of the well known songs used to salute the spirit *Granbwa* during Vodou ceremonies is: “Granbwa Ile, Ile o/ Granbwa Ile, Ile o/ Granbwa Ile Ile o/ Granbwa Ile Ile Sousou pandyaman”. 

---

45
traditions to the West African Yoruba culture found in the modern-day countries of
Nigeria, Togo and Benin. Ilé-Ifè is the creational site of the Yoruba people (Euba, 1990;
Mbiti, 1990; Thompson, 1984), one of the significant African ethnic groups that formed
the slave population on Saint Domingue. Expanding on yet another version of the myth
of origin of the gúdúgúdú drum as related by various Yoruba drummers to Euba (1990),
places the drum’s first appearance in Mecca before its use in Ilé-Ifè. Euba relates their
voices in the following manner:

God created a gúdúgúdú and ìyáàlù [another drum] for the Prophet
Mohammed, which were placed in the mosque and guarded by two spirits.
One day, as Mohammed and his followers were praying in the mosque, some
enemies approached, intent on devastating the mosque. The spirits
immediately began sounding the drums and alerted the worshippers. (p. 39,
emphasis in original)

These Yoruba creational tales that talk of the gúdúgúdú drum (shown in 2.4) are
captivating. For one thing, they follow the traditional style from around the world of
telling origin stories. As similar creational stories of divine gift giving to humans, we
have in the Judeo-Christian belief system that God gave Adam and Eve the gift of
knowledge; in Greek mythology, the Titan, divine and demi-god Prometheus presented
man with the gift of fire. In the Yoruba stories, those drums (gúdúgúdú and ìyáàlù) came
from a heavenly spirit, and are spiritual and divine gifts to the Yoruba people. The
creational storytelling patterns are identical.

Drums are indeed one of the most significant ritual objects in African culture and
in African diasporan cultures. It is understandable that their provenance is attributed to a
divine power. In Haitian Vodou as in various African traditions (in Africa or the New World) drums are one of the most sacred ritual objects (Rigaud, 1985; Wilcken, 1992; Fleurant, 2006). If it were only linguistically and culturally accidental, it is nonetheless fascinating to juxtapose the Haitian *goudougoudou* with the Yoruba *gúdúgúdú*. Such a coincidence almost demands further inquiry. These sorts of findings help to underscore the notion that there is an embodied African linguistic and cultural memory that underlies the essence of Haitian linguistic and cultural constructions and choices.

Ultimately, when the Yoruba word *gúdúgúdú* (name of a drum and its sounds and characteristics) is placed next to the Haitian word *goudougoudou* (popular term for earthquake and its sounds and effects), they in fact compel us to wonder and ponder about the linguistic and cultural influences that have formed, shaped, and filled the Haitian people’s linguistic and cultural reservoirs. If there aren’t any great significations or connections between the two terms, their orthographic and onomatopoetic construction proximity, including the fact that they both carry one similar semantic meaning: to denote and describe sound, alarming or alerting sound and to capture the sound of drums, still makes this an interesting linguistic cultural coincidence. Such linguistic and cultural excavatings are important for the historical understanding and experience of Haitians.
Ongoing efforts to unearth and recover African words in Haitian linguistic and cultural practices offer a significant entrepôt to the parallel world of many profound philosophical ideas that the slaves enacted, reinvented and/or reconstructed to reclaim their spirituality and humanity in attempting to overcome and overturn the system of slavery. The Haitian Creole language and culture with its Taino and African linguistic and cultural words and terminologies are important for Haitians and for the education of Haitian children, as well as for African-diasporans as a whole. These words represent gateways to the overall Trans-Atlantic slave experience.

Haitian Vodou prayers and songs are alive with African words that practitioners refer to as langaj, literally translated as language, to which they attribute magical power. These extraordinary linguistic and cultural transactions certainly have the flair of a mythical affair. These African expressions and terms operated as a source of strength for the enslaved. Words and expressions that provided them with a sense of being and belonging, and reminded and connected the slaves to experiences that they knew where they were not objects, and thus, were always humans. Usage, integration and/or appropriation of these African words in the new language the Saint Domingue slaves were inventing and constructing ultimately contributed to their resistance. These words helped the slaves maintain essential elements of their identities so that they could rebuild and preserve who they were, assert and affirm their existence, and eventually triumph over their conditions.

Meaning of linguistic and cultural practices and reasons for their inclusion in schooling
The Australian sociolinguist Alastair Pennycook (2007) posits that: “Language use is centrally an agentive act, an act of reconstruction […]. Language use is not so much the repetition of prior grammatical structure but rather a semiotic restructuring as a claim to a particular identity… language itself [must] be seen as a product of performative acts” (p. 110). His proposition suggests that people invent and construct language to provide themselves with means to actualize and become who they want to be in the world. As such, our language is always performing or representing who we are or evolving into. Language is a critical aspect in the construction of our identities, Pennycook contends.

Maintaining our language/languages and culture/cultures are like the responsibility of securing a govi (the sacred earthenware in Haitian Vodou used to protect the souls of the departed) on an altar. Haitian language and culture are like a govi that protects, nourishes and sustains daily the Haitian soul and identity. Language and culture are an existential matter. Haitian linguistic and cultural practices are an existential matter. Thus, denying Haitian learners access to their Haitian cultural heritage as part of their schooling experiences is problematic. These cultural traditions represent an essential support system for Haitian learners.

Language and culture are major elements in identity-formation and affirmation, and schools have a role to play in helping children develop pride in their language and culture, and confidence in the persons they are to become. Devaluing the Haitian students’ linguistic and cultural practices contribute in low self-esteem and under-achievement of these students. Continuing the colonial slavery cultural erasure project forced on the African slave ancestors of the Haitians, by both Spain and France, engendered a “dangerous culture” of self-alienation and rejection of all that composes the
Haitian identity (their indigenous Taino and African-based practices). Furthermore, the
rejection and suppression of Haitian cultural knowledge by the French-educated
governing elite in Haiti, as well as the dominant/metropolitan societies (i.e., The United
States, France, etc.) where Haitians have sought respite against the ruthless post-colonial
conditions at home, continue to obscure and deny Haitian the rights to claiming and
affirming their cultural heritage. This exploratory research effort into the linguistic and
cultural practices of Haitians as critical meaning-making spaces for Haitian learners
represents an attempt to recuperate and restore these resources that are existential to
Haitian identity and destiny.

The chapter that follows discusses the major theories that structure or principally
frame the study. That is, “post-colonialism” (Gandhi, 1998; Said, 1979; Fanon, 2004),
“culturally responsive pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009; hooks, 1994; Yosso,
2005; Bartolomé, 2009) and “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (Paris, 2012). It is thus
understood that a pedagogy that responds to the linguistic and cultural needs of
minoritized/language minority students remains fundamental. Such a pedagogy holds the
potential to attend to, intervene and transform the dire academic conditions of Haitian
learners.
Chapter 3

Theoretical framework: Interpretive bodies of knowledge

To excavate the meanings of the Haitian linguistic and cultural practices and the ways in which they have been excluded from schooling, and the importance of such inclusion, I explore here two basic interpretive bodies of knowledge—post-colonial studies and culturally sustaining pedagogy. I then comment on the significance of post-coloniality (Ghandi, 1998; Said, 1979; Fanon, 2004 [1963]) to foreground the dominant ideological currents that suppress, obscure and inferiorice the epistemological knowledge of the formerly enslaved and colonized in the mainstream academic canon, as well as the intellectual and existential harms that such practice exerts on Haitian youngsters—descendants of slaves and victims of the dehumanizing colonial project.

Moreover, I endeavor to inscribe two Haitian intellectuals, namely, Anténor Firmin (1850-1911) and Jean Price-Mars (1876-1969) as post-colonialists before the letter by highlighting their work and contribution that challenged the notion of race inequality (Firmin, 1885), and a return to blackness and indigenism (Price-Mars, 1928) to reflect on and understand the self-alienating impact of the Trans-Atlantic colonial slavery experience on post-colonials, and to reclaim the humanity and dignity of the formerly colonized. Lastly, I explored the possibilities in applying and implementing a cultural responsive/sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012) that responds to the the linguistic, cultural and schooling needs of Haitian students—inheritors of the colonial slavery experience—in order to validate the language, culture, history and existence of these youngsters and improve their academic production and performance.

1. Post-colonialism: A theory for reclaiming the humanity and heritage of Haitian learners
The Indian post-colonial theorist Leela Gandhi (1998) advances that, “post-colonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (p. 4). As such, post-colonialism serves as more than a space to respond to the colonial history and act, which was based on the “false ideology” (Eagleton, 2007) of white superiority against the inferiority of all Others (black, brown, and so on) by European colonial agents for the purpose of de-territorialization, domination and exploitation. Post-colonialism equally represents a significant conceptual field in which scholars such as Gandhi (1998), Fanon (2004), Said (1979), Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant (1990), Mignolo (2003), among others, whose origins are particularly connected to former colonized countries—can critically engage with the processes and objectives of European colonization; the assigned superiority don on white (i.e., European) culture over the cultures of non-Whites (e.g., Africans, Asians, Indigenous cultures); the historical conditions that have formed both colonial and colonized subjects; as well as the continuous linguistic and cultural alienation of the colonized subjects’ descendants within institutions of learning.

Moreover, post-colonialism serves as an intellectual arena in which post-colonial thinkers reclaim the self/being, history, language and culture of those “beings” in the pre, during and post colonial encounter, even if these reclamations and restorations could never fully return the colonized to his/her un-fragmented and pre-colonized self.

On the subject of “reclaiming the past” by the colonized (e.g., the reclamation of his/her humanity, spirituality, history, language and culture), the post-colonial Martinican
scholar Frantz Fanon (2004), who presents a haunting psychoanalytic interpretation of the colonized mind in his seminal text *The Wretched of the Earth*, vehemently sustains:

> Reclaiming the past does not only rehabilitate [...] It triggers a change of fundamental importance in the colonized’s psycho-affective equilibrium. Colonialism [was and] is not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or of draining the colonized brain of any form of substance. With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it. This effort to demean history prior to colonization[,] today takes on a dialectical significance[…] [w]hen we consider the resources deployed to achieve the cultural alienation… (pp. 148-149)

This “dialectical significance” or the signification of the opposing forces inherent to colonization which Fanon calls attention to, suggests both the ways in which the colonizer defined/defines the intents and purposes for his/her conquest, as well as how the colonized interpreted/interprets or lived/lives the colonial encounter and experience.

The well-propagated European colonial myth of *la mission civilisatrice*, the civilizing mission, with roots in European Middle Ages history, is well illustrated, for instance, in the number of Spanish catholic priests\(^34\) who accompanied envoys such as the

---

\(^{34}\) “Columbus returned to Hispaniola [the present day island shared by the countries Haiti and the Dominican Republic] in the fall of 1493 […] to found a colony on Hispaniola. The king and queen [of Spain] instructed him to establish gold mines, install settlers, develop trade with the Tainos, and convert them to Christianity. They provided him with a fleet of seventeen ships, abundant supplies, and about 1,500 men, including a doctor, a map maker, and several clerics—among them Father Ramón Pané, who was to make a study of the Taino religion. […] Bartolomé de Las Casas “an adventurer, who later repented, joined the priesthood, and became known as the Protector of the Indians” was another cleric associated with Spanish expeditionary conquests in the region. (See Rouse *The Tainos: Rise and decline of the people who greeted Columbus*, 1992, pp. 145-156).
Spanish merchant-explorer Christopher Columbus in his journeys (Rouse, 1992; Wilson et al, 1997). In many ways, it is that same colonial myth and plan that is being sustained in “the quasi-colonial nature of minority education” (Bartolomé, 2009, p. 340), where the language and culture privileged and valued by schools, is presented as “superior” to the linguistic and cultural practices of minoritized students like the Haitians. These examples represent the colonizer’s continued investment in resources toward the “cultural alienation” project of the encountered: past and present. In sum, the colonizer has always needed to invent these others to be “civilized,” and to be culturally assimilated into its European culture as part of his overall colonial plan of domination and exploitation. That the colonial must distort, disfigure, and destroy the past of the encountered and colonized, as argues Fanon (2004), helped/helps to achieve the colonial ends, strategically central to the colonial plan of de-humanizing his/her colonial subjects.

Moreover, Fanon’s (2004) argument of “reclaiming the past” so as to “rehabilitate” compels the colonized (and descendants) to revisit, remember, interrogate and reclaim his/her humanity and spirituality prior and post the violent and disruptive colonial encounter. In reclaiming the past, the colonized counters the violent objectification s/he underwent and endured through the process of colonization by seeking ways of validating and affirming his/her being and his/her doings, i.e., practices, to regain a sort of balance, or, equilibrium, contends Fanon.

Without a doubt, when we consider today what prevents Haitian students—and other minoritized students/language minoritized students—from accessing and viewing their linguistic and cultural heritage as knowledge, we cannot ignore the symbolic continuation of the colonial process of effacement, or its cultural erasure and alienation.
project. This linguistic and cultural alienation process or the exclusion of the language and culture of Haitian students as part of their educational experience forms the root cause of these children’s academic disengagement, the absence of quality academic production, and thus, their academic underperformance.

The chief goal of this research study on Haitian linguistic and cultural practices and their significance in the education of Haitian learners is to shed light on certain Haitian resources that can be helpful in the education of Haitian learners, and to help reclaim these resources for Haitian students and their families in order to help them develop intellectual abilities and imaginations for successful academic and social emancipation. Utilizing the language and culture of Haitian students in their education not only reclaims their linguistic and cultural inheritance as knowledge, such pedagogical practice also opens access to resources that can make learning more engaging, more comprehensible, and ultimately can help these students bridge and connect their linguistic and cultural knowledge with new knowledge and new literacies. Moreover, such curricular and pedagogical practice also “rehabilitates” (Fanon, 2004), by validating the linguistically and culturally familiar/relevant heritage that are fundamental to both the Haitian students’ cognitive and social development for a more wholesome and healthy identity, for his and her humanity.

**Dis-inventing and decolonizing post-colonialism**

The work of several prominent post-colonial theorists explicitly informs this proposed study on Haitian linguistic and cultural practices. Many others are implicitly present. There are constructs borrowed throughout from thinkers such as Leela Gandhi (1998); Edward Said (1979); Frantz Fanon (2004); and Jean Bernabé, Patrick
Chamoiseau, and Rafaël Confiant (1990), among others. The very modest list presented below in table 1, highlights six thinkers from the post-colonial school of thought—some more widely known than others. The selection primarily aims at shedding light, and broadly situating the long intellectual resistance and history of post-colonialism, and providing a glimpse at the ways in which some post-colonial thinkers have discussed, approached, conceptualized and problematized issues such as race and racism, language and culture. That they all have Caribbean Creolophone and Francophone connections is accidental.

This table is far from being exhaustive for the Creolophone/Francophone Caribbean context. As for the inclusion and (re) presentation of the contributions of the Haitian scholars Anténor Firmin (1885) and Jean Price-Mars (1928), it is an attempt to bring these two important thinkers out from obscurity within the larger academic world (See Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban’s Introduction to The Equality of the Human Races (2002) by Anténor Firmin). The two Haitian intellectuals, Firmin and Price-Mars, are in fact influential in my understanding of the post-colonial context and impact on my own schooling.

This list is motivated by a need to “dis-invent,” “decolonize” and enlarge the field of post-colonialism in order to reclaim it. Ultimately, this intellectual action serves to argue that the two Haitian thinkers—Firmin and Price-Mars—were pivotal in opposing colonialism in its old and new forms, and in spearheading the reflection space in which the reclamation and affirmation of the colonized humanity, history, language and culture are prioritized. In effect, Firmin and Price-Mars could be considered post-colonial thinkers avant la lettre, before the letter, who emerged prior to the invention of the
terminology, or, what constitute the definitions, purposes, and functions of that school of thought. Their early work critically and boldly interrogated the colonial experience. In sum, these two Haitian scholars introduced/ (re) introduced here represent an example of thinkers from Haiti who have long been engaged in voicing the deconstructive impact of European colonization and enslavement on the colonized, as well as the ideological damage and cultural alienation/self-alienation that have resulted/result from the colonial project. Such practices continue and remain evident in the ways the languages and cultures of minoritized students/language minoritized students such as the Haitian learners are continuously excluded in their schooling experiences.
Table 3.1

Post-colonial concepts from some major Creolophone post-colonialist thinkers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theorists</th>
<th>Conceptual contributions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anténor Firmin</strong></td>
<td><em>Race equality</em> (1885). With the publication of <em>The Equality of the Human Races in 1885</em>, the Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin established himself as a pioneer post-colonial thinker by responding to Arthur Gobineau’s <em>The Inequality of the Human Races</em> (1853-1855), as well as other racist thoughts propagated during that time. <em>Firmin’s</em> text became one of the first critical anthropological works that analyzed the notion of race and racism (outgrowth of European colonization and enslavement slavery), the West’s false ideological constructs used as bases for human exploitation. “The races are equal; they are all capable of rising to the most noble virtues, of reaching the highest intellectual development; they are equally capable of falling into a state of total degeneration. Throughout all of the struggles that have afflicted, and still afflict, the existence of the entire species one mysterious fact signals itself to our attention. It is the fact that an invisible chain links all of the members of humanity in a common circle. It seems that in order to prosper and grow human beings must take an interest in one another’s progress and happiness, and cultivate those altruistic sentiments which are the greatest achievement of the human heart and mind” (Firmin, 2002, p. 450).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1850-1911)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jean Price-Mars</strong></td>
<td><em>Négritude</em> and <em>indigénisme</em> (1928). The 1928 publication of <em>Thus spoke the uncle</em> places Price-Mars as the founding father of the literary and ideological movement that came to be known as <em>la négritude</em> (world) and <em>l’indigénisme</em> (Haiti). Influenced by his predecessor and compatriot Anténor Firmin, who responded to the prevalent racist ideology that was articulated in Arthur Gobineau’s <em>The Inequality of the Human Races</em> (1853-1855) by his <em>The Equality of the Human</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1876-1969)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35 Post-colonial scholars generally place the beginning of post-colonialism around the 1950s and 1960s. In sum, most post-colonialists contend that this school of thought was majorly influenced by the independence of several former European colonial territories in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean in that period. In including Anténor Firmin and Jean Price-Mars as influential thinkers who provided some deep reflections on affirming the colonized’s humanity, history, language and culture, I am arguing that these Haitian scholars were long engaged in reflections on European colonization and enslavement, the ideological damage, the cultural alienation and so on, that’s a part of the colonial project. As such, the work of both Firmin and Price-Mars were openers to the post-colonial resistance project. In effect, it is my critic of post-colonialism that it has failed to account (and, therefore accurately historicize) what occurred in Haiti through its anti-colonial and anti-slavery revolution and culminated into its independence in 1804 (Trouillot, 1995, Buck-Morss, 2009), as the onset of post/anti-colonialism, as well as the omission of such significant pioneering voices and thinkers like Firmin and Price-Mars, in what represents the intellectual canon of post-colonialism. It would be disappointing if post-colonialism views or positions the Haitian Revolution, or Haitian scholars like Firmin and Price-Mars as “anachronistic,” falling outside the timeframe or timeline that’s been “invented” to historicize the anti/post-colonial resistance project—which began in the hulls of slave ships—. Such positions would be an affront to the “decolonization” scholarship endeavored by the field.
Races in 1885.

With *Thus spoke the uncle*, Price Mars made a large contribution to the developing school of thought which would later be termed as post colonialism, an intellectual and conceptual space to reflect on the impact of the Trans-Atlantic colonial slavery experience of Africans and their descendants, and its aftermath on the “colonized,” and advocated for reclaiming the colonized language and culture. Using, an ethno-historical approach he demonstrated that blacks were equal in intellectual and political ability to other members of the human race, and refuted the colonial cultural alienation.

More than 75 years ago, Price Mars was arguing for the value of using Haitian linguistic and cultural practices in the education of Haitian learners. On the subject of language in education for Haitian students, he praised the Haitian educator Doret, who work “advocate[d] the use of Creole as a starting point for teaching …

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frantz Fanon</th>
<th>Martinique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1925-1961)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Deconstruction and alienation of the colonized personhood, language and culture (1952); *Reclamation of the past* (1963). The collection of works and reflections of the post-colonial Martinican scholar Frantz Fanon remains impressive as he only lived to the age of 36.

Trained as a psychiatrist, Fanon became the first post-colonial thinker to attempt at peering into the mind of the colonized. In his seminal text *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004[1963]), a haunting psychoanalytic interpretation of the colonized mind, Fanon argues that this colonial past, a violent encounter, interruption and relation explains why “the colonized [exist] in a state of rage…caught in the tightly knit web of colonialism… The muscular tension of the colonized periodically erupts into bloody fighting between tribes, clans, and individuals. At the individual level we witness a genuine negation of common sense. Whereas the colonist or police officer can beat the colonized subject day in and day out, insult him and shove him to his knees, it is not uncommon to see the colonized subject draw his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive look from another colonized subject” (p. 17).

He vehemently sustains that: “Reclaiming the past does not only rehabilitate […] It triggers a change of fundamental importance in the colonized psycho-affective equilibrium Colonialism [was and] is not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or of draining the colonized brain of any form of substance. With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it. This effort to demean history prior to colonization

---

36 The translation of this segment from *Thus spoke the uncle* of Jean Price-Mars was done in 2015 by Menes Dejoie.
today takes on a dialectical significance [...] [w]hen we consider the resources deployed to achieve the cultural alienation...” (2004, pp. 148-149).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jean Bernabé (1942-) Patrick Chamoiseau (1953-), and Raphaël Confiant (1951-) Martinique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Créolité</em> [Creoleness] (1990). Drawing from the work of those who came before them throughout the Caribbean such as Glissant (1981), Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant (1990) would theorize <em>In Praise of Creoleness</em>:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing Creoleness will be expressing the very <em>beings</em> of the world. What we felt, our emotional experience, our pains, our uncertainties, the strange curiosity of what was thought to be our defects, will help in our achieved expression to build in diversity the harmonious Being of the world [...] Creoleness liberates us… (113).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These scholars contributed in reshaping, re-authoring, “reclaiming”, “(re) vocabularizing” the discourse and narrative that define and characterize our cultural production, away from the colonial linguistic shackle. “French ways forced us to denigrate ourselves: the common condition of colonized people... Our imaginary was forgotten, leaving behind this large desert where the fairy Carabossa dried Manman Dlo dried up… Some of our traditions disappeared without being questioned… we tried to beg the universal in the most colorless and scentless way, i.e., refusing the very foundation of our being, a foundation which, today, we declare solemnly as the major aesthetic vector of our knowledge of ourselves and the world: Creoleness” (pp. 86-87).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant praised creoleness and the oral traditions from which it emerged. We find one early example of that Creole affirmation in an ancient Haitian Vodou prayer:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Anonse o zanj nan dlo o, adosou miwa lawe lawe³⁷  
Anonse o zanj nan dlo Adosou miwa lawe lawe  
Mwen pral lavil Okan eee  
Kreyòl mande chanjman  
Announcement to the water angel(s) o, adosou miwa lawe lawe  
Announcement to the water angel (s) o, adosou miwa lawe lawe  
I am going to the town of Okan  
Creoles demand change/changes |
| In a seemingly simple set of lyrics stands the evidence of a total embrace of the enslaved linguistic and cultural identity, his/her experiential and existential being and becoming, and his/her assertiveness in naming him/herself as Creole, avowing in that singular line that they are no longer accepting their colonial and enslaved conditions, and envisioning change, and transforming their realities. |
| The ancient Vodou prayer, a mixture of Creole and “*langaj*” (the definition given by practitioners to the African words and expressions that exist in the Vodou practice without a connection to French lexicon of the Haitian language), has a |
| ³⁷ The word “miwa” is from the Swahili language spoken in Southeast Africa, including Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and means sugarcane or cane. The presence of the word in the prayer could lead to a couple of assumptions: 1) the enslaved on Saint Domingue may have origins that range far beyond West Africa with such a Swahili word, 2) the slaves created oral, musical and memorable stories/histories about their conditions in the sugarcane plantations, and, 3) Vodou songs and practices are a rich field to understand and evidence the slaves’ resistance to their conditions. |
clear, direct, powerful and anti colonial message. The last line introduces/contains two significant, powerful and unmistakable liberating concepts and ideas: **Creoles demand change**. It is a clear affirmation of their Creole identity, this “culture créole de résistance” (Chamoiseau & Confiant, 1999, p. 47). They are not referring to themselves as slaves, French slaves, or, Saint Dominguan slaves, but appropriating or owning fully the Creole identity. And, they are announcing that change is going to come. Another fascinating thing revealed by the presence of the African words in this Vodou prayer is the ancientness of its creation. Moreover, the Swahili word “miwa” that means sugarcane or cane further evidences its oldness. In sum, it is entirely possible to argue that the prayer/lamentation created by these slaves to demand changes was connected to these enslaved conditions toiling on the sugarcane plantations of French colonial Saint Domingue.

2. Culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy: A philosophical argument for the inclusion Haitian linguistic and cultural practices in the education of Haitian learners

Among the various academics to have contributed to the culturally responsive pedagogy school of thought, Ladson-Billings’s (1995) succinct definition as to how such pedagogy manifests in the everyday schooling experiences for black and brown youngsters represented a major starting point. She maintains: “[C]ulturally relevant teaching must meet three criteria: an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness” (p. 483). In other words, Ladson-Billings, among other critical scholars (in the American context), began challenging the notion that the academic underproduction of minority learners like the Haitian could not only be explained by placing blames on a knowledge deficiency with these students, illusory, or, even tangible in some cases. Her argument took to account the system. The

---

38 While we can argue that all students are teachable. We also recognize that students that have had interrupted schooling because they resided in places that were/are war-ravaged or plagued with violent social and political upheavals like Iraq, Afghanistan, among others, may have tangible deficiencies that required lots of supplemental services to help them catch up. Similarly, it is clear that children with certain learning disabilities such as dyslexia, mental retardation, and so on, require lots of sustained work and
underperformance of minority youngsters was primarily connected to a systemic, dysfunctional and deficient educational system that causes the failure of these children. She pointed to the role and responsibility, or the abandonment thereof, of the education system (schools and their educators) to create appropriate learning environments for these children. Minority students ought to feel that they are learning and their culture valued. They also need to know that they are being equipped with intellectual tools to understand themselves/others and their conditions, acquire knowledge and the means to change/transform their situations. This move represented a major step in questioning the education system (school leaders and classroom practitioners), and holding them accountable for the academic conditions of minoritized learners.

The notion of a “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (Paris, 2012) puts forth the necessity for long term and continued implementation of curricular and pedagogical agendas and practices that affirm, value, support and maintain the linguistic and cultural resources of these learners “while simultaneously offering [them] access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95). Furthermore, a “culturally sustaining pedagogy” comprises the involvement of these students and their families as builders and preservers of cultural knowledges, rather than being the passive recipients of systemic responses designed to accommodate them. In other words, it isn’t enough to respond (often with a temporary application of the “remedy”), but rather educational policy makers, leaders and classroom practitioners ought to be engaged in continuous and systematic and strategic efforts and plans that ensure schools “perpetuate and foster—sustain—linguistic, literate, and
cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 95).

While the difference between “responsive” and “sustaining” as qualifiers for pedagogy can be somewhat viewed and interpreted as being semantic, the two complement each other. In connecting the two ideas we have a broader and more comprehensive educational objective where the goal becomes: 1) recognizing the academic, linguistic and cultural needs of minority children, and 2) continuing and maintaining curricular and programmatic plans that sustain the intellectual emancipation of these children. Thus, culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy demands a conscious teaching approach that is constantly aware of the conditions of these children, and plans and intervenes accordingly in order to give minority learners a fair shot at succeeding.

**Unifying critical educational concepts and demarginalizing minority learners**

What remains essential, however, is that “post-colonialism” (Gandhi, 1998; Fanon, 2004; Said, 1979; Mignolo, 2003; Bartolomé, 2009) and “culturally responsive pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009; Yosso, 2005; Moll et al, 1992) and “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (Paris, 2012) overlap in their questioning of the “intellectual and epistemological exclusions” (Gandhi, 1998) of non-Western communities and cultures—like the Haitian—amidst what is considered to form the epistemological canon of the world, and offered to minority students in schools. Together, post-colonialism and culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy provide a crucial space in which critical educators can reflect on the ideological and historical processes at the roots of the absence of the “cultural inheritance [of marginalized communities] as knowledge” (Gandhi, 1998, Preface xi), and rejected as part of the
established “canon of knowledge” presented to minoritized students and language
minoritized students such as the Haitian learners. In their broadest sense, these theoretical
fields problematize what Western dominant culture privileges and values as knowledge
for students to acquire and master, at the expense of the exclusion of the languages and
cultures of marginalized students, such as the Haitians.

Thus understood, post-colonialism, culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy
afforded this research study with the most appropriate tools to interrogate, historicize,
analyze, and interpret the academic issues faced by Haitian students in American schools.
These theories provide a critical toolset to argue, and recommend ways in which certain
Haitian linguistic and cultural practices can be included in the educational experience
offered to and received by Haitian students for a more well-rounded intellect and self.
Moreover, these theoretical and conceptual structures help to foreground, and address the
problem of the exclusion of Haitian language and culture in the education of Haitian
students, as well as to identify, present, and suggest Haitian linguistic and cultural
practices as resources and assets that can help meet the academic needs of Haitian
learners.

In their totality, these culturally validating theories (post-colonialism, culturally
responsible and sustaining pedagogy) make overtures for critical educational researchers
to advocate for a schooling experience where the language and culture of minority
students, including Haitian learners, are integrated in the schooling process. It is only
then that education achieves its role and responsibility as a bedrock or corner stone in this
nation’s democratic project.
It warrants underscoring here that theoretical concepts such as “culturally responsive pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al, 1992); Yosso’s (2005) “community cultural wealth” or Paris’s (2012) “culturally sustaining pedagogy”, among other critical educational paradigms that advocate for the inclusion of the language, culture and experience of marginalized students are principally moored inside Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009; Leonardo, 2009; hooks, 1994; Yosso, 2002). Moreover those constructs all correspond to the main theory that frames and guides this study on Haitian learners and their practices, namely, “post-colonialism” (Fanon, 2004; Said, 1979; Gandhi, 1998). While post-colonialism critiques and “attempts to reform the intellectual and epistemological exclusions” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 1-4) of minority learners, it enlarges the discussion of race, language and culture and propels it in the realms of ideology (Eagleton, 2007; McLaren, 2009; Gramsci, 1971). In that sense, post-colonialism addresses and questions the cultural alienation of postcolonial subjects (as in the education of minority students) by pointing the light on who has the power of “production and representation of ideas, values and beliefs and the manner in which they are expressed and lived out by both individuals and groups” in society (McLaren, 2009, p. 69, emphasis in original). Post-colonialism challenges the “quasi-colonial nature of minority education” (Bartolomé, 2009, p. 340) that is dominated and undergirded by a system that privileges colonial languages and cultures over the cultural heritage and practices of minoritized children.

In effect, critical race scholars such as Richardson (2006), Bartolomé (2009), Yosso (2005), Delpit (1995), Moll and et al. (1992), Paris (2012), to cite a few, have
helped reconcile and/or connect Critical Race Theory\(^\text{39}\) (CRT); culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP); culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), and so on, with the broader theory of post-colonialism, which encompasses the systematic examination of the colonial slavery experience and its impact, past and present, on formerly colonized and/or currently marginalized people and communities. What remains incontestable is that the inclusion and maintenance of the language, culture and experience of minoritized students/language minoritized students such as the Haitians is integral and indispensable if schools are to ensure a transformative and empowering schooling experience for these children, their families and communities. Including Haitian language and culture in the education of Haitian learners will lead to improved academic and social outcomes for these children.

**If they could simply be heard and seen**

In a 2009 article published by the *New Jersey Ledger*, the reporter Brian Donohue quoted the Dominican-American author Junot Diaz (a former student of the New Jersey public schools) telling a group of community college students the following:

> You guys know about vampires? …You know, vampires have no reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't see myself reflected

\(^{39}\) “Critical Race Theory (CRT) [is a school of thought in] education that made central the issue of race in pedagogical discussions, as well as indigenous and ecological reinterpretations of emancipatory schooling in society” (See Antonia Darder, Marta P. Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres, Critical Pedagogy: An Introduction in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, 2009, p. 16, NY: Routledge).
at all. I was like, Yo, is something wrong with me? That the whole society seems to think that people like me don't exist? And part of what inspired me, was this deep desire that before I died, I would make a couple of mirrors. That I would make some mirrors so that kids like me might seem themselves reflected back and might not feel so monstrous for it.

The monster metaphor in Diaz’s statement is powerful. It captures and echoes the voices of the Haitian students in this research. It is the same account told by numerous black and brown youth across the nation. The common thread in those narratives is that American society and school system do not really “see” minority youngsters like the Haitian students. This feeling of monstrosity or non-existence is to a great extent the result of educational policies, programs, curricula and pedagogies that discount/make the language, culture and lived experiences of these children invisible. Those stories are all addressing the fact that the system neglects, invalidates and disregards the linguistic and cultural heritage of black and brown students, rather than seeing them as resources, assets and learning tools that could benefit and sustain the intellectual development of minority children. Yet, these children and families recognize the significance and value of the languages and cultures that have shaped, and continue to form and inform their worldview and their identity/identities.

In a provocative analysis about awakening/raising the political consciousness of black youth, the African-American scholar Shawn Ginwright (2010), contends: “Culture alone is not an antidote to [remedy low] academic performance and [address youth apathy toward] social action, but is one important aspect of building a healthy identity” (p. 153). Ginwright is correct in his assertion. Developing a healthy sense of self is
significantly anchored in the pride one feels in living, affirming, and enacting one’s language, culture, history, and sexual orientation.

Culture and language are only tools, albeit important ones, among an array of teaching and learning necessities (e.g., professional, caring and respectful educators, historically-accurate textbooks, safe school environments, healthy school buildings, nutritious school foods, fun and structured recreational times, etc.). Education should aim to provide minority learners with opportunities to: 1) acquire new knowledge; 2) maintain the home/community knowledge that they come to school with; 3) affirm and validate a healthy identity; 4) develop positive learning attitudes; and, 5) transform their lives for the better through the development of critical and creative abilities to problem-solve in order to positively impact their environment/community.

Likewise, if educators expect students to become more engaged in the teaching and learning process and feel competent in performing and accomplishing tasks, they cannot disregard or invalidate the home/community language and culture of students. In fact, they must be engaged in advocating for the presence of the language and culture of these children. What learners bring to school with them (i.e., languages, cultures, lived experiences or “prior home/community knowledge,” etc.) constitute what Moll and co-authors (1992) term as “funds of knowledge.” All these elements and experiences that children and their families have “historically accumulated and culturally developed [form part of the bodies of knowledge and skills essential for […] functioning and well-being” (p. 133). These cultural resources and assets are vital in helping learners produce, perform and achieve academic success. Family, home and community practices are resources that should be welcomed, respected and used to help students.
The power of theory

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), the critical educator and feminist scholar bell hooks argues: “Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end” (p. 61). Using post-colonialism, culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy as theoretical foundations for this study on Haitian linguistic and cultural practices has helped to assess the relevance and meaning of these practices in the education of Haitian children. It was an attempt to ask theory, or directly observe the theories of post-colonialism and culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy in their capacities as instruments for: 1) *healing* by providing answers and remedies to the low academic performance issues facing Haitian children; 2) *liberating* by functioning as a tool to engage in authentic and empowering dialogues and actions to change the academic and social situations of Haitian children; and lastly, 3) *revolutionizing* by offering new and constructive discourse that validates and affirms the possibilities contained within these Haitian linguistic and cultural practices in order to help transform the dire academic and social course and conditions of these Haitian children.
Chapter 4

Methodology and research design

This research study began with the collection, review and inventory of a number of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices—namely, texts and narratives in Haitian Creole language, Rara and Vèvè—drawn from published sources. Moreover, the study benefited from the willingness of Haitian adolescents and Haitian parents in the New York area who voluntarily participated in focus group sessions and follow up in-depth ethnographic interviews where additional data on the practices were collected. All of these data collection processes addressed the questions put forth, and helped bring to light Haitians and their linguistic and cultural practices. After restating the research questions, this section described the methodological approach employed to achieve the study, including data collection activities and data analysis strategies.

Restatement of the research questions

The chief goal of this study has been to shed light on a number of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices that should be included in the education of Haitian learners in order to ameliorate their schooling experience, as well as improve the academic production and performance of these students. Thus, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the linguistic and cultural practices of Haitians that are pervasive and what are the meanings of these practices?
2. What are the meanings of these practices for Haitian adolescents in the United States?
3. What are the meanings of these practices for Haitian parents in the United States?
These questions were significant for the study for two primary reasons. One, they allowed for the identification and description of a set of Haitian linguistic and cultural items that could support quality teaching and effective learning for Haitian students. Second, they helped to understand how the exclusion or inclusion of these linguistic and cultural practices impact the identity/identities and learning of Haitian youngsters.

**Research design and rationale**

Luttrell (2010) argues that *qualitative research* as a mode of inquiry demands a great deal from research practitioners. Myriad social science disciplines use qualitative research method (i.e., psychology, feminism, education, etc.), and may use traditional techniques that are specific to their fields. Nonetheless, contends Luttrell, the qualitative research endeavor essentially represents “an effort to highlight the meanings people make and the actions they take, and to offer interpretations for how and why” (p. 2). She further cautions researchers that doing qualitative work is less about the formulaic standards devised by the various disciplines, and more about: “Your destination in your research *story*—stories…” (p. 6, emphasis in original)

Bogdan and Biklen (2010) offer added nuances to the discussion on qualitative research methods in their comprehensive historiography of the practice. Qualitative research at its core is an ideological and political venture, contend the researchers:

[T]he doing of qualitative research reflects particular relationships to how power is distributed in a society. Who is studied? Who studies? […] There are […] a number of contradictions in the historical relationships of qualitative methods to progressive social change. On the one hand, some of
the method’s practices and representational strategies have been developed and exercised in the context of dominance and control, […] of western countries over so-called third-world countries, and hence connected to repressive practices. On the other hand, […] qualitative methods have been useful for and attractive to researchers who have been excluded from, or are studying the perspectives of people excluded from the mainstream. (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010, pp. 26)

The researchers’ viewpoint on the role and function of qualitative research as an approach that can help foreground the stories, voices and practices of marginalized people helped confirm the choice and utilization of the qualitative methodological activity for this study. Historically, the Haitian people’s experiences and traditions have often been misunderstood and misrepresented in dominant research narratives, and frequently, totally absent.

To tell or arrive at the destination of the story/stories (Luttrell, 2010) needing to be told about the Haitian linguistic and cultural practices investigated here, as well as to de-silence the Haitian subjects—the adolescents and parents that participated in this study, along with the researcher—it was best served to follow a qualitative research approach.

This research study had two phases. For Phase I of this research project, I collected published sources texts and narratives in Haitian Creole, as well as the practices of Rara and Vèvè. As we will see, for this phase I conducted a semiotic analysis of the narratives and texts selected. Semiotics helps to attend to various sign systems and ways of understanding, knowing and being in the world (Gee,
From that standpoint, the study of signs in their “fusion of form and meaning” (Kress, 2010, p. 54) provided me with ways of studying Haitian linguistic and cultural practices. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988) define semiotics as “the general study of semiosis, that is, the processes and effects of the production and reproduction, reception and circulation of meaning in all forms, used by all kinds of agent of communication” (p. 261, emphasis in original). With semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010; Rogers et al., 2005; Mignolo, 2003; Gee, 2011; Fairclough, 2003) we enter a realm where all possible regions and resources for communications with purposeful intent to message ideas and thoughts, feelings and emotions can be explored. Thus, semiotics affords, equalizes, democratizes or levels all communicative acts and forms “in all kinds of human society at all periods of human history” produced by any and all peoples to make meaning of experiences in their respective time and place (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 261). I expand on semiotics in the section on data analysis.

For Phase II of this research project, the study of Haitian adolescents and parents’ ideologies about Haitian linguistic and cultural practices, I used what Chase (2010) terms “narrative inquiry.” According to Chase, “narrative inquiry can be characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods—all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them” (p. 208, emphasis in original). In other words, the narrative inquiry technique or storytelling process within the qualitative research work approach provides an opportunity for people to narrate their own stories, and create an existential route for researcher and
their research participants to get to the destination of the story/stories that must be told. Through the voices of participants, including the researcher, the study became the “kinds of narratives [that] disrupt oppressive social processes […] and offered] stories [that] encourage social justice and democratic processes” (Chase, 2010, p. 226).

Using a qualitative approach that combined semiotics with narrative inquiry facilitated the naming of the historical causes and conditions at the source of the absence or exclusion of Haitian practices in the mainstream knowledge canon, the significance of these practices for Haitians themselves, as well as others in the world community. Ultimately, the qualitative research approach helped to highlight:

a) the theoretical significance of this study as it facilitates the identification, description and naming of important linguistic and cultural practices that represent the Haitian cosmology and ties them to their history of enslavement, as well as discusses how and why they have been erased in the Western canon,

b) the empirical significance, providing a space to consider and examine the academic and social impact of the exclusion or inclusion of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices in the education of Haitian students, and,

c) the policy significance, contributing in making research-based recommendations that inform educational policies, as well as curricular and pedagogical practices to help address issues of poor production and low academic performance of Haitian students, particularly those in the New York City public school system.

The semiotic inquiry and narrative inquiry helped bring attention to the cultural
dissonance and discontinuity between what the American school system values as knowledge at the expense of the cultural knowledge that Haitian students bring to school in the participants’ own voices and stories (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Yosso, 2005; Scott, 1990). It also shed light on the ideological roots for the “intellectual and epistemological exclusions” (Gandhi, 1998) of the cultural heritage of Haitian students as part of their schooling experience. As Luttrell (Introduction, 2010, p. 1) contends: “[I]f educational research is going to serve democratic ideals and make a difference in people’s lives, it will need to be inventive in its approach to problem solving and social analysis.”

Luttrell’s reflection compels me as researcher to seek creative, imaginative and innovative solutions for narrating or telling about the educational issues faced by the Haitian Creole speaking students. This qualitative research study using semiotic and narrative techniques was an “inventive” act on the part of the researcher. Who is to tell that story when it is not there or represented in the canon? It was an audacious, disruptive and inventive act to select an educational research study that offered a description and analysis of Haitian practices accompanied with the voices of their Haitian practitioners to argue for their usage and implementation in the education of Haitian learners in order to transform the dire educational conditions of these children.

As such, this study is a democratic endeavor that seeks to make a difference in the lives of Haitian students. It is a study that seeks responses and solutions to remedy these academic disparities. It seeks to serve our democracy, and to inspire our society to move toward greater social justice principles and human rights standards. When the academic and social needs of Haitian learners are addressed and met, our democracy enriches itself.
Luttrell’s argument that educational research anchored in democratic values can help make the case that *all* children are deserving, provided a focus for this qualitative research inquiry.

Lastly, the combination of semiotics and narrative inquiry offered the possibility of taking a holistic outlook on the Haitian objects and subjects. That is, the method allowed for textual analysis on Haitian linguistic and cultural practices, as well as the voices of the Haitian practitioners, showing interconnectivities and relationships, as well as highlighting the significance of the practices for Haitians as tools and resources for Haitian knowledge-making and producing.

**Phase I: Haitian texts and narratives, and cultural practices**

**The data: Texts and practices**

The sample of narratives, texts and practices in this part of my study was purposive. That is, the items were chosen because of their pervasiveness in Haitian daily living. The selected texts and narratives in Haitian Creole, as well as Rara practices and Vèvè reflect elements of Haitian identity.

For the purpose of the semiotic analysis, the following three types of items were selected and considered:

1. Haitian Creole texts and narratives
   - Four (4) stanzas from a set of Haitian Vodou prayers
   - Twenty (20) Haitian Creole proverbs and expressions
   - Two (2) Haitian folktales
   - Two (2) excerpts from plays in contemporary Haitian literature

2. The Haitian *Rara* practice
   - Three (3) *Rara* songs
   - Two (2) *Rara* instruments
3. The Haitian *Vèvè practice*

Seven (7) *Vèvè* diagrams

Below I offer a more detailed description of the data that made up the sample that was analyzed. I also provide the sources of the data.

1. Haitian Creole texts and narratives

- Four (4) stanzas from a set of four Haitian Vodou prayers from *Lapriyè Ginen* (2004) by Max Beauvoir
- Twenty (20) Haitian proverbs and expressions
- Two (2) folk stories selected from Diane Wolkstein (1997) *The Magic Orange Tree and Other Haitian Folktales*
- Two (2) excerpts from two plays from contemporary Haitian literature
  *Pèlentèt* (1978) by Franketyèn, and *Masuife* (2015) by Menès Dejwa

2. Haitian Rara practice

- Three (3) popular *Rara* lyrics/songs
- Two (2) *Rara* instruments: Drum and *lanbi* (conch shell)

3. Haitian Vèvè practice

- Seven (7) *Vèvè* diagrams from *Diagrammes Rituels du Voudou* (1974) Milo Rigaud

*The methodology and analysis of Phase I: Semiotics*

While language in its conventional appearance and structured uses, functions and roles is integral to the inventoried Haitian items being investigated, a few practices
combine or enter language as a “mode” (Kress, 2010), but move beyond language. It is in
that sense that semiotics offers a more apt and broader canopy where all signs “made”
(Kress, 2010) for communicative acts, doings or codes employed by people to
convey and enact thoughts, feelings, emotions, actions or inactions between
them and between the world can be analyzed.

To address more specifically the Haitian communicative practices under study
requires the more delineated location of “social semiotics” (Gee, 2011; Fairclough, 2003;
Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010, Rogers et al., 2005; Mignolo, 2003), the branch of
semiotics that helps to answer questions about the social, economic, political, ideological
contexts for the emergence of a communicative form, and also addresses, according to
Kress, “meaning in all its appearances, in all social occasions and in all cultural sites”
(Kress, 2010, p. 2). The Haitian practices evolved within a particular social context, the
colonial slave society of Saint Domingue, and continues to develop inside a post-slavery
and post-colonial Haiti—where the remnants, vestiges and imprints of its former self
remain influential on the social, economic and political, and is central to the upheavals or
power struggles between the post-colonial elite and the Haitian masses.

Kress (2010), building on earlier work in social semiotics by Michael Halliday
(1978); Hodge and Kress (1988); Kress (2003); van Leeuwen (2005), among other
critical semioticians, has broadened the definition of social semiotics as a theoretical
framework which presupposes that: “signs are always newly made in social interaction;
signs are motivated, not arbitrary relations of meaning and form; the motivated relation of
a form and a meaning is based on and arises out of the interest of makers of sign; the
forms/signifiers which are used in the making of signs are made in social interaction and become part of the semiotic resources of a culture” (pp. 54-55). Accordingly, contexts, human rapports and exchanges, motivations, purposes and interests (hidden and/or visible), and creation of resources are fundamental to the sign-making process and effect viewed within the sphere of social semiotics. This definition serves our analysis of the Haitian texts and narratives, as well as cultural practices that arose or were newly made (remade) within the colonial conditions and realities in Saint Domingue.

**Phase II: Haitian adolescents’ and parents’ ideologies about Haitian linguistic and cultural practices**

As I said before, I conducted focus group sessions and follow in-depth ethnographic interviews with a selected group of Haitian adolescents and parents. The site of the community-based organization *Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project* was used to conduct the focus groups and ethnographic interviews.

**The participants**

Although the participants were included were included through snow-ballng techniques, I observed the following criteria in selecting participants.

*For Haitian adolescents*

- Ages: 13 to 17 years old
- Haitian Creole speaker
- Students
- Residents of New York City

The sample selected consisted of ten (10) youngsters between the ages of 13 to 17 years old. All ten adolescents were fluent Haitian Creole speakers, and had different levels of English language proficiency. Seven of these youngsters were born in Haiti,
and three were born in the United States. The youth who were born in Haiti migrated to New York City in the past six years, following the 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti. All the adolescents reside in New York City, and attend High School.

Haitian parents included were also the result of snow-balling techniques, although, as with the adolescents, there were a number of criteria that were required, as follows:

For Haitian parents
- Parent or guardian of school age child/children in elementary, junior high school or high school
- Haitian Creole speaker
- Residents of New York City

The sample of Haitian parents selected consisted of eight (8) parents with school age children either attending elementary, junior high school or high school in the city. They were all fluent Haitian Creole speakers. Some of the parents were literate, although a few were not. One parent possessed a bachelor’s degree from a U.S. college. Only two of the eight parent participants were male. They all reside in New York City.

In chapter 8, we provide more in-depth information about the characteristics of both the adolescent and parent participants. This information appears in Tables 8.1 and 8.2.

The methodology

Between September 2016 and February 2017, I conducted focus groups with parents and students, and also interviewed some of the participants. I detail the methodology below. The researcher facilitated and took notes on the dialogue that
ensued during the focus groups. The ethnographic interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Focus groups**

Two (2) focus groups sessions were conducted with the adolescents. One focus group consisted of five adolescents, whereas the second focus group had five other adolescents. There were 10 adolescents in total who participated in the focus groups.

Two (2) focus group sessions were conducted with the parents. One focus group had four Haitian parents and the other focus group had four other Haitian parents. There was a total of eight Haitian parents who participated in the focus groups.

The focus groups for both the Haitian adolescents and parents were formatted and structured similarly, and occurred all on the site of the community-based organization *Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project* in Brooklyn, New York. The exact same linguistic and cultural items presented in the same order were used to facilitate the discussions and dialogues with both of the populations (adolescent and parent).

The only difference was the days on which the focus groups were conducted with each of the population. The two focus group sessions with the adolescents were conducted on December 27 and 28, 2016. And, the two focus group sessions with the parents were conducted on December 29, 2016 and January 7, 2017. In all the total of four groups were held on four different days.

A total of nine (9) slides were prepared in advance. Contents of the slides are
discussed further below. Handouts/copies of the slides were distributed to participants as well. In addition to the visual aids, the researcher read aloud the materials on the slides/handouts that were used to prompt the participants in recollecting, discussing and sharing their experiences with the various linguistic and cultural items. The details of each slide for each of the practices follow:

_Haitian Creole texts and narratives._ There were four prepared slides for discussion and dialogue on the _texts and narratives._

- Slide 1: Vodou prayers,
- Slide 2: Proverbs,
- Slide 3: Folktales,
- Slide 4: Excerpts of two plays.

In addition to the visual aids, the Vodou prayer and the excerpts of the two plays were pre-recorded and played for the participants to listen to.

_Haitian Rara practice_

- Slide 5: Drum picture,
- Slide 6: _Lanbi_ (conch shell picture).

_Haitian Vèvè practice_

- Slide 7: _Vèvè_ symbol for Èzili, goddess/es of love,
- Slide 8: _Vèvè_ symbol for Legba Atibon, keeper of the gate,
- Slide 9: _Vèvè_ symbol for Marasa, the spirit of twins.

**For the Haitian texts and narratives**

Specifically, the first slide projected headlined Vodou prayers and had the prayer stanza: _Anonse_ (Announcing). The second slide listed the following three (3)
proverbs: “Joumou pa donnen kalbas (literal translation: the pumpkin tree does not grow calabash; English equivalent: The apple does not fall far from the tree), Yon jou pou chasè, yon jou pou jibye (literal translation: One day for the hunter, one day for the prey; English equivalent: Every dog has his day), and Pale franse pa di lespri (literal translation: Speaking French does not equate spirit/intelligence; a possible English equivalent for this proverb is: Appearances can be deceiving).”

The third slide had the titles of the following two folktales: Bondye ak Jeneral Lanmò (The Good God and General Death) and Ti pye zoranj (The Magic Orange Tree).


All the items, the Vodou prayer stanza, the three three proverbs, the two folktales, and the excerpts of the two plays that were discussed in the focus groups figured among the texts and narratives analyzed in the semiotic analysis on Haitian texts and narratives in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

**For the Haitian Rara practice**

Slides 5 and 6, plus handouts were used to show the following musical instruments: drums (figure 6.5 in the dissertation) and lanbi (the queen conch shell, figure 6.2 in the dissertation). Illustrations and discussion on the two items are in chapter 6 of this dissertation, a semiotic analysis of the Haitian Rara practice.

**For the Haitian Vèvè practice**

Three slides (number 7, 8, and 9) plus handouts were utilized to show the vèvè symbols for the Haitian Vodou spirits: Èzili, the goddess/es of love (figure 7.5
in the dissertation), *Legba Atibon*, keeper of the gates (figure 7.1 in the dissertation), and *Marasa*, the spirit of twins (figure 7.3 in the dissertation). The three (3) vèvè diagrams are pictured and discussed in chapter 7 of this dissertation, a semiotic analysis of the Haitian Vèvè practice.

Following the projection of slide(s) associated with the specific linguistic and cultural item, participants were invited to discuss and share their familiarity with the objects, tell what they know about the historical and communal significance of the objects for Haitians, share experiences if any with the objects, and to assess what roles, functions and uses the linguistic and cultural items could play to support the teaching and learning of Haitian students.

**Ethnographic interviews: Haitian adolescent**

Two (2) respective follow up in-depth individual ethnographic interviews were conducted with two selected Haitian adolescents.

*Protocol for the ethnographic interviews with the Haitian adolescents*

The follow up in-depth individual ethnographic interviews with the two selected adolescents utilized an interview instrument that was tailored for the youngsters. The two (2) individual ethnographic interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

A short questionnaire designed within the parameters of “narrative interviewing” (Reissman, 2008) techniques with four items were used to facilitate, gather and “generate [more] detailed accounts” (p. 23), deeper personal interpretations about behaviors and attitudes regarding Haitians, their linguistic and cultural practices and productions as part of their schooling experiences.
There were four (4) guiding questions for the individual ethnographic interviews with the two selected Haitian adolescents:

1) Who was the last Haitian / Haitian-American author that you read in school, or, your teacher suggested for reading? And, what was the book about?

2) When was the last time you did a group or individual project in school that focused on any aspects of your Haitian experience (personal/familial, community/Haiti, etc.)?

3) Can you tell me /share with me your opinion on the teaching materials offered to you in school? and,

4) Can you tell me what you would change about your school community if you could?

**Ethnographic interviews: Haitian parent**

Two (2) respective follow up in-depth individual ethnographic interviews were conducted with two selected Haitian parents.

**Protocol for the ethnographic interviews with the Haitian parents**

The follow up in-depth individual ethnographic interviews with the two selected parents utilized an interview instrument that was tailored for the parents. The two (2) individual ethnographic interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

A short questionnaire designed within the parameters of “narrative interviewing” (Reissman, 2008) techniques with four items were used to facilitate, gather and “generate [more] detailed accounts” (p. 23), deeper personal interpretations about behaviors and attitudes regarding Haitians, their linguistic and
cultural practices and productions as part of their child/children’s schooling experiences.

There were four (4) guiding questions for the individual ethnographic interviews with the two selected Haitian parents:

1) When was the last time your child/children brought home a book from school that had a Haitian / Haitian-American author? And, why would you want your child to read texts by Haitian / Haitian-American writers?

2) When was the last time you child/children asked you for help to do/complete a school project that focused on any aspects of your child/children’s and family’s Haitian experience (here in the United States/New York or in Haiti?

3) What would encourage you to visit your child/children’s school(s) more frequently? and,

4) Can you tell me what you would change about your child/children’s school(s) if you could?

Data analysis strategy: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

To analyze the results of both the focus groups and the individual interviews, I used Critical Discourse Analysis. “Critical Discourse Analysis” (Gee, 2011; Fairclough, 2003; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010, Rogers et al, 2005) enabled me to analyze and discuss the data collected through the voices/stories of the Haitian participants (adolescents and parents). Rogers (2011) makes a salient point on CDA as a communicative theoretical tool that helps to bridge or invite “into dialogue… [a range of] theories of language to answer particular research questions… and [represents] a methodology that allows them [these various theories of communication, i.e., semiotics,
CDA, linguistics, etc.] to describe, interpret, and explain such relations” (p. 3). In defining the purposes and functions of CDA, Rogers and her coauthors (2005) argue that as a methodology, CDA represents a significant instrument that can help: “disrupt discourses, challenge restrictive pedagogies, challenge passive acceptance of the status quo” (p. 376). Such comprehensible and powerful explanation of CDA made it a useful analytical tool for analyzing the discourse of the Haitian participants about their practices.

CDA allowed for the discernment in the participants’ language use occasions of “identity/identities building” and “politics building” (Gee, 2011), as they validated their practices as essential and existential cultural assets. Moreover, Rogers and coauthors (2005) argue that CDA permits deep examinations “with an interest in understanding, uncovering, and transforming [the] conditions of inequality” (Rogers et al., 2005). Using CDA, a critical, descriptive and narrative data analysis strategy has helped this research study project make the voices of the participating Haitian subjects central in the interpretation of their practices and experiences as they related the effect of the exclusion of Haitian language and culture in the education of Haitians, as well the potential contained in including them. Utilizing a theoretical tool that allowed the Haitian voices to come through and offer their own perspectives on the inequity faced by Haitian children in schools because they are denied the right and opportunity to use and sustain their linguistic and cultural practices, an essential bridge to their learning, made the use of CDA invaluable in this research study project.
Combining and using these two levels of communication analysis methodologies for the research study, that is, **semiotics** (Gee, 2011; Fairclough, 2003; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010, Rogers et al., 2005; Mignolo, 2003) to analyze the inventoried Haitian linguistic and cultural practices, and **CDA** (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Gee, 2011, Lakshmanan, 2011) to analyze the voices/stories of the Haitian adolescent and parents who voluntarily participated in the focus group sessions and follow up ethnographic interviews helped shed unprecedented light on the uses, roles and functions of these linguistic and cultural items in the lives of Haitians. It also helped to uncover particular cultural, social and historical events contained within these practices that have shaped, informed, and continue to influence the ways in which Haitians do these practices, or, use these various communicative resources and means (i.e., language, culture, body, performance, etc.) to read and access knowledge from their world (inside and outside), as well as to communicate, create, convey and make meanings for themselves, and about themselves for others.

**The researcher’s positionality**

Banks (2010) uses the term “indigenous-insider” to describe the researcher who “endorses the unique values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge of his or her indigenous community and culture and is perceived by people within the community as a legitimate community member who can speak with authority” (p. 46). His definition typifies me as a classic indigenous-insider researcher. In addition to my very public endorsement of Haitian values and beliefs, inside Haiti and within Haitian diasporic
communities such as the United States, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, I am recognized as “a legitimate member” of the “community” who is imbued with knowledge of its culture, and as someone whose perspectives are valued. Efforts to remain connected to the “community” are evidenced in my frequent travels to Haiti and the Dominican Republic to support women’s rights issues, establishing links with Cubans of Haitian-descent in Cuba who are advocating for the maintenance of their Haitian Creole language, culture and identity, as well as my continuous presence and engagement inside the New York Haitian community.\textsuperscript{40}

There are privileges in being an indigenous-insider researcher. But, with that also comes enormous responsibility. For one, organizers and workers, as well as members at large in the community can reward you by giving you unprecedented access to hear their stories and document their experiences and work. Moreover, you do not need a linguistic and cultural broker to negotiate relationships or conduct research projects in the community. Yet, there can also be tensions when talking or telling stories on behalf of, or about the inside or community. For instance, the claim made earlier, discussing the historical parcours of Haiti and Haitians, and which in part places the blame for the developmental stagnation of the country on the French-educated mulatto political and economic governing elite, may not be taken to kindly. There are countless indigenous-insider researchers and commentators that have become persona non grata in their respective communities.

Indigenous-insider researchers must answer to the inside (family, friends, community colleagues and members at large, etc.) that has certain expectations.

\textsuperscript{40} A more detailed description of my New York Haitian community work can be found in the section subtitled “A biographical background” in chapter 1.
Community insiders can at times label indigenous-insider researchers as traitors for airing dirty laundry, cultural taboos, or, making critical commentaries on their society. (As I write this, I could not help thinking about one such notable example: The literary scholar Salman Rushdie, whose 1988 text *The Satanic Verses* unleashed enormous controversies in the Muslim community to the point that a *fatwā* was pronounced against him.)

And still, indigenous-insider researchers have to contend with the *outside* as well (academic institutions and colleagues, other scholars and communities, etc.), which has its own set of expectations, and can even accuse them of biases. Banks (2010) observes:

Scholars, especially those who work with marginalized communities and who promote policies and practices that conflict with those institutionalized within the mainstream academic community, experience a number of academic risks when they become intellectual leaders. They are open to charges by mainstream researchers that they are political, partisan and subjective. (p. 52)

“*Des deux côtés [... le] mal est infini*”, as the 17<sup>th</sup> century French tragedian Pierre Corneille rightly underscored in his highly contested 1637 play *Le Cid*. Oftentimes, there is indeed no win for the indigenous-insider researcher. From the inside or the outside!

In my view, the work or storytelling done by indigenous-insider researchers is still worth all the risks. Reading the Argentinean scholar Walter Mignolo—an indigenous-

---

41 In the Islamic faith, a *fatwā* “is a nonbinding but authoritative legal opinion.” In other words, a *fatwā* takes on the role of a non-court or legal judgment, but still carries force. A *fatwā* was pronounced against Rushdie, who was accused of blasphemy for including in his novel a traditional Muslim story about Muhammad adding verses to the Qur’an about three goddesses who used to be worshipped in Mecca as divine beings. (Source: en.wikipedia.org. Retrieved March 7, 2017).
insider who has taken on the role of speaking on behalf of the Americas, particularly his Latin-American portion, about the European colonization nightmare that befell the region—acknowledging that, “the Haitian Revolution was forgotten, at least until the 1970s” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 241) was received as more than simply a remarkable and candid admission for me. It also particularly underscored the significance of storytelling by indigenous-insiders. And, that is what I have attempted here with this foray or study into Haitian linguistic and cultural practices. “The Haitian Revolution remained not only isolated from France, but also from the ideologues of independence in Spanish- Anglo-speaking continental countries,” admits Mignolo (p. 241).

**The importance of my research study and of my taking the role of indigenous-insider researcher**

How is that possible seems perhaps the most facile question after one becomes aware that following its Revolution, Haiti and Haitian leaders provided “support for [Simón] Bolívar42 and other revolutionaries in Haiti’s vicinity” for their own anti-colonial insurrections and liberation struggles (Dubois, 2012, p. 64). Maybe a better question is why has the Haitians’ anti-colonial and anti-slavery struggle as well as their revolutionary success been omitted and excluded, even in the continental (the Americas) history books? And sadly, the practice of omitting and silencing the Haitian Revolution and experience continues to date. This study about the critical significance of Haitian linguistic and

---

42 “The great Simón Bolivar, the liberator and founder of five South American republics […had his request for help from the English rejected.] Desperate and without means, he decided to journey to Haiti to appeal to the generosity of the Black Republic to solicit the help he needed to continue the liberation struggle […] He came to Haiti perhaps with a sceptical (sic) mind. But Alexandre Pétion, the president of the western part of Haiti, welcomed him with great warmth […] the Haitian government made available to the hero of Boyaca and Carabobo all the resources he needed. Bolívar needed just about everything, and he was generously given men, weapons, and money” (Anténor Firmin The Equality of the Human Races (2002 [1885] p. 396).
cultural practices for Haitian learners in fact denounces and challenges such a practice. The resulting damage to Haitian children’s minds, bodies and souls are simply just too costly.

Yet, to better understand the admission (and confession) made by Mignolo on the isolation of the Haitian Revolution and Independence on the very continent where it occurred, I decided to follow his trail a bit. One of the reasons for historical isolation, or cultural alienation remark Latin-American thinkers such as Mignolo or the Argentinean philosopher Enrique Dussel (an influence on Mignolo), is the fact that our stories are not being told by ourselves. That many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are so impoverished today—unable to provide their people with adequate human standard of living—and unable to produce their own historical accounts are entirely connected to that brutal and violent colonial experience, argue many post-colonial thinkers in the region (The Americas, which includes the Caribbean Archipelago). Let’s make it clear that this situation about the lack of resources in these countries is linked—as mentioned elsewhere in this document—to the exploitation of these peoples and their lands by the former European colonial powers. It should not be forgotten that territories throughout the Americas (North and South Americas and the Caribbean) had their natural resources (e.g., gold, silver, copper, bauxite, mahogany trees, etc.) hauled away by the European colonial powers that invaded the region, plus, their indigenous populations along with millions of Africans transported to the Americas were enslaved and their labor created enormous wealth for European colonial empires. In sum, when countries in the region are discussed in books, scholarly and journalistic reports according to their poverty indexes, such as the famous/infamous tag line: “Haiti is the poorest country in the western
hemisphere,” the reason for the current state of poverty or the other side of the story is never explained.

Thus, the problem with not having the resources and means to write/tell our own stories/histories is duly connected with the devastation left behind by European colonial powers. Moreover, another problem for the historical redaction of such a significant event as the Haitian Revolution and Independence lies in the fact that historical renditions are frequently told from the perspectives of the victors, and they have no interest or desire to positively portray “us” the victims, or, tell the events as they actually happened. Further and in a crude reality, our ignorance, self-ignorance helps keep us in a state of subjugation (or colonial dependence) and self-alienation, which profit those “external-outsider” (Banks, 2010) storytellers.

This state and condition of post-colonial subjects throughout the Americas is superbly captured by Dussel (2012), who writes:

With my trip to Europe – in my case, crossing the Atlantic by ship in 1957 – we discovered ourselves to be “Latin Americans,” or at least no longer “Europeans,” from the moment that we disembarked in Lisbon or Barcelona. The differences were obvious and could not be concealed. Consequently, the problem of culture—humanistically, philosophically, and existentially (sic)—was an obsession for me: “Who are we culturally? What is our historical identity?” This was not a question of the possibility of describing this “identity” objectively; it was something prior. It was the existential anguish of knowing oneself. (pp. 28-29, emphasis in original)

I remember a similar story told in class by the Barbadian writer George Lamming, who
was a visiting professor at my institution in New York City in the late 1990s. Anglo-Caribbean writers like himself, Samuel Selvon and others made the same discovery upon arriving in England in the 1950s, 1960s that they were not British after all. There are similar stories told by various francophone/creolophone Caribbean writers, who met in France during that same period.

Telling one’s story matters (for inside and outside). In telling one’s own story, one finds validation of the self, language, culture, and history, Dussel (2012) contends. He offers as one example for the empowering project of *self-story* and self-description, Rigoberta Menchú, a K’iche’ of the Mayan people from Guatemala, who became an important voice and storyteller for her neglected, abused and marginalized indigenous community, inside and outside. These sorts of indigenous stories ultimately help victims of the European colonial project to liberate themselves, Dussel observes.

Thus, I am willingly accepting the label of being an “indigenous-insider” (Banks, 2010) researcher for my Haitian community and people with all the risks that such a designation and work carry. My position being that it is an important step toward a renewed liberation project. “Scholars who become intellectual leaders have many opportunities to make a difference in their communities,” argues Banks (p. 52). The difference I thus seek to make is, one, telling the story/Haitian story from one/another Haitian perspective. Second, I seek to challenge and replace alongside others in the community some of the rampant misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and misleading stories that have been told about Haiti, Haitians, their practices and experiences. And lastly, I accept and take ownership of the label indigenous-insider researcher because it is

---

43 I simply want to note here that I am not the first Haitian doing these sorts of storytelling. But this Haitian community of storytellers is still very small.
a means to draw the attention of the “outsider” to the plight, immorality and injustice being done to Haitian learners in our schools, denied of the right to utilize their linguistic and cultural practices as part of their educational experiences. For, these Haitian linguistic and cultural tools represent critical meaning-making sites for these children to know and understand themselves as Haitians as well as their Haitian stories/histories as contributing members of this global community.

On English and research

Chase (2010) raised an important point in discussing the need for researchers to carefully think about research tools in regards to “whom we [researchers] write for and speak to—and how we do so” (p. 230). This is extremely significant in the telling of stories by non-Western researchers. But of equal significance is whose voices and stories are being told. This dichotomy or duality can place non-Western researchers in difficult positions. On the one hand, they are addressing colleagues most of whom are outsiders of the culture(s), and, even those who may be considered insiders are generally trained within western research traditions. Thus, these colleagues expect research stories to follow certain western narrative styles. But, does that also require sacrificing the cultural voice of non-Western research participants (or the true or inner voice of non-Western researchers)?

One choice made in this study, further explained in chapter 8, is to link the voices and stories of the Haitian adolescent and parent participants. In keeping the voices and stories together, we refuse to sacrifice the cultural, communal, collective and circular narrative style of the Haitian participants (including the researcher), influenced by Haitian storytelling style and tradition. While the two groups spoke separately, and the
two adolescents and two parents were interviewed individually, it was more significant to hear and find shared paradigms and themes in the complex stories that they told, and needed to be retold. This provided added evidence for the cultural, communal, collective and circular Haitian storytelling narrative style, which can prove useful for cooperative teaching of literature/literary texts, and for collective/group activities for communicative arts with students.

What is, however, sacrificed to accommodate colleagues is the privileging of the English language over the Haitian Creole language. It is a huge sacrifice considering that raising the status of the Haitian Creole language is a major goal in the study. But it is a sacrifice made and informed by logic, and inspired by those who came before us.

Besides other obvious constraints, making the point about the research language choice is particularly inspired by the Spanish-speaking Argentinean post-colonial scholar Walter Mignolo, who provided this explanation for writing *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization* in English. Mignolo (2003) reasons:

Writing in Spanish means, at this time, to remain at the margin of contemporary theoretical discussions. […] To write in Spanish a book that attempts to inscribe Spanish/Latin American and Amerindian legacies into current debates on the Renaissance / early modern period and into colonial legacies and postcolonial theories means marginalizing the book before giving it the possibility of participating in an intellectual conversation, which, since the eighteenth century has been dominated by German, French, and—more recently—by English.” (Preface, viii)
Writing in English was an easier choice (if it were a choice at all) than keeping together the voices of the Haitian adolescents and parents (as well as the researcher) in the overall discussions and interpretations of the significance of these practices, somewhat a disruption of the Academy’s canonic rule of classification and compartmentalization. If the exercise accomplishes nothing else, at the very least, it helps illustrate Chase’s (2010) argument that: “As part of everyday lived experience, narratives themselves are messy and complex” (Chase, 2010, p. 216), and even their reporting can be.

However, borrowing from Mignolo, this dissertation about Haitian linguistic and cultural practices as critical meaning-making spaces for Haitian learners written in English offers the possibility to inscribe Haitian legacies into current debates and into colonial legacies and postcolonial theories. And certainly, when the means to translate this dissertation in Haitian Creole comes, it is my hope that it will contribute in raising the status of the Haitian Creole language and show the potential of the language as a vehicle for theoretical thought and analysis. Further, it will help to remove Haitians and their practices from obscurity, while showing their significance in shaping the Black-Atlantic history and experience, and lastly, inspire.
Chapter 5
Texts and narratives in Haitian Creole:
A semiotic analysis of Vodou prayers, proverbs, folktales and literature

In exploring the discursive features found in Haitian linguistic and cultural practices such as Vodou prayers, proverbs, folktales, and contemporary written literature, one does indeed encounter a rich corpus that help carry Haitian philosophical and didactic tradition. The language use in these Haitian practices articulates and offers knowledge, critical analysis, and creative problem-solving approaches. As a whole, Haitian language practices demonstrate a sheer will to construct or make language do or perform best in its role as builder, preserver and protector of identity. What is referred here as Haitian Creole, Creole, or, the Haitian language is an instrument invented and constructed by the Saint Domingue slaves, prepared and suited for the context in which it emerged. That language came to serve the slaves as a “unifying and empowering force” (Cerat, 2011, p. 73), and to confront and challenge their enslavement. The Haitian language was adequately organized and structured to perform acts of resistance and self-determination, to build, preserve and protect their identity/identities, to maintain and affirm their cultural traditions, as well as to transform or change conditions.

1. Inside of the Vodou prayer

Traditional Haitian Vodou ceremonies are generally held at night. Understanding the structures of slave societies allows us to easily explain this custom. Slaves worked from sunup to sundown and therefore, could only attend to personal activities at night. Moreover, the fact that the slaves’ African religious traditions were prohibited in favor of the masters’ Catholic practices further recognizes why Vodou ceremonial rituals occur
under the cover of darkness. Ceremonies usually begin with a set of lengthy prayers (Rigaud, 1985; Beauvoir, 2004; Edeline Sanon: personal communication with the author). Prayers are recited before any drumming, singing, dancing, drinking and eating can take place. Such routines also signal that the slaves wanted the community to focus on the “performative acts” (Pennycook, 2007) or messages and actions contained within these prayers.

The four sets of prayers are collectively named “Lapriyè Ginen, The prayers of Guinea” (Rigaud, 1985, Beauvoir, 2004). The four prayers are: Lapriyè Sen Franswa – Sen Dominik, La litani Djò, Lapriyè Djò and Le Bohoun (Beauvoir, 2004; Rigaud, 1985; Edeline Sanon: personal communication with the author). These sacred oral texts are rote learned and memorized by initiates and most practitioners, but also by many non-initiates, who regularly participate in ceremonies.

Recitation of the prayers follows the African “call and response” (Manuel, 2006) style of singing. That is, the Vodou priest or priestess, or, the oujenikon leading the ceremony first states or sings the stanza, and the ounsi and attendants respond by repeating the same stanza. Vodou songs follow the same style and pattern. The ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel (2006) explains that the call and response style of singing, “an antiphonal style of music making [was] brought [to the Americas] by enslaved Africans […]” (pp. 181-190). Many music scholars agree that call-and-

---

44 In “Haitian mythopoeia and theology” (Christophe, 2006 “Rainbow over Water”) Ginen or Lafrik Ginen (Guinea or African Guinea) represents for Vodou believers the concept of paradise.

45 The oujenikon is “A Vodou song specialist” (Wilcken, The Drums of Vodou, 1992, p. 121). He or she can sometimes be a Vodou initiate, but not necessarily so.

46 Vodou initiates who have learned or are learning the sacred practices associated with the Vodou belief system and form part of a specific community/family of Vodou believers in various communities or regions of the country.
response, a double musical phrasal-conversational style, present in African-American work songs and blues singing and Haitian Vodou ceremonial singings are rooted in African musical traditions (Fleurant, 2006; Manuel, 2006; Rose, 1994). The singing style of these prayers indicates a systematic and intentional approach to facilitate memorization. Considering that the slaves had to rely on oral and memorization skills to preserve all sorts of knowledge (i.e., genealogical, herbal medicine, historical, personal, spiritual histories, etc.) helps to validate the technique. Until the last ten or fifteen years, there were no complete written transcriptions of these Vodou prayers.

Vodou ceremonies generally start with the Lapriyè Sen Franswa – Sen Dominik, Prayer to Saint Francis and Saint Dominick. It is the first to be recited of the four sets. The late Vodou priest Max Beauvoir, one of people who transcribed and compiled these sacred oral texts, proposed that Toussaint Louverture, one of the fathers of the Haitian Revolution, might be the author of the Lapriyè Sen Franswa – Sen Dominik. Beauvoir (2004) writes: “Ce que nous avons appris de Toussaint Louverture nous porte à croire qu’il en aurait peut-être été l’auteur. [What we have learned about Toussaint Louverture leads us to believe that he might have been the author] (p. xx). Pushing his assertion further, Beauvoir suggests that when the slaves recited the prayers, they were in fact speaking of Louverture. It is an interesting proposition, despite the absence of any concrete evidence.

The opening stanza of the prayer begins in the following:

L’Ange du Seigneur dit à Marie
Qu’elle concevra un Jésus Christ,
La Trinité l’ayant choisie
Elle a conçu du Saint Esprit.

The angel of the Lord told Mary
She will conceive a Jesus Christ
The Trinity having chosen her
She is made by the Holy Spirit.
One can actually choose to hear or read into the prayer the making of Toussaint Louverture into a messiah. Its very first stanza announces the coming of “a” Jesus Christ. In the Christian belief system, Jesus Christ figures as a savior. That Jesus Christ or Christ is used as metaphor for a coming liberator who helps free the slaves makes complete sense.\(^{47}\)

The *Lapriyè Sen Franswa – Sen Dominik* has 21 stanzas. The first 12 strophes are completely in French. Stanzas number 13, 14 and 15 are in a mixture of Creole, French and *langaj* (the Haitian term for the African words, henceforth referred to as “African *langaj*”). The last six mix only Creole and African *langaj*. The prayer is an imploration to a myriad of Catholic saints like Saint Peter, Sainte Philomena, certainly Saint Dominick, to be merciful from the first to the fourteenth stanza. However, by the fifteenth stanza, the tone shifts to also include appeals to their Vodou spirits as well.

The stanza cites Saint Mary Magdalene in the first line, and immediately in the next one moves to the Vodou spirit *Danbala Wèdo*:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Sainte Marie Madeleine, priez!} \\
&\text{Lapriyè pou Sen yo, Danbala Wèdo} \\
&\text{Soulaje zanfan yo.} \\
&\text{Sainte Marie Madeleine, priez!} \\
&\text{Lapriyè pou Lwa yo, Danbala Wèdo} \\
&\text{Soulaje zanfan yo.} \\
&\text{Jésus, Marie, Joseph, manman, men nou,} \\
&\text{O gran Samadjègwe, papa, men nou} \\
&\text{Ou pa wè n soufri ase.} \\
&\text{Danbala Wèdo Tokan, papa, men nou} \\
&\text{Ou pa wè n soufri ase!}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Saint Mary Magdalene, pray!} \\
&\text{Pray for the Saints, *Danbala Wèdo*}^{48} \\
&\text{Relieve the children.} \\
&\text{Saint Mary Magdalene, pray!} \\
&\text{Pray for the spirits, *Danbala Wèdo*} \\
&\text{Relieve the children.} \\
&\text{Jesus, Mary, Joseph, mother, here we are,} \\
&\text{O great Samadjègwe, father, here we are} \\
&\text{Don’t you see we’ve suffered enough.} \\
&\text{*Danbala Wèdo Tokan*, father, here we are} \\
&\text{Don’t you see we’ve suffered enough!}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{47}\) African-American Negro Spirituals are rich with songs using Biblical figures as subversive allusions as well as a means to sustain their belief and ideation in deliverance through a persona like Moses who, according to the Old Testament liberated the Israelites from bondage in Egypt (Dubois, 1963).

\(^{48}\) *Danbala Wèdo* is a male at the helm of the Vodou pantheon. It is represented in the symbol of a Serpent.
The couplet is essentially a mixture of Haitian Creole and African langaj. Danbala Wèdo, the male spirit at the helm of the Haitian Vodou pantheon is invoked in the second verse, and in three following verses. The term saints that precedes Danbala Wèdo is employed synonymously with lwa, spirits, in Haitian Vodou. In fact the word lwa is used in the fifth verse in a similar construction to the second, in place of the word “saints.” Danbala Wèdo is being implored to deliver/relieve the children/his children as they have suffered enough. The African langaj expression Samadjègwe is yet to be linguistically and culturally identified or its specific African source located. What is interesting with Vodou practitioners, however, is when questioned on the meanings of these words and expressions, their answer generally is that they have accepted them as magical powerful words left to them by the ancestors.

The third prayer in the set, the Lapriyè Djò, is completely in African langaj and Haitian Creole. It sings as a rallying cry, a call to action. The second strophe wastes no time in calling for the “family” or the collectivity to come together:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lafanmi sanble di yo nou la e.} & \quad \text{Family gathers, tell them we exist eh.} \\
\text{Lafanmi sanble di yo nou la e.} & \quad \text{Family gathers, tell them we exist eh.} \\
\text{Nanpwen ginen ankò, lafanmi sanble!} & \quad \text{Guinea no longer exists. Family gathers!} \\
\text{Nanpwen ginen ankò, lafanmi sanble non!} & \quad \text{Guinea no longer exists. Family let’s gather!} \\
\text{Kriyòl nou la e.} & \quad \text{Creole we exist eh.}
\end{align*}
\]

The core message throughout the stanzas is an invocation to the “Creole family,” what their slave community now represents, to rally and team up. It is direct: We are no longer in Guinea, the term generally used by Haitians and their ancestors as an equivalent to Africa. We are a family constructed and reconstructed away from the paradisiacal or mythical Guinea homeland left behind. It is equally an incantation for all the lwa, the Vodou spirits to assist in bringing them together in order to form that singular unifying Creole identity.
Upon a close examination of the 24th stanza of the prayer, the call to action goes even further. The strophe underscores the notion that language can be used to perform “acts of identity” (Pennycook, 2007, citing LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985). *Anonse o zanj nan dlo o adosou miwa lawe lawe*, Announcing to the Water Angel(s), has a clear performative, identity-building message:

| Anonse o zanj nan dlo o Adosou miwa lawe lawe |
| Announcing to the water angel(s) o, *adosou miwa lawe lawe* |
| Nan lavil Okan eee |
| Kriyòl mande chanjman |

In the town of Okan⁴⁹ Creoles demand change/changes

This condensed four-line stanza using the metaphor angel, has a straight, powerful anti-colonial message as well as a message of hope, a message of change. The first two verses (repeated) is an announcement to the water spirits. The second half of the verses: *adosou miwa lawe lawe* is African langaj, and in some ways remains somewhat obscure. What is however intriguing is that *miwa* exists as a Swahili word, and means cane or sugarcane.

Let’s recall that French colonial Saint Domingue was the “king” of the sugarcane empire in the New World. If the term *miwa* inserted in these slaves’ prayer were in fact Swahili, it would indicate that the *sanba*, “rethor” (Kress, 2010) or composer of that prayer must have had Swahili as a language practice. (Swahili is not yet an identified source language for Haitian Creole.) W.E.B. Dubois cautions in the *Souls of Black Folk* (1963) that the words left behind by enslaved African ancestors are meaningful, even when the descendants don’t understand them. When “cleared of evident dross”, maintains Dubois

---

⁴⁹ *Okan, Vilokan or Minokan* is used to refer to Haitian mythological site of origin. An equivalent could be the Yoruba Ile-Ife, or Christian’s Eden.
(p. 383) or sitting alone with them in stillness and silence, these words can reveal
themselves and their meanings, and offer a widow to be with the ancestors, to know the
ancestors and to glimpse with them into their experiences.

_Adosou miwa lawe lawe_ in that Haitian Vodou sacred oral text accomplishes
exactly that purpose. It helps to glance into _le quotidien_ of the enslaved ancestors, and to
see their hopes, fears, frustrations and aspirations. The metaphoric use of angel or
announcement to the water angels stands here for both the Haitian Vodou spirits as well
as the ancestors lost during the Middle Passage. They are being called upon to listen and
witness their sufferings in the sugarcane plantations, and to assist them in the creation of
that collective identity, essential to overcome their conditions.

What makes the word _miwa_ in that stanza of the _Lapriyè Djò_ prayer even more
curious, and likely to be the Swahili word for cane/sugarcane, rests in the last verse.
There is no question, ambiguity and obscurity about the last line of the stanza: _Creole
demands change/changes_. The line is unmistakably an anti-colonial and anti-slavery
message. The stanza directly communicates that we, the Creoles will no longer tolerate
the state of affairs: Slaving and toiling in the cane fields will no longer be accepted.
Moreover, the stanza is a complete affirmation of the slaves’ new assumed Creole
identity. They are fully appropriating or owning their Creole identity.

The Caribbean scholars Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant (1990) theorize in
_Éloge de la Créolité [In Praise of Creoleness] that:_

.Exprimer la Créolité sera exprimer […] ce que nous avons ressenti, notre
acquis émotionnel, nos douleurs, nos incertitudes, l’étrange curiosité de ce
que l’on a cru être nos tares, servira dans notre expression réalisée à bâtir
l’être harmonieux du monde dans la diversité. [...] Sera créole l’œuvre qui, exaltant dedans sa cohérence, la diversité des significations conservera cette marque qui fonde sa pertinence quelle que soit la façon dont on la lira, le lieu culturel d’où on la percevra, la problématique dans laquelle on la ramènera.

(p. 52)

[To express [our] Créolité will be to express [...] what we felt, our emotional achievements, our pain, our uncertainties, the strange curiosity what we thought was our defects, will be used in our expression to build the harmonious being that we are in this world of diversity. [...] Creole work exalts in its coherence [consistency], the diversity of meanings that retains this brand and bases its relevance regardless of how it is read. [Creole is] the cultural place where we will perceive the problem in which we will bring it.]

(p. 52)

In the four-line stanza inside the Lapriyè Djò prayer cited above, we find evidence of a total embrace and expression of the enslaved linguistic and cultural identity, his/her experiential and existential being and becoming. They name themselves Creole, and avow that they are no longer slaves. It was an announcement indeed of what was being fomented for ages, and would come with the last revolt in 1791. There is no waste of words. In the third verse, we also find the mythical site Okan, also referred to as Vilokan and Minokan— the spelling may vary from one region to the next—considered the origin of Haitian Vodou (Rigaud 1953). It is worth noting here that despite the total and complete reliance on orality, Haitian Vodou across the Haitian geographic landscape remains quite a unified practice. Slight variations exist, but the Haitian Vodou religious
belief system with its rituals, prayers, songs, drums and dances remains highly coherent and consistent.

2. Inside of the proverb

Proverbs represent one of the most common Haitian linguistic practices. They form an important part of the everyday speech, and are virtually used by everyone, young and old, regardless of class or creed. Haitians utilize proverbs to illustrate personal and collective ideas, thoughts and arguments, and to express feelings and emotions about any life situations. In Haiti, proverbs serve as a primary vehicle for passing down the society’s values, traditions, morals, norms, and ethics. Haitian parents and adults rely on proverbs to teach the young about right and wrong, as well as acceptable and unacceptable societal behaviors. Several Haitian proverbs in fact fall within a sort of parenting child rearing category or theme. “Lè ou wè ti poul cho, malfini ki dèyè li,” [When the little chick is too excited, the eagle is not far behind] allow Haitian adults to articulate and warn youngsters that not keeping a calm and tranquil disposition can have dire consequences. “Joumou pa donnen kalbas,” [The squash plant does not grow calabash] and “Ptit tig se tig,” [The cub of a tiger is a tiger] are two proverbs, among many, that are used by parents in order to express the responsibility for their children.

The proverb “Ptit se richès,” [Children are wealth] emphasizes the society’s valuation of children. Haitian parents generally go to great lengths to provide for their children, particularly for education.

---

50 Haiti needs to work to improve the rights and protection of its children. One inhumane and unjust practice in Haiti that affects young children is the restavek issue. Parents who cannot provide for their children often give them over to better to do families where these children end up in slave-like conditions, are physically and sexually abused and mistreated, and work from sunup to sundown without any educational opportunities. The situation of these children requires the urgent and sustained attention of Haitian authorities (executive, legislative and judicial) to eliminate this practice.
In Haiti, a country with one of the lowest GDPs\(^5\) in the world, and where the majority of schools are privately-run and operated (Locher, 2010; Trouillot, 2010; Dejean, 2010), it is not uncommon to find the child of the local coal seller, one of the lowest and poorest means of earning a living in the country, attending the same elite private school as children from the middle class and the elite. Writing on the state of the education of Haitian children in the United States, Joseph (2010) postulates:

“[G]enerally, Haitians continue their traditional high regard for education as the key to upward mobility, especially the poor and working class. Many parents make great sacrifices, often working two jobs, in order to send their children to parochial schools, continuing the preferred Haitian pattern of private schooling” (p. 241).

“Tete pa janm twò lou pou mèt li, Breasts are never too heavy for its master [owner]” is one of those proverbs that Haitians may use to articulate the full charge and responsibility of parents to provide for their children regardless of the difficulties and challenges faced.

It is not difficult to comprehend why Haitian Creole developed or contained such a significant corpus of proverbs in its parlance to interpret and make sense of day-to-day life matters (Fayo, 1970; Manigat, 2009; Madhere, 1992). The enslaved African ancestors of the Haitians came from cultural traditions and backgrounds where proverbs represented an important oral tradition, and serve as a means for reflections on life and the world (Finnegan, 1981). Haitian proverbs mirror their African sources in style, structure, and conception of the world. Certain Haitian proverbs and composing-styles

---

5\(^{1}\) As per the CIA World Fact Book, “80% of the population [in Haiti are] living under the poverty line and 54% in abject poverty […] In 2011, GDP growth rose to 5.5% as the Haitian economy began recovering from the earthquake. However, growth slowed in 2015 to 2% as political uncertainty, drought conditions, and the depreciation of the national currency took a toll on investment and economic growth” (CIA World Fact Book. Retrieved. November, 30 2016).
resonate with peoples and cultures from the African continent that have not been identified as regions of origins for the enslaved found on French colonial Saint Domingue. In “Proverbs in Africa” (Finnegan, 1970, reproduced in The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb (1981) by Wolfgang Mieder), a Xhosa and Zulu proverb like: “There is no elephant burdened with its own trunk” is echoed in the stylistic form and appearance of the Haitian “Breasts are never too heavy for its master [owner]” or “The load is never too heavy for its master [owner]”. Furthermore, the proverbs connote and convey a similar idea and sense—that one must assume his or her responsibility or “load” even when it is burdensome.

In many ways, Haitian proverbs resemble their African linguistic cultural ancestral sources. A significant number of Haitian adages share similar motifs as African proverbs on existential matters as life, death, responsibility, and perseverance, among others. Many Haitian proverbs are stylistically patterned in constructions to their African counterparts in their usage of imagery, hyperbole, aphorism, allusion, metaphor, simile, parallelism, and comparisons.

While every stratum of Haitian society uses proverbs, they are particularly employed and enjoyed within the Haitian peasantry and masses. Proverbs enrich the people everyday speech with a wealth of wisdom. The Haitian scholar Max Manigat (2009) notes:

Un proverbe est un joyau de la sagesse populaire. Mieux qu’une longue tirade, il dit les sentiments, les espoirs, les frustrations, avec force et à propos. Il encourage, met en garde, conseille ou fustige. Code moral de nos populations du pays “en dehors” il est vécu intensément chaque jour… Les
proverbes représentent l’expérience d’un peuple. Peuple de paysans vivant de peu; aux prises avec une terre devenue revêche et des hommes parfois mesquins, les Haïtiens réagissent souvent de façon difficile à expliquer; les proverbes aident à mieux cerner leur univers mental et à comprendre certaines de leurs démarches. Cet héritage, longtemps ignoré de nos élites, n’a jamais cessé de vivifier la culture populaire. Des nègres marrons d’hier à nos sanba et konpòz d’aujourd’hui: aucune solution de continuité. (pp. 8-9)

A proverb is a gem of wisdom. Better than a long speech, it succinctly expresses sentiments, hopes, and frustrations with force. It encourages, warns, advises or criticizes. A moral yardstick of our people in the country “outside” it is lived intensely every day... Proverbs represent the experience of a people. Peasants living with little; struggling with a land that has become cantankerous and sometimes petty men, Haitians often react in ways hard to explain; proverbs help to better understand their mental universe and to understand some of their approaches. This legacy, long ignored by our elites has never ceased to vitalize the popular culture. From the Maroons of yesterday to our Sanba and composer of today: no continuity.] (pp. 8-9)

Upon close examination, one does notice that Haitian proverbs possess deep historical and social meanings for its people, as Manigat contends. Most Haitian proverbs indicate that they were constructed to provide accounts of the overall experiences of the people(s) and culture(s) that created and/or recreated them. They were also useful to call upon what they knew as their truths to construct meaning or make sense for their life context in French colonial Saint Domingue.
Though many of these proverbs existed and descended from the colonial period, they have never lost their freshness and “currency.” That is, they continue to be frequently used as part of Haitian knowledge transfer and conservation, as well as a source for the production of new knowledge, evident in their integration in Haitian written literary production. Their inherent philosophical attributes and didactic conventions allow them to remain current and a reliable source for Haitian teaching and learning.

The sample of proverbs selected for this analysis is grouped within three themes: 1) perseverance and determination, 2) knowledge of self, and 3) justice and equity, that we discuss below. They capture a certain philosophical and didactic objective that was significant for the enslaved ancestors of the Haitians, a community in need of resources that could overcome their conditions. These Haitian proverbial utterances are equipped with a spiritual and intellectual interiority that have aided the ancestors of the Haitians to affirm their humanity and identity, confront their oppression and oppressors, and dream of their freedom and liberty amidst the repressive system of slavery of French colonial Saint Domingue.

Perseverance and determination

The Haitian proverb “Yon jou pou chasè, yon jou pou jibye, One day for the hunter, one day for the prey” presents an image of the possibilities in life when one perseveres, and believes in his and her ability. Yet, the proverb in and of itself can be deemed “deceptive” (Obelkevich, 1994), considering the context of its emergence. Despite the “David and Goliath” or dominant and dominated, slave-master positions in which the two entities (hunter and prey) are entangled, the proverb audaciously promises
a reversal of event or condition, challenging the notion of impossibility. As Obelkevich (1994) argues, “Taken at face value they [proverbs] seem safe and sensible, unproblematic constants of the human condition; looked at more closely, they turn out to be social and historical variables after all, a source of division and dispute, caught up in the language of politics and in the politics of language” (p. 241). On the surface, one can question what are the chances of the prey? The label prey itself makes the very purpose for existence for the animal to be hunted and killed. Imagine the original “rethor” (Kress, 2010), to be enslaved and oppressed, amid the community of slaves. The acceptance of such a Haitian maxim amidst such an austere milieu is problematic. The prey is defenseless against the ammunition of the hunter, as were the slaves against the brutality and rigidity of the system of slavery and slave masters. What gets produced in this “language of politics and politics of language” (Obelkevich, 1994) is a far-fetched idea, which equalizes hunter and hunted, dismissing the power and superiority of the hunter over the prey’s inferiority. The hunted can outsmart the hunter any day. Using the notion of time and the repetition of the “one day” construction: “One day for the hunter, one day for the prey”, the language shifts and rearranges the paradigm as to whom victory is guaranteed in the game. The proverb underscores a definite futuristic possibility of a reversal of event or condition, despite the embedded inequality and contradiction of strong and weak or slave and master.

That one day construction technique in the proverb puts time on the side of the prey or slaves. If they, the slaves, do not escape the experience of tyranny today, it does not mean that they will never be free of it, for the possibility always exists. The one day utterance stretches and bends time in favor of the slave. It liberates the slaves from the
burden of internalizing time as a constraining, regimented and limited element, as perceived or construed in Western thought (Plaisir, 2010; Fleurant, 2006; Thompson, 1967; Mignolo, 2003) to something that has no boundaries. Thus, time offers the enslaved, dominated and oppressed an opportunity to contemplate their triumph over the conditions. Employing the images of the hunting event where the best hunter can and will one day miss his or her prey, allows the proverb to allude to, and simplify the very ideologically complex, organized and structured system of slavery or oppression into something defeatable. With perseverance and at the appointed time, the slaves could visualize overturning the oppressive system.

This use of language in the Haitian proverb: “Yon jou pou chasè, yon jou pou jibye, One day for the hunter, one day for the prey” exemplifies, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) contend, the “ability to make things happen with words, the power of words to give orders and to bring order is quite magical” (p. 147). Moreover, the proverb still achieves and creates poetic rhythm, and balance or parallelism in repeating the one day construction. Using the opposites hunter and prey, the proverb gives the nouns full charge and power for linguistic action. The absence of verbs contributes to the logical force of the utterance. It is a combat for life between the hunter and the prey with nothing in between. They are simply aware of each other, and endowed with the same capability.

Another proverb that renders a similar dictum is: “Toutotan tèt poko koupe gen espwa pou l met chapo,” [Not until the head is cut off, it can still hope to wear a hat.] Although this proverb presents a harsh reality, it also places hope as an eventuality in the game or inherent intersection of life and death for the particular colonial slavery context.
of the Haitians’ African ancestors. As long as one is alive, one can hope and expect for a good day to arrive.

A call for perseverance is also contained in the following two proverbs: “Dèyè mòn, gen mòn,” [Behind mountains are more mountains] and “Si ou gen pasyans ou a wè lonbrik foumi,” [With patience you will see the navel of ants.] These proverbs also deconstruct the notion of bounded and limited time-space. These proverbs are used to mentally and physically prepare one for the difficulty that lays ahead for any endeavors undertaken, for the known and unknown that pave the way of life.

With “Behind mountains are more mountains”, the proverb actually exploits the knowledge of the actual topographical terrain of Ayiti—the Taino name for the island that means land of mountains—to create an image that warns of the continual cyclical struggle in life as one attempts goals. In other words, this proverb cautions and reminds us of the necessity of being ready to face the ongoing hardships and challenges that life will always present. There will be obstacles to overcome as long as one remains alive.

Haitian Creole itself as a language created on a terrain of resistance, and whose speakers continue to face challenges for the language’s very acceptance can apply these proverbs to understand their struggle, as well as the prospect of victory that lays ahead, somewhere beyond the visible mountain or horizon. The struggle with the education system to provide Haitian Creole-speaking learners instruction in Haitian Creole, a language that they understand, a vessel of their cultural heritage, a tool rich with African/Haitian philosophical traditions is one such obstacle for the language and its speakers to overcome.

Knowledge of self
Among the proverbs with messages of knowledge construction and protection of the self are, for example, “Mèt kò, veye kò, [The owner of the body watches the body], “Danmjann touni pa al nan priyè wòch galèt, [A bare claypot should not attend prayers for stones] and “Ravèt pa janm gen rezon devan poul,” [The cockroach can never be right [justified] when in front of the chicken.] All these proverbs speak to the significance of knowing oneself and understanding one’s strengths and weaknesses in the milieu in which one finds oneself. Here again, the context for the creation of these expressions must be accounted for. The creators or rethors of these proverbs lived in the colonial slavery context of French Saint Domingue where they were objectified, abused and had to be constantly on guard against the powerful colonial and slave masters. Thus, they needed cautionary words that would serve them as reminders of the need for self-protection and self-preservation.

In his poignant introspective memoir: Between the World and Me (2015) discussing black life in America (the African-American experience) Ta-Nehisi Coates writes as a cautionary note to his young son: “The spirit and soul are the body and the brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are precious” (p 103). In a sad, yet familiar way, his words echo the three Haitian proverbs presented earlier, drawing a certain similarity in the life experiences, past and present, of these African diasporans, descendants of African victims of the Middle Passage.

Justice and equity

There are also many Haitian proverbs that articulate notions of justice and equality. The proverb “Baton ki bat chen nwa a se li ki bat chen blan, The stick that beats the black dog is the stick that beats the white dog” expresses the idea of justice and
equality in the way people experience life in general, despite certain perceived
differences such as color or creed. Perhaps the proverb makes a direct reference to the
skin color of the colonial agents and the slaves. Nonetheless, the expression remains one
that is mostly used to illustrate the fact that all Haitians, rich or poor, are subjected to
similar life experiences such as death, life, love and hate.

The proverb above in fact connects with, and resembles, the moralistic message in the
Haitian folktale “Bondye ak Jeneral Lanmò, The Good God and General Death” where
God and Death are presented in a contest to find out which one of them was more loved
by the people. In their exchange, God reminded Death that the people call on him more
frequently. To test their argument, they decided to go ask for water at a peasant’s house.
God went in first, introduced himself as God, and asked for water. The owner of the
house refused God the water. When Death showed up and asked for water, the owner
quickly served Death using the best and most precious goblet. Later, the two returned to
question the peasant about his decision. Without hesitation, the peasant replied: “Well,
from my personal experience, Death does not have favorites. He takes old and young,
rich and poor. On the other hand, God seems to give only to some and not many others.
That is why.” Similarly, the Haitian proverb: “Bondye konn bay, li pa konn separe, [The
Good God knows how to give, he does not know how to divide] falls in a category of
proverbs that make reference to God, but underscores problems of inequality and
injustice by metaphorically placing the responsibility on God.

In the same thematic category of justice and equity, we also find: “Jistis Bondye se
kabwèt bèf.” [God’s justice is an ox cart]. It recalls that justice can be slow in coming,
but it does get there. The expression makes a direct comparison between God’s justice
and an ox cart, implying that in the world or context in which it was uttered, justice was/is a rarity. The principle of justice that embodies protection of rights and punishment for wrongs or the concept of justice and equality under the law is also echoed in: “Kou pou kou, Bondye ri,” [Punch for punch, the Good God laughs]. Interestingly, this Haitian proverb carries a similar sense to many of the dictum from various cultures grouped under the Golden Rule.

Haitian proverbs provide a window to Haitian philosophy of life. They serve as an inexhaustible source for hope, resilience and guidance. These oral texts represent one of the most critical meaning-making spaces for Haitians. They are sites for understanding Haitian identity construction and affirmation, transmission of values, interpretation of existential matters. The abstract language use offers a wide field for developing critical and creative thinking, and authentic reflections on the world (local and global). The usage of proverbs with Haitian learners also offers the opportunity to truly connect and engage the family, home and community in the education of Haitian children.

Rather than encapsulating Haitian proverbs within the binary of positive and negative, it seems more appropriate to frame them within a Haitian philosophical and existential reality, shaped by the overall Haitian experience. The proverbs illustrate a voice that shows an inherent wisdom in the capability and possibility of the human spirit. The Haitian proverbial trope mirrors the people’s perception of colonization and slavery, as well as their response of resistance and survival tactics to these conditions. Thus, Haitian proverbs are best analyzed through a “paradigmatic model” (Dundes, 1981); that is, rather than considering the surface linguistic appearances of the proverbs, an exploration of the paradigm: the ideas, thoughts, lessons and morals contained within
them, and transmitted via these oral texts form a significant window through which one can attempt to apprehend the Haitian worldview or “figured worlds” (Gee, 2011, citing Holland et al, 1998). It is through an understanding of the “rhetorical processes [that] underlie…” these proverbs that we can find the most appropriate analytical frame (Kress, 2010, p. 121). Such an approach allows the demonstration, as Kress posits that: “The rhetor’s task is a political one, with political and communicational effects, namely to provoke and produce the rearrangement of social relations by semiotic means… [and] to transform political intent into a semiotic form” (p. 121). Haitian proverbs are action-oriented. The language use in these proverbs or the communicative performative acts in these oral texts illustrate “linguistic utterance is an act of power” as Bourdieu and Wacquant argue (1992, p. 145). Haitian proverbs represent one critical space in which one can observe the people’s resistance, and confrontation to colonial or oppressive power. They are rich sites for examining and understanding Haitian philosophy, as well as Haitian identity construction and affirmation. Haitian proverbs represent one fundamental means of transmission of cultural knowledge and of knowledge production.

Though a fairly recent field of study, paremiology, the study of proverbs, contributes to our ability to apprehend the significant uses and functions of proverbial practices among various groups of people around the world, including Haitians, deemed “primitive” or “undeveloped” because of their extensive oral practices. Paremiology has developed greater understanding and respect for the complex semiotic structure and profile of proverbs. There are, however, frequent warnings from conscientious researchers that knowledge of context or a certain degree of “cultural literacy” (Mieder, 1994) about the peoples and places whose expressions are being examined is essential to
fully comprehend messages embodied in these oral texts. While there has been development in defining, interpreting and understanding the structure of proverbs to fully apprehend the meaning behind a proverb, cultural literacy is essential, contends Mieder.

Interpreting the representations or finding equivalencies for a Haitian proverb such as: “Pale franse pa di lespri,” [Speaking French does not say spirit or intelligence] requires familiarity of the milieu out of which such an expression was created. One would need to know the Haitian historical context and experience. This proverb challenges and resists the French language as a civilized language by equating the language with the barbarity and inhumanity of the French colonial slavery system and its authorities, or, even the repressive post-colonial, French-educated Haitian elite that replaced the system. It rejects the idea that speaking French can equate to being intelligent and spiritual. In doing so, it affirms the Haitian Creole language and identity. Gee (2011) argues that, “we do more with language than give each other information” (p. 42). This Haitian proverb is an act/action. In fact, there are a few old and inherited Haitian Creole expressions that express this assumed, prideful, and performative act of speaking the Haitians’ Creole identity. The proverb “Kreyòl pale, Kreyòl konprann,” [Creole speaks, and Creole understands] or the common expression “Se krèyòl nou ye,” [We are Creoles] circulate, affirm and enact Haitian identity.

3. **Inside of folktales and oral literature**

Orality represents a significant cornerstone in Haitian culture. The oral body of work handed down by the Haitian ancestors to their descendants (proverbs, folktales and Vodou prayers, among others) constitutes a significant part of Haitian literature. Similar to proverbs, Haitian folk stories have an ancient existence, and continue to transmit
knowledge and information to Haitians, inform and teach them, and nourish and inspire the productions of Haitian writers, both in Haiti and in its diasporic communities. Moreover, these oral narratives (proverbs and folktales) provide Haitians with a generous body of concepts and expressions to guide and manage their lives throughout the neglect of its national education system. Madhere’s (2010) argument for a Haitian Creole policy in education in Haiti that integrates these Haitian linguistic and cultural practices rightly depletes the country for “national illiteracy [skills to read and write in the Greco-Latin alphabet, that] persists at a rate close to 60 percent” in the twenty-first century (p. 249).

While these statistics are inexcusable, they also show why Haitians rely on the power of words or their ancient oral texts. Words matter in Haiti. In effect, many Vodou and Rara “rethors” (Kress, 2010) or composers (semi-literate or illiterate) utilize and rely on their rhetorical and oratory skills to compose highly lyrical, poetic, as well as socially, cultural and politically pointed texts or songs that enter the Haitian oral literary landscape, and offer Haitians a space to make meaning of, and reflect on their existence and reality.

In exploring various Haitian tales or oral literary texts, one discovers the courage of Haitian rethors, then and now, who use language and the supernatural world as metaphorical instruments to entertain, while addressing various significant complex social and political ideas. The notions of greed and generosity flow in a myriad of tales found in all corners of the country. One of the most popular and widely told is “The Magic Orange Tree.” Also referred to as the *Haitian Cinderella*, the story cautions about emotional and physical abuses of children by depicting the life of a young girl who is being mistreated at the hands of her stepmother (depending on the regions in Haiti, it could be a godmother). One day, the young girl, whose transgression was eating a few
oranges was facing some harsh punishment from her stepmother. Fearful and weary of the wrath of her stepmother, the young girl decides to go hide in the woods. There, she ends up on her mother’s grave and by magic was able to sing an orange tree to life, and to return the oranges to her stepmother. However, the stepmother in her greed climbed the orange tree trying to keep the oranges away from the young girl. Thus came the opportunity for the girl to magically sing and command the tree to grow all the way up to the sky and to break, causing the fall and death of the stepmother. In the end, the young girl is victorious, sang the orange tree back to life, and was able to provide for herself by selling oranges. These types of moral messages “which has been communicated and preserved from generation to generation via the earliest and most resilient technology of all times: word-of-mouth and human memory” (Plaisir, 2010, p. 266) continue to caution and shape behaviors of young and old.

Similarly, in the folktale “Bondye ak Jenerel Lanmò, The Good God and General Death”, the rethor audaciously has the Haitian peasant refusing water to the Good God, but not General Death in order to drive the point that inequality is wrong and unjust. The story reaches its highest spiritual power to carry its message of equality and inequality, or, what is just and right. The Haitian scholar Plaisir (2010) posits, “when humans [Haitians] tell stories, they rely on both spirits and other humans to help construct their tales and to make meaning of their collective stories” (p. 266). This story of the Good God, Death and the Haitian peasant shows a radical departure in the ways communication can occur between the spiritual/supernatural world and humans. Using God as a metaphor allows them to address, challenge and question unjust power, as well as inequitable and
unequal division of resources. That these African peoples and their descendants have created these sorts of spoken text is remarkable.

Many Haitian folk stories use songs. These songs function as a literary device or narrative strategy that helps to engage the audience in the telling of the stories. They are also a means to help commit the literature piece and literary moment to memory. Furthermore, the shared dynamism in the rapport and communication between teller(s) with their audience fosters a shared or distribution of the stories’ authorship (Kress, 2010). Thus, the songs structure the storytelling experience as a collective activity with multiple layers of signification and intentions that go far beyond the objective of entertaining or amusing listeners.

Unquestionably, Haitian folk tales were, and remain hugely significant and valuable for Haitians. Survival of the knowledge, and experiences, and “figured worlds” (Gee, 2011) of their enslaved African ancestors have come through the spoken or oral forms. It was and is so because of the very context in which these progenitors had to create/recreate, construct/reconstruct their existence or being. These tales comprise part of the Haitian identity and form an inexhaustible “fund of knowledge” (Moll et al, 1992; Plaisir, 2010; Madhere, 2010) that can contribute to the development of critical and creative thinking and help to develop the character of Haitian youngsters (Madhere, 2010).

Haitian oral literature abounds with stories, which have been used throughout time to transmit the society’s values and norms, as well as various meaningful philosophical concepts, understandings and interrogations. Inside the multitude of African souls, minds, bodies and memories forcibly subjected to the world of slavery in
colonial Saint Domingue also existed these cultural elements that have helped to reshape, reclaim, and pass down these humanistic skills that have nurtured the Haitian ethos.

4. Inside two plays

Haitian linguistic and cultural practices have their imprints on all forms of Haitian written literary productions from colonial times to the present (Nzengou-Tayo, 2010; Hoffmann, 1982; Antoine, 1992). However, this written literature reveals a staggering and perplexing relationship with the Haitian Creole language for quite a considerable time. Writing on the historical use of the Creole language in Haitian written literature, the scholar Marie-Jose Nzengou-Tayo (2010) remarks: “First, Creole was used sparingly and in the form of “creolized” French. Second, it is used as a social marker and for satire as a comic device” (p. 160). Accordingly, in the early development of the written form of Haitian literature, there is clear evidence that the Haitian Creole language was cast aside for the benefit of the French language. Haitian intellectuals, writing mainly for their own consumption and the ruling elite, did not consider Creole to be the language of their class. The utilization of Creole in these early texts was only employed when necessary to portray or present members of the lower classes (i.e., the peasant, the help, etc.) or the illiterate.

The earliest record of the use of Creole in a Haitian literary text, according to Nzengou-Tayo “is without doubt the poem “Choucoune,” written in 1883 by Oswald

---

52 Following the Haitian Revolution and Independence in 1804, the French language left behind by colonial France became the de facto official idiom. It was used for the governance of the country, the education system (instruction), and the primary language used in the written literature. This move denied the right of the majority of Haitians to fully participate in the construction of the new country. In effect, it was not until 1979 that the then Haitian Minister of Education Joseph C. Bernard introduced a reform, known as the Bernard Reform (Dejan, 2006, 2010; Joseph, 1984; Locher, 2010; Spears, 2010; Trouillot-Lévy, 2010; Zéphir, 2010), establishing Haitian Creole as a language of instruction. Similarly, it was not until the 1987 Constitution (Dejan, 2006; Joseph, 1984; Déjoie, 2010) that Haitian Creole was finally written in as a co-official language with French, 183 years after the Haitian independence.
Durand” writes (Nzengou-Tayo, 2010, p. 154). It would in fact take 171 years after the Haitian Revolution to find Franketyèn’s *Dezafi* (1975), Haiti’s first novel to be entirely written in Haitian Creole (Nzengou-Tayo, 2010; Hoffmann, 1982; Confiant & Chamoiseau, 1999). Haitian theater boasts a far longer existence than both the Haitian novel and poetry (Nzengou-Tayo, 2010; Hoffmann, 1982; Poujol-Oriol, 2002; Confiant & Chamoiseau, 1999), but a Haitian theater in Creole would not happen until the middle of the twentieth century.

Haitian theater with the authentic voice of the Haitian people would see its dawn in 1953, with the arrival of Feliks Moriso-Lewa’s staging of the Haitian Creole translation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* (Nzengou-Tayo, 2010; Poujol-Oriol, 2002; Dominique, 2002) in Port-au-Prince. When the Creole-speaking and Vodou believing Haitian *Antigòn* and her thespian acolytes took to the stage, a new age for Haitian literature was born. The borrowed Greek gods and goddesses of Sophocles were substituted by the Haitian Vodou spirits of Moriso-Lewa, who spoke Haitian Creole, and brought with them to the theatrical arena various symbolic Vodou items like the *ason* (sacred ceremonial rattle utilized by Vodou priests, priestesses and initiates) and the *govi* (the sacred earthenware urn used to safeguard the spirits of believers whose bodies have transitioned). Moriso-Lewa’s daring and effective integration of the language and culture of the people in the genre breathed new life in Haitian theater, and Haitian literature for that matter. Thus was born the Haitian theater in Creole, fathered by Moriso-Lewa with his translation and cultural adaptation of the Greek tragedies (*Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*). This historical literary moment in Haitian literature liberated and transformed Haitian theater. It turned the genre into an unprecedented powerful voice (chorus) for the people.
The aesthetic passage created by the Creolist Moriso-Lewa in introducing “Haitian theater” in Haitian Creole contributed a renewed awareness by Haitian writers—long burdened and entangled in a colonial *simulacrum* for the taste of the elite—of their responsibility as change agents. Haitian theater in Creole became a literary instrument and platform where Haitian life with its splendor, beauty and color, as well as the fears, hopes and aspirations of the people could be critically and authentically represented (Poujol Oriol, 2002; Nzengou-Tayo, 2010; Batraville, 2002). No longer was the Haitian language set apart as the affair of the peasantry and working class, or, simply used as a derogatory humoristic or satiric device to identify the lower class or the low level of education of characters. Haitian theater in Creole gave the same voice (language) to every character: rich or poor, literate or illiterate, urban or rural. The genre would develop into an art form where writers explored, and continue to examine the real social and political forces that have created the fragmented and alienated Haitian self via their Haitian Creole language and culture. It provided/ PROVIDES a space where all Haitians can see, hear and reflect collectively on various existential matters such as justice and equality, individual and society, including the issues that have stunted the progress of Haiti from past to present: slavery and colonization, dictatorship and militarism, among others.

Haitian theater in Creole opened up one of the most critical artistic modes and means for Haitians to engage in the quest and search to affirm their Haitian “being” or identity in their Creole language and Vodou culture. It represents a unique space in which the talent and imaginative creation of Haitian artisans can be observed. But it is also a location where Haitian art fully assumes the meaningful role as a tool for transformation and democratization, a place where every Haitian voice matters.
Many Creolist playwrights would heed the call of Moriso-Lewa. Among them are Franck Fouché, Syto Cavé, and the two writers of interest and focus for this investigation: Franketyèn and Menès Dejwa. There are reasons for selecting Franketyèn with his *Pèlentèt*, and Menès Dejwa’s play *Masuife* for the dialogue or questioning in this project. First, their plays are written in Haitian Creole, and second, the two have chosen to explore Haitian life and reality beyond the frontiers of the homeland: *Pèlentèt* (United States) and *Masuife* (Dominican Republic). In that sense, their plays can help to improve understanding about the experiences and vicissitudes of the Haitian immigrant life.

Moreover, the characters are reflecting on their Haitian existence while away from home, and the distance in their contemplation provides opportunities to look back on the homeland, and assess the current contexts with a sharper clarity. In these foreign lands, the characters find themselves obliged to question and answer the Haitian *raison d’être* in order to confront the challenges and adversities being faced. Through their journeys, the characters contemplate and debate notions of freedom and progress, language and culture, justice and injustice, among others. They also confront ideas about collective identity and collective responsibility as a means for resistance and survival. Listening or hearing them, one realizes a sort of *inherent* determination, a part of the Haitian identity and spirit to overcome vicissitudes.

Franketyèn’s translated and culturally adapted text *Pèlentèt* (The Noose)\(^5\) was first staged in Port-au-Prince in 1978. It pitted the characters Polidò, an intellectual and political exile from the middle-class, against Piram, an illiterate factory worker from the peasantry, living the Haitian immigrant life in Brooklyn. The play exposes the dire living

---

\(^5\) *Pèlentèt* (The Noose) is a Haitian Creole translated and culturally adapted text *The Emigrés* (1974) by the Polish playwright Slawomir Mrożek by the Haitian writer Franketyèn.
conditions of these two Haitian immigrants “buried” in a basement in Brooklyn, New York. The two men don’t fit in. Their blackness invites discrimination and stigmatization. Yet, they cannot escape the nightmares from both sides of the Atlantic that have entrapped them. The social, political, and economic inferno they left behind in the homeland awaits them, if they attempt to return. Yet, they are equally and dangerously invisible in their new American society. The two characters force their Haitian audience to reassess the mythical idea in Haitian minds of the United States as a “land of milk and honey”.

In their noisy basement where they hear every bathroom flush, showers and constant footsteps, Polidò and Piram must teach each other, learn from each other, and open each other’s eyes about the realities of the Haitian life, at home and abroad. In the process, the two Haitian immigrants become brothers in order to survive and overcome the myriad challenges of being strangers in a strange land where they are living like dogs (the literate Polidò prevents his illiterate roommate from eating a can of dog food because Piram cannot read). In fact, in their New York reality, they find their existence matters less than back in Haiti where both had a life: Polidò, a known intellectual persecuted for his revolutionary ideas, and Piram with his large family of three wives and twelve children. In their collective invisibility, in spite of class differences, the two men recognize that their survival requires interdependency. In their invisibility in the “dark” and noisy Brooklyn basement, their Haitian Creole language and culture, their knowledge of the Haitian reality, and their desire for a better Haiti bonds together the two men, as they become each other’s keepers.
Menès Dejwa’s *Masuife* (The Greasy Pole) was published for the first time in 2015. However, the play is well known for having been read and presented in excerpt form for several Haitian diasporic audiences throughout the United States from the late 1980s and well into the twenty-first century. *Masuife* provides yet another window into the Haitian migrant experience. Set across the border in Haiti’s neighboring country of the Dominican Republic, the play presents three Haitian *braceros* (two men and a woman) cane cutters, living in a crude *batey*, the communities that house the Haitian cane cutters, and reminds of slaves quarters. The characters Kongo, Konga and Kongolito are recruited as cane cutters on false promises with the complicity of the Haitian and Dominican governments, but find themselves trapped and living an infrahuman existence in the Dominican Republic. Once dropped inside the remote *batey*, located far from any major cities, they become invisible, nonexistent, and dependent on the cruel Dominican overseer of the sugarcane plantation where they labor like slaves earning little or no money.

With their Creole language and culture, Kongo, Konga and Kongolito, along with the invisible Viejo (The Old), take us inside the wretched life of the Haitian *braceros*, while demonstrating the power of the human spirit with unyielding determination not to give the hard life the last word.

_Masuife_ opens with Konga, the female character, desperately calling out and gesturing to get the attention of the sugarcane plantation overseer, to bring them the one peso a day promised to them in between cane seasons. The overseer on his horse inspects the plantation, dismisses the calls of the cane cutters, and goes away. They are after all

---

54 Dominican and International sugarcane plantation owners in complicity with the Dominican government/military routinely round up various Haitian cane cutters and deport them back to Haiti often before paying them their salaries for work done. And they continue the same cycle, exploiting the Haitian labor force, which cannot find work in their country.
invisible and voiceless. Hungry and angry, Konga declares: “Me, woman… I swear on my grave… I will not die on the steps of neighbors.” Her words would prompt Kongo into considering his own return home: “[…] Soon I may resign myself, pack my bags and take the road to my country. Whatever happens happens. Goodbye cane season!” Yet the characters know that they are prisoners to the cane harvest season, and the powers that placed them there.

It is worth noting here that there is a long tradition in Haitian theater, including its theater in Creole of offering two opposing characters, usually males. Haitian theater in all its artistic, linguistic, cultural approaches has been a male dominated affair. Most of the writers are male. Women have had mainly secondary roles. In that sense, Dejwa’s text is refreshing. 

*Masuife* gives the leading role to a woman. And, it takes more than two men (Kongo and Kongolito) and the invisible and wiser Viejo (The Old) to stand across from Konga. If it were not intended, this Haitian feminist path (wave) by *Masuife* and its author has lifted Haitian theater in Creole to a new level. Konga stands as a *potomitan*, a central pillar in the play. She unapologetically displays her emotions about her conditions, the homeland and the current context, and the men who have her in mind as their love interest. Moreover, in her dialogue with the male characters, Konga demonstrates greater insightfulness, introspection, and less passivity toward the forces that have created these conditions. Konga is Dejwa’s *Antigôn*. Konga is the heroine in *Masuife*. Her character is sure to inspire many Haitian girls and women interested in any aspect of the Haitian theater genre.

The character Kongolito, the youngest of the brood, embodies all of the world’s children who have never known their childhoods. At 17, he has already made the long
journey to the Haitian cane cutters’ world in the Dominican Republic, has been away from home and family searching for the better life that he will never encounter. While the play dates from the 1980s and draws from that period, the conditions of Haitians in the Dominican Republic remain the same in the twenty-first century, keeping the play *too* current, states the author (Menès Dejwa, personal communication, 2016).

*Pèlentèt* and *Masuife* delve into long interrogations, comments and examinations of self and others, the reasons for the exodus from the homeland, as well as the eternal longing for the familiar (home) that lurks inside the immigrant heart. The migration theme explored in the two plays compelled their Haitian characters to ponder and analyze the social, political and economic violence of Haiti, as well as their exploitation and invisibility as immigrants in their host countries. The characters go as far as comparing their existence to that of their enslaved African ancestors. In the last tableau of *Pèlentèt*, Polidò and Piram debate their views and comprehension of the concept of freedom, and their own freedom. The two conclude: “Liberty resembles someone struck with madness.” When Polidò confronts his Haitian basement brother’s attempt to hang himself in order to put an end to his misery and be free, he reminds Piram: “…You were never free. Until now, you are not free.”

It is not a stretch to assert that *Masuife* is a more forcefully engaged text than *Pèlentèt*. One reason lies in the originality of Dejwa’s *Masuife*. Though inspired by news in the 1980s of the conditions of Haitian cane cutters in the Dominican Republic, the play is an original creation. All of the characters hail from the Haitian masses. Moreover, Dejwa does not provide a platform for the Haitian intellectuals inside the play. His concern seems to be only the plight of the voiceless. Moreover, *Masuife*’s themes (i.e.,
forced migration, poor labor conditions, human rights violation, even sexual exploitation, etc.) directly confront the systems that have rendered life inside Haiti impossible for the masses. They are the causes for the voluntary exile of these Haitians to the Dominican Republic. They are the sources that created the social, political and economic strangulation, and have forced their wandering and escape to benefit the international bourgeois class. Masuife also offers a poignant linearity or grim chronology of the history of Haitian cane cutters in the Dominican Republic. It shows the bitter lives (the sweat, blood and tears) of three generations of Haitians ensnared by the cane fields in the Dominican Republic: the invisible Viejo (the Old), who represents the first generation of cane cutters, Kongo and Konga, who follow that generation, and Kongolito, who symbolizes the most recent arrivals.

_Pèlentèt_ would garner the scorn of the Duvalier regime, the father and son dictators—François (Papa Doc) Duvalier and Jean Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier—who ruled Haiti with an iron fist for a total of 29 years. François Duvalier came to power in 1957, by 1959, he declared himself president for life. When he died in 1971, the Duvalier ideologues and members of the Tonton Macoute militia he created to terrorize the Haitian people assured that his son replaced him. Jean Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier would rule Haiti from 1971 until a popular uprising toppled his despotic government in 1986. The Jean Claude Duvalier regime would ban the play _Pèlentèt_ for its themes, comments, and particularly its indictment of the nefarious Duvalier system, which has contributed to the mass departure of Haitians from Haiti, the continued high illiteracy rate, and the adversarial chase of the country’s intellectual class. However, despite the cultural tour de force of _Pèlentèt_, the fact of it being the Haitian Creole translation and cultural adaption
of *The Emigrants* by the Polish playwright Slawomir Mrożek lightened the creative burden and responsibility of Franketyèn. Though the play would eventually be banned from the Haitian stage by the Jean Claude Duvalier regime, Franketyèn himself would never experience exile (forced or voluntary) like his characters, despite the fact that it was clear who and what *Pèlentèt*’s characters were questioning and pointing the finger at. On the other hand, *Masuife*, though conceived and presented in New York before the “demise” of the Duvalier regime, would continue to delight its Haitian-diasporic audiences for years un-harassed, never falling victim to the dictatorial Duvalier regime.

Franketyèn and Menès Dejwa rejoin each other in the ways that both playwrights stylistically structure their texts. Using various Haitian linguistic and cultural elements, particularly, an elaborate employment and treatment of Haitian proverbs and expressions, the two playwrights use their plays as both literary devices and significant analytical tools for critical reflection. In *Pèlentèt*, Piram, the illiterate factory worker, emerges as wiser than his intellectual counterpart. It is he who sounds the bell of humility for his basement-mate middle-class intellectual Polidò with proverbs such as: “Sa ou pa konnen pi gran pase ou,” [What you do not know is greater than you] or “Ti pwason anmègde kò li jouk li pran nan nas,” [The small fish fools around so much that it gets caught in the net] to draw Polidò’s attention about the incertitude of life, or to dispel the notion that “the grass is always greener on the other side.” In other words, one never knows until one undergoes the experience, Piram reminds his basement brother.

Dejwa’s play achieves similar goal with its dispersion of Haitian proverbs and expressions, but goes further. The text gives the feel that the author intentionally employs proverbs and other significant elements of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices to
enter into a *konfyolo*, the Haitian term for complicity, with the Haitian masses. None of
the characters are intellectuals capable of spitting knowledge acquired from books. However, they can eloquently speak about their conditions. They rely on knowledges and stories inherited from the ancestors to guide them and make sense of their current realities. They call upon and scold their Haitian Vodou spirits to come assist them in facing the cruel and brutal forces devouring their lives. They lean on their Haitian philosophy or way of making meaning of the world to traverse their unfortunate life impasse. Kongo, Konga and Kongolito speak like the majority of Haitians, unencumbered by the poisonous chatter of an outside world.

In that sense, *Masuife* achieves a form of collective authorship with the Haitian people. Dejwa relates: “It is my effort to restore the language of the people, to return it back to them” (personal communication, 2016). More than twelve proverbs are distributed throughout *Masuife*, allowing the characters to make salient points about their life context: “*Bourik travay, chwal galonnen,*” [The donkey works, but the horse gets decorated] uttered by Konga is used to remind her *batey* compatriots of the exploitation and abuse of the Haitian cane cutters working in the sugarcane plantations in The Dominican Republic for the benefit of the Dominican bourgeois. “*Moun pa se dra,*” [Your people are your covers]; “*De mòn pa kontré, men de kretyen vivan kontré,*” [Two mountains do not meet, but two people meet] are employed by the characters in order to frame, formulate or put flesh on the notion that collectivity, interdependence and togetherness matter, particularly in these dire conditions.

In *Lettres créoles*, Chamoiseau and Confiant (1999) write:
La littérature, elle, malgré l’étranglement, ne pouvait pas se taire. Alors... [...] nous eûmes cette exigence d’une mémoire fuyante à conserver, donc, d’une histoire éclatée à retenir, à restaurer. Ceux-la feront avec ce qu’ils ont. Et si le conteur, au départ, se souvient du griot africain et balbutie une parole africaine, il devra rapidement, pour survivre et déployer sa résistance, se trouver son langage. (pp. 39-46)

[Literature, in spite of the strangling, could not be silent. Then... [...] we had this requirement to preserve a fleeting memory, thus to retain a broken history, a history to restore. They will do it with what they have. And if the storyteller, at the beginning, remembers the African griot and stammers an African word, he will have to quickly, in order to survive and unfold his resistance, find his language.] (pp. 39-46)

It is by means of the Haitian language and culture that Haitian literature, in particular Haitian theater in Creole, the foremost object of our investigation in this segment, offers Haitians a reflective space to express frustrations and hopes, and carve a path toward transformation and progress.

The uses of linguistic and cultural elements like proverbs and folktales as literary devices in Haitian theater in Creole has helped authors to engage and reflect with their audiences (young and old) on various significant existential matters: self and others, local and global (home and abroad), justice and injustice, individual and society, life and death, language and culture. Integrating Haitian theater in Creole with all its Haitian linguistic, cultural and humanistic elements as a tool for instruction can carve a path toward an intellectually liberating and transformative education for Haitian youth.
Chapter 6

The Haitian practice of Rara: A semiotic analysis

Figure 6.1 Rara musicians and revelers in the streets of Leogane, Haiti. Photo © Steve Deats.

This research study’s investigation into the popular Haitian cultural musical performative practice of Rara represents an effort to reveal tools and styles of creative thinking, critical reasoning, as well as linguistic dexterity embedded in these practices. These cultural assets, we argue, can be used to strengthen the education of Haitian children whether in Haiti’s diasporic communities or the Haitian homeland. The inclusion of Haitian linguistic and cultural heritage in the schooling experience of Haitian learners hold the greatest potential for helping to improve Haitian children’s academic production and performance.

For the present semiotic analysis, we focus on three popular Rara songs: “Piram,” “Kote moun yo [Where are the people]” and “Mwen rantre nan lakou a [I enter the yard].” Complete translations of the songs into the English are provided when they are analyzed later in the section. With Rara lyrics and songs, one enters the realm of higher
order thinking, the highest level of cognition (Bloom et al, 1956), to succinctly synthesize and evaluate. These are indispensable skills for teaching students communication arts, which requires critical problem solving and analytical skills in order to learn to question, explore issues, and apply knowledge to act on one’s environment.

**What is Haitian Rara?**

Rara is a popular Haitian linguistic cultural musical performative practice. Rara is music, singing and dancing to drums and *banbou* (an instrument made with pieces of the stem of the bamboo plant), among other Haitian instruments. Although Rara compositions and other operating aspects go on all the time, Rara bands only take to the streets every year during the Lent season, with their most spectacular performances and costumes from Holy Thursday to Holy Saturday (as seen in figure 6.1).

With his 1997 play *Rara*—set in a fictional community named *Boulay*—the late Haitian writer Feliks Moriso-Lewa takes Haitians inside one of Haiti’s most popular linguistic cultural musical performative practices, capturing the full essence of Rara in the people’s language: Haitian Creole, and several local cultural customs. A pioneer Creolist, who tirelessly used his pen and voice to advocate for the “inalienable [linguistic] rights” of the Haitian people, and the affirmation of their cultural identity^{55}, Moriso-Lewa presents us his main character Simon, a proud peasant and Rara band leader, to remind Haitians of the significance of Rara in Haitian life. In the voice of Simon, we learn that Rara has stood the test of time, and comes out every year for as long as *he can remember*.

^{55} In 1953, Feliks Moriso-Lewa translated and staged Sophocles's *Antigone*, etching his reputation and legacy as a pioneer kreyolis/creolist. He totally (re)located the play in a Haitian linguistic and cultural basin, using many Vodou symbolism, including the *ason*, the sacred ceremonial rattle used in the practice. This Haitian Creole translation helped changed the attitude of many Haitians about the limitless possibility of their Haitian Creole language, and the recognition of elements in Vodou as important cultural assets.
We also learn that children alongside their parents, husbands and wives, all equally participate. Following is one of Simon’s exchanges with his wife Sannit, a Rara singer in her own right, as he explains the decision to call the Boulay Rara band into the streets that particular year:

M soufle lanbi a pou tout moun nan Boulay sanble…sanble, pou bann rara a soti kou li konn soti chak ane […] M pa pè nonmen non lanmò. Lavi n ap viv la, sa li vo? Koute mwen byen, Sannit. M leve, mwen jwenn papa m chèf bann rara nan Boulay, chak ane li soti ak tout popilas nan Boulay. Yo chante depi jedi sen jouk samdi dlo benit. M pa fouti di ki laj mwen te genyen lò m koumanse mache dèyè bann rara. Ou menm tou…

[I blow the conch shell for all of Boulay to gather…gather, so that the rara band can take to the streets as it has done every year […] I grew up finding my father as the leader of the rara of Boulay. Every year he goes into the streets with the whole populace of Boulay. They sing from Holy Thursday until Holy Saturday. I cannot tell what age I was when I started taking part in rara band. Neither do you…]

Against the backdrop of the harsh reality of a disenfranchised Haitian peasantry (Barthélémy, 1989; Fleurant, 2006; Bellegarde-Smith & Michel, 2006) that lives isolated and under authoritarian rule in an independent and post-colonial Haiti, Moriso-Lewa’s

---

56 In *Yoruba Drumming: The Dùndún Tradition*, the writer Akin Euba mentions that there is “a category of rárá singers who are also court drummers and who accompany their chanting with drums” in the Yoruba drumming tradition and practice, essentially supporting Courlander’s assertion that the Haitian rara has a Yoruba (West Africa) geographic and etymological origin. (See Euba’s *Yoruba Drumming: The Dùndún Tradition*, 1990. p. 406).
Simon, or, the collective voice that he represents, tells us what the old practice of *Rara* signifies for the people:

We sing, we dance, we eat, we drink together for three days, we live the way a man must live. To live three days as a man is better than living 30 [to] 40 years as a pig. What has life in store for us to be afraid of death? I get up everyday take my hoe and machete to the field. I work until sundown. I eat when there is food, and what’s there to eat. Sleep. Have children. Children get sick. No money for medications. Children die. Sell what you have for the burial. You have one dress. I have one pair of pants with holes in it. [...] I am here blowing the conch shell for the rara to come to the streets as it has done in all the years. To live as a man must live.

Simon tells us that Rara is that old traditional time, space, and event where repressed and suppressed emotions, built by the relentless paroxysms of a hard life and the enduring
brutal conditions Haitian people are subjected to, find release. He equally reminds us that Rara represents that popular space, time and event where the Haitian gets a sense of his manhood, her womanhood, or, a taste of freedom. “To live three days as a man is better than living 30 [to] 40 years as a pig,” Simon says.

We also find a definition of Rara in Harold Courlander’s *Haiti Singing* (1973), originally published in 1939, and considered one of the earliest written descriptions of the Haitian Rara practice in Western literature. Courlander observes:

Rara is very old. The word itself may come from the Yoruba adverb *rara*, meaning loudly; it was used only to modify the verb *ke*, meaning to make sound or noise. This festival dance was known early in the history of the colony. It may claim an even older origin, but there seem to be no records of Rara in West Africa. […] The [Rara] danse itself, today identified with the holy days of the Church, is likely to be as sensual as anything you may find in Haiti. But while there is much overt sexual expression there is little violence. (Old accounts go so far as to contribute the abundance of large families and “irregular” children to the Rara celebrations.) Collecting stragglers as it goes, *marchands* [street vendors], vagabonds, children, and the free women known as bouzins [prostitutes], the Rara band festively shuffles behind its vaccines and drums […] In the front of the procession the musicians, the king, the flag bearers, and the torchbearers move sedately; in the rear there is great display of undisguised loin movements—children, old people, everyone participates. Perhaps you would call it an orgy if you could concede that there is much sexual inhibition in Haiti. But this is no release of
long pent up emotions. It is simply Rara, loud noise, and everyone is having fun. (pp. 168-169, emphasis in original)

Courlander recognizes, as Simon states, that Rara is old. He also sheds light on the Yoruba origin and meaning of the word, which connects the practice to West Africa, an important site for the provenance of the African captives transported to the colonial slave society of Saint Domingue, present day Haiti. Whereas Courlander’s claims that Rara “is no release of pent up emotions. It is simply Rara, loud noise, and everyone is having fun” (Courlander, 1973, p. 169), Simon clearly differs with him on several important points. On the contrary, Simon confides and proclaims that Rara does represent an important social, emotional and psychological vehicle where: “Nou chante, nou danse, nou manje, bwè ansanm pandan twa jou, nou viv kou yon nonm dwe viv,” [We sing, we dance, we eat, we drink together for three days, we live the way a man must live]

Moving forward about sixty years following the initial passage of Courlander in Haiti, the American religious scholar Elizabeth McAlister (2002) returned to the Rara site, widening its definition in her text *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora*. The result of a lengthy field venture that lasted about five years, McAlister’s book is frequently referred to as “the definitive” work on Haitian Rara. What follows is one of her descriptions of the popular Haitian linguistic cultural musical performative practice. She remarks:

Rara is the yearly festival in Haiti that, even more so than Carnival, belongs to the so-called peasant classes and the urban poor. Beginning the moment Carnival ends, on the eve of Lent, and building for six weeks until Easter Week, Rara processions walk for miles through local territory, attracting
fans and singing new and old songs. Bands stop traffic for hours to play music and perform rituals for Afro-Haitian deities at crossroads, bridges, and cemeteries. They are conducting the spiritual work that becomes necessary when the angels and saints, along with Jesus, disappear into the underworld on Good Friday. (p. 3)

McAlister, along with Simon and Courlander cited above, all agree that Rara is an old Haitian practice. It is worth noting that while Courlander and McAlister have contributed to introducing Haitian Rara to the Western world, they are not the only researchers to have explored the practice. The choice of Courlander and McAlister is driven and informed by how frequently both are encountered as sources for understanding the Haitian Rara practice.

In fairness, McAlister’s work on Rara differs vastly from Courlander’s. Her text focuses entirely on Rara, and contains several important observations. To begin, it makes explicit that the practice has an indelible connection to Vodou. Moreover, McAlister recognizes various significant aspects of the tradition in her analysis, including the salient fact that Rara represents a powerful site of contestation to the hegemonic forces at play in Haitian society. On the other hand, Courlander’s account on Rara in Haiti Singing is a short report of only a couple of pages. However, having been one of the earliest outside expert voices on the practice, and one who ultimately penned five books and countless articles related to Haiti, Haitians and their practices, Courlander frequently surfaces as a quotable source. He appears as a voice in McAlister’s Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora.
Here I attempt to collect fundamental elements in Rara—among the identified, inventoried and described Haitian practices for this research project—and to show them as critical “resources” (Kress, 2010) within the larger set of Haitian “semiotic resources” that have, and continue to contribute to Haitian identity formation and affirmation, Haitian “knowledge production, and meaning-making” (Kress, 2010). It is an endeavor to reveal tools and styles of creative thinking, critical reasoning, as well as linguistic dexterity embedded in several Haitian practices, which include Rara, and that can be used to strengthen the education of Haitian children in today’s Haiti as well as in its diasporic communities. This also requires consideration and evaluation of what have been said or written about these Haitian doings. That is, the ways in which these informants speak of, and discuss, the Rara practice is quite important. Their voices, writings and analyses form part of the body of work that represent the Haitian Rara practice, and can help to facilitate the inclusion of these practices in the education of Haitian learners, or, impede that inclusion for that matter.

The communicative methods borrowed or drawn from social semiotics, including critical discourse analysis, are applied here to examine Haitian Rara. They also offer ways to analyze various forms of data related to the Rara activity, including oral and written texts from authoritative voices such as Moriso-Lewa’s character Simon, the peasant and Rara bandleader; Courlander, the Midwestern American folklorist and author of *Haiti Singing* (among other texts on Haiti and Haitians) and, McAlister, the Northeast American Religion Scholar and author of what is considered the “ultimate” work on Haitian Rara. We engage here in the quest to understand, identify and redefine the Haitian Rara practice as an important semiotic site for Haitians, and can be quite
significant in teaching critical and creative thinking, as well as creative writing for learners.

Borrowing “The Making Strange Tool” from the critical discourse analysis toolbox of James Paul Gee (2011), we will attempt to first frame questions to illuminate certain routes and detours in the voices of these three Rara experts (that is, Simon, Courlander and McAlister), as well as attempt to answer the questions raised by their analyses in order to further this investigation. To use “The Making Strange Tool,” Gee suggests that the critical discourse analyst should:

For any communication, try to act as if you are an “outsider.” Ask yourself: What would someone (perhaps even a Martian) find strange here (unclear, confusing, worth questioning) if that person did not share the knowledge and assumptions, and make the inferences, that render the communication so natural and taken-for-granted by insiders. (pp. 12-195, emphasis in original)

Gee’s “Making Strange” instrument is essentially a cautionary remark made to analysts in order to avoid biases and prejudices in their endeavors. It serves as a reminder of the value and significance of distancing oneself from objects/data, and/or, subjects/stories under study for a more objective analysis, particularly when one resides inside of the culture investigated, as well as when one is an outsider in that culture. As such, Gee contends that if an analyst makes himself/herself a true “stranger” amid the familiar or unfamiliar, leaving behind “taken-for-granted” attitude, he or she will have a greater probability to arrive at an analysis or sets of claims that are most accurate, and can stand the test of time. A similar argument is proposed by the British scholar Deborah Cameron in her text *Working with Spoken Discourse* (2001), which offers a particular warning to
insiders, contending: “Insider-observers have to put distance between themselves and the phenomena they are observing; they have to notice what normally passes unnoticed [...] it may help them to do this if they come to the task with a systematic framework for making observations” or interpretations (p. 57). Her view joins Gee’s proposition that observers/analysts/ethnographers must detach themselves or become strangers when investigating certain phenomena, regardless of positions or familiarities, in order to realize a more objective analysis.

To begin the dialogue with these three informants, we approach the Haitian Rara practice as if we were a complete stranger or outsider. We pose certain questions to the selected interlocutors, based on what is said or not said in their discussions about Rara. In other words, we assess, evaluate and judge their words and interpretations as if we were a “Martian” (Gee, 2011). In so doing, we listen and/or read what the three dialogists offer on Haitian Rara without any preconceived opinions in order to garner greater insights about the practice, and as an effort to allow the overall analysis to stand objectively. As Gee (2011) instructs, we then ask: What would a “Martian” or stranger find “strange, unclear, confusing, or worth questioning” (p. 195) about the words and communications of Simon, Courlander and McAlister on the practice? And, what sorts of inferences could he or she (the stranger) make, based on the data or evidence on hand?

**What would our stranger uncover about Haitian Rara by listening to Simon?**

Let us suppose that our stranger begins the investigation and examination of the Haitian Rara practice by analyzing certain gathered pieces of information from conversations between Simon and his wife. What sorts of questions would s/he have or formulate, and what inferences would our visitor make by listening or probing through
the threads of the exchanges between the Haitian characters Simon and Sannit in the play

*Rara* by the Haitian writer Feliks Moriso-Lewa? Let’s listen:

**Sannit** *(Si tèlman sezi li rete yon moman san lapawòl)* Simon, ou soufle lanbi a?

[(So shocked that she momentarily became speechless) Simon, you blow the conch shell?]

**Simon** *(Fè jès ak tèt li anvan l pale)* Wi (Li soufle l ankò twa fwa, pi fò) m soufle l. (Li fè de pa, pwoche pi pre Sannit. Li kenbe lanbi a ak yon sèl men kounye la a. Sannit fè de pa pwoche pi pre l tou).

[(Nodding before he starts speaking) Yes (he blows the conch shell three more times, louder) I blow it. (He took a couple of steps, nearing Sannit. He holds the conch shell with one hand. Sannit took a couple of steps to come closer to him)]

**Sannit** Simon !!!

**Simon** M soufle lanbi a pou tout moun nan Boulay sanble…sanble, pou bann rara a soti kou li konn soti chak ane.

[I blow the conch shell for all of Boulay to gather…gather, so that the rara band can go into the streets as it has done every year.]

[…]

**Sannit** Moun isit gen madichon. Yo pa pè nonmen non lanmò.

[People in this place are cursed. They are not afraid to name the name of death.]

**Simon** Mwen, nonplus. M pa pè nonmen non lanmò. Lavi n ap viv la, sa li vo? Koute mwen byen, Sannit. M leve, mwen jwenn papa m chef bann rara nan Boulay. Chak ane, li soti ak tout popílas nan Boulay. Yo chante depi jedi sen jouk Samdi dlo benit. M pa fouti dì ki laj mwen te genyen lò m koumanse mache dèyè bann rara.Ou menn tou, Sannit, ou pa kapab dì ki laj ou te genyen lò ou kòmanse chante nan bann Rara. Sèl bagay m ka dì, m pa janm bliye premye fwa m tande vwa w.

[Me, too. I am not afraid to name the name of death. The life that we are living, what is it worth? Listen to me carefully, Sannit. I grew up finding my father as the leader of the rara of Boulay. Every year he goes into the streets with the whole populace of Boulay. They sing from Holy Thursday until Holy Saturday. I cannot tell what age I was when I started taking part in rara band. Neither do you, Sannit, you cannot remember what age you were when you started singing in rara bands. The only thing I can tell, I will never forget the first time I heard your voice.]
Sannit Vwa m chanje.
[My voice has changed.]

Simon Pou mwen, li pa chanje. Nou grandi déyè bann rara jouk papa m vin mouri yo mande kilès ki pou ranplase l. tout moun rele: Simon. Simon. Se ou kit e pi chon an rele non m.

[For me, it hasn’t changed. We grew up inside rara bands until my father died and they asked who should replace him. Everyone screamed: Simon. Simon. You were one of those leading that cry.]

[…]

Sannit Sèlman. Pa nonmen non lanmò ankò.

[Stop. Do not name the name of death anymore.]


[We sing, we dance, we eat, we drink together for three days, we live the way a man must live. To live three days as a man is better than living 30 [to] 40 years as a pig. What has life in store for us to be afraid of death? I get up everyday take my hoe and machete to the field. I work until sundown. I eat when there is food, and what’s there to eat. Sleep. Have children. Children get sick. No money for medications. Children die. Sell what you have for the burial. You have one dress. I have one pair of pants with holes in it. […] I am here blowing the conch shell for the rara to come to the streets as it has done in all the years. To live as a man must live.]

Besides direct information offered by Simon—how he became the Boulay Rara band leader replacing his father in that position after the death of the latter; and, that his wife Sannit is a talented Rara singer, and has been since a young age—our stranger would still have many unanswered questions. What is the meaning of the conch shell? What sort of life does Simon live that doesn’t allow him to feel that he is living like a man? Why is
Simon so accepting of death? And lastly, what makes this Rara activity so significant for Simon that he is willing to risk dying for it?

After listening to the conversation between Simon and Sannit, here are some of the possible inferences that our stranger may construct. Simon lives in Haiti, but particularly in rural Haiti. The Haitian peasantry represents about 75 percent of Haiti’s population, and lives almost totally alienated from the governing elite, whose power is centralized in the capital city of Port-au-Prince (Barthélémy 1990; Dupuy, 1997; Clérisme, 2006). Haitian peasants like the character Simon toil on small plots of land where as Simon expresses: “I get up everyday take my hoe and machete to the field. I work until sundown. I eat when there is food, and what’s there to eat. Sleep. Have children. Children get sick. No money for medications. Children die. Sell what you have for the burial. You have one dress. I have one pair of pants with holes in it.” In disentangling the litany of words Simon offers in this dialogue with his wife, the investigation would reveal that the person who is intimidating Simon and his *Boulay Rara* from parading the streets—as they have done for generations—is the Rural Police Chief. It would become clear that the power structure that supports and undergirds the Rural Police Chief in Haiti, or, the Boulay community Rural Police Chief Mr. Dipèval,
operates under the orders of a nefarious, authoritarian and despotic regime similar to what the Duvaliers’ reigns represented in Haiti (Barthélemý 1989; Dupuy, 1997; Schuller, 2012). Thus, the inquiry would expose that in the face of the hard life with no opportunities and crushing misery that Simon spells out, appointed Rural Police Chiefs in the rural sections of Haiti are authorized to rule over local Haitian peasant communities as “judge, jury and executioner” (Pierre Charles, 1973; Abbott, 1988; Bernat, 1999; Diederich, 2006). Then, the exploration will reveal that the fear expressed by Sannit for her husband’s life is real, and anchored in a reality where deadly forces (i.e., dictatorial and authoritarian powers and various social ills) are indeed difficult to confront and overcome. Here too, our visitor will be able to put in perspective the reason Simon states with such dignity: “I am not afraid to name the name of death. The life that we are living, what is it worth?” This new knowledge would help clarify Simon’s despondent resignation to die, even for his Rara band, by defying the threat of the Boulay Rural Police Chief Mr. Dipèval not to allow the band into the streets, simply because he ordered so. This will also illuminate the manners in which Rural Police Chiefs, also known as Chèf Seksyon (Section Chief) and Choukèt Lawouze (literally translated as that stub capable of evaporating/drying out the dew) and their leaders govern Haiti with impunity.

The meaning of the *lanbi*, conch shell (shown in figure 6.2), will surface as a significant practice in Haitian culture. Our stranger would uncover that *lanbi* is a Taino word for conch. That the incorporation of the shellfish *lanbi* as part of the Haitian diet, and the presence and usage of the shell as a sacred item in Vodou and in Rara is inherited from the Indigenous Taino ancestors of the Haitians. Deepening the investigation would
also reveal that blowing the conch shell is a signal for gathering, gathering calls for collective action, particularly among the peasantry—the class to which Simon belongs. And, Simon’s blowing of the conch shell was a call or signal to the *Rara* musicians, singers and dancers of Boulay to gather in his *lakou*, yard, in order to take the band out into the streets. The use the conch shell to signal and call on others to remind them that they are needed for a *konbit* (collective work for planting or harvesting a field), a system of “shared labor” work, is common among the Haitian peasantry. When peasants call one another to gather for a *konbit*, they trade labor rather than exchanging money. In *konbit*, owners of the fields being planted or harvested are only responsible to provide food and drink for fellow laborers. The visitor may even recognize certain similarities in the ways the Haitian conch shell is used with the manner religious Jewish people utilized the *shofar*, the ancient religious musical instrument made out of a ram’s horn.

Understanding the long practice of blowing the conch will take the inquiry further back in time to the colonial slavery period on Saint Domingue, present day Haiti. The blowing of the conch shell would lead to uncovering how Maroon slaves adopted the usage of the conch shell from their Taino counterpart, and sounded the *lanbi* to signal clandestine meetings to one another. The symbolism of blowing the conch shell as *un cri d’appel*, a calling cry or call, would explain why the *Estati Nèg Mawon*, The Maroon Negro Statue (shown in figure 6.3) blowing a conch shell is Haiti’s most recognizable national monument, and how significant this tool and strategy was in the slaves’ organization and fight for liberation.

Our visitor would gather that Simon and his community have a system for collective organizational communal governance and continuity. Using the example of his
blowing of the conch shell to assemble the Rara would illustrate his leadership and the community’s response (musicians, singers, and members of the Boulay community at large) with their own conch shells and the eventual gathering in his yard reflect the collective understanding and respect for the meaning of that *calling signal*. The popular vote that selected Simon to lead the *Boulay Rara*, after his father died, would indicate that there are governing principles by which the community lives, and a knowledge and agreement of the value of continuity. Our stranger will also find out that Haitian Rara bands frequently take the names of the communities where they originate (i.e., *Boulay Rara, Bèlè Rara, Bizoton Rara, Laflèdichèn Rara*, etc.).

![Figure 6.3. The Nèg Mawon national monument blowing a conch shell.](image)

*In the background, the National palace, which was destroyed in the 2010 earthquake.*

One aspect of Rara that would surely capture the attention of our visitor is that it is performed near Easter time, one of the holiest times in the Christian religious calendar, although the traditional and local Haitian religious belief system practice is Vodou (Bellegarde-Smith & Michel, 2006; Fleurant, 2006, Clérismé, 2006). All three speakers refer to the Christian Holy Week in their description. A deeper inquiry would reveal that Rara season in Haitian popular culture is nearly synonymous with the Pascal season. To
fully discover the connection between Rara and Easter will bring the exploration to the historical site where both Spain and France were respectively colonial powers that ruled and occupied the territory from the 15\textsuperscript{th} to the 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries. It would show that these European colonial powers enslaved Simon’s ancestors: the Indigenous Taino (Rouse, 1992; Cummins, 1997; Joseph, 1997) and various African ethnic groups transported to the island (Hurbon, 1987, 1993; Fouron, 2010; Dubois, 2012) and imposed Catholicism, a brand of Christianity on the enslaved.

In other words, the stranger would be able to infer that Haitian Rara, an African-based practice, coincides with Christianity’s Easter as a result of that encounter. In fact, Courlander’s “linguistic archeological endeavor” that identifies the word \textit{rara} as having a Yoruba (West African) origin can help our stranger explain or substantiate the assertion that as colonial agents were engaged in celebrating certain Christian religious traditions (i.e., Easter, Christmas, etc.), they might have permitted slaves to mark these festivities as well. However, unbeknown to the masters, the slaves were reviving and recreating African practices from their former lives and societies, and, which actually challenged colonial authorities’ cultural erasures project and power. Maintaining an African cultural tradition like Rara, tightly woven with Vodou, and containing moments that give the Haitian a sense of his manhood, womanhood, or freedom—as Simon reminds us that Rara does for its practitioners—designate the practice or activity as an important site for the identity reconstruction project for Simon’s enslaved ancestors.

Moreover, the search would garner indications that the slaves used or incorporated activities and elements within their Rara practice that appeared Christian-like on the surface such as, the \textit{“bat jwif eran}, the beating of the wandering Jew”
(McAlister, 2002; Gateau, 2016: personal communication; Giglio, 2016: personal communication), the legend of a Jewish person condemned to wander the earth until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. These *similak*, a Haitian Creole term that expresses mocking or calculated pretenses and ruses utilized by the slaves to protect their African-based practices, help explain the Haitian Good Friday custom of the “beating of the Jew.” Today this is more of a lasting idea in Haitian mythology than in actual ritual, though old Haitian oral historical accounts suggest that in colonial times and the old days, one could find effigies of “this wandering Jew” subjected to beatings at noon on Good Fridays. French Catholic colonial agents must have delighted in observing the slaves’ manifestation or sign of acquisition of their Christian teachings, with all its anti-Semitic overtones. It would also be recognized that the “wandering Jew” ritual fits along with the slaves’ inclusion of the images of Catholic Saints in Vodou to cover their African-based traditions, and subvert the attention of colonial authorities (Cerat, 2011; Hurbon, 1993; Bellegarde-Smith & Michel, 2006). Moreover, the stranger will discover that the Rara tradition is known to cleverly appropriate Christian melodies within Rara rhythms, while inserting their own socially, politically, and at times, “sexually daring” lyrics, demonstrating astute cases and situations of *similak*. And, those Christian *similak*, travesties, were used to confound masters and colonial authorities from discovering the true nature of their activities. The Haitian concept of *similak* will be discussed again later in this section.

Accordingly, the coincidence, coexistence or proximity of dates for various Haitian traditional practices—Rara culminating on Easter Week, as well as days dedicated to honor certain Haitian Vodou spirits on dates devoted to Christian saints
and/or other Christian religious events—would have to be understood within the
Christian Catholic colonial slave condition in which the Haitians’ ancestors found
themselves. This sheds light and supports the practice of similak in words and actions that
the enslaved utilized to dupe and mystify colonial masters.

As per the words of Simon, our stranger will also remark that the Rara tradition is
passed down to Simon from his ancestors—his father, and going all the way back to the
formerly enslaved and colonized Africans on Saint Domingue. It would be clear that the
practice remains quite meaningful to him and his community, and also represents a
moment of joy, music and freedom in their lives. Rara, Simon tells us, is that moment
when he and his neighbors are able to claim some sense of humanity: “We sing, we
dance, we eat, we drink together for three days, we live the way a man must live. To live
three days as a man is better than living 30 [to] 40 years as a pig.” And thus, Rara
represents the voice or cry “of the people, by the people, and for the people” during
oppressive times, past and present. In conclusion, our stranger’s investigation would have
to articulate and infer that Rara is a significant Haitian tradition of making music,
singing, dancing and moving freely about the streets, lakou, yards and corridors, and
across the Haitian territory. And that Rara also remains an empowering space for Simon
and the collective Haitian voice on whose behalf he is speaking, to counter his Haitian
world that is filled with political, economic, social and human injustices. And lastly, s/he
would understand why Simon feels that Rara is something worth dying for.

What would our stranger uncover about Haitian Rara by listening to Courlander?

Courlander would help confirm for our stranger that Rara is indeed an ancient
practice: “Rara is very old. The word itself may come from the Yoruba adverb rara,
meaning loudly […] This festival was known early in the history of the colony,” Courlander states. The constancy about the *oldness* of Rara from Simon’s voice, and reiterated by Courlander’s, would sustain that claim. Having already figured out Haiti’s colonial slavery past would explain how the Yoruba word *rara* got into the Haitian language. It would also be natural or logical to seek clarification as to why Courlander (1973) perceived, interpreted and proposed Rara as:

> [A] much overt sexual expression [where] there is little violence. (Old accounts go so far as to contribute the abundance of large families and “irregular” [or illegitimate/out of wedlock] children to the Rara celebrations.) Collecting stragglers as it goes, *marchands* [street vendors], vagabonds, children, and the free women known as bouzins [prostitutes…]

Perhaps you would call it an orgy… (p. 169, emphasis in original)

Hearing Courlander’s use of a *hypersexualized* language with scathing words to describe Rara and its practitioners—going so far as defining and claiming Rara as “an orgy”—would or should cause confusion for our visitor. Courlander’s description stands in stark contrast to that of Simon, the Haitian peasant and Rara band leader, who relates that as a child he participated in Rara alongside his father, that his wife Sannit along with “the whole populace of Boulay” have been following or taking part in Rara for as long as they can remember.

In the end, our stranger would have to decide which is the most reliable and credible voice: Simon, the Haitian peasant character and *Boulay Rara* band leader created by the Haitian writer Feliks Moriso-Lewa or the Midwestern American folklorist Harold Courlander. A logically inference or conclusion would be based on
the credibility of their voices. Ultimately, s/he would have to conclude that either
Simon is falsely reporting the familial, communal, historical, cultural value of his
Haitian Rara activity, or, that Courlander misunderstood, misinterpreted, and
perhaps made some faulty claims about what he observed.

**What would our stranger uncover about Haitian Rara by listening to McAlister?**

McAlister’s work would become enormously significant for our stranger. As a
third voice, her words can substantiate or support one view or the other. McAlister (2002)
remarks that:

Rara is the yearly festival in Haiti that, even more so than Carnival, belongs
to the so-called peasant classes and the urban poor. Beginning the moment
Carnival ends, on the eve of Lent, and building for six weeks until Easter
Week, Rara processions walk for miles through local territory, attracting
fans and singing new and old songs. Bands stop traffic for hours to play
music and perform rituals for Afro-Haitian deities at crossroads, bridges, and
cemeteries. They are conducting the spiritual work that becomes necessary
when the angels and saints, along with Jesus, disappear into the underworld
on Good Friday. (p. 3)

In so far as the ancientness of Rara, our stranger now has a set confirmation as all three
interlocutors are in agreement. Similarly, the recurring idea that Rara is celebrated during
the time of Christianity’s Holy Week would be settled. Though unlike Simon, who
simply lets us know that Rara bands are out in the streets and in the open from Holy
Thursday to Holy Saturday, both Courlander and McAlister (surprisingly) seemed to
move with too much haste toward “Christianizing” Rara. Courlander (1973) writes: “The
[Rara] danse (sic) itself, today identified with the holy days of the Church…” (p. 169, emphasis added) and McAlister’s (2002) claims that “They [Rara bands] are conducting the spiritual work that becomes necessary when the angels and saints, along with Jesus, disappear into the underworld on Good Friday.” (p. 3, emphasis added) imply that Rara has a definite and fundamental connection to Christianity when in fact the practice is indeed an activity steeply lodged within Vodou (McAlister, 2002; Fleurant, 2006; Clérismé, 2006). In effect, the Church in Haiti views and recognizes Rara as a Vodou practice, and the vast majority of Christian Haitians distance themselves from the activity because of the way it is described and spoken of in their churches and by their church leaders. In that sense, the allusion made by both Courlander and McAlister that Rara is connected to the Christian Holy Week in any fundamental way is complicated. Both analyses would have missed the contextual, historical and social motive that places Rara during Easter. Rather than being a choice by the slaves, who passed down the practice to their Haitian descendants, the coincidence of Rara with Easter, among other similar happenstances — must be understood within the historical, social and context of the Saint Domingue colonial slavery society. That society, a time-place where European masters’ culturally dominated, encased and governed the lives of slaves, including the imposition of Christianity or Catholicism could not be undermined in this investigation.

Our stranger’s study would show that Courlander represents an important source and voice in McAlister’s (2002) Rara: Vodou, Power and Performance in Haitian and its Diaspora. In that same vein, McAlister’s silence on Courlander’s (1973) claim that Rara is a debauchery, or, his hypersexualized description of Rara would have to be questioned by our visitor. Silence has meanings. The fact that McAlister does not counter
Courlander’s claims and interpretations *problematizes* the issues. That McAlister selects to argue against Courlander’s assertion in the *Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People* (1973) that “Rara is non-religious” and goes on to prove in her work that Courlander was/is wrong, yet not addressing his depiction of Rara as being similar to “an orgy” is hugely problematic. Her choice or refusal to dispel or speak against Courlander’s broad generalization of Rara as a “sexualized” activity could appear to our stranger as complicit. Although her observations about “sexualized Rara songs” in Rara, which argues that these lyrics are generally created by men, and that the Haitian “male voiced texts betray an implicit misogyny” that reflects a certain apparent practice in most patriarchal society, stands. She also contends that sexualized lyrics also indicates some sort of *masculine insurgency* within a Haitian society where its male citizens feel disempowered due to excessive unemployment, and the lack of opportunities for men to socially thrive, and provide for their families (McAlister, 2002; Schuller, 2012).

Lastly, what will our stranger come away with after probing and going through what these three informants offered on the popular Haitian linguistic cultural musical performative practice of Rara. To begin, s/he will understand that the practice of Rara was passed down to Simon from his enslaved ancestors. Rara allowed Simon’s ancestors to challenge the status quo and experience moments of freedom amidst their enslaved conditions. Moreover, Rara continues to provide Simon—or the collective voice for the Haitian of today that he embodies—a means to continue to challenge the status quo, and experience moments of freedom amidst their current oppressive conditions in Haiti. S/he may conclude that Rara serves as a vehicle and an instrument for Haitians, past and present, to express social, economic and political frustrations. It will also have to be
acknowledged and accepted that Rara offers Haitians unique cathartic *moments in time* to overtly and openly channel ideas and thoughts, feelings and emotions about their situations. Additionally, the Rara activity represents an ancient and significant social, linguistic, cultural, historical, political, musical, performative and semiotic resource for Haitian people: men, women and children use it to express and demonstrate their humanity with all its contentment and discontent.

In our stranger’s quest to construct a comprehensive image and report on the popular Haitian linguistic cultural musical and performative practice of Rara from the gathered perspectives, s/he might be reminded of Geertz’s (1973) cautionary account in the essay “The Politics of Meaning” where he critiques the readings/interpretations or misreadings and misinterpretations of scholars of culture and politics on analyzing the struggle for continuity and discontinuity within the 20th century reality of Indonesia as a Third World country. And, s/he will align with Geertz’s foresight in contending that:

> Culture… is not [simply] cults and customs, but the structures of meaning through which men give shape to their experience; and politics is not coups and constitutions, but one of the principal arenas in which such structures unfold. […Therefore] analytical style—of aim and of the methodological issues the pursuit of such an aim entails [… necessitates] questions of definition, verification, causality, representativeness, objectivity, measurement, communication [… which] all boil down to one question: how to frame an analysis of meaning—the conceptual structures individuals use to construe experience—which will be at once circumstantial enough to carry conviction and abstract enough to forward theory. (p. 313)
In that sense, our stranger might still walk away with unsettled questions about definition, objectivity and communication approach in Rara used by these informants. S/he will also likely come away with her own understandings about themes such as beliefs, culture, power, resistance, continuity, individual and collective memory, shared consciousness and identity observed in the popular Haitian linguistic cultural musical performative practice of Rara. And ultimately and perhaps, our stranger’s own observations will contribute to counter unjust descriptions about Rara, and help to elevate understanding and respect for this important Haitian activity.

**Continuing the investigation on Rara: An endeavor to fill gaps for our stranger**

Gee (2011) writes:

Another thing we do with language is use it to perform actions in the world. The actions we accomplish using language allows us to build or destroy things in the world, things like institution […] One thing we build with language […] is actions. We do things with language like promise and encourage. But action goes further than this. We also use language to build what I will call “activities,” using the word in a special limited sense. Activities are just another way to look at actions. When I call something an action, I am focusing on doing and what is being done. When I call something an activity I am focusing on how an action or sequences of actions carry out a socially recognizable and institutionally or culturally normed endeavor. (pp. 88-97)

One of the most significant and particular features of Haitian Rara lies in its lyrical metaphorical trope, or, the type of “language” used to compose lyrics and songs (Gee,
Examining the language form utilized by Rara lyricists in various compositions—as we will demonstrate later with the three Rara songs analyzed in this segment—shows that it is an activity that uses a language clearly intended to carry powerful messages or messages that possess destructive force, as Gee contends. But it is also a language that allows messengers to maintain an elusive and obscure presence. Whether the message is one of resistance to local and national power structures, or, entertainment, or a combination, Rara songs are often loaded with the linguistic goal of building or destroying their various targeted political, social, or cultural taboos or individuals. Rara songs can be accusations against alleged “thieves” and “adulterers,” used to finger individuals or actions perceived as malfeasant, point out political and societal abuses of the Haitian masses, or include protective messages. This is demonstrated, for example, in the song “Pa di sa, pa di sa, Don’t say this, don’t say this” (Vilson, 2015, p. 101) that brings attention to the plight of a *sanba*, a Haitian term used to describe the most skillful lyricists or song creators in Haitian traditional music genres of Rara, Vodou, folklore, and so on, to whom Kress (2010) would attribute the title of “rethor” or makers of messages.

**Rara songs and lyrics and their omniscient rethors**

Rara songs are counter-discourses created by the Haitian people to inscribe their ideas and thoughts, feelings and emotions about their realities, past and present. A Rara song like “Piram” notated for the first time in Georges Vilson’s (2015) *Kandelab II* and shared below, illustrates the resistance, defiance or fighting back feature in the language form used by the Haitian *sanba* or rethor to create or construct Rara lyrics.

*Piram O! Piram O!*
*Gade on prizon m pran ane sa a o.*
Piram O! Piram O!
Gade on prizon m pran ane sa a o.
Bèf la pou lajan m, men bèf la mennen nan prefekti, prefekti
Voye lan kazèn, men kazèn voye m lan palè, men palè
Voye m tribunal, tribunal yo voye m Fò Dimanch.
M pap lage, o.
Gade on prizon m pran ane sa a o.
Gade on prizon m pran ane sa a o.

[Piram O! Piram O!
Look at the prison time I endure this year, o.
Piram O! Piram O!
Look at the prison time I endure this year, o
The cow is for my own money, but the cow takes me go to the prefecture, the prefecture
Sends me to the army’s barrack, the army’s barrack sends me to the palace, the palace
Sends me to the tribunal, the tribunal sends me to Fort Dimanche.
I will not be released, o.
Look at the prison time I endure this year, o.]

The song is written in the present tense, except for the eighth verse expressed in the
future perfect tense: *I will not be released*, postponing the action to some indeterminate
time in the future. In other words, the speaker is saying that he might be in prison for a
very long time. We also have a subject that wavers. The omniscient narrator, subject or
“rethor” (Kress, 2010) travels in and out of the song. Is it Piram who is talking or is it an
unnamed speaker addressing someone named Piram? This linguistic scheme renders the
subject elusive and fluid. It can be Piram or an unnamed speaker who is lamenting and
listing his frustration and suffering the injustice and unfair treatment he has received at
the hands of the Haitian legal, militaristic and political systems over a cow that he bought
with his own resources. In his litany, he reports having been taken to: “the prefecture, the
army’s barracks, the [presidential] palace, the tribunal, and lastly, to the Fort Dimanche
[prison]” over his own acquired/bought cow. But once at *Fort Dimanche*, Piram or the
unnamed speaker exclaims that he will never be released.

The song is undated as are most popular Haitian Rara, Vodou and folkloric songs.
Collective authorship or distributed ownership needs to be mentioned as an equally
important aspect of the majority of Haitian Rara songs. It is within that collective authorship, ownership, and responsibility assumed by Rara lyricists, members and groups that help to form a protective shield, which often serves to prevent the wrath of authorities (colonial or dictatorial) against single individuals. This linguistic tactic therefore makes it nearly impossible to punish “single” offenders. In other words, Rara (and Vodou) musical repertoires are credited to the Haitian people in general, and are recognized as having been created by the Haitian people, and for the Haitian people.

The popular Rara song “Piram” is not dated, yet, it can still be understood to be at least 59 years old because of its explicit reference in the seventh verse to *Fort Dimanche* (Abbott, 1988; Heinl & Heinl, 1978; New York Times, 1994). *Fort Dimanche* was the notorious Haitian prison outfitted with dark dungeons lodged deep in the belly of the Haitian earth that was the preferred torture chamber of the dictators François (Papa Doc) Duvalier and his son Jean Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier, who consecutively ruled Haiti from 1957 to 1986 (Laguerre, 1984; Dubois, 2012; Dupuy, 1997). Oral and written accounts exist about thousands of Haitians who were “made to disappear” inside *Fort Dimanche* (Abbott, 1988; Heinl & Heinl, 1978; New York Times, 1994), either because they disagreed with the political abuses of the Duvaliers, denounced the social, economic and human rights terrors of their regimes, or, simply became unfortunate victims at the hands of the Tonton Macoutes, the Duvaliers’ nefarious armed gangs that fearfully roamed, and helped the dictators rule the country (Laguerre, 1984; Dubois, 2012; Dupuy, 1997).

Piram’s or the unnamed speaker’s words: “*M pap lage*, I will not/never be released” pronounced in that eighth verse of the lyrics following the naming of the top-
security prison captures both the fear and uncertainty that awaited prisoners like our Rara song’s speaker when sent to *Fort Dimanche* (Patrick Lemoine, 1996; Abbott, 1988; Heinl & Heinl, 1978). In effect, *Fort Dimanche* was, and remains a sinister metaphor for the Duvaliers’ dictatorial grip on Haiti and the Haitian people (Abbott, 1988; Heinl & Heinl, 1978; New York Times, 1994). What makes the reference to *Fort Dimanche* in the song even more curious, however, is the revelation that *Fort Dimanche* might have existed prior to the rise of the Duvalier to power in Haiti.

In a 1994 *New York Times* article on Haiti, the writer Rick Bragg claims that *Fort Dimanche*: “was built in the 1920’s, it became under François Duvalier, and later his son Jean Claude Duvalier, a political prison where men were beaten, electrocuted, dismembered, blinded and castrated.” What Bragg shied away from noting or recalling in his piece was that the United States occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934—which would essentially make the fort one of the U.S. projects during the occupation of Haiti (Abbott, 1988; Heinl & Heinl, 1978; New York Times, 1994). This begs the question whether the *Fort Dimanche* prison referred to in the Rara song could in fact be older than 60 years? That is, if the fort were built in the 1920s during the U.S. occupation, it would have existed 40 to 50 years before Francois (Papa Doc) Duvalier came to power in 1957. There is no lack of historical accounts, oral and written, of the U.S. military’s inhumane, racist and physical abuses, murders and imprisonments of Haitians such as the apprehended members of the *Cacos*[^57], one of the local groups that resisted the U.S. occupation. In the

[^57]: “[T]he tradition of the Cacos—rebels in the countryside rising against the central government in Port-au-Prince—became adapted, quite smoothly, into guerrilla resistance against the American forces. […] As [American] marines faced continued resistance from bands under leadership of men like Josaphat Jean-Joseph [and Charlemagne Peralte] they enacted harsh reprisals. Entering the village of Bertol, for example, marine officer Chandler Campbell found the residents waving white flags from their houses. He questioned the local women about Caco activity, and he told them that “if in future a single shot is fired” by rebels in the area, the marines would, “return and burn all their houses and...”

162
end, regardless of how long Fort Dimanche existed, it has maintained a serious grip on the social imaginary of the country and its people as the Rara song “Piram” relates and records.

No words—spoken, signed, written, graffitied, or sung—are innocent. The words that form our language in whatever shapes they take are one of the most effective and potent social and political tools and vehicles. What we say and do with our language(s) have intents and purposes. Gee (2011) argues that: “language-in-use is a tool, not just for saying and doing things, but also, used alongside other non-verbal tools, to build things in the world” (p. 88). As such, Gee proposed that when we write or graffiti, speak or sing, there are “seven things or seven areas of “reality” that can be singularly or simultaneously be part of our goals with that language act. According to Gee, we can use our language to attach signification to things; carry out certain activities; identify ourselves; build or construct relationships; enter the terrain of politics, specifically to dispute social goods; make connections; or, to create signs, sign systems or produce knowledge (Gee, 2011). Demonstrably, the Rara song “Piram” exemplifies language use attempting to “say or do” at the very least three things labeled and named in Gee’s critical analysis toolbox.

The Rara song attaches “significance and meaning” (Gee, 2011) to people, events and places perceived as critical, and dares to name or identify the people and things engaged in that activity. To start, it forces the recognition of Piram (a masculine name) or the unnamed speaker as an important person. He is possibly or even verily an honest
peasant who possesses one cow for which the various Haitian governmental apparatuses (the prefecture, the army, the presidency, the tribunal, and the prison system) is wrongfully treating him, or have literally taken away from him with dire personal consequences. He is being jailed indefinitely over his cow. The song boldly identifies and accuses the complicity of the various political entities in his wrongful treatment or oppression. Furthermore, whether *Fort Dimanche* was constructed in the 1920s during the U.S. occupation or under Francois (Papa Doc) Duvalier, the song manages to “say and do” or inscribe the popular Rara lyrical musical cultural performative genre within the means and processes of Haitian “knowledge production, and meaning making” (Kress, 2010), as well as Haitian identity formation and affirmation. The Haitian peasant Piram, his cow, and the governmental entities named in the song are etched for time indeterminate.

Further deconstructing the proper noun *Piram*, and the common nouns *cow* and *prison*, shows that much is happening in the communicative act being performed in and by the song. *Piram, cow* and *prison* have metaphorical functions. The proper noun Piram takes the place of the oppressed Haitian populace, and stands for both the locutor and the destinataire. It is Piram (subject/locutor) addressing Piram (object/subject/ destinataire). The common noun *cow* represents the meager resources of the people, acquired through their own sweat, but that is being litigated or stolen from the people by the “system.” *Prison* itself acquires polysemic values: It is *the prefecture, the army, the palace [or presidency], the tribunal [or legal system], and Fort Dimanche [or the prison system].* By citing all these governmental machineries in oppressive roles or conspiracy against a poor peasant, the Rara song essentially testifies against the entire political system that
operates the country by addressing, messaging, informing or making the Haitian people aware of the abuses they are subjected to under the Duvaliers, or the U.S. occupying force that was present between 1915 and 1934, or any oppressive regimes at any point in history.

The “Piram” song also shows the characteristics of a fable in its use of metaphoric language, even assigning the cow an important role, and featuring the animal active characteristics: “Bèf la menyen m… The cow takes me…” It is the cow that leads Piram to all these places where he becomes all tangled up in the legal, political and penal systems, and which will have eventually caused him to be sent to the Fort Dimanche prison for time indefinite. The song forces one to question in what life context could owning a cow bought with one’s own resources could warrant a person to undergo all these systemic “ordeals”. The “Piram” song thus becomes a metaphor for the trials and tribulations of the poor man. A situation, which the song implies, is nothing but a blatant case of injustice.

Kress (2010) argues that: “All signs are metaphors… So metaphors-as-signs [materialize] “from the rhetor’s interest […] and his/her] use of available semiotic resources in an awareness of the requirements of the social environment. Signs are means of making knowledge material. Signs-as-knowledge are tools in dealing with problems in the sign-maker’s life-world” (p. 30). Evidently, the Rara song “Piram” was created for multiple purposes, including the need to be a means to educate and inform Haitians about concerns over Haitian social, political and human conditions. It also indicts the entire
Haitian political, legal, militaristic, and penal systems. This is all metaphorically embodied in the *Fort Dimanche* prison, which has been referred to as the Haitian “gulag or Auschwitz” by various observers and reporters.

Numerous Rara songs take the language form observed in the song “Piram.” They contain accusations and denunciations that illustrate abuses by political and military leaders, as well as offer wide windows on the neglect and exploitation of the Haitian peasants and masses. The “Piram” Rara song helps posit, explain and problematize the purpose of the political and militaristic titles assumed by core Rara members. Many Rara songs explicitly accuse Haitian political system entities, and deride politicians and military leaders. One example is the song about Raoul Cedras\(^58\), the military leader who mounted the coup d’état that ousted President Jean Bertrand Aristide in September 1991. It is then hard to accept the militaristic titles figuratively assumed by core Rara members within their respective Rara groups as something fundamental and meaningful in the inherent functioning of groups. Rara groups and their songs are widely known to “confront the powerholders” (McAlister, 2002) or challenge the social and political status quo. With such an understanding, it is in fact appropriate to characterize Rara’s “sayings and doings” in regards to these militaristic titles and royal designations as just plain *similik*, travesty, mockery or parody (McAlister, 2002). The slave ancestors of the Haitians had taken similar actions to confound slave masters in believing that they attached real value to their Christian practices by using them as covers (i.e., the beating of the wandering Jew, or, the appropriation of Christian melodies for Rara songs, etc.). In

---

\(^{58}\text{There is a four-line stanza Rara song ridiculing General Raoul Cedras, the military leader that orchestrated the 1991 coup d’état against Jean Bertrand Aristide, in scatological terms.}^
other words, these militaristic and royal designations represent more a linguistic similak, travesty, or, a contestatory act to undermine the hold that political and militaristic figures occupy in Haitian society, and clearly beyond.

Rara songs are generally cleverly constructed through a particular language form (Gee, 2011; Kress, 2010; Cameron, 2001; Hymes, 1980) which composers, lyricists or rethors utilize to craft lyrics that can either be used to inform and build knowledge about self and others, or, to destroy systemic and societal wrongs and wrongdoers in their world (Gee, 2011). The example of the “Piram” song is a perfect illustration.

Let’s examine another Rara song: “Mwen rantre o nan lakou a” that forms part of the semiotic inheritance bequeathed to Haitians by their ancestors.

```
Mwen rantre o nan lakou a
M ape mande si pa gen granmoun o nan lakou a
Mwen rantre o nan lakou a
M ape mande si pa gen granmoun o nan lakou a
Bonjou manman, bonjou pitit kay mwen
Bonjou manman, bonjou pitit kay m atò
Mwen rantre o nan lakou a
M ape mande si pa gen granmoun o nan lakou a

[I enter the yard (or the compound)
I am asking if there are any adults [old folks] in the yard
Good morning mother, good morning my child
Good morning mother, good morning my child, at last
I enter the yard (or the compound)
I am asking if there are any adults (old folks) in the yard]
```

“Mwen rantre o nan lakou a” is considered one of the most popular and recognizable Rara songs in Haiti. It is also an undated song. Here, it is worth recalling that slaves in colonial spaces like Saint Domingue generally passed down their traditions orally as their communities had no other means or resources to record any genealogical or philosophical information because “the distribution of social goods” (Gee, 2011), including the Roman
and Latin alphabetic writing system and European numeral system used by colonial agents, were denied to them (Douglass, 1982). Illiteracy continues to plague Haiti and its human reality and potential. Madhere (2010) notes that: “[T]he problem of national illiteracy is yet to be conquered, despite sporadic campaigns […] it still persists at a rate close to 60 percent” (p. 249). This explains Haitians’ reliance, throughout time, on oral and memory skills. Consequently, many Rara songs, and various other Haitian practices (e.g., Vodou songs and prayers, folktales, etc.) are passed down in oral forms. Orality was, and continues to be one of the skillful means used to conserve knowledge, information, and personal and collective stories.

Considering that Haitian Rara dates back to the colonial period (McAlister, 2002; Fleurant, 2006; Clérismé, 2006), one can safely assume that the song “Mwen rantre o nan lakou a” is indeed old. No Rara groups or researchers have been able to date it, but all Rara groups use it in their repertoire. And all Haitians know the song. “Mwen rantre o nan lakou a” cleverly uses the one-stanza poetic format to facilitate retention and memorization. Keeping the lyrics brief, using the literary device of repetition aids recollection and remembrance. In essence, the song contains what it deems critical and essential to remember. It is succinct, precise, poetic and melodic. There’s an obvious earnest effort at economizing words. The lyrics construction shows “that the energy has been focused, winnowed and carefully contemplated” (Cerat, 2015, p. 114).

The Haitian Creole word o, a single morpheme, which divides or cuts through the verse, stands as an imploratory cry. It plays a similar role as what the English interjection “oh” at times stands for. It expresses pain. Adding the Haitian word o turns the song into a lamentation: Mwen rantre o nan lakou, sums up the fatigue (mental and physical) that
the traveler experiences at that point of his/her journey. The fifth verse is repeated in the
sixth verse, but with the added word atò, at last. By adding the word atò, at last, the verse
and overall message in the song reinforces that the journey was long and arduous. What
is then expressed can be surmised as: *I am here at last after a long journey, a long road.*

*Take pity on me, empathize/sympathize with me.*

The song is also a greeting in the form of a dialogue between a mother and a
child. The child greets the mother, and she answers back with the Haitian term of
endearment “pitit kay, child of my home.” There’s an acknowledgement and acceptance
that the child is welcome. The child is received almost in the same manner that the
“prodigal son” is welcomed in the Biblical parable from the book of Luke in the New
Testament. Without explicitly stating the imbedded message, permission is requested to
enter the yard, the home or space. And permission is granted. There is also reverence
built into the lyrics: a mother lovingly understands and feels the pain of her child after a
long and difficult journey. Yet, the economy of words and conservation style where ideas
rather than whole events are spelled out evidences abstract thinking. This is higher order
thinking at the highest level of cognition, and a demonstrated ability to synthesize and
evaluate (Bloom et al., 1956). These are communication skills indispensable in preparing
learners to communicate well in a highly sophisticated verbal linguistic-driven world
community.

Furthermore, the presence of the word lakou, yard, repeated six times in the short
song has huge meaning in Haitian cultural reality (Moriso-Lewa, 1997; Désir, 2011;
Cerat, 2011). Let’s recall that Simon, the Haitian character in Moriso-Lewa’s play blew
the conch shell to call the Boulay Rara band first in his lakou before going into the
streets. The Haitian educational scholar and theorist Charline Désir (2011) defines the Haitian _lakou_ in these terms: “The lakou nurtured community under slavery and fueled the revolution; it has also kept our culture alive and growing, despite betrayals by selfish leaders and constant attempts to suffocate our freedom from outside the country. What is done inside the _lakou_ has potential for lasting change, because it engages the spiritual source of Haitian survival and resistance” (p. 282). Let’s also recall that Simon first called the _Boulay Rara_ into his _lakou_, yard, before parading the streets. The Haitian _lakou_, yard, has always represented a sanctuary and safe space for Haitians. In its literal and figurative form, the _lakou_ is unarguably a demonstrable source for the resilience, resistance, and courage for the enslaved African ancestors of the Haitians, as well as for Simon or the collective voice or the Haitian masses that today he represents. The _lakou_ signifies a central ideological and physical space for Haitians and their practices such as an event like Rara.

Rara exists, draws on, and is sustained by the Haitian _lakou_, a common Haitian mode of communal living found throughout the peasantry, and in urban poor areas of the country where most of the working class resides. The _lakou_ is generally a pretty sizeable and bounded space. Each has its own name or identifying characteristics that locals know and understand. In the Haitian ideology, the concept and practice of _lakou_ embodies a spirit of community and togetherness (McAlister, 2002; Désir, 2011; Cerat, 2011). This old communal system of family dwelling (biological, spiritual and extended) in Haiti is inherited from both their African and Taino ancestors compound style of living (Rouse, 1992; Olazagasti, 1997; Wilson et al, 1997). When a person or a family lives in a _lakou_, they show efforts or a willingness to help and support one another. It is an unspoken
accord that is appreciated, returned, and rewarded within the Haitian lakou context. There are also various ancient lakou in Haiti that are entirely inhabited by spiritual families (i.e., Lakou Souvenans, Lakou Badjo, Lakou Soukri, etc.) located in Gonaives, the northern part of the country, and are very significant for Vodou practitioners. Many Vodouwizan, Vodou adherents, pilgrimage to these lakou to demonstrate their pietism or devotedness to the practice.

What this translates is that in the lakou everyone matters. The lakou concept editorialized in the Rara lyric/song “Mwen rantre o nan lakou” reminds Haitians of the importance of the lakou. People sustain one another in the lakou through the sharing of wisdom, knowledge and resources, water and food. In the lakou, Haitians help one another to abate the harsh realities and conditions that characterize modern-day Haiti, as in colonial times. Inside the lakou, one responds to the other’s cries of vin pote m sekou, come help me, without conditions. Just as Rara music carries the voice and resistance of the Haitian peasants, poor and working class people who reside in these rural and urban yards, lakou sa yo, view them as sanctuaries and protections for their marginalized existence. Rara and lakou epitomize Haitian collective energy, and Haitian resistance. This explains why the Rara song “Mwen rantre o nan lakou” has risen to being a Rara anthem, that is, it is always almost used when bands first enter a lakou along their journey across the territory for either respite time or to salute connected Vodou families.

While the Haitian concept and practice of lakou traditionally represents a “safe space” for Haitians, and continues to be so by offering the Haitian masses a spiritual, communal, and ideological space where their sense of self, their dignity can withstand the oppression, abuse, and neglect of the Haitian ruling elites, it is far from being a paradise.
It is in fact very important for indigenous-insiders or outside-observers to guard against entirely romanticizing the physical lakou in Haiti. In the barren and wretched urban lakou, communal yards, where the Haitian masses continuously face daily injustices such as extreme poverty, indecent or unsuitable housing, no access to potable or non-potable water, no quality health care, lack of privacy, among other political, economic and social ills and challenges.

Lastly, the lakou or communal yards connected with Rara groups are often where the founder(s) resided/reside, or, where you may find most of the musicians, or other core members, who play major roles in the functioning of the groups. When locals say: “Lakou sa a, se lakou tèl ou tèl Rara, This yard is the yard of this or that Rara group”, they are usually identifying the birthplace or origin of the group, or the communal yard where most group members reside. At the height of Rara season, before groups take to the streets to perform and to travel on foot to great distances away from their home base, musicians, core members, and fans first gather in the lakou of the Rara to conduct Vodou rituals connected to the practice (McAlister, 2002; Fleurant, 2006; Clérismé, 2006). The song “Mwen rantre o nan lakou a/l enter the yard” is also almost always or frequently used to salute the lakou—yards and residents.

The following Rara song, “Kote moun yo woy” exemplifies the moralistic, critical social commentary role and tone of Rara music.

Kote moun yo woy mwen pa wè moun yo woy
Kote moun yo woy mwen pa wè moun yo woy
Kote moun k ap pale moun mal
M pa wè moun k ap pale moun mal
Woy, woy, woy (bis)
Woy o devan byen déyè mal o
There are some similar lyrical and literary devices being used here as in the prior songs.

Arranging short, rhythmic and repetitive lines is one clear strategic language use by Rara groups. The short and condensed six-line stanza makes the lyrics easy to remember.

There’s a skillful employment and clustering of opposites: **good and bad, front and back** in the last verse that shows creative word usage.

Achieving this effective rhythmic alliterative cadence with the Haitian Creole words: *mwen/moun* (me/folks) and *devan/dèyè* (front/back) is a remarkable rhetorical feat (Kress, 2010) for a people, particularly the Haitian peasants, who are vastly “illiterate” or “semi-literate” in the Western sense of being literate (Madhere, 2010). To format or “design” these Rara lyrics using such clever language form indicates the skillfulness of Rara lyricists or what Kress (2010) terms as:

The *rhetor* or maker of the initial message, [who must at all times evaluate] the conditions of communication [in all its senses/manners of recognition]:

‘What are my purposes?’, ‘What do I wish to communicate?’, ‘What are the characteristics of my audience?’, ‘What are the best resources to do this, given the characteristics of my audience?’ ‘What relations of power obtain between myself and my audience?’, ‘What resources for communication are available?’ ‘How are these resources best arranged to represent what is to be communicated?’ and the larger framing question: ‘Am I attempting to educate, to entertain, or both?’. These are essential questions for the rethor,
in any environment at all times. (pp. 42-44, emphasis in original)

The Rara lyricists or rethors must create messages that account for all these questions, and respond to all the “modes” (Kress, 2010) that enter in the making of Rara (i.e., language, music, dance, performance, mobility, and so on). Linguistically, they have to compose lyrics that have clear, succinct, powerful and memorable messages. Such a linguistic deed is demonstrated in “Kote moun yo woy,” which offers a moral lesson on honesty while denouncing the hypocrisy of people who “talk good” of others in their presence, and “speak ill” of them behind their backs. Such song forces Haitians to reflect on the concept of hypocrisy, as well as on the ethics, principles and virtue embedded in honesty. The “Piram” song achieves the same result with an intense political message that indicts the entire Haitian political system.

In sum, the language-in-use (Gee, 2011) in Rara songs like “Piram”, “Mwen rantre o nan lan kou a” and “Kote moun yo woy”, among countless others, give evidence that there is a Haitian Creole register that can be categorized and labeled as an andaki register. The vast majority of Haitians immediately understand the expressions: andaki, pale andaki, which means to speak in code. When one speaks andaki or pale andaki, it is agreed that the language event or action being carried out in the message/messages is coded and abstract. In the Haitian linguistic and cultural reality, the term “bay yon pawòl andaki characterizes the abstract manner in which the interlocutor says or speaks his/her words. The term immediately connotes and signals to destinataries, recipients of the message(s), or audience that the message implies and contains more than its literal meaning.

When Haitians in their various language practices (proverbs, folktales, Rara
songs, Carnival songs, etc.) select to employ the *andaki* language form, it connotes and
denotes that the precise meanings of the speech event are not explicitly expressed. In
effect, this Haitian Creole language *andaki* register, which is a commonly used and
chosen form by Rara groups is activated when interlocutors need linguistic cover for
message/messages that are subversive, or challenging to the status quo, or intended to
undermine people, things, events, ideologies, and so on, that they wish to confront in
their Haitian reality.

Thus, the Haitian Creole *andaki register* that represents a form of linguistic
marooning, a linguistic camouflage or cover is perfectly illustrated in Rara lyrics and
songs. And the Rara linguistic cultural musical performative practice is one of its
preferred media. With the *andaki* register, words and expressions have multiple
meanings, words take the place of other words, and messages are not easily deciphered.
Messages constructed within the *andaki* register require contextual knowledge to be
decoded. In other words, when the Haitian Creole *andaki register* is deployed *what you
hear is not always what you hear*. And Rara lyricists, *sanba* or rethors prove to be some
sorts of polysemic geniuses with their coded compositions. To sum up, the lyrical
repertoires and reservoirs of Rara belong to a specific Haitian Creole speech act, event,
pattern, and form or genre that could be group under what people in Haiti refers to as
*andaki*. There are other Haitian linguistic maneuverings and expressions that fit within
the Haitian Creole *andaki register* such as *voye toya* and *voye pwent*— speech acts used
by Haitians and are characterized by the abstractness and coded manner that they speak to
make indirect/direct accusations about individuals, events or institutions. One example is
when Haitains use such words as “zòt” (the other), “lapèson” (the person) or “moun yo”
On the act of mobility by Rara groups

Integrally inherent to the Haitian Rara practice is its act of mobility. The Rara band must move. Movement or “mobility” is one of the essential “modes” (Kress, 2010) or media that Rara must use to afford the message/messages in its lyrics or songs to travel and reach its audience. Imagine the role of the “town crier,” found in various cultures around the globe in pre-global communication modes. Rara, then and now, simply represents a chorus of “town criers” in movement on foot. In his discussion related to modern-day “mobility and portability” of communication facilitated by current technologies (i.e., cellular telephones, i-pads, i-pods, etc.), Kress (2010) reminds us that: “mobility is a response to aspects of current conditions […] and can be] seen as a panacea to a range of problems” (p. 29). In that sense, the mobility of Rara afforded the Haitians’ ancestors bounded in their colonial slavery world, as well as their descendants living in a treacherous post-colonial Haiti, a means to circulate their messages. Thus the Haitian expressions “pawòl mache, pawòl konn gen pye, words walk, words at times have feet.”

What would a contesting and resisting message, or the memory building, identity forming, knowledge producing and meaning making of Rara language (messages) serve, if it could not be disseminated? It is in fact remarkable that despite the “technological” challenges or the limited resources available to the people (the African ancestors then, and the Haitians of today) to move or send messages from one point of the country to the other, incorporating movement/mobility in their activity was an essential mode. Rara
bands are known to travel great distances on foot all over the country (McAlister, 2002; Jean Raymond Giglio: personal communication) north to south, and vice versa, singing and dancing in the streets.

**On the instrumentalities of Rara: The manman drum and the kès/kata drum**

Rara is music. The drums of Rara: the *manman* (mother) big drum and the *kès/kata* (a snare drum) represent the heartbeat of Rara music. Equally important to Rara music are its wind instruments called *vaksin* or *banbou* as pictured below in figure 6.4. Perhaps a result of the country’s deforestation issues, nowadays groups frequently use Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC) pipes instead of the traditional bamboo. There could be as many as five *banbou*. An assortment of *klewon*, tin-made trumpets, is also used to support the Rara melody. In recent times, a variety of brass instruments have been added. Combined, these instruments make Rara music magnetic.

![Figure 6.4. Rara band in the countryside of Haiti.](image)
The rhythmic, harmonious, vibrant, energetic, musical blending and complexities of Rara represents one of the key elements of this unique form of popular Haitian linguistic cultural musical performative practice. These instruments unite to create the very distinct Haitian musical genre or form that is Rara. While the genre has its unique sound, the drums are fashioned to the Petwo drums (see figure 6.5 below) used in Vodou drumming (Wilcken, 1992, Fleurant, 2006). Lighter wood is generally used to carve and construct Rara drums in order to facilitate the long distance travel groups and their musicians take. Rara is in fact motion, movement, and made to travel, as mentioned earlier.

The drumming traditions found in Haiti, within Rara as with Vodou, have their roots in African drumming. What sets apart traditional Haitian drumming in all its forms from other drum arrangements in the African diaspora is the fact that Haitian drumming reflects the blending and collection of drum rhythms from the diverse African ethnicities and their specific musical traditions that met in the context of the colonial slavery of Saint Domingue. In comparison to other slave societies in the New World, the colonial and slavery experience on Saint Domingue terminated relatively early (James, 1963; Dupuy 1997; Dubois, 2014, Laguerre, 1984; Buck-Morss, 2009). This has helped Haiti and Haitians maintain many inherited traditions (from African and Taino ancestors) that closely resemble these practices in original forms.
While many music scholars (Wilcken, 1992, Vilson, 2015) recognize that Haitian drumming is highly complex, mathematical and temporal, the vast majority of traditional Haitian drummers learn drum rhythms, patterns, and techniques from other drummers, and by watching drummers playing at Vodou ceremonies or in Rara bands. Haitian drumming is part of the Haitian ancestral body memory. It is indisputable that the captured Africans who were transported to be enslaved in New World colonial places like Haiti literally came naked. The reconstruction and recreation of cultural traditions and practices such as the drumming skills and techniques found in Rara or Vodou music were stored in the slaves’ minds, bodies, and memories.

In the end, this semiotic exercise about the popular Haitian linguistic cultural musical and performative practice of Rara, along with insights about how our stranger would approach the issue, has led to some significant revelations. The analytical application has helped to reveal that the Haitian Rara practice has long been a vehicle to
record and recover the genealogical, historical, and social experiences of Haitians. In addition, the linguistic astuteness employed by Rara lyricists, *sanba* or “rhetors” (Kress, 2010) in composing songs demonstrate an intellectual, critical, and creative ability with enormous potential for learners. With Rara lyrics and songs, one enters the realm of higher order thinking (Bloom et al, 1956), the ability to succinctly synthesize and evaluate. These are indispensable skills for teaching students communication arts, which requires critical problem solving and analytical skills in order to learn to question, explore issues, and apply knowledge to enact one’s environment for positive outcomes.

Lastly, this analytical experiment on the popular Haitian linguistic, cultural, musical performative practice of Rara has led to many new understandings. It has facilitated adding the following insights to the basic definition of Rara:

- Rara represents “*onè, respè*” 59, honor and respect” core values in Haitian life.
- Rara is a “multimodal” (Kress, 2010) Haitian expression that embodies the people’s spiritual, philosophical, communal, linguistic, cultural and ideological views of the world (inside and outside). It is music and movement, songs and dances, rites and colors. With its lyrics, Haitian Rara *sanba* or rethors challenge, contest, destroy, rupture and disrupt imposed silences.
- Rara resists and transforms the *baboukèt*, muzzles, as well as the social and political restraints that try to stifle the Haitian people’s voices, bodies, spirits and souls, by dominant groups of past and present. Rara represents the collective voice, a collective instrument used by Haitian people to *koupe kòd, kase chenn*, to

---

59 In the Haitian peasantry and among the Haitian masses, there’s an old practice for a guest to say *onè*, (honor) before entering a person’s house. The host responds *respè* (respect), and thus invite/welcome the guest in his/her home.
sever cords, break chains that try to bind and tie down the Haitian peasants and masses: men, women, children, young and old.

- Rara is one resistant Haitian popular institutional semiotic symbol and resource that has facilitated Haitian people to create, preserve, and inscribe their voices in their own historical narratives.
- Finally, Rara offers a set of teaching and learning tools for critical and creative thinking, communication arts, Afro-cultural instrumentation/music teaching, among other instructional possibilities.
Chapter 7

The Haitian practice of vèvè: A semiotic analysis

Figure 7.1. A vèvè for the Haitian Vodou spirit Legba Atibon, keeper of the gates.

Studying and presenting the Haitian sign system vèvè as part of this dissertation project endeavors to illustrate the complexity and significance of this set of diagrams in the life of Haitians. Vèvè as a sign system has many components, and has not been exhaustively identified and codified in this dissertation. However, the Haitian vèvè sign system—containing more than 300 diagrams—merits further research. For the present semiotic analysis, we focus on seven (7) vèvè diagrams.

---

60 In Haiti, the symbolic drawings or graphic images that are used to represent the vast majority of the Haitian Vodou spirits are called vèvè. They are traced using maize flour, brick dust, powdered bark, ashes, coffee grounds and other powdery substances. The selected vèvè images used throughout are taken from Rigaud’s book, but are also freely available on the Internet. Vèvè images form part of the patrimony of Haitian culture and belong to all Haitians. Thus, their authors are collectively the African ancestors of the Haitian people of today and those to come in the future and a legacy to Haitians for the ages. (Courlander 1973 [1939]; Métraux 1972; Rigaud 1974; Turnier Férère 2005).

61 Vèvè diagrams are a part of the Haitian patrimonial heritage. All the Vèvè diagrams used in this document were retrieved from the compilation by Milo Rigaud (1974) in VE-VE: Les diagrammes rituels du Voudou, French & European Publications.
**What is Haitian vèvè?**

In his ethnographic account *Voodoo in Haiti*, the Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux (1972) provides the following definition for vèvè:

In Haiti it is the symbolic drawings, called vèvè, which fulfill (*sic*) the functions elsewhere devolving upon statues and images. These are traced out, according to the *nanchon* [origin/nation] of the loa whose emblem the officiant wishes to represent, in flour made from corn or maize, brick dust or powdered bark, ashes or even coffee grounds. (p. 163, emphasis in original)

Writing on the significance of the diagrams in the Vodou practice, the Haitian researcher Milo Rigaud (1985), a leading expert on the study of vèvè, writes: “Vèvès are without any doubt the most spectacular ceremonial factor in Voodoo” (p. 79).

According to existing literature, oral and written, the diagrams of vèvè form a complex sign system that is quite significant in the Haitian Vodou practice (Rigaud, 1985; Métraux, 1974; Turnier Fèrèrè, 2005). There are more than 300 diagrams (Rigaud, 1974) in the vèvè system of signs. Each serves to represent the spirits in the Haitian Vodou pantheon, forming an intricate set of signs that are considered powerful ceremonial symbols in Vodou rituals. The diagrams are used to invoke and convoke the *lwa*, spirits, serving as communication channels between the human and spirit world. As Rigaud stated, when drawn during ceremonial events, vèvè signs function as mystical invitationals to the spirits “to descend to earth” (Rigaud, 1985), engage and connect with believers, and assist them with their human foibles, endeavors and needs.

A vèvè is for all intents and purposes an emblem dedicated to honoring a *lwa* by displaying its various attributes and manifestations. Vodou adherents in fact relate the
oral historical account that the warrior spirit Ogou Feray, the god of iron, (represented by
the vèvè depicted below in figure 7.2) was not only a spiritual protector of the
revolutionaries\(^2\) of 1791, but descended to earth to be on the battlefields with the slaves
in rebellion.

*Figure 7.2 Vèvè for the warrior Spirit Ogou Feray, the god of iron.*

Vèvè is a complex Haitian sign system or a set of diagrams. In the Haitian Vodou
practice, the diagrams serve to connect the spirit world with its human community of
adherents. Vèvè is sometimes inscribed on personal objects (i.e., handkerchiefs, scarves,
doorsteps, swords, and the like) and serves the same function as a talisman that protects
the person wearing it against danger. The Haitian revolutionaries knew of the protective
powers of vèvè, and they carried vèvè diagrams on their weapons and personal effects at
all times. Contemporary Haitians trace vèvè and offer libations and sacrifices before
embarking on civic rallies and mass political demonstrations whether in Haiti or abroad.

---

\(^2\) “Haitian Vodou is a compendium of a deliberate amalgam of Dahomean traditions, those of the Kongo basin and
surrounding ethnic nations in both West and Central Africa. But the origins of Vodou lie in Dahomey (present-day
Benin), either because that population provided a critical mass to that of colonial Saint Domingue over a historical
period of time or because Dahomean tradition offered a theological sophistication found throughout that region of
Africa in Yoruba, Dogon, Dagara peoples and others” (Bellegarde-Smith and Michel (2006: Introduction).
On the origin and context of Haitian vèvè

To better understand the origin and context of Haitian vèvè requires a brief overview of the Haitian Vodou religious belief system that emerged within the rigid context of colonial Saint Domingue. Discussing the source of Vodou, Bellegarde-Smith and Michel (2006: Introduction) observe:

Haitian Vodou is a compendium of a deliberate amalgam of Dahomean traditions, those of the Kongo basin and surrounding ethnic nations in both West and Central Africa. But the origins of Vodou lie in Dahomey (present-day Benin), either because that population provided a critical mass to that of colonial Saint Domingue over a historical period of time or because Dahomean tradition offered a theological sophistication found throughout that region of Africa in Yoruba, Dogon, Dagara peoples and others.

Accordingly, Vodou was a unifying force as well as a creative space for the various groups or ethnicities of enslaved Africans on Saint Domingue. Vèvè—a principal element in the Haitian Vodou belief system—shares an integral role in the complex cultural, historical, spiritual and “social semiotic” experience of the Haitian people. The diagrams of vèvè reflect that “conjunction, invisible and indivisible, of form and meaning” (Kress, 2010, p. 14) and are one visible representation or carrier of the Haitian worldview or “figured worlds” (Gee, 2011), constructed and/or reconstructed in the colonial slavery context of Saint Domingue by these African slaves.

In *Les mystères du vaudou* (1993), the Haitian sociologist Laënnec Hurbon, a former Catholic priest, remarks:
In the Fon language spoken in Benin, *vodun* means an invisible power, redoubtable and mysterious, with the capacity to intervene at all times in the lives of humans. The transportation to the New World of millions of black slaves led to the recovery of their African beliefs and practices in the Americas, which took various forms and names: *candomble* in Brazil, *santeria* in Cuba, *obeayisne* Jamaica, *shango cult* in Trinidad, or *vodou* in Haiti. [...] Facing a system of slavery that claims to completely remove their humanity, the transported Africans [who ended in Saint Domingue] gradually develop a variety of vodou rites that become their own religion: radical imaginary along real community connection that will form the basis of their various clandestine struggles for freedom. (pp. 13-33, emphasis in original)

Thus emerged what became the Vodou religion in Haiti, a unified collection of practices that reflect various African cultural traditions carried to colonial Saint Domingue, according to the scholars, by African captives. It is inarguable that Haitian Vodou is an African-descended practice. In effect, Haitian Vodou with the spirits or *lwa* venerated, drums/drum rhythms and dances performed at ceremonies, including the *vèvè* sign system all reveal deep African roots (Bellegarde-Smith & Michel 2006; Rigaud 1985; Wilcken

---

63 French colonist arrived on Hispaniola, the named given to the island by the Spanish colonist Christopher Columbus in 1492, around 1630. The 1697 colonial pact known as the Treaty of Ryswick officially ceded the western part of the island to France and the remaining two-thirds stayed with Spain. The French colony of Saint Domingue lasted for about 175 years until the successful anti-Slavery Revolution of the slaves from 1791 to 1804. (James 1963; Trouillot 1995; Dubois 2004).

64 The Haitian Creole term *lwa* is equivalent to both gods and spirits. It is the generic name given to the families of spirits represented in the Haitian Vodou pantheon. However, the concept of a God as a supreme creator also exists and referred to as *Bondye*, The Good God.
1992; Hurbon 1993; Thompson, 1984), originating from across western and central Africa.

What helped the invention or (re) invention of vèvè on Saint Domingue seemed unmistakably to have traveled in the minds, memories and souvenirs of those African captives who survived the Trans-Atlantic\textsuperscript{65} journey to the world of American slavery\textsuperscript{66}. Vèvè is a physical representation of Vodou belief systems. It is singularly linked to Vodou identity. It is present in all Vodou ceremonies. In the end, it is understood that the maintenance of African cultural traditions such as vèvè by Saint Domingue slaves became one significant and powerful source for the slaves’ indefatigable belief in their spiritual and existential strength, and in turn, sustained their confidence and conviction in the possibility of regaining their freedom and dignity.

Considering the rigid structures of the colonial-slavery society of Saint Domingue, one is left to wonder how the enslaved population was able to construct or (re) construct an African-based religious system that served as a unifying tool, and also contained complex ceremonial diagrams like vèvè. Besides the severe surveillance and control of the slaves, French colonial authorities sanctioned only their Christian Catholic belief system (Hurbon, 1993; Clérismé, 2006; Fleurant, 2006). Why and how the slaves managed and succeeded in maintaining and recreating certain African spiritual traditions complete with a large set of spiritual diagrams or vèvè merit attention.

\textsuperscript{65} The 16\textsuperscript{th} to 19\textsuperscript{th} century European practice of capturing and transporting Africans to be enslaved in the New World is also referred to as the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Various scholars have argued that more than 11 million Africans survived the trade and ended as slaves in the New World. (See Gates, 2011).

\textsuperscript{66} The name “The Americas” was given to the continent that constitute the entire region, including the archipelago of islands that surround the landmass, following the entry of Amerigo Vespucci in the early 1500 and identifying that landmasses such as those of Brazil and the Caribbean islands were part of the continent.
Understanding the spiritual, historical and educational significance of vèvè as well as their complexity problematizes their existence. For one, what prompted the African slaves on colonial Saint Domingue to make and use vèvè? What purpose did vèvè serve? And again, why and how did the slaves effectively hide vèvè images from the gaze and knowledge of their colonial masters?

**Vèvè: A complex sign system inside the Haitian Vodou tradition**

![Veve](image)

*Figure 7.3 Veve for Marasa, spirit of twins.*

To deepen the investigation of the rise of vèvè on colonial Saint Domingue, we draw from the concept of “logonomic systems” (Hodge & Kress, 1988), or systems of thought theory articulated by Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress in their *Social Semiotics* (1988). The social semiotic concept of “logonomic systems” helps to develop our understanding about the purposes, motivations, and context in which vèvè signs appeared or were activated/reactivated by Saint Domingue slaves.

Logonomic systems, explain Hodge and Kress (1988), are the ideological superstructures on which dominant groups—such as the colonial power and authorities that established the slavery colonial system on Saint Domingue—organize and operate
their oppressive societies. Hodge and Kress argue that “logonomic systems” frame and support the “ideological complexes” or the structural mechanisms created and utilized by dominant groups, “to constrain behaviour by structuring the versions of reality on which social action is based…” within these societies. As such, the constraining structural societal mechanisms that operated a slave society like Saint Domingue could be understood as being undergirded and buttressed by a “logonomic system” or system of thought, which informed, supported and dictated circulated messages (thoughts and actions), which carried the views and positions of the dominant group or colonial entity to the dominated group, the enslaved Africans on Saint Domingue.

In return, Hodge and Kress (1988) further argue, these ideologically structured and controlled societal mechanisms and messages (i.e., methods, processes, discourses, narratives, and actions etc.) would serve to ensure and protect the dominant groups’ powers, privileges and interests. In other words, these authoritarian structural and societal mechanisms in place would help to maintain and sustain the established power relation between dominant groups and dominated groups by conveying the messages (thoughts and actions) that ordered repressive and domineering societies like colonial Saint Domingue.

Within a slave society such as Saint Domingue, the dominant group or colonial authority’s logonomic system would exploit and order ideological mechanisms that circulated notions of European superiority versus African inferiority—master versus slave—via systematized messages used to maintain the system of slavery. That is, the logonomic system supporting the societal structure in operation on colonial Saint Domingue would display “unambiguous” (Hodge & Kress, 1988) messages manifested in
the manner masters ruled and treated their slaves with impunity to enforce the slave society’s strict social codes, and ensure its duration and continuation (Lara 1998; James 1963; Dubois 2012). Actions such as chaining slaves; verbal abuse and insult; cutting-off the hands of slaves caught with books or other objects that demonstrate reason and intelligence; verbal and physical public humiliation and flagellation; exhibition of mutilated, murdered and dead bodies of rebellious slaves, abuse and exploitation of the bodies of female slaves, selling of slaves to separate families, among other practices, would compose and illustrate the messages built within the logonomic system of colonial slave society of Saint Domingue (James 1963; Dubois 2012; Lara 1998) in order to ensure the power of the dominant group or colonial authority over the dominated group, the enslaved population. Another ideologically controlling device employed by Saint Domingue colonial authorities was the automatic conversion and baptism of slaves into Catholicism, as well as the total prohibition of the slaves’ African religious practices (Hurbon, 1993; Clérismé, 2006; Fleurant, 2006).

However, caution Hodge and Kress (1988), while these complex sets of ideological and structural machineries or the “logonomic systems” of dominant groups can serve them to maintain their control and preserve their powers, privileges and interests: “Dominated groups are not always and everywhere blinded to the operations of these structures [and can] attempt to resist the effects of domination, often succeeding in countless, many social encounters within [these] social structures” (pp. 3-4), argue the authors. Logonomic systems or systems of thought that serve to control how to read messages and thus support structural mechanisms of oppression (Hodge & Kress, 1988) operated in Saint Domingue. But the slaves must have recognized and understood the
logonomic system or operational structures of the French colonial-slavery society with its ideologically distorted “versions of reality” that propagated the master-slave contradiction. The slaves then developed and activated a parallel logonomic system to counteract and reject the effects of the ideologically flawed ideas and messages that constructed and supported the slave colonial societal structures of Saint Domingue.

The apparition of vèvè in colonial Saint Domingue supports this assertion. The sustenance, recreation and/or reinvention of the slaves’ Vodou beliefs and traditions with significant cultural and spiritual elements such as vèvè, among other examples, illustrate that the Saint Domingue slaves successfully challenged the colonial logonomic system or ideological superstructure that created and propagated messages of master superiority versus slave inferiority, fundamentally embedded in the colonial logonomic system or its operational structural process of enslavement.

**Opening the way and making the road with vèvè signs**

Colonial Saint Domingue received captives from a variety of African ethnic groups, who spoke different languages. This plurilingual environment is evidenced in the Haitian language practice, which contains linguistic traces from African languages such as Ewe, Fongbe, Mandingo, and Kikongo (Zéphir, 2010; Dejean, 2010; Spears, 2010), among others. While imposed colonial languages like Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese English and French rose over time as “lingua francas” between European masters and their slaves throughout the Americas, it is a given that early American slave societies like Saint Domingue were linguistic “hodge-podges”. Yet, it is equally inconceivable that not having a common language meant that slaves hadn’t needed to communicate between themselves. This assumption is theoretically unthinkable and illogical.
On the other hand, it seems natural that slaves would attempt to find ways outside of spoken languages to communicate among them. It thus appears that the lack of a shared language among the enslaved Africans on colonial Saint Domingue—prior to the development of their Creole language\footnote{The Creole languages form a family of languages that were developed in colonial places and resulted form the mixing of the languages of colonists and the various languages of the African slaves. In Haiti, this language is today called Haitian Creole. It is worth noting that Haitian Creole is not mutually intelligible with French.}—might have in fact prompted the use of images to make connections and interact with one another. In effect, the American discourse analyst scholar James Paul Gee (2011) argues that: “humans can communicate via other symbol systems (e.g., mathematics) or via systems composed using modalities other than language or ones composed by mixing other modalities with language… an image communicates (has meaning),” concludes Gee (pp. 189-90, emphasis in original).

Language is just one method for human communication and interaction to occur, contend several semioticians. Gunther Kress reminds us that: “Image has been a part of human culture longer than script…” (Kress 2010, p. 5). It therefore appears that some African slaves on colonial Saint Domingue possessed prior knowledge of communication systems that used images in their former societies as a form of communication, and that these slaves used and/or “remade, redesigned” (Kress, 2010) these signs known today as Haitian vèvè to establish connection with one another within their slave community as well as to create/make existential meaning.

There currently exists no solid research data on the connection of Haitian vèvè symbols to other sign systems found in Africa. Yet an Adinkra symbol\footnote{The Adinkra symbols are a cultural production of the Akan people and culture of Ghana. Seeman’s (2010) article argues that a heart-shaped symbol found on one coffin at the African burial ground in New York City may have been mislabeled as the Adinkra symbol Sankofa, which means in the Akan language of the Akan people of Ghana “Go back and fetch it.”} (Seeman, 2010)
such as the *Sankofa* of the Akan people of Ghana in West Africa (shown in figure 7.4), which means: “Go back to fetch it”, shares a striking resemblance to the Haitian *vèvè* image (figure 7.5) that symbolizes and represents *Èzili*, Vodou goddess/goddesses of love. Research focusing on such a significant Haitian tradition like *vèvè* could in fact be informative and constructive in establishing and authenticating other important African connections and practices among African diasporans to their ancestral homeland. In addition to the striking resemblance between the Akan’s *Sankofa* to the Haitian’s *Èzili*, one can even discern similarities, or, hear the echo of the Akan’s *Akofena* symbol (figure 7.6), that represents the concepts of valor, bravery, protection, and military prowess, to the Haitian *vèvè* representation for *Ogou Feray*, warrior spirit and god of iron, depicted in figure 7.2.

![Figure 7.4 The Adinkra symbol Sankofa from the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa.](image)

---

69 The *Sankofa* symbol is connected with [...] Akan mortuary practices; the word sankofa translates as “go back to fetch it.” This phrase refers to a proverb “it is not a taboo to return and fetch it when you forget it,” that describes the connections between the spirit world and this world” (Seeman 2010).
There might have been numerous motivational factors for the emergence or development of vèvè as a sign system of communication for the Saint Domingue slaves. Slaves, just as their masters, had the human need to communicate, record and historicize their experiences, in spite of their different positions in a colonial-slavery society. Yet, evidence of masters preventing their slaves from learning to read and write in order to sustain the societal structures of “inequalities” (Hodge & Kress, 1998, p. 3) as well as to de-humanize and de-historicize slaves are plentiful in historical records of slave societies.

Figure 7.5 Vèvè for Èzili, a Haitian Vodou goddess of love.

Figure 7.6 The Akan’s Akofena Adinkra symbol that stands for gallantry, valor, bravery.
One example is recorded in the 1845 personal narrative of Frederick Douglass, a slave in the United States, whose story helps illustrate the control that dominant groups exerted in slave societies like Saint Domingue, and the lengths to which slave masters went to prevent and deny slaves access to European forms of knowledge. Douglass would relate to the rest of the world why his new mistress abandoned teaching him “learning to spell words.” Douglass (1982) writes:

[When] Mr. Auld found out what was going on… [He] forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read… ‘A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world… if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. (p. 78, emphasis in original)

Teaching slaves to write and read in the masters’ language was inconsistent with the system of slavery, Douglass reminds us. “Education and slavery were incompatible with each other” (1982, p. 82), he observes. Notably, there were exceptions. When bible teachings contained messages of obedience and facilitated religious indoctrination, many slave masters saw their usefulness in instructing their slaves (Douglass, 1982; Hurbon, 1993). Nevertheless, teaching European forms of reading and writing (read: Roman and Latin alphabetic writing and reading systems) to slaves was not a project of slavery, as Douglass points out.
European colonial-slavery in the Americas or the New World was first and foremost an economic enterprise (Williams, 1994; James 1963; Trouillot 1995). Teaching slaves to read and write was not a project of slavery. Period. In fact, European trans-Atlantic slavery was entirely based on an ideological fallacy, which circulated that Africans were less than human, incapable of learning, and their enslavement therefore justified (Firmin, 2002; James 1963; Trouillot 1995). Educating slaves was regarded by the majority of slave masters as a de-structuring factor to the system of slavery, as Douglass expressed in his Narrative.

Thus understood, if the Saint Domingue slaves were discovered to be using vèvè, a logographic sign system to maintain, record and store their existential, philosophical and cultural beliefs, traditions and practices, in essence their worldview, French colonial authorities would have taken the harshest possible measures against the practice, and slaves identified as makers of these signs would have been eliminated. This also helps to explain the ephemeral aspects of the substances used to create or trace vèvè (i.e., maize flour, coffee ground, etc.), a myriad of powdery substances that gave/give these objects their subversive nature, easily erasable, to escape being found out. Ultimately, the need for Saint Domingue slaves to communicate with one another, as a result of their different language practices, seemed clearly to have been an impetus for the emergence of vèvè. The diagrams were visually and visibly accessible by all the members of the slave community, thereby, providing them with a means to communicate, identify their origin and make existential connectivities, without having a commonly shared language among them.
How does the Haitian vèvè sign system relate, connect or fit within the “logonomic systems” or systems of thought paradigm proposed by Hodge and Kress (1988)? What can we glean from vèvè to ascertain, consider and claim that these ritual signs represent a significant element in the development of a logonomic system by the Saint Domingue slaves that would help resist, contest and challenge the colonial logonomic system, which undergirded the colonial slavery societal structures? Hodge and Kress (1988) contend that: “Where structures of domination are under challenge, logonomic systems are likely areas of contestation” (p. 4). In other words, logonomic systems or systems of thought are not the sole properties of dominant groups. They can be confronted and counteracted by dominated groups, unequivocally endowed with the same human intellectual capability and imagination as their oppressors. Logonomic systems as sites of ideological contestation help illuminate the creation and/or recreation or the emergence of a ritual object such as vèvè within the cultural practices of Saint Domingue slaves.

When closely examined, vèvè diagrams appear to have initially emerged as the slaves’ effort to connect with one another. They came to represent one important vehicle for the slaves to affirm their African identity. With vèvè, the slaves were able to maintain spiritual connections with African spirits and traditions, and thus, create a parallel African-based philosophical and ideological logonomic system that challenged the French colonial logonomic system. Vèvè equally served to destabilize the constraining and controlling colonial ideological and societal structures on Saint Domingue.
The Caribbean scholar C.L.R. James (1963) writing on the conditions of Saint Domingue slaves and the “calculated brutality and terrorism” of the slavery-colonial system on Saint Domingue, remarked: “The difficulty was that though one could trap them like animals, transport them in pens, work them alongside an ass or a horse and beat both with the same stick, stable them and starve them, they remained, despite their black skins and curly hair, quite invincibly human beings; with the intelligence and resentments of human beings” (pp. 11-12). \textit{Vèvè} clearly represent one manifestation of the humanity and intelligence of the enslaved Africans, existing within one of the most austere and constraining contexts: slave societies.

\textit{Vèvè} signs seemed to have offered the Saint Domingue slaves one intellectual passage, an outlet to reconcile their existence and reconstruct their identity and humanity, thereby challenging the colonial objectives of dehumanization/objectification, as well as the colonial project of cultural erasure. The signs created or recreated by Saint Domingue slaves became a significant element that provided the slaves a means to communicate and interact with one another. \textit{Vèvè} symbols became a vehicle to claim or reclaim their humanity and spirituality. They assisted the slaves in the construction or reconstruction of their identity, as well as to develop a collective identity. \textit{Vèvè} helped the slaves in combating the colonial logonomic system and societal structures that circulated and upheld the master-slave contradiction. \textit{Vèvè} allowed the slaves to challenge colonial authorities’ strongholds on resources or goods, manifested through the master’s withholding and denying the slaves access to their European writing and reading methods. Via their vèvè symbols the Saint Domingue slaves came to resist and contest
French colonial authorities’ flawed ideological constructions with messages that propagated European superiority versus African inferiority.

The act of forming bonds and creating a collective identity based on their African cultural, spiritual and philosophical traditions via objects such as vèvè in their Vodou practice inarguably seemed to have helped challenge, destabilize and disrupt the French colonial system of slavery. Vèvè signs offer one example that indicates the enslaved on Saint Domingue constructed a logonomic system or systems of thought that represented them differently—human, spiritual, and intelligent—to themselves, and away from the logonomic system in use by French colonial authorities.

We thus contend that the practice of vèvè, a logographic sign system found inside Haitian Vodou, became one significant ideological and unifying tool in the Saint Domingue slaves anti-colonial and anti-slavery arsenal. Vèvè aided the slaves to think of and view themselves as other than their enslaved and shackled bodies, but as beings endowed with spirituality, humanity and intelligence (Hegel, 1970; James, 1963; Fleurant, 2006) equaled to their masters. Vèvè provided the slaves a semiotic tool to circumvent the obstacle of not having a shared language among them (at least, initially). Moreover, they helped the slaves to identify and connect with one another. Vèvè became a means for the enslaved to maintain cultural spiritual connections and practices. Vèvè was, and remains a vessel to preserve knowledge of an African sign system, as well as share, transmit and pass down/teach cultural knowledge and practices that helped to reconstruct, preserve and maintain their identity throughout the colonial-slavery experience, and beyond.
Overall, vèvè represented one of these ideological tools that helped the Saint Domingue slaves to transcend their condition, historicize their experience, as well as to counter imperial colonial France’s logonomic system that structured and supported the distorted idea of African inhumanity.

In truth, Haitian vèvè ought to be considered and classified as a set of important cultural, historical and cosmological texts—similar to Egyptian hieroglyphs or the Adinkra symbols of the Akan people of Ghana, or, even the sacred symbols found with the Dogon people of Mali. Haitian vèvè signs carry and conserve complex concepts, stories and events. They have preserved vast amount of spiritual, philosophical, linguistic and cultural knowledge about the enslaved Africans on Saint Domingue. Having survived more than half a millennium, these ritualistic diagrams have been used and continue to be used to pass down knowledge and wisdom about African cultural practices and traditions to their Haitian inheritors. Vèvè are a repozwa, a cultural abode, and a source for understanding the resiliency of African culture and tradition across time, evidenced in the Haitian practice of Vodou.

**Messages in Vèvè images**

Each vèvè symbol or sign carries a multitude of information about the identity of the lwa, spirit, that it represents. A vèvè activates remembrances of appropriate prayers and songs for a spirit; his or her powers, character and attributes; ceremonial dances and drum rhythms connected to the spirit; food and drink offerings, colors and items connected to that lwa, and even pieces of information about the African geographic region and ethnic groups the spirit originates from, among other important details. In sum, vèvè represent a set of cultural liturgical texts for the Vodou religious practice.
Increased research and understanding of vèvè may help retire the oft-debated idea that the Vodou religion is deficient, because it lacks a physical “book” or accompanying religious texts in the “Western sense” of book and text. For vèvè are indeed texts, subversively created or recreated within the constrained colonial-slavery context of Saint Domingue to preserve the enslaved Africans’ philosophy, knowledge and cultural heritage.

Accepting vèvè as texts draws upon the work of the Argentine semiotician scholar Walter Mignolo (2003), who responds to the cultural blindness, albeit cultural violence, manifested by European colonials when they encountered Indigenous historical-cultural record-keepings during their conquest of the Americas. Texts such as the Mexica *Amoxtli*, the Maya *Vuh* and the Peruvian *Quipu* (Mignolo, 2003) used by these indigenous societies to memorialize and historicize their experiences were savagely destroyed—most were literally burned. European conquistadores attacked and destroyed these texts physically as well as in conquest narratives, Walter Mignolo reminds us, simply because these American indigenous texts did not resemble European texts or books. That Haitian vèvè survived is remarkable. But the survival of this Haitian logographic sign system indicates that the slaves recognized that in order for these texts to outlive the system of slavery, they needed to be ephemeral: drawn on the ground with powdery substances that could be easily erased. Ergo, they created a temporary, yet, permanent mental notebook of the images.

To challenge and demystify the dominant Western idea of books, centered on sixteenth century European Renaissance definition of book, Mignolo (2003) argues that: “A[ny] solid surface is a book as an object to the degree to which it is the sign carrier for some kind of graphic semiotic interaction” (p. 78). In that sense, a book must and should
be viewed as “culture specific” and context specific. Mignolo’s (re)conceptualization and (re)conception of book, away from Western ideological and epistemological perspectives, allows us to further recognize the Haitian ritualistic images that came to life on ceremonial grounds during the colonial slavery experience as texts. The hard surface of the ground, one available and accessible “resource” (Kress, 2003) for the slaves in their colonial-slavery context and conditions, represented their book. Vèvè images or graphic signs therefore constitute written texts, however ephemeral their nature. Their subversiveness through the use of impermanent substances is in fact consistent with the colonial-slavery situation during which they emerged or (re) emerged, as well as provided “makers” or “designers” the means to guard and protect themselves and their sign system.

All told, Haitian vèvè stand among one of the phenomenal achievements of the enslaved Africans on French colonial Saint Domingue. The Haitian spiritual and ritualistic diagrams—inhaled from their enslaved African ancestors—exemplify the slaves’ intellectual ability, and represent a major counternarrative to European colonial ideological fallacy of African inhumanity and inferiority. Lastly, vèvè signs or the practice of vèvè making rentre d’emblée, enter without difficulty, among critical cultural funds and assets of Haitian people. Such a significant African-based cultural object holds great value for teaching the history and experience of the slaves who survived the Middle Passage.

**The Haitian practice of tracing vèvè to open communication between human and spirit**
Veve open a window onto Haitians’ philosophy of life and conception of the world. They carry within them, as I have argued elsewhere, vestiges of “… the history, culture, genealogy, identity, philosophy, and worldview of Haitians” (Cerat, 2011, p. 77). Here, we borrow from the concept of “figured worlds” (Holland et al, 1998) to argue that a people and their life stories and actions must be understood, interpreted and based on their specific social and cultural contexts, experiences and positionalities, past and present. With a fundamental understanding of the colonial slavery past of the Haitian people, and their present “post colonial” (Gandhi, 1998; Fanon, 2004; Said, 1979) reality, we are attempting here to access the sorts of messages or “figured worlds” that are embedded in the Haitian practice of vèvè. Such an exercise should help “to understand them better and bring them to overt attention” (Gee 2011, p. 172). Increased understanding of the complexity and significance of vèvè in the history and experience of the Haitian people should help in making the argument about their value as critical cultural knowledge, assets and resources that can contribute to their intellectual emancipation.

**A vèvè for Granbwa, spirit of the forests and the woods**

*Figure 7.7. Vèvè for Granbwa, spirit of the forest and the woods*
Using primarily the semiotic and discursive analytical tool of “figured worlds”, we glean significant messages and stories in vèvè images. Represented in the vèvè in figure 7.7 is the Haitian Vodou lwa Granbwa, a male spirit that lives in the forests and woods. He belongs to the Petwo\textsuperscript{70} group of spirits and is known as a master herbalist and healer. In Haitian Vodou lore, the spirit Granbwa, also known as Granbwa Ile, Mèt Granbwa or Granbwa Ifé is a major spirit in the Haitian Vodou pantheon. He possesses knowledge of the curative properties of all medicinal plants. The word Ifé connected and attached at times to Granbwa is quite significant. In the West African Yoruba culture (found in southwestern Nigeria and southern Benin in West Africa), Ifé is the creational site of the Yoruba people (Courlander, 1996; Mbiti, 1990; Thompson, 1984). The survival of the term helps locate the spirit in a particular West African culture, thereby, identifying and establishing the ethnic, linguistic and cultural origin of some Saint Domingue slaves and their African spiritual traditions. Such information offers supporting evidence that West Africa was a major source of the enslaved found in Saint Domingue.

The Granbwa vèvè depicted in figure 7.7 contains a wide range of geometric shapes that form the ensemble of the image. It is worth noting that it is not unusual to find a series of differently designed and/or slightly altered vèvè symbols to represent one spirit. Rigaud (1974) compiles five vèvè symbols used to represent Granbwa. Two of which (figure 7.7 and figure 7.8) appear in this document.

\textsuperscript{70} The Petwo form a group of spirits within the Haitian vodou pantheon that are known to be “aggressive […] quick and demanding, but they offer their servants strong protection.” (See, Wilcken, 1992).
In addition to the geometric shapes used in the *Granbwa vèvè*, the symbol also includes human features such as eyes and eyebrows, nose and mouth, arms, legs and feet. This *Granbwa vèvè* symbol, and one of the *vèvè* used to represent a spirit of the waters, the *lwa Lasirèn* (not featured), and the *Bawon Simityè vèvè* (figure 7.9) that is discussed later in the document are the only ones to contain and incorporate identifiable human features. Most *vèvè* are abstract. It is unclear as to why, since most, and perhaps all the Vodou spirits share characteristics with their human believers. For instance, the *Ogou* family of spirits are all males, and known as brave and valiant; the *Èzili* goddesses are loving, motherly, amorous and jealous; the *Gede* family of spirits are playful, jovial, fun and bold; the *Legba* spirits are grandfatherly and protective; the *Zaka* spirits are hardworking peasant farmers, and so on.

It ensues that in the Haitian Vodou practice, the line of division and separation between spirit and human world is quite thin. Observing a practitioner channeling a spirit, or serving as a vessel when that spirit “descend[s] to earth” (Rigaud, 1985) to partake in ceremonial events illustrate the spirit human relational harmony imbedded in the Vodou practice. In other words, in the Haitian figured worlds spirits experience human moments humans experience spiritual moments, and both are constantly engaged with the other, being at once different and the same. It can even be said that spirits and humans in Haitian Vodou exist in a semiotic relation, one that reflects that “conjunction, invisible [and visible] and indivisible, of form and meaning” (Kress, 2010, p. 14) for mutual existential affirmation.

Returning to the *Granbwa vèvè* being analyzed and depicted in figure 7.7, it is also noticeable that the human features are expressed in geometric language. The nose is
a small triangle that extends into the two arcs to create the eyebrows. There are clear mathematical elements lines, triangles, rectangles, and dots or points that go into composing the entire image. Two heart shapes constitute the head and part of the torso. The two hearts in the Granbwa vèvè convey the spirit’s love and appreciation for the land, woods and forests, thereby reminding us of his knowledge and respect of the earth’s flora in the symbol (see Granbwa vèvè in figure 7.8), which reiterates the significance and value of nature/the environment for human and spiritual existence/co-existence.

The hands and feet of Granbwa in the figure are represented by what resembles twigs or shows plant features, elements that are consistent with the spirit’s attributes as a knower of the forests and woods. The feet appear like roots coming from the ground. Both the leaf on the right side and the small plant piercing from the three arcs or semi circles in the image reiterates the significance of the earth’s flora. The arcs look like the three layers of the earth: the crust, the mantle and the core. These details capture the spirit’s deep connection with the earth. There are other vèvè images of Granbwa that simply use leaves and plants to create the symbolic representation of the lwa’s magical and knowledgeable relationship with nature and the environment (Rigaud, 1974; Turnier Férère, 2005).

The dots or points placed on the vèvè for Granbwa (figure 7.7) have deep meaning. In Haitian Vodou discourse, the notion of pwen, point, carries the signification of spiritual strength and magical force. Rigaud (1974) offers the following for the meaning of the point seen in vèvè diagrams, as illustrated and used in the Granbwa vèvè: “The point [represents] the unity of philosophers” (82), or, an ensemble of philosophical knowledge or cosmic spiritual strength. Invocation prayer for Granbwa begins with: “Par
(Rigaud 1974, p. 243) to assert the mystical force associated with the spirit. The 12 dots or *pwèn* on the figure are thus a symbolic representation that conveys the spirit’s magical force. To say in Haitian parlance that a person has a *pwèn* on him or her signifies that she or he is spiritually strong.

We take Rigaud’s *unity of philosophers* as his way of inferring the knowledge and power of *vèvè* and their maker/makers, or to use Kress’s (2010) social semiotic term, “the rhetor” as a master teacher or “maker of a message… [in] all aspects of the communicational situation: of her or his interest; of the characteristics of the audience; the semiotic requirements of the issue at stake and the resources available for making an apt representation; together with establishing the best means for its dissemination” (Kress, 2010, p. 26). Kress (2010) writes: “A rhetorical approach draws on the resources both of *competence* and of *critique* and utilizes them in the process of *design*.” He adds: “A rhetorical approach is based on the agency of maker and remaker of messages. It has direct implications for *knowledge production*. Knowledge is made and given shape in *representation*, according to the potentials of modal *affordances*; the process of representation is identical to the shaping of knowledge. Makers of representations are shapers of knowledge” (pp. 26-27). Rigaud’s *unity of philosophers* and Kress’s *rhetorical approach* analyses to knowledge creation and knowledge making allow us to consider *vèvè* makers/remakers, the enslaved Africans on Saint Domingue, and their *vèvè* signs as the embodiment of a high level of wisdom. The enslaved Africans who initially created or recreated these signs inside colonial Saint Domingue showed a deep understanding of
human’s capacity to understand their conditions and contexts, and to make use of whatever resources were available to act on and overcome these conditions.

Moreover, contends Kress (2010), “Sites of appearance and sites of dissemination are a part of the process of knowledge production; they come with principles of evaluation of the logonomic rules of ‘engagement’/ ‘reading’ / evaluation in communication” (Kress, 2010, p. 27, citing Hodge & Kress, 1988). In other words, the Haitians’ enslaved African ancestors or the original sign makers/remakers or rhetors understood their roles and the roles of their signs as being the media and messengers for their existential and social histories (Kress, 2010; Gee, 2011).

Here Kress joins Rigaud in the understanding of the rhetorical knowledge and ability of sign makers such as the enslaved Africans and their descendants on colonial Saint Domingue. The making of signs, such as Haitian vèvè, involves enormous rhetorical ability and philosophical awareness by sign makers, as well as a high level of consciousness and understanding of the “instability of the environment” in which they are creating these signs. Their impermanence via the selection of powdery substances show that the slaves understood the need to secure and protect these semiotic productions and representations, which served as vessels for their conceptual, affective, and genealogical habitats for the slaves’ identity.

Traditional Vodou ceremonies include drumming, singing, dancing, vèvè tracing, among other rituals. Songs to salute and honor the spirit Granbwa are played to the Petwo drum rhythm. The lyrics often refer to the spirit’s magical knowledge of the energy and power in plants and leaves. The songs can be sung as part of ritually ordered songs performed during ceremonies and/or to welcome and regale the lwa when a sèvité,
believer is visited or mounted by the spirit. The following is well known song for Granbwa:

\begin{align*}
M \text{ pral nan Granbwa, m pral chache féy } O & \quad \text{I'm going into the woods to search for leaves} \\
M \text{ pral nan Granbwa, m pral chache féy } O & \quad \text{I am going into the woods to search for leaves} \\
Lè \text{ m te rive la, mwen sot chèche féy} & \quad \text{When I arrived from collecting leaves} \\
Lè \text{ m te rive, yo di se maji m pote} & \quad \text{When I arrived, they say that I carry magic}
\end{align*}

Figure 7.8 Another vèvè sign for the spirit Granbwa that also incorporates stars in the sign

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{granbwa.png}
\end{center}

**Granbwa’s impact on the Haitian figured worlds in relation to nature**

In the Haitian figured world or worldview, the flora is considered sacred and animated with spiritual force: The environment and man/woman are interdependent. Haitian Vodou practitioners consider trees, rocks, and bodies of water, among other natural elements, as homes to spirits. The environment is to be preserved and protected because it abounds with spiritual life. Most Haitians rely on the natural life for health and medicine, using herbs for infusions and baths, inside and outside the practice of Vodou.
As remedies to cure a cold or fever, before purchasing a pharmaceutically produced concoction, most Haitians would first use orange or basil leaves for both teas and baths. A common Haitian custom, though currently mainly continued in rural regions of Haiti, is the planting of a tree along with the remnants of a newborn’s umbilical cord. That tree would acquire a sacred status, becoming an extension of the person, and never cut down. *Ou fèt pou sonje kote kòd lonbrik ou antere*, “You must remember where your umbilical cord is interred,” is heard in Haitian everyday speech. This statement highlights and captures a binding attachment and the Haitian’s deep relation with nature.

Such relation, dependence/interdependence with the environment, along with these conservational traditions and practices embedded in the Haitian figured worlds are inconsistent with the current depletion of the Haitian eco-system. And it must be noted when discussing the severe reduction of the vegetal cover and loss of arable land in Haiti—entirely blamed on the Haitian people—it is too comfortably forgotten that the ravages of the Haitian soil started with the colonial conquests by Spain and France combined, which lasted more than three centuries. It must also be remembered that colonial powers cleared the land to mine for gold, and to establish vast sugarcane plantations that earned them enormous wealth (Williams, 1994; Trouillot, 1995; Buck-Morss, 2010). A recent work by the American historian Jennifer Anderson (2012), *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America*, represents an effort to remind of the colonial participation in the deforestation of places like Haiti and Jamaica, whose mahogany trees became the preferred wood to build elegant furniture for the consumption of colonial powers and their elites.

The Haitians certainly need to lead the efforts in repairing their ecological crisis
today. But remembering or historically exposing the primary cause for the depletion of the Haitian environment helps to recognize, confront, as well as heal from the devastating impacts European colonialism visited upon peoples, cultures and spaces.

Overall, the Haitian figured worlds dealing with the environment are reflected in characteristics of a spirit like Granbwa. Moreover, the knowledge and custom of herbal medicine, inside and outside of the Vodou practice, passed on to Haitians from their enslaved African ancestors, continues to play a significant role in the Haitian state of being and the Haitian quotidian.

**A vèvè for Bawon Simityè: A spirit of death**

![Figure 7.9 Vèvè for Bawon Simityè, a spirit of death.](image)

The spirit *Bawon Simityè* (Figure 7.9) belongs to the *Gede* family of spirits. Collectively, the *Gede* are known as the spirits of death, but are equally considered to be fun, bold, sexual, and as life loving spirits. Ceremonies and festivities for *Gede* have plenty of laughter and enjoyment. *Gede* spirits remind the living of the inevitability of death in life, and essentially symbolize the cyclical and perpetual intersection of life and death. The *Gede* are known as guardians and residents of cemeteries, and they sleep in coffins. One can easily identify the area of an *ounfò* (house of spirits) or altar dedicated to
a *Gede* by the presence of objects like miniature coffins, skulls or skeletal bones, and funerary colors such as purple and black. There are both male and female *Gede*, though most are of the masculine gender. Two of the most commonly known female *Gede* spirits are *Grann Brijit* and *Tipis*. The *Gede* are known to fiercely protect the lives of their children or servants, guarding them against harms from the natural and supernatural worlds.

In this *vèvè* for *Bawon Simityè*, as with the *Granbwa vèvè*, rectangles, lines, stars, losanges, among other shapes create the image; though it also comprises certain human features. At the base of the *vèvè* are two rectangles that assume the rudimentary shape of coffins, an important symbol for *Bawon Simityè*, as with all the *Gede*. The different sizes of the symbolic coffins are metaphoric reminders that young/small and old/big experience death. On the face of the two rectangles/coffins are marks that appear like freshly tilled earth, turning the coffins into the very ground where they belong. An open triangle is cut on the outer edges of the two flags/swords mounted at the edge of the smaller rectangle. The life and death duality that *Gede* spirits embody and represent informs us that one sword stands in for the beginning of life, and the other for its termination.

A number of crosses are also used in the *Bawon Simityè vèvè*. In fact, crosses often appear in *vèvè* for Gede spirits. One spirit in the family even has the name *Bawon Lakwa*, the Baron of the Crosses. *Lakwa* means “the cross/crosses” in Haitian Creole. In this *vèvè*, a large cross dominates the center rising right out of the two mounted coffins. There are a total of seven crosses in the diagram, counting the one located at the top end of the cross’s vertical line (composed of two parallel lines with curved ends), and running
through the heart-shaped face. The other two crosses are located at the edges of the horizontal/parallel lines with the curved ends repeated. These three crosses are superimposed with the letter x, a symbol for the unknown and constant intersection of life and death.

Crosses appear in many vèvè, and can be explained by what the discourse analyst scholar Norman Fairclough (2003) defines as “intertextuality” or the ways in which “…texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize and dialogue with other texts” (p. 17, emphasis in original). The cross is a major Catholic sign, the sanctioned religion of the colonial authorities (Spain and France) that occupied the area. The appropriation of the cross by the Saint Domingue slaves represents an instance of *intertextuality* between religious signs or symbols within the colonial slavery society of Saint Domingue. The Vodou religion itself is at times described as being a syncretic practice, because elements drawn from Catholicism and Free Masonry (Rigaud 1974; Buck-Morss 2009; Ackermann, Gauthier & Momplaisir, 2011) are incorporated in the practice. However, these religious intertextualizations or appropriations do not seem to have fundamentally changed the Haitian belief system in its spirit-human relation, which is unique in the ways Vodou spirits visit, mount, enter the bodies of their human believers or *sèvite*. In fact many researchers interpret these instances of intertextualizations and appropriations like the Catholic cross in Vodou or the integration of the images of Catholic saints as part of the slaves’ cultural survival tactics and behaviors (Hurbon, 1993; Cerat, 2011; Clérismé, 2006). In other words, these examples of intertextuality and appropriation in Vodou were a strategy used by Saint Domingue slaves to camouflage and conceal their African-based practices and rituals.
The phenomenon of life and death as integral to human experiences is revealed and exposed by Gede spirits. The Gede song: Kriye pa leve lanmò, “Crying does not bring back the dead” contains a strong message for coping with death, and accepting the transition of loved ones to the afterlife. The belief that departed loved ones are only physically absent, but continue to live in a spiritual invisible world probably helped the slaves to deal and cope with the endless experiences with death and loss throughout the process and system of slavery: from the hulls of the Négriers, the name for the French slave ships, to the constant deaths of slaves on the plantations due to hard labor and at the hands of their masters.

The Gede family of spirits, including Bawon Simityè, and life and death in the Haitian figured worlds

The conception of life in the Haitian figured worlds, passed down from their African ancestors (Olupona 2000; Thompson 1984; Courlander, 1996) and evident in traits of Gede spirits, embodies both mortality and immortality. In the Vodou belief system, the soul or spirit never dies. It travels or returns to Ginen, the spiritual ancestral paradise, to be with those who have gone before. Within the Vodou belief system, after death, the soul or spirit of an individual grows and becomes even more powerful than when she or he was alive on earth. As with most cultures and peoples, Haitians place great value on life. It must be enjoyed, however cautiously, but one’s relationship with loved ones, continue beyond death or their earthly absence. In Haiti, the French expression: Les morts sont bien vivants, “the dead are very much alive” is not trivial, nor does it refer to the zonbi, “zombie,” phenomenon. Haitian Vodou practitioners as with

\[^{71}\text{Zonbi (spelled here in Haitian Creole) are believed to be people who have been lethally poisoned by sorcerers, who also have a special antidote to bring them back to life. While they may be morally incapable, it is believed that they are}\]
many non-Vodou adherents have practices that reflect a Haitian cult of the dead. During the month of November, a period dedicated to *Gede* Vodou ceremonies (as well as the Catholics’ *All Saints’ Day* celebrations), many Haitians—Vodou practitioners and Catholics alike—conduct personal familial activities in memory of their departed loved ones. They visit family’s gravesites, hold special prayers, and feed and donate to the poor in memory of loved ones, among other special rituals. Even Haitian Protestants, who will quickly quote the New Testament’s verse: “Let the dead bury their own dead”, would make certain to give a first-class funeral to loved ones as well as maintain family gravesites in excellent condition. Moreover, the vast majority of Haitians, from various religious denominations and social classes, take dreams about dead relatives and friends seriously and as important messages. *Gede lwa* or spirits embody the Haitian figured worlds in the continued relation that is maintained between the living and the dead in Haitian culture and the Haitian quotidian.

*Vèvè in the here and now*

At present, *vèvè* continue to retain their place and significance in Vodou ceremonial practices, both in Haiti and its diasporic communities. There are several Haitian academics investigating the usefulness of *vèvè* beyond its spiritual and cultural value in Haitian life, and exploring ways to integrate *vèvè* in Haitian education. For instance, the Haitian scholar Serge Madhere (personal communication 2012) is conducting research on *vèvè*, comparing their construction to fractals, and searching for

---

72 Over the years, *vèvè* have been widely reproduced as art on objects such as jewelry, clothing etc. for public consumption.

73 A Fractal is a mathematical set that has fractal dimension that usually exceeds its topological dimension and may fall between the integers. Fractals are typically self similar patterns, where self-similar means they are “the same from near
their mathematical and scientific applications in order for them to be used as instructional tools. Madhere is advocating for Haitian educators to embrace: “a maieutic pedagogy”\textsuperscript{74} by encouraging educators to engage with daily life and cultural elements like vèvè, kap, kites, which can open up learning possibilities for Haitian students while also affirming the wealth of their local cultural knowledge and assets. Vèvè can in fact be used to help develop hand-eye coordination and motor skills for early childhood students, among other critical learning skills. Allowing Haitian children learning to write to first experience drawing and tracing vèvè—these rich and complex geometric diagrams—could help children develop strong motor skills, develop their spatial and architectural intelligence, as well as stimulate these children’s artistic and creative imagination. Such practice can help render classroom experiences more engaging, exciting, as well as help build and validate these children local knowledge, and encourage the participation of Haitian parents in the education of their youngsters.

Lastly, vèvè are unquestionably a significant repository of Haitian knowledge and wisdom, philosophy and ideology, inherited from their enslaved African ancestors. They represent a significant semiotic site where many of the cultural, spiritual and historical elements that have shaped the Haitian people can be observed and experienced.

---

\textsuperscript{74} Serge Madhere defines “maieutic pedagogy” as a teaching approach, reportedly favored by Socrates, to help a person reach a new level of understanding from latent knowledge that he/she already possesses.
Chapter 8

Haitian voices on the meanings of Haitian practices

Gathering Haitian voices—adolescent and parent participants in the New York City area—to discuss (and story-cize) the inventoried Haitian linguistic and cultural practices was essential for making this research study project more comprehensive. The use of focus group sessions and ethnographic interviews conducted in a community setting proved most appropriate to achieve this goal.

As explained previously, four focus group sessions were conducted—two with the Haitian adolescents and the other two with the Haitian parents. A total of ten (10) adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 participated. Eight (8) parents took part in the focus groups. In addition to the focus group sessions, four follow up in-depth individual ethnographic interviews were conducted with two (2) Haitian youngsters selected from the adolescent focus group populations, and two (2) parents also selected from the parent focus group populations. The focus groups and ethnographic interviews focused on the Haitian linguistic and cultural practices described in the research study, and garnered the Haitian adolescents’ and parents’ ideologies about these practices.

---

75 To protect the identity, privacy and confidentiality of the participants, all the names used to refer to the participants (adolescents and parents) in this document are pseudonyms.

76 The focus group and ethnographic interview sessions were held on the site of the community-based group Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project in Brooklyn.

77 Each session lasted about an hour. The names of all the participants (adolescents and parents) have been changed/coded to protect their privacy, and thus render them anonymous.

78 It was much easier to recruit mothers as volunteers than to find fathers. Of the eight parent participants, only two were male.

79 It was easier to recruit female adolescent participants than male. Of the ten adolescents only three were male.
To further expand the possibilities for the exchanges and dialogues, participants were informed that they could “translanguage” (García, 2009); that is, they could freely access all of their language resources (i.e., Haitian Creole, French and English) to address questions or communicate thoughts, ideas and feelings about the subjects and/or objects in discussion. In that sense, the researcher’s ability to speak the abovementioned languages helped remove certain limitations or hurdles that could have complicated the process (e.g., the use of an interpreter, length of session, note taking and/or transcription). The communal environment helped to create a safe and vibrant atmosphere. The entire process allowed participants to speak openly and explicitly about the practices, and to produce “discourse [that] offers meanings to be realized; […] shapes the world of knowledge […]; and provides a social-conceptual location” (Kress, 2010, p. 114), all for greater understanding of Haitians and their cultural traditions.

Certain differences and similarities were made evident in the manner the two groups told stories. The Haitian adolescents generally communicated more openly (outspoken) than the parents. Also, adolescents identified as Haitian, but also viewed themselves as African-American. They see themselves connected to the overall black experience and struggle. They made unambiguous comments about their life/reality and its interconnectedness with the current Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice around the United States. Because many of the practices discussed are not taught in schools and are somewhat absent from the youth’s lives, it became necessary in various instances of the focus groups and the interviews to provide explanations of certain practices.
On the other hand, the Haitian parents presented and viewed themselves as just Haitian and were generally knowledgeable about the linguistic and cultural practices presented. Moreover, the parents were more culturally isolated/insular in comparison with the adolescents who showed more cross-cultural awareness. None of the parents made reference to the *Black Lives Matter* movement.

Both parents and youth gave a clear sense that they believed they are subjected to unequal, unfair and unjust treatment within the society. But the youth pointed to their blackness in the United States; whereas parents pointed to the absence of understandings about the Haitian experience.
Table 8.1 presents in more detail, the profile of the adolescent participants:

Table 8.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Particular characteristics</th>
<th>Academic interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monique</strong></td>
<td>12\textsuperscript{th} grader. She was selected for one the follow up in depth ethnographic interviews.</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linda</strong></td>
<td>10\textsuperscript{th} grader who loves chemistry and attends a High School located in East New York, Brooklyn. Linda was one of the two youngsters selected for a follow up in depth ethnographic interviews.</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>12\textsuperscript{th} grader. He wants to study mathematics in college.</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroline\textsuperscript{80}</td>
<td>9\textsuperscript{th} grade. She describes herself as creative and hard to please, and does not like disappointment.</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>11\textsuperscript{th} grader. He loves music from Haitian music to Rap and Hip Hop.</td>
<td>Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>9\textsuperscript{th} grader. She is very reserved and not talkative.</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geraldine</td>
<td>9\textsuperscript{th} grader. She is soft-spoken, but full of opinions.</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlo</td>
<td>10\textsuperscript{th} grader. His dream is to become an architect.</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>10\textsuperscript{th} grader. She is fascinated with Greek mythology. She expressed being pleased in seeing that Haitians has something comparable to the Greek gods and goddesses.</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mireille</td>
<td>11\textsuperscript{th} grader. She wants to study history.</td>
<td>History/Social Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* All the names of participants have been changed to protect their privacy.
** Monique and Linda were selected for the follow up ethnographic interviews.

In contrast, Table 8.2 displays the characteristics of the Haitian parents who participated in the focus groups.

---

\textsuperscript{80} Caroline, Jessie and Geraldine whose names are bolded/highlighted and italicized identify as Haitian, but were born in the United States. They are fluent Haitian Creole-speakers.
Table 8.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Particular characteristics</th>
<th>Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mirna</td>
<td>Mother of two. Identifies as a Christian. From Croix-des-Bouquets, a commune in the northeast of Port-au-Prince, known for the production of vèvè images and other decorative art in metal.</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Claude</td>
<td>One of two fathers who volunteered for a focus group session</td>
<td>Parking attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgette</td>
<td>Mother of four. She is also the parent of one the adolescents who participated in one of the focus groups.</td>
<td>Home attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yanick</strong></td>
<td>Mother of four. Immigrated to New York at a very young age. Graduated from an American college with a Bachelor’s degree. Yanick was selected for a follow up in depth ethnographic interview.</td>
<td>Works in an administrative position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulette</td>
<td>Mother of two. She feels that her low English language skills keep her away from being more involved in her children’s schooling.</td>
<td>Home attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gerard</strong></td>
<td>Father of one of the high schoolers who participated in the adolescent focus groups. He was selected for a follow up in depth ethnographic interview.</td>
<td>Unemployed. In between jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benita</td>
<td>Benita is not very talkative. She works as a cook at a Brooklyn Haitian restaurant.</td>
<td>Cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>Mother of three. Sometimes she works seven days a week.</td>
<td>Home attendant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* All the names of participants have been changed to protect their privacy.
** Yanick and Gerard were the two parents selected for the follow up ethnographic interviews.

The focus groups and ethnographic interview sessions transformed into some dynamic “dialogic” (Bakhtin, 1981) moments and movements. Responses, personal reflections as well as instances of “individual’s coming to consciousness” (Blackledge & Creese, 2010, p. 126, citing Bakhtin, 1981, p. 348) about the value of these traditions created opportunities for the participants (including the researcher) to “jointly construct narrative and meaning” (Riessman, 2008, p. 23) that contributed to the discursive field about the identified and inventoried practices.
On the value of collaborative meaning-making in the focus groups

Chase (2010) posed an important question in defining and laying out various narrative inquiry theories and practices used by qualitative researchers. In comparing narrative styles of Western and non-Western people, she asked: “What do non-Western narrative researchers have to teach their Western counterparts about the kinds of narratives that need to be heard and about interpretive and narrative strategies for presenting and performing them?” (p. 229). Her viewpoint supported the decision not to strictly separate the voices/stories of the Haitian adolescents and parents in the analysis that follows. However, this was not initially planned. Certainly, there was neither the intent to teach non-Western counterparts about non-Western narrative approaches nor the aim to disrupt Western categorizations/classifications, chronology/linearity of storytelling traditions. The choice was made at the subconscious level, and only became explicit later. Perhaps there is a teachable moment in the outcome.

After reading and rereading how both adolescents and parents discussed the Haitian practices during the focus group sessions and the ethnographic interviews, the idea to merge or assemble them under a single chapter rather than two (one adolescent, one parent) as initially planned, seemed appropriate. But it still was not explicit why such a decision made sense. It was much later after writing the chapter and making revisions that it became clear that the section was constructed, or, drew from Haitian folktale storytelling style/tradition (out of which the researcher comes from). Haitian storytelling is a dynamic, collective and communal practice. That is, while there is a main teller leading the event/story, the audience participates in the telling. The practice is discussed in the semiotic analysis of Haitian texts and narratives in chapter five.
On the role of the storyteller/narrator, Plaisir (2010) notes:

[Th]e [Haitian] storyteller works hard to hold the interest of the audience and engage participants in the communicative act. As a messenger, the storyteller provides his/her listeners with information about ancient times, customs, beliefs, history, and heroic deeds of the Haitian people. Interestingly, the storyteller speaks at the request of the audience, and the latter oftentimes participates in tailoring the shape of the message. All participants are somehow involved in the encoding and decoding of the message. At least, if the audience does not like the message, it has no reason to kill the messenger. Notably, the audience plays a supporting role in the delivery of the message. (p. 269)

In that sense, the Haitian adolescents’ and parents’ voices, including the researcher’s interpretive voice became one Haitian storyteller, taking on a heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981) and pluritopic (Mignolo, 2003) storytelling voice. While initially unplanned as a data reporting strategy, the intersecting and overlapping of the voices about the practices took a sort of collective authorship/ownership of the stories that could not be separated. And this makes perfect sense in the Haitian storytelling style, tradition and world.

The Haitian adolescents and parents in their respective focus groups and ethnographic interviews took on collective discursive roles in answering questions about Haitian traditional practices as one individual would start with a proverb or folktale and others would unreservedly join in and participate in the recounting, making connections with similar expressions and stories, swapping recollections and meanings about the items under discussion. During one-on-one ethnographic interviews, individual
interviewees would refer to and recount others’ stories and accounts to illustrate their points. The language or discourse (words, voices, stories and interpretations) of the participants in both formats (focus groups and ethnographic interviews) offered meanings as to why the inclusion of Haitian cultural knowledge in education would benefit the intellectual and social development of Haitian learners.

The selected formats (focus groups and ethnographic interviews) as well as the Haitian storytelling style even circumvented issues such as the “Western” illiteracy of some of the parents (ability to read and write in the Roman alphabet), and the adolescents labeled as Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) by the school system, as well as the limited English proficiency of members in both groups (adolescents and parents). The dynamic dialogue styles and collective Haitian storytelling constructions created verbal forums in which rich and vibrant exchanges occurred.

The format (and perhaps the familiar and communal context as well) allowed the Haitian adolescent participants and parents to candidly express the enriching value of curricula that might embed Haitian cultural heritage as part of their education. And Haitian parents show that they have “kichoy” or things in their knowledge bags to offer their children. That is, they possess tacit knowledge and can share important cultural goods, information and knowledge (Paris, 2012; Yosso, 2002; Moll et al, 1992; Madhere, 2010; Plaisir, 2010) with their children as well as participate in their youngsters’ schooling if the linguistic and cultural openings exist. In the discussion about the value of exposing Haitian children to a multicultural and multilingual literary canon—including texts by Haitian authors, written in Haitian Creole and exploring Haitian realities—
parents with limited English and literacy skills were able to make astonishing self to text, culture/world to text connections.

**Exploring the language use, discourse and story themes of participants**

In *How to do Discourse Analysis* (2011), James Paul Gee offers numerous tools to examine discourse or language acts that people put forth either “to build or destroy things in the world” (p. 88). In working with the collected oral data and exploring the overall language use or discourse produced by the Haitian participants, two of Gee’s proposed discursive analytical instruments, “the identities building tool” and “the politics building tool” emerged as appropriate lenses. Gee contends, when analyzing discourse via the identities building tool, analysts ought to be aware that “communication […] can make evident] what socially recognizable identity or identities the speaker is trying to enact or get others to recognize […] and] how the speaker is positioning others…” (p. 199). To use the “politics building tool” as an instrument, the discourse scholar suggests looking at the “words and grammatical devices [that] are being used to build (construct, assume) what counts as social goods and to distribute these to or withhold them from listeners or others” (p. 199). Thus understood, our language and/or discourse reflect locations, attitudes, situations, conditions, biases, accesses/ or lack thereof, among other characteristics. To put it differently, our language and discourse embody not only our positions, but also those of others in the world around us.

Taken as a whole, the narrative corpus or oral data gathered from the Haitian adolescents and parents reveal a consistent thread in the discourse produced that falls within, or, overlaps the identities building and politics building tools proposed by Gee (2011). There are clear and notable themes emerging from the voices and stories of the
Haitian adolescents and Haitian parents. The four themes that surfaced from the focus groups and interviews comprised the following:

1. *A stigmatized identity: “Bad,” but “that's who I am”*

Haitian youth and family members pointed to the realization that despite their pride in being Haitian, others stigmatize them.

2. *Missed opportunities*

   - For learning: Musical traditions
   - For learning: Vèvè
   - For family engagement in school and at home: Proverbs and stories

Haitian youth and family members discussed how not using musical traditions, Vèvè and proverbs and stories, has been a missed opportunity for engagement in school and family.

3. *Tools for overcoming: Haitian Creole and history*

   - Overcoming “not so good English”
   - Overcoming being left out and mistrust

Haitian youth and families discussed the insecurity and grief they have had to overcome due to the exclusion of Haitian Creole and Haitian history from schooling.

4. *Tools for affirmation*

   - Affirming Haitianess: “Confidence to know where you come from”
   - Affirming Haitian Creole instead of: “We can't speak our language”

Both youth and families defended the use of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices, as well as history, in affirming a strong Haitian identity that can resist the stigmatization.

1. **A stigmatized identity**

   Scott (1990) contends: “There is a pattern to […] stigmatization” (p. 55). The dominant class and its institutions (i.e., school, factory/work place, church, etc.), Scott argues, “stigmatize activities or persons that seem to call into questions official realities” (p 55). Haitian children in American schools and Haitian parents in American society at
large perceive themselves as victims of “social stigmatization” (Garcia, 2009) due to their language and culture.

To accept to validate Haitian identity is to admit that slavery and colonization were wrong. To admit/concede that Haitian cultural knowledge and epistemology is important for Haitian children and all children being educated and prepared to become contributing citizens and change agents in their society is to promote a transformative education with potential of changing society into a real equal, equitable and more perfect space.

**A stigmatized identity: “Bad,” but “that's who I am”**

Both youth and parents hold the belief that Haitians are stigmatized, misunderstood and undervalued in U.S. society. This is reflected in the words of 12th grader **Monique**81: “There’s a certain way society looks at you / I want to change that…” The same idea was reflected in the words of college-educated Haitian parent **Yanick**, who said: “I don’t think these teachers understand the cultural style or the plight of Haitian parents. Haitians come from a culture where education is valued.” Statements like these clearly signal that Haitians are grappling with the negative ways American society and its institutions view them. They are struggling to remove Haitian identity/identities and practices from under such negative lights.

Ninth grader **Geraldine** states:

I know some people who just don’t want to say that they’re Haitian[s] / because it is associated with **bad** things / I think like learning about all this

---

81 To report the Haitian voices, I opted to use virgule (/) rather than ellipsis (…) to give the stories a poetic flow. I used the virgule and a period at the end of cited texts. One other poetic choice made for fluidity/fluency of the stories was inserting quotes directly inside and throughout the analytical text when necessary.
Haitian linguistic and cultural practices] will give people this confidence in saying I am Haitian / That’s who I am /.

Geraldine’s language substantiates Gee’s notion that our communication is always engaged in asserting our identity/identities and worldview(s), as well as pointing to others’ positions and views in relation to ourselves.

For one, her statement reflects that she’s cognizant that identifying as Haitian carries negative stereotypes; and that Haitian practices such as Haitian Creole, Haitian Vodou, and so on are perceived as bad by society (schools, people, etc.). Moreover, her wording clearly underscores that this situation has forced many Haitians to hide their identity to deflect these negative perceptions. But she also astutely redirects and ends the stanza by affirming her Haitian identity: “I am Haitian / That’s who I am.”

Geraldine’s answer perfectly illustrates a discursive strategy engaged in identity and politics building. Without directly naming society and its apparatuses (schools, churches, etc.), her language identifies/names the problem of how Haitians are viewed in society, and connects that denigration to the shame that Haitians feel in affirming their identity. By extension, she also suggests that the inclusion of Haitian practices (language, culture, history, etc.) as part of schooling experiences would challenge these views held by Haitian students and others.

Equally interesting is Geraldine’s clever usage of the pronoun it in the line: “because it is associated with bad things.” The construction shows a judicious and incisive, almost subversive use of language. Geraldine’s it refers to various entities. It is an antecedent for Haitians and their practices, as well as a stand in for society (people and institutions). But her phrasing veils all the antecedent(s) that she has called forth. The
pronoun acquires an indefinite value/meaning, and serves to abstract and mask the loaded antecedent(s). Unquestionably, there is a political statement made on identity in her answer. That is, she brings light on whose identity is valued and not valued in the society, as well as how and to whom society grants/distributes social goods, cultural goods or not. She also finds the interstices/spaces to affirm her Haitian identity as she concludes her declaration. “I am Haitian / That’s who I am.” It is a commanding language act, one that allows her to firmly assert her Haitian identity.

To accept and validate Haitian identity is to de-stigmatize these Haitian children, and to begin to heal the horrors of slavery and colonization. To create school environment that validates and affirms Haitian cultural knowledge and epistemology is to truly educate these children and prepare them to succeed, socially and academically.

2. Missed opportunities

In Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom (1995), Delpit writes:

If we plan to survive as a species on this planet we must certainly create multicultural curricula that educate our children to the differing perspectives of our diverse population. In part, the problems we see exhibited in school by African-American children and children of other oppressed minorities can be traced to this lack of a curriculum in which they can find represented the intellectual achievements of people who look like themselves. […] Our children of color need to see the brilliance of their legacy, too. (p. 177)

One vivid personal example in the New York Haitian community that can immediately use to substantiate and corroborate Delpit’s assertion is this experience
that the Haitian-American author Jaïra Placide shared at a Haitian community gathering talking about her young adult novel *Fresh Girl*, published in 2004. She relates:

I was always an avid reader, from a very young age. But I was haunted by not seeing girls who look like me, sound like, eat the kinds of food that I ate, or exposed to stories, real and fictional, that are a part of my Haitian and Haitian-American lives (Haiti and its New York diasporic communities). So I created this character in which I could see those things. (personal communication, Brooklyn, New York)

**Missed opportunities: The value of musical traditions**

Some of the adolescents made striking and powerful comments about the missed opportunities by schools to engage them by omitting and excluding such thing as Haitian musical traditions and instruments. They express clearly what they and their schools would gain by incorporating such cultural elements as part of their instructional experiences.

For example, the ninth grader **Caroline** stated:

Schools should teach drums / Haitian drumming / In the time of slavery the slaves especially utilized the drums to have their own celebrations / When the masters gave them some free time / They would dance though the masters mistreated them / Although they would be beaten while they worked / They’d beat the drums to express how they felt / Even though they were

---

82 The young adult novel *Fresh Girl* (2004) is about a 14 year-old girl, who seems naive to the classmates at her U.S. school. Yet while living in Haiti during the 1991 coup d’état, she experienced a life-changing event too horrific and personal to share with anyone.
enduring great misery / Even though the masters were beating them / They had no food / But they still felt grateful and thankful that they were still alive and they danced /.

Kevin, one of three boys who participated in the focus group sessions, added:

“Schools should teach cultural music / Cultural music is important / Like some people who play piano play because some people in their family did back then / Schools should have cultural music / They actually teach a lesson / They actually is history (sic) / School is not about teaching /.”

To these youngsters, the absence of what they refer to as “cultural music” and “drumming” in school, that is, Haitian music and musical instruments or African-diasporan music teaching is an error by the school. Their statements present cultural music or music that the slaves created during slavery using drums and other instruments to relieve their bodies and spirits as a historical understanding. Kevin’s: “They actually is history [sic]”, and Caroline’s: “that they [the slaves] were still alive and they danced.” point to missed opportunities by schools to connect with these children in culturally meaningful and relevant ways.

The youngsters’ language is doing both, identity/identities building and politics building work (Gee, 2011). Moreover, these students are making the case that this sort of knowledge is important to them, and that “teachers […] and them] can successfully use such knowledge and skills in formal classroom learning” to validate and include their ways of knowing as part of the instructional experience (Paris, 2012, p. 94).

The glaring and conspicuous: “School is not about teaching” that tagged the end of Kevin’s statement on the teaching of Haitian cultural music and instruments (African
diasporan music) in schools is equally noticeable. This line, seemingly unconnected to
the whole of the statement, in essence indicts the entire education system with not being
about teaching. The Haitian youngsters repeatedly accused the schools of not teaching
them. We will return later to this point.

**Missed opportunities: For learning Vèvè**

Another similar edifying moment occurred during a focus group session with the
parents. Prior to presenting and questioning the group about what purpose vèvè diagrams
could serve in the education of Haitian youngsters, the researcher referred to them as a
form of writing or ideograph that came to Ayiti in the memory of the African slave
ancestors. As such, the diagrams were discussed outside the Vodou tradition, but rather
as essentially being a set of ancient cultural tools, which today can be valuable in
education, and in helping students develop hand eye coordination, sketching and drawing
abilities, drafting and architectural skills, and so on.

After examining the three vèvè diagrams circulated around the table, **Mirna**, a
mother of two who identifies herself as a Christian, excitedly joined the conversation.
She started recounting her experience with the vèvè making tradition in her Croix-des-
Bouquets community. Indeed, the Croix-des-Bouquets region located in the northeast of
Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, is renowned for its artisans who recreate vèvè
diagrams using metal (old oil drums) to be sold as decorative objects for home.

**Mirna**’s voice was animated talking about the diagrams. In essence, she separated
the vèvè art pieces from religion, and instead spoke of the items as a significant art form
for her community: “Se pou ta wè lè ti mesye sa yo ap travay bò lakay la / Se traptrap yo

---

You should see these young men working in my area / In a minute they are able to trace these things / In the blink of an eye they are able to finish them / And then, they are so beautiful.” She went on explaining and acknowledging the artistic skills of their makers, and the economic contribution of the art form to her Croix-des-Bouquets community.

It was also enlightening when Jean-Claude, one of only two fathers, who volunteered for the research study, pointed to the coat of arms at the center of the Haitian flag that hangs in the conference room of the community organization where we met, and compared the emblem in the flag to the vèvè images. “Yo sanble menm jan ak sa a / Se menm kalte bagay sa a ki nan mitan drapo a / Wi, se pou timoun nou yo ta konnen sa yo vle di / tankou sa ki nan drapo a | They resemble the same thing as this [pointing to the insignia in the middle of the flag]. It is the same thing as what’s in the middle of the flag. Yes, our children should know about the meanings of these diagrams, like the one in the flag,” he stated.

Figure 8.1 above is the Haitian flag whose center image prompted the parent Jean-Claude to compare it to a vèvè. The image does combine numerous symbolic items that can be found in a number of vèvè images such as the flags, particularly the two black ones planted on the ground next to the canons and bullets. The six yellow bayonets
(swords) placed on the side and flanking the royal palm tree as well as the drum in the middle are familiar items that can be found in vèvè images. The phrase in the coat of arms: *L’union fait la force* translates as “In unity, there’s strength,” a phrase well known by Haitians.

My conversations with both the Haitian adolescents and parents became spaces where participants fully engaged in reclaiming their Haitian identity and Haitian practices. When the adolescents were presented with the three vèvè diagrams, some expressed not being very familiar with the items. But they all were still able to discuss them and understand their value as important teaching and learning tools.

One of the first reactions, before the diagrams were introduced was an eagerness on the part of the youngsters to know their meanings. “Is there a specific meaning to each specific image?” asked *Nadia*, a tenth grader who participated in the first focus group session. The symbols were then described as having been a part of the cultural life of the African slaves in Saint Domingue, and today remains a significant tradition in the Haitian Vodou practice.

Using the vèvè for Èzili—the Haitian Vodou goddess of love—the researcher explained that in Haitian Vodou, there are many deities or gods and goddesses almost similar to those found in Greek and Roman mythologies. For instance, The Haitian goddess Èzili was presented as an equivalent to the Roman goddess Venus and the Greek goddess Aphrodite. And, that vèvè images are made to represent the various Haitian deities.
Nadia, the young woman who asked the question about the meanings of the diagrams exclaimed:

I love Greek mythology / I never understood that our culture has some similarities / It’ll be great to learn and know that my culture has its own mythology / If we do have it / It shows that there are similarities between us / Not just the differences due to our skin tone / Due to the fact that we are black / It’s not exposed as much as those people who are Caucasians / Greek mythology go online / I am pretty sure you’ll be very limited on information about Haitian mythology / It’d be great to know my culture has its own /

The conversation continued around the table with the tenth grader Carlo adding: “It would help to have these in schools / You don’t see those shapes often in the real world / It would be some kind of new thing coming out / They would be useful /.” In startling and illuminating ways the Haitian youngsters are demonstrating how the curriculum/curricula of schools can become inclusive and collective “intellectual properties” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009) where the cultural knowledge of all students has a place, rather than being the sole property of the dominant ideology that permeates
the schooling experience. Carlo’s sentence about vèvè diagrams: “It would be a new thing coming out” underscores the obscuration and invisibility of Haitian practices.

On their own, the youth connected the diagrams to math. **Caroline**, the 9th grader who describes herself as being creative and hard to please, commented: “When I have a problem to solve / I always think of a weird and crazy way to do it / to solve it / All of them [vèvè images] would be useful / This one would be very great with graph / like math for example / teaching someone how to label plot / Create a heart / label plot / They can give you two coordinates and just tell you to plot it down and find it / This one actually looks like a graph line and you can actually use it to try to figure out the coordinates of these small shapes / axes / They are very complicated stuff /.”

The perspectives and understandings of the Haitian parent participants on the significance of these linguistic and cultural customs built on one another. Their voices and viewpoints intersected, and articulated eloquently the case for the inclusion/integration of these items in the teaching and learning of their children. When asked about the value of including literary work such as the play *Masuife*[^84] (The Greasy Pole), in learning experiences with Haitian youngsters, **Gerard**, the father of a high schooler, quickly jumped in the conversation, capturing the sense and essence of the play just through the title. He immediately took to interpreting the title of the text, explaining how he would help his child acquire deeper meaning and understanding of the text by sharing a Haitian Creole expression that is in fact metaphorically equivalent to the title. “I

[^84]: *Masuife* (The Greasy Pole) is a play by the Haitian playwright Menès Dejwa. From the mid-1980s, *Masuife* was being staged in various Haitian enclaves in the United States. But the text was not published until 2015.
would tell him / if the play is called Masuife / It is a story about people who are

‘climbing a mountain backward’ / Someone is living a terrible experience in life /.”

In Haitian parlance, when it is said that “yon moun ap monte on mòn pa do” / A
person is climbing a mountain backward”, the expression connotes that s/he is dealing
with great life difficulties, challenges and obstacles at that moment.

Florence, a mother of three, who works as a home attendant caring for
homebound elderly, added: “I would explain to my kids that / the people in the story are
experiencing great difficulties in life / Life is hard and dangerous for these people /.” The
play Masuife (The Greasy Pole) indeed tells the story of three migrant Haitian cane
cutters in the Dominican Republic who are confronting issues such as discrimination,
exploitation, and other hardships. Both Gerard and Florence’s inferences and extensions
about what could be inside the text were precise. And they had not yet heard the full
synopsis. Furthermore, these two parents’ interpretations intersected with the statement
by the ninth grader Jessie in one of the youth focus group sessions where she said that the
inclusion of Haitian practices (i.e., linguistic and cultural knowledge, literary materials,
etc.) in instructional events would improve communication in her family. “If I knew these
Haitian riddles, folktales and stories / Then I’d have something to talk to my parents
about / Talk together… / A family thing we could do/.”

Missed opportunities: For family engagement in school and at home: Proverbs
and stories

The message about improving connection between children and families, school
and home via the inclusion of Haitian cultural knowledge echoed in the words of both
Haitian adolescents and parents. When we discussed the use and importance of proverbs
in Haitian language, Monique, a 12th grader resumed: “If schools would do that [include Haitian practices] then when my grandmother says / And she always says that / ‘Sa m wè pou ou Antwàn lan Gomye pa wè l’ [What I foretell for you, Antwàn of the Gomier does not see it]’ I would not be scared / Well not scared / Be so confused / You know / She says that when I spend too much time on the phone texting / or if she suspects that I have a boyfriend / I know it’s a warning / But I am not sure exactly what it means/.

The words scared and confused used by Monique to describe her feeling regarding the proverbial expression frequently used by her grandmother sustains the view of various paremiologists on proverbs and proverbial expressions that use names of people. They are culture-specific, and can be confusing particularly for outsiders or younger generations who may lack familiarity with the expression(s). In Haitian culture and folklore, Antwàn lan Gomye (Anthony of the Gomier) was an oun gan (Vodou priest) who lived in Grand-Anse, the south of Haiti, in the nineteenth century. Antwàn was deemed to possess the most accurate future telling ability in all the land85. The proverbial expression carries his name, and retains an ominous quality in Haitian language and culture. Parents and families often use the expression in attempts to curb behaviors that they foresee as problematic and perilous for their children. What is equally interesting is that Monique corrected herself. She’s not so scared as she is confused. But she knows that the grandmother invokes the proverb as a warning when she senses or judges that Monique’s activities can be a problem.

85 The Vodou Scholar Milo Rigaud mentions Antwan Lan Gomye in La Tradition Voudoo et Le Voudoo Haitien initially published in 1953. The Haitian poet Etzer Vilaire (1872-1951) from the Grand-Anse area is known to have referred to Antwan Lan Gomye in his work, as well.
Linda, a 10th grader who attends school in the East New York neighborhood of Brooklyn said the following regarding Haitian proverbs:

My parents use a lot of proverbs / The language itself is so great and different / The use of metaphors is extremely there / I remember when my mom came / She was forcing me to eat vegetables / And, I don’t want to eat / And she was ‘ou ka fôse bourik janbe rivyè, men ou pa ka fôse l bwè dlo [you can force a donkey to cross the river, but you can’t force it to drink]’. It [Haitian Creole] shapes like the use of figurative terms / that is why it was way easier for me to learn to use figurative terms in my writing / because of the consistent way of using metaphors like that/.

The intersecting responses from Haitian adolescents and parents on the significance of including Haitian cultural knowledge in instructional experiences—illustrate and address one of the key elements for students success in school: Family engagement. In Bilingual Education in the 21st Century, García (2009) argues: “All successful education relies heavily on parents and schools sharing the same values. [...] It is up to schools to manipulate this variable by devising strategies to inform and involve parents as much as possible” (p. 151). Various educational researchers make similar arguments about the importance of engaging and partnering with families for greater student success (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Paris, 2012; García & Kleifgen, 2010). One sure way that schools can foster and accomplish greater familial involvement in the education of children is through the inclusion of the family’s cultural heritage. When the linguistic and cultural knowledge of children are integrated in
teaching and learning events, it creates a portal for parents and families to become more engaged and supportive in the intellectual and social development of their children.

Parental engagement, however, is more of an amorphous “catch all” term used by the system. To some, it speaks to parents being individually involved in their children’s education (showing up for parent-teacher nights, picking up report cards, etc.). Still, others view it as parents collaborating to impact plans of schools and districts. There are yet others who see the relation of parent-school as oppositional in the sense that stakeholders like parents, teachers, and the school system have different concerns (Henig, et al., 2011). The reflections of those Haitian parents and high schoolers on ways to engage families are clear. They are aware of the educational, social and familial benefits that can result when this connection is realized. In their own voices, the Haitian parents and youngsters in this research study expressed that drawing on and using the cultural knowledge of families can help improve student engagement, production and performance, strengthen familial bonds, and increase the involvement of parents/families in the education of their children.

Yanick, a college educated mother of four expressed concerns about schools’ criticism of the absence of Haitian families and parents:

For one, I don’t think these teachers understand the cultural style or the plight of certain Haitian parents / Some parents work outside of their homes the whole week taking care of other people’s children / Senior citizens who are homebound / The Haitian community has a lot of parents who are home only on the weekends / And the system and teachers aren’t aware that Haitians come from a culture where education is valued / But they believe
that schools and teachers are authorities, and replace them in their absence when the kids are in school / Like every parent, Haitian parents strive to support their children and want them to achieve more than they did / That’s what we all want /.

The parent Yanick’s view on the value Haitians place on education is consistent with that of the adolescent Mireille who shared one of the Haitian proverbs often used by her mother to motivate and remind her of the value of school.

When I am feeling lazy to go school / My mom often says: ‘kote ki gen kou pa gen chenn, kote ki gen chenn pa gen kou’ | [where there is neck there’s no chain, where there is chain there’s no neck] / she says that to remind me of the opportunity that I find here to go to school / When in Haiti some kids want to go to school and they can’t / because their parents don’t have money to send them to school /.

In Haiti and in Haitian diasporic communities, the proverb “kote ki gen kou pa gen chenn, kote ki gen chenn pa gen kou” uses a metaphoric construction to convey the message that not everyone has everything. In other words, one never has it all. As a result, you must appreciate what you have. The words neck and chain metaphorically stand for the concept opportunity. In digging for an English equivalent, the Haitian proverb could be rendered as: “Where there’s a will, there isn’t always a way, and where there’s a way, there isn’t always the will.” To understand the arrangement of the Haitian proverb does in fact support the warning of various paremiologists about “cultural literacy” or knowledge of the context and culture where the expression emerged. In a certain sense, the Haitian
proverb addresses the distribution of social goods and resources in society. There are also
Haitian proverbs that speak to the idea of when the will is there, it can create the way or
resemble the proverbial English saying: “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” One such
Haitian proverb literally translated is: “If you are patient, you’ll find the navel of the ant.”
In essence, one can find the way, if the will is there or if s/he persists/perseveres.

Our schools cannot continue to miss out on opportunities to tap into Haitian
children’s and families’ linguistic and cultural resources and assets (e.g, Haitian proverbs,
oral and literary works, vèvè, musical traditions, etc.) to provide them with a quality
education that prepares them to succeed locally and globally.

3. Tools for overcoming: Haitian Creole and history

Haitian Creole and Haitian history (as well as Haitian culture) are quintessential
tools and sites for expressing Haitian identity. In the past, as in the present, they have
served/serve and helped/help Haitians in overcoming ideological and cultural adversities.
That they are excluded and denigrated (read: unwelcomed, repressed/suppressed) within
the American educational context of Haitian children and their families represents a form
of oppression. When the language, culture and history of students are absent in the school
community, it makes these children feel invisible as well. In turn, this situation makes
families absent and invisible, and reticent to interact with schools and school leaders and
instructional facilitators. This historical, cultural and linguistic stigmatization or shaming
(Scott, 1990; García, 2009) can be “responsible for the academic failure of many […]
children [like the Haitians] who are members of minoritized groups” (García, 2009, p.
56).

Tools for overcoming: “Not so good with English”
One significant reason for the absence of Haitian parents in their children’s school life, is given by Paulette, a single mother of two, who talked about her limited English proficiency. “M pa renmen al lekol timoun yo / paske m pa fò nan angle a ditou | I don’t like going to the kids’ schools because I am not so good with English.” The family is a significant repository of the ways of knowing and being of youngsters. Paulette’s statement and explanation for her absence, disengagement or distance from schools speaks to the urgent necessity for schools—particularly those in urban settings such as New York City with high population of minority language learners like Haitians—to recruit multilingual staff and direct resources toward creating school environments where the language and culture of students and families are manifestly present. Her Haitian Creole language is an asset that can contribute to the intellectual emancipation of her children. In that sense, schools should view parents’ languages such as Haitian Creole as a resource. The 10th grader Linda gave an excellent example of how the preponderance of metaphors in Haitian Creole proverbs used at home with her family facilitated her learning of figurative terms in schools. Mireille’s example of her mother’s use of the Haitian proverb “kote ki gen kou pa gen chenn, kote ki gen chenn pa gen kou | where there is neck there’s no chain, where there is chain there’s no neck” to motivate her to go to school illustrates how Haitian families/parents rely on these proverbs to teach and pass on important values.

Schools must be made to understand the significance of the linguistic and cultural practices/assets of minoritized youngsters and their families. And as argues García (2009), schools taking “[i]nitatives to overcome such reticence [as expressed by the Haitian parent Paulette, who feels her English isn’t adequate enough to interface with
schools] require imagination” (p. 151). This show of imagination by schools/school leaders demands inventive and committed actions such as: ensuring that the language and culture of learners and families are prominently visible in schools; recruiting multilingual and multicultural school staff; organizing yearly festival of languages/language fair in the school community; offering/sponsoring a yearly course for school staff/teachers and other parents in one of the languages present in the school community inside the school; partnering with community-based groups that serve these children and families; having multilingual and multicultural school libraries; creating space for parents to be in the schools (not just in the main office), among other creative and practical acts; and inviting families and parents to participate in instructional events where they can share cultural and historical experiences/knowledge with classes and the school community. Even organizing an annual cultural foods festival at school can help render school climate/atmosphere more inviting for students and families. That can create a time when the school community can learn about one another’s culture. Ultimately, if schools decide to plan for the success of minoritized students, including Haitians, they will have to strategize and find ways to involve families and parents to make the most of these children’s families/communities linguistic and cultural knowledge.

**Tools for overcoming: Being left out and mistrust**

Over and over, the Haitian adolescents returned to the idea that something is missing in their schooling experience. As a result, they do not trust the content or teachers. They expressed, however, that the integration of Haitian cultural knowledge in their education would result in them becoming: **trusting** students (e.g., trust and believe curricular contents), **confident** learners, and **proud** Haitians. That they returned to these
three areas various times speak volumes about the general state of education for minoritized youngsters like the Haitians in the school system.

This lack of trust in contents comes through when a youngster like Mireille joined in the conversation discussing the value of including Haitian practices in schooling experiences by exclaiming:

I think it’s important that they do [integrate Haitian linguistic and cultural practices in instructional activities] / Cause they tend to leave things out / Like recently my dad was telling me about that / How slavery ended in Haiti / And that there were Haitian soldiers that helped America when they were trying to become free / And I never knew that / Cause they never say that in the history books / so I was surprised / So they are leaving things out that they shouldn’t /

Because that’s important in a way /

This kind of accounts repeatedly came up as the conversation moved around the table during focus groups. Eddie, another 12th grader, added: “I was really concerned about Haitian history / cause / They have all the nations in the Global World history / What they call world history / I was thinking you know / the Global book / They should have a chapter that talks about slavery / But they don’t really talk about Haiti /.”

Monique, the 12th grader who has been in the United States for five years, gave a lengthy and pointed response to the question. Her answer was telling and complex, and showed careful word choices, omissions, and phrasings. She started:

It would help to know more about my culture / And it would impact my educational life / because sometimes I ask myself / I say, is there like one type of religion and other stuff / […] There’s a certain way the society looks at you /
want to change that/ I want to know why they keep this part of my culture away from us/ Why do they keep [it] away/ And the things they’re teaching you/ They have nothing related to other cultures/ They teach us about slavery/ really/ But they never teach us about the whole history of slavery/ And then it’s like they’re putting this thing into our mind that, ok, slavery happened/ But they expect us to forget what happened/ And I can’t forget what happened/ Even tough I did not participate/ Even though I did not suffer from it/ But I still suffer now because I have been affected by racism/ People have been racist to me../.

Monique’s comments was followed by those of Mireille and Linda, who connected the discussion to the youth-led Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice in the United States in recent years. Mireille opened the brief exchange by stating:

I am very proud to be a Haitian/ though sometimes because we are black/ and how we speak and how we are/ sometimes we face injustice/ People are mistreated because of the way we are/ Like nowadays there is something that called Black Lives Matter/ about the way that American police are mistreating black people/ accuse them of crimes they did not commit/ just because they are black/ Because we are black they think we can do bad things/ like killing people and other bad stuff/.

Linda added:

Like what she said, in English class we are studying about genocide/ and the holocaust/ and when I think of the Black Lives Matter thing she brought up/ to me I feel like it’s a genocide on a low key because they’re taking someone of a
particular race and doing unjust to them. Yeah, I think it’s genocide on a low key /
People / the citizens don’t know /but we know/.

As mentioned earlier, the Haitian youth unlike their parents identify as both
Haitian and African-American. They articulate an understanding of the intersection and
interconnectedness of being black in America. Period.

The youth’s connection of the absence of their Haitian linguistic, cultural and
historical experience in school to racism is important. The Haitian youngsters brought up
the question of race and racism as they discussed their educational context and
experience, the exclusion of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices as part of their
learning, as well as the distrust in curricula contents. Another youngster in that same
focus group stated:

They think that just because we are black we’re inferior and they’re superior
/ I can say that we’re not inferior / Just because our pigmentation is different
from them doesn’t mean we are different from them / Because we work hard
as much as them to feed our families / To have a better life / To go to school
/ Sometimes people are mistreating us and don’t know how it feels / But we
just still keep going because we know we have to do better / But it hurts a lot
when they discriminate against you because of your skin / The way they
 treat you different as if you are not a human being/.

The Haitian youth’s observation and naming of racism, as being connected to the
exclusion of Haitian practices in their schooling is powerful. Clearly, the Haitian
youngsters recognize the presence and impact of race and racism in their education, and
are “defining racism as fundamentally a problem of attitude and prejudice […]with
material consequences of institutional racism, behaviors that produce unequal outcomes […] and have a direct] causal link between academic achievement and the racial organization of society” as argues the educational scholar Zeus Leonardo (Leonardo, 2009, p. 132). In other words, the Haitian youngsters are aware that their academic conditions (i.e., reductionist curricula or incomplete information, as well as a sense that they are discriminated against because of their black skin, etc.) are a consequence of the racist attitude toward black people that permeates American society.

Monique was one of the two adolescents selected for a follow up ethnographic interview. There again, when asked about what she would change about her school if she could, she returned to the doubts that she has about the way history is taught at her school. “All they tell us is that / we were slaves and Abraham Lincoln liberated the slaves / That’s not the whole story / It makes me think that what they are teaching in school is not the whole story / There is a different side to the story / I would change the way history is taught /.”

Haitian language, culture and history are tools that schools can utilize to help Haitian children and their families overcome racial, linguistic and cultural stigmatization and discrimination.

4. Tools for affirmation

Knowing and being comfortable with one’s language, culture and history can fuel one’s ability and sense of being, becoming and belonging. The failure of schools to catch and embrace, and build on what Haitian children and their families bring with them to the school community [culture, language, history and experience] contributes to these students’ academic disengagement (as well as the reticence of parents such as Paulette to
be present and involved in school), erodes students’ self-esteem and confidence, and ultimately, becomes a factor in the underproduction and underperformance of students. Therefore, reinforcing and supporting these children’s language, culture, history and experience can help schools in building their resiliency and affirming their identity so that they can resist stigmatization and discrimination, and transform their conditions as well as society for the better.

**Tools for affirmation:** “Confidence to know where you come from”

**Geraldine**, the 9th grader Haitian-American, who was born in the United States, but identifies as Haitian, goes straight to the notion of confidence:

> I am Haitian because that’s where my parents are from / I think it would be a good thing [the inclusion of Haitian practices] because it gives people this confidence, to know where you come from / Like the thing about Vodou / I know some people who just don’t want to say that they’re Haitian[s] because it is associated with bad things / I think like learning about all these [the various Haitian practices: Proverbs, Rara, Vèvè, etc.] will give people this confidence in saying I am Haitian. That’s who I am.../

Building students’ confidence does matter. Having confidence in oneself is one of the surest routes to feeling capable. Building confidence in learners lies in part on the validation of their identity/identities (ethnicity, language, culture, ways of knowing and being in the world, etc.). Geraldine repeated the word *Haitian* three times and *confidence* twice in her statement to underscore her position, clearly demonstrating there’s a link between the two. Showing respect for students’ ethnic origins, languages, cultures, sexual
orientation, and so on, can help reassure them of who they are; make them feel valuable
and able; and sustain both schools/teachers’ expectations of them, as well as theirs.

Many youngsters talk about pride with passion. The need to be proud of their
Haitian identity/identities, their practices and histories/stories were brought up numerous
times. Linda, one of the 10th graders who arrived in the United States in 2013, three
years after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, implored:

I think it would have a great impact to expose people to different cultures / It
just shows a great value of your country / What you have to offer/ What your
people did / sometimes due the fact that we are black people of African-
American / African descent / and that our country is really small / People
think really low of you and really / Like / Expectations they don’t expect you
to know certain stuff / They don’t expect you to do…/ For example, after the
earthquake and everything / Everybody was saying Haitians this Haitians
that / They don’t really know natural disaster is something we cannot avoid /
After the earthquake we still did songs and told stories / There are things we
still do / The event has not destroyed us / Whenever we talk about Haitian
history I feel very proud and due to the fact that I knew my people have done
so much (sic) things / like today I am not enslaved by the French and
everything /and also I have helped people / I do feel proud of that and I feel
that would help other people to understand the culture better /.

---

86 Haitian high school and college students in New York City have for years used Haitian Flag Day, May 18 to affirm their Haitian identity. Students wear Haitian flag as part of their attire to go to school around the city, and often organize celebration with their schools’ clubs.
The answers given or language used by many youngsters in the groups illustrate their mistrust/distrust of the curriculum, as well as the need for schools to create and integrate instructional events that incorporate their cultural knowledge to enhance students’ confidence and sense of pride. In their words, the Haitian youth clearly expressed that what they are receiving as instruction in schools does not make the cut. They do not trust that they are being told the full story, and feel that the curriculum silences them. Moreover, they do not sense that schools offer opportunities to appreciate the diversity of linguistic, cultural and historical experiences of students.

One advantage that many of these Haitian immigrant youngsters do have is that many were partly educated in Haiti. Despite shortcomings in the Haitian education system, these children were exposed to a different story. Literate and illiterate Haitians are cognizant of the successful anti-slavery Revolution by the African slaves in Saint Domingue that led to the creation of Haiti in 1804 as the first black Republic in the Americas and world. Therefore, the absence of this significant Trans-Atlantic historical event in American history books and classes baffles these children. In fact, Eddie, the 12th grader who is interested in majoring in mathematics in college, stated: “You never see / study / the history of slavery in Haiti / It’s not just up to us in our country Haiti / They should acknowledge that also / First Black African that got our Independence /.” In their own words, these Haitian youngsters are making compelling arguments about identity, politics, cultural silencing and obscuration, ideological construction and destruction, misinformation and mis-education advanced by our schools and its curricula. Therein lies their distrust of the version of history that schools are offering them, leading ultimately to academic disengagement and loss of interest in school.
In a research study on elements that support positive minority youth identity development, Crocetti and coauthors (2014), building on work by Erikson (1968), Berzonsky (1989, 2001), and Lerner et al., (2005), proffer that confidence plays a huge role in youth’s healthy development. The authors contend: “Confidence indicates an internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy” (p. 1820). In other words, when young people feel valued, worthy and respected by society and those around them, they exert confidence. In turn, that confidence boosts their pride and nourishes/sustains their belief in the ability to carry out tasks, attain objectives, and ultimately, feel capable and ready to succeed. To put it differently, when young people feel confident about who they are, their identity/identities, language, culture and history, they are more likely to develop a positive sense of self and to perform better academically, contend the authors.

Based on the words of the Haitian adolescents, what occurs in their schools via their instructional exposures does not contribute in raising or nurturing their confidence, or, in making them feel proud of who they are. To hear a Haitian adolescent voice that a schooling experience that would include Haitian practices would help her develop confidence in herself as a learner captures the damage that schools inflict on the healthy development of minority youth when they exclude these children’s cultural knowledge.

Tools for affirmation: “Why can’t we speak our language?”

The ninth grader Geraldine sounded troubled when she shared what the exclusion of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices has done to her and her schoolmates. She stated:

Some Haitians don’t want to speak Creole at school / I know the value at home / I tried to speak Creole with a friend, he said speak English / I asked why, he said
because we’re in public / I was like, I was so confused / I am like what about the other kids that speak their language. He was… I was… / Why can’t we speak our language? … Then he was looking like he was embarrassed then I leave it alone cause—yeah /.  

For Geraldine and some of her peers to express that they are not comfortable in speaking Haitian Creole at school or identifying as Haitian further reveals the dilemmas with the kinds of environment that schools create. At the same time, these Haitian students understand that if schools would teach them about their history, language and culture, these educational actions would help nurture their self-esteem and pride, create greater learning engagement, and positively impact their production and performance. The reluctance by the system to incorporate such sound educational practices reflects the structural dysfunctions inherent in the system. That school systems in urban centers such as New York City where the majority of their more than one million students are Black, African-American, Latino, Asian, make no effort to offer courses that foreground the history, culture and language of these minority learners is programmatically unthinkable and problematic.

The voices of the Haitian parents and adolescents who participated in telling the story for this research project form a needed chorus in the effort to recuperate, reclaim and advocate for the inclusion of these practices in the schooling experiences of Haitian learners. These Haitian linguistic and cultural traditions are essential vessels of Haitian knowledge of self, sources of knowledge preservation and transfer, as well as sites of knowledge construction and production, and meaning making. Indeed, their voices are an integral part of the argument presented in this research study that the inclusion and
integration of the cultural knowledge that Haitian learners bring to school must be incorporated in their schooling education to transform the current dire academic and social conditions of these learners.
Chapter 9
Discussion, implications and recommendations

The findings of this study reveal that the American public education system is not leveraging the histories and experiences of Haitian children. Further, schools do not plan, program, nor provide Haitian learners with opportunities to learn in Haitian Creole as they acquire proficiency in the English language. In fact, schools do not invite or welcome the use of Haitian Creole, reported one of the youth. Moreover, they complain that no structured courses on African, African diaspora and Indigenous experiences are offered, but as incidental. Based on the Haitian youth’s words, schools are not educating them and preparing them to succeed.

For years, several education scholars and advocates have argued that the endemic crisis with academic underperformance of minoritized students is fueled by structural dysfunctions inside the system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009; Buttaro, et al., 2010; Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012; Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2008; Flanbwayan, 2011). The Haitian youngsters repeatedly voiced that the system engages in neglectful educational practices that limit their achievement possibilities. They complained of finding the historical versions/contents that they are offered/presented are biased, and therefore, they do not trust the materials and their teachers. They expressed that the exclusion or absence of their historical, linguistic and cultural experiences in schooling/instructional practices erode their confidence and pride in their identity/identities and ways of knowing.

The stories of the Haitian learners about their public schools’ experiences are not new, and are real. In Ta-Nehisi Coates’s memoir *Between the World and Me*—
African-American author offers a window that helps to historicize the problems minority students have long confronted in American schools, and corroborates the perspectives of the Haitian high schoolers. Coates (a former student of the Baltimore public schools) writes:

The streets were not my only problem. If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. [...] I suffered at the hands of both, but I resent the schools more. [...] I loved a few of my teachers. But I cannot say that I truly believed any of them. [...] Some years after I’d left school, after I’d dropped out of college, I heard a few lines from Nas that struck me: "Ecstasy, coke, you say it’s love, it is poison […] Schools where I learn they should be burned, it is poison [...] That was exactly how I felt back then. I sensed the schools were hiding something, drugging us with false morality […] Schools did not reveal truths, they concealed them. Perhaps they must be burned away so that the heart of this thing might be known. (pp. 25-27, emphasis in original)

What the Haitian students, Coates and the rapper Nas (whom Coates quoted) are all expressing is that schools do not in any way include their histories and truths, but rather concealed them. Schools were poison, drugs that kill. There is a consistent thread running through these accounts. The schools have failed black and brown students.

If the dismal statistical tables and narratives about the dire state of education for black and brown children have morphed into a distant din, the voices of these Haitian youngsters in the New York City public school system, or words from black men like
Coates and the rapper Nas boldly remind of the depth of the crisis. Their voices and reflections on the educational system are powerful, elucidating and alarming.

**The (mis)education of black and brown children in the age of Brown**

What’s more disturbing is that the Haitian youngsters are being schooled decades after the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. The 1954 *Brown* challenge and message to the nation was: Being a black child should not be a condemnation to a “separate” and unequal education, and ultimately, ostracization to a life of poverty in these United States (Anyon, 2005; Shor, 2009; Leistyna & Alper, 2009). The poignant comments of these current and former public schools students on their schooling experiences echo each other’s voices, years after *Brown*.

The neglectful educational practices recounted by the Haitian students are occurring inside the system despite the presence of *Brown*. And, in sight of myriads of educational legislations\(^87\) and various negotiated consent decrees\(^88\) that followed *Brown*, promising minoritized youngsters to make education equitable and fair and attend to the

---

87 Right on the heels of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration and its Great Society project would shepherd through Congress the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which paved the way for the 1968 Bilingual Education Act. These early mandates were all enacted to provide and strengthen the education of minority learners, including minority language children like the Haitians, and close the “achievement gap” in order to improve the social and economic conditions of minority children, families and communities. These would be followed by the Education and consolidation Act of 1981, Improving America’s School of 1994, the No Child Left Behind of 2001, and most recently the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. Meanwhile, the “achievement gap” for minority youngsters identified since 1964 has literally remained unmoved or unclosed, because the execution of these mandates were/are so poorly implemented and monitored.

88 In addition to *Brown* and ensuing congressional mandates throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the education of language minority youngsters is *supposedly* to be further supported nationally by the 1974 *Lau Decree* that resulted from a Supreme Court ruling in favor of Chinese-American plaintiffs against the San Francisco school districts. A year later, in New York City itself, the Puerto Rican community would launch a case against the then Board of Education of the City of New York, the current New York City Department of Education to demand for the linguistic educational rights of Puerto Rican children (extended today to all Latino students), which produced the *Aspira Consent Decree of 1975*. However, in legal jargon or terminologies, a consent decree never admits conditions of wrong doings. Therefore, consent decrees are even weaker than some of the legal and legislative acts on the book.
“ever” growing achievement gap. Under the law and these legal mandates, the cultural heritage of Haitian children (i.e., various Haitian linguistic and cultural practices that are knowledge building assets) should be taught in schools, and be a part of these children’s educational experience. Yet, while all these mandates were enacted to ensure educational equality and equity for black and brown children in order to move American society beyond the plagues of its racialized, divided, and unequal self, not much reflect the idea of having to include the histories of these groups, including those of minoritization, enslavement, oppression. The words of the Haitian youngsters in fact prove that no serious educational advances have been made to level the playing field for Haitian children. And thus, the (mis)education and failing of black and brown children continue.

The physical structures of most school buildings where minoritized youngsters attend classes today may not be compared to those of the days prior to the Brown decision (Clark, 1965; Taylor, 2001; Podair, 2002; Cerat & Hollins, 2014). However, fundamental issues such as educational neglect, academic ostracization, lack of rigorous and challenging academic instructions, and the obscuration of historical truths still prevail. That being said, providing learning experiences that are intellectually and socially transformative and offer possibilities for these youngsters to thrive are still missing.

Loewen (2007), the sociologist who penned *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, argues that:

[T]extbooks supply irrelevant and even erroneous details, while omitting pivotal questions and facts in their treatment of issues ranging from Columbus’s second voyage to the possibility of impending ecocide. […]
Textbooks rarely present the various sides of historical controversies and almost never reveal to students the evidence on which side bases its position.

(pp. 301-302)

In a profound sense, the words of these current and former students (the horse’s mouth) suggest that much of the structural dysfunctions within the system have remained unchanged post *Brown*. Sadly, the Haitian youngsters offered no contrasting or differences in opinions as to their schooling experiences. And they are certainly not isolated voices.

Between 2012 and 2014, the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Civil Rights Project published a series of reports on the education of Black and Latino students that coincided (perhaps intentionally) with the sixtieth anniversary of *Brown* that similarly decried the dire state of education for these children. Segregation, the principal subject of contention in the cases pursued by *Brown* lingers in some of the most progressive and liberal states in the nation, claimed the authors (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014; Kucsera & Flaxman, 2012; Cerat & Hollins, 2014; Anyon, 2005). The UCLA Civil Rights Project’s writers charged that black and brown children are still subjected to school environments which they labeled as “apartheid schools” for the manner in which these students are educationally treated and isolated. Such damning reports in fact further authenticate the dismal viewpoints of the system offered by the Haitian students.

Not only are the Haitian children being schooled in segregated settings throughout the city, and must contend with school atmosphere that can at times be tense and
violent\textsuperscript{89}, they also endure the demeaning of their linguistic and cultural practices, shadowed by allegations of superstition and magic. The Haitian children are subjected to school curricula that continue to present western thoughts and ideas, languages and cultures as \textit{the} superior site of knowledge\textsuperscript{90}, while their Haitian cultural knowledge has/is being transformed into magic and folklore, and thus, positioned/positions outside of western knowledge and epistemologies. Hearing the Haitian youngsters, one does come away with the sense that they feel out of place in their schools.

**Rebellion and resistance: Minoritized students rebelling against the system**

In \textit{Domination and the Arts of Resistance}, James C. Scott (1990) discusses tactics of resistance used by the oppressed to “infiltrate the public transcript with dissent and self-assertion” and engage in “political dialogue with power in the public transcript” (p.138). Coates (through his writing), the rapper Nas (via his rap lyrics), as well as the candid responses of the Haitian students in interviews for this research study represent the voices of minoritized and oppressed students expressing dissent, affirming themselves, and entering the public sphere. For one, uttering their concerns with schools so vehemently and openly means that Haitian students understand how significant schools should be in their intellectual and social advancement. Second, they also clearly recognize that they are being denied a quality education. In their words, a comprehensive

\textsuperscript{89} Linda, one of the Haitian youth, reported that following a shooting in the neighbor of her school, the school was put on a lock down. As a result, not only school atmosphere became tenser, relationships between school security officers and students have totally deteriorated since.

\textsuperscript{90} The grips of former colonial and slave holding nations such as France and Britain, among others, have continued to influence the language in education as well as the historical materials, instructional materials used in the education system in various post-colonial spaces, and with post-colonial children. Discussing the continuing cultural damage done to post-colonial students, Faraclas and coauthors (2010) remark: “Throughout their entire experience with formal education, the only lesson that the preponderant majority of students learn well is that their own cultures, languages, families, communities, and by extension, themselves are somehow inferior to the people, language, and culture of the metropole” (p. 88)
and quality education must incorporate their ways of knowing, and validate their historical experience and linguistic and cultural heritage in order to create opportunities for them to become well educated, successful and productive, as well as **confident** and **proud** citizens.

Admittedly, in a twisted and dark manner, Carlo, one of only three boys who participated in the focus groups, states: “I don’t really like school / They don’t teach you anything / I don’t even want to be there”. His words send an eerie reminder about the torrential drop out issue with black and brown children. Is the exit of black and brown children from our schools simply a response to the fact that the system has continuously, and continues to ignore their voices, needs and plights? The continuous dropout rate among minority youngsters in American schools is alarming (New York City is billed as the “epicenter”), and this has been an issue for time indefinite (Siskin, 2011; Mathews, 2006; Anyon, 2005). However uncomfortable the idea, many black and brown children who drop out of schools, symbolize a “direct confrontation” (Scott, 1990) of these minoritized, oppressed and marginalized children with the system. While Carlo never stated that he would leave High School before graduating, there a subtext to his statement: “I don’t even want to be there.” Consequently, the act of dropping out by black and brown children should be read as an act of rebellion and a message that they understand they are being educationally and socially mistreated and neglected. But it should never be framed as a sign of these children’s intellectual shortcomings or weaknesses. These children’s dropping out is perhaps best captured in this line by Coates: “The world had [has] no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could [can] the schools?” (2005, p. 25).
Scott (1990) further asserted: “We must above all recognize that the creation of disguises [with our language and actions] depends on an agile, firm grasp of the codes of meaning being manipulated” (p. 139). In other words, our language and action are manifestations and responses to our conditions. Thus, the critical voices of minoritized learners about the system represented in the words of Coates, Nas and these Haitian students exemplify that these youngsters recognize or have a firm grasp on the wrongdoings of the system. Why should they stay when they know that they are not being educated? When their language, culture and history are devalued, marginalized, disrespected, and excluded from their learning experiences. Why should they stay when the system behaves as if they are not needed? It is that very same haunting idea of feeling invisible or monstrous, neglected and not needed by the system that is echoed by the Dominican writer Junot Diaz, mentioned in an earlier section, in his exchange with the students at a New Jersey community college.

The testimonies of the Haitian adolescents, the words of Coates, Nas and Diaz present all a disturbing tableau of the ways minority youngsters know that society (its schools, and its various other institutions) perceives them. Schools—the place responsible to educate these children, develop their character, and build their confidence, self-esteem and self-worth—deny minority students “at the cultural level,” as Diaz emphasized, turning them into undesirable monsters. Yet, schools know that language, culture, and history matter. But it is the dominant ones that schools value and teach, not these children’s. Schools render minoritized children like the Haitians invisible and monstrous. 

**The culture of minority children and families matters!**
Shawn A. Ginwright (2010) in Black Youth Rising: Activism and Radical Healing in Urban America makes a compelling argument about what schools can do to educate, nurture and retain minority youth. Ginwright underscores the significance of cultural affirmation for minoritized youngsters like the Haitians. He remarks:

African culture and philosophy is simply too valuable to discount. […] We should continue to challenge, push and develop African-centered scholarship and practice in ways that allow us to confront this crisis of black youth today. An emancipatory vision for black youth means that being rooted in African culture is a starting point for identity development, but not the end point. Our understanding of culture and identity development must be viewed as a pathway to justice and freedom. First, this requires an acknowledgment that African cultural identity is perhaps the most effective weapon to fight white supremacy. For black youth who internalize negative images of black people without knowing why, culture is a powerful vehicle to uncover their hidden shame of being black. (pp. 153-154)

While Ginwright proposes the validation of African culture for black youth [the validation of the cultures for all minoritized, oppressed and marginalized learners], he acknowledges that it is not a silver bullet. He argues, however, that validating minority children’s cultural and historical heritage—which requires teaching the true and whole *story about slavery* (as Monique suggests), and the linguistic and cultural practices that are a result of enslavement remains an *incontournable* starting point.

Ginwright joins Anyon (2005), who presents a similar argument in *radical possibilities*, and contends: “[H]istory of both oppression and resistance is so important.”
Students who are knowledgeable about dominant forms of power and how this power affects them can better move from self-blame to informed efforts at change” (p. 180). It is when schools refuse to recognize the historical experience of these children and to incorporate epistemological elements from the philosophy of their culture as part of the learning process that they begin to fail them. As such, schools contribute in the underproduction and underperformance of these youngsters. Moreover, schools become a participant in violating the human rights of these children, and play a part in cornering them into that life of poverty with all its social ills (i.e., school drop-out, gang violence, drug epidemics, poor health and wellness, imprisonment, underemployment and unemployment, depletion of community, etc.).

Culture matters. It matters in helping these children shed the negative images long propagated about minorities in an American society tainted by the inhumane system and practice of slavery, Jim Crow laws and segregation. And the kinds of teachings that occur at schools can help these children develop confidence about who they are and their origins. The teachings that happen in schools can help these youngsters feel proud in their ways of knowing. Analytical, authentic and thought-provoking instructional events can help them be hopeful about the future, and recognize their potential as vested citizens in their society. Schools can and must participate in uplifting these youngsters by fully including their historical and cultural heritage as part of their schooling experiences.

The way forward

A most salient proposition from one of the UCLA Civil Rights Project series of reports between 2012 and 2014, spelled out the necessity to recognize the enduring problems with educating black and brown children by the system. It proffers:
A first step is to recognize what is happening and think very seriously about the alarming consequences for all of us if we do nothing. The next is to decide that we must foster schools that build the society that our changing population needs if it is to flourish. Then we need to have the courage to speak about the challenge positively, develop the will to act, and take concrete steps to begin to reverse the trends…” (Orfield, et al., 2012, *Foreword*)

One wonders what has been made of the UCLA Civil Rights Project reports, among myriads of similar alarming calls for change. No serious and urgent national debate followed the releases of the UCLA reports, even in the age of President Obama—the first African-American Commander-in-Chief to lead this nation in its 240-year history. For these disturbing assessments of American public schools about the education of black and brown children to exist on paper and inside institutional reports, academic books and journals indicates unwillingness and insincerity on the part of the system to comprehensively address the academic and social needs of minoritized children. To paraphrase Coates, the lack of response by the educational system and American society at large messages that no one has time for the childhoods of black and brown boys and 

---

91 It was significant and illuminating to hear President Obama in his Farewell Address to the nation comment on the idea that many insinuated a post-racial America when he was elected, but clearly “such a vision, however well intended was never realistic. For race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society” (President Obama, Farewell Address, January 10, 2017. Source: [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov). retrieved, January 11, 2017). In some ways, he wanted to let it be known by the nation and the black community that racism is very much alive. Furthermore, that the limitations set on his Administration by Congress and the Senate were undergirded by a country still racist at heart. Likewise, his comments that: If [and when] something needs fixing, lace up your shoes and do some organizing” is read as instructional. Most of the human and civil rights advances and laws that this country have achieved, from Women’s Suffrage, Roe v. Wade, the Civil Rights Act and so on, have all been spearheaded by the people. In that sense, what needs to occur to change the conditions of the education system will require the commitment of the people, just as was done in the 1920s, the 1950s, the 1960s and on.
girls. Or, the equally poignant words of the Haitian parent Georgette who asked during a focus group session: “Why can’t schools do the right thing…”

How do we indeed impress upon the system and its schools to do the right thing (as the Haitian parent suggests) for black and brown children? To begin with, communities of color must return to Brown and demand that Brown not be abandoned or cast aside as judicial theater. After all, this country prides itself not only as the wealthiest and most powerful democracy in the world, but also, most importantly as a nation where the rule of law and principles of human rights and civil rights are guiding lights. For national and local educational policy-makers and school leaders to do the right thing for all minoritized learners, including the Haitian students requires that these communities first force them to recommit to the 1954 Brown decision.

Brown remains the people’s voices, the people’s actions, and the people’s cases. It is the starting point, the groundbreaking legal case that lifted the veil on the poor, unequal and inequitable educational conditions of minority children. The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court Brown decision on behalf of minority children was the precursor, the harbinger that opened the way for the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), “the largest and most influential federal education policy,” which remains significant to date for the education of minority learners regardless of the semantic/linguistic “hide and seek game” played by past administrations, or future ones (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010, p. 29). Moreover, the ESEA provided the legal frame and language that would produce the 1968 Bilingual Education Act that specifically addressed the “special educational needs of the large numbers of children with limited English-speaking ability in the United States…” (sec. 702)
Despite disrespect and failure of the system in upholding the legal instructions mandated by *Brown*, the ESEA, the Bilingual Education Act to the *1974 Lau Decree* or the *New York City Aspira Consent Decree*, they represent gains made by black and brown children and their communities through long struggles, and should never be abandoned.

However, Haitian children, their families and allies must be unafraid to climb the steps of local and national courts to make the case that more needs to happen for these children. English-only programs for newly arrived Haitian youngsters, whose home and community language is Haitian Creole need to be legally challenged. There needs to be legal challenge to the *déficitaire* (deficit) bilingual transitional model—which barely exists in New York City for Haitian children—that focuses on “quick exit” from these programs to mainstream English programs/classes rather than programs that sustain and maintain the linguistic and cultural practices of these learners. These practices represent some of the structural dysfunctions within the system that are causing the failure of those children.

Haitian children, their families and allies must demand that the educational rights of Haitian learners are respected as per *Brown*, the ESEA—whatever the name given to the powerful federal policy by the administrations in charge—the Bilingual Education Act, and all the other local and national legal mandates such as the *1974 Lau Decree* that resulted from a Supreme Court ruling in favor of Chinese-American plaintiffs against the San Francisco school districts, and the Puerto Rican agreed settlement with the then Board of Education of the City of New York (now the New York City Department of Education), the *Aspira Consent Decree of 1975*, to demand for the linguistic educational
rights of Puerto Rican children, that were/are put in place to ensure and protect the educational rights of minority students.

To ensure that the system and its schools do the right thing by Haitian learners, these children, their families and allies will have to “lace up [their] shoes and do some organizing” and prepare to organize and mobilize for the long haul, or, until they get results. That is, seeing real changes in the academic conditions of these children. To move that needle in a positive direction demands a firm commitment to a structured, authentic and national project that advocates for the reassertion and reclamation of the educational legal authority given and empowered under the law. This new and reenergized project must accept nothing but the full implementation of the law.

Resolving the educational crisis of minoritized learners in American schools requires an organized collective movement that brings together all minority students, their families and communities (e.g., African-American, Latino, Caribbean, Asian, Indigenous-American, etc.), uniting resources and calling on the system to respect their children’s educational rights, and insisting that appropriate actions be taken to redress and change the current conditions. Specifically, Haitian students and their families (as well as allies) must prepare to “storm the courts” (Goldstein, 2005). They must be willing to camp out on the steps of local and federal tribunals to demand the respect of the educational rights of their children. They must insist for the legal protection that can ensure their children receive the quality education that they need and deserve, and which

---

92 The term “storm the courts” is borrowed from Brandt Goldstein’s 2005 text Storming the Court, which tells the successful story of how some Yale law students accompanied by their law professor Harold Koh represented the rights of Haitian refugees with HIV status detained on Guantanamo Bay in the 1990s in federal courts and won the refugees humanitarian parole and the right to be admitted in the United States.
makes integral the linguistic and cultural heritage of these youngsters as part of their school experience.

**Further study**

There is a dearth of educational research studies, both quantitative and qualitative, on Haitian Creole-speaking students in U.S. schools. Despite limitations, this qualitative research study that combines an inventory and description of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices sourced from various published formats and interviews about those practices with Haitian adolescents and parents represents one of the first efforts to bring to light the situation of Haitian students in American schools and the absence of these community knowledge-making and production. Future research on Haitian students should compile empirical data that encompass classroom observations, teachers’ attitudes, and that are longitudinal.

This study focused on Haitian linguistic and cultural practices and the impact of their absence in schools for Haitian learners. The reverse could also be informative. Conducting future research studies on Haitian learners in school contexts that implement and maintain a culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy that foregrounds their Haitian linguistic and cultural practices could provide means of verifying the findings of this study.

**Recommendations**

Haitian children and their families along with their advocates have long been pleading with the system to provide these students with adequate and appropriate educational services. In 1996, cognizant of research data which support that language minority students such as Haitians, perform best when linguistic and cultural services are
in place Haitian parents and community advocates initiated a court case against the then
New York City Board of Education (the current New York City Department of
Education) and the New York State Education Department. The court case sought
educational justice on behalf of “Haitian national origin school children who speak
Haitian Creole” (1996 New York Civil Court deposition by the Multicultural Education,
Training and Advocacy, META, Inc.). Dialogues between educational policymakers,
school leaders and the various representatives of the community on actions to address and
rectify the educational wrongdoings brought no results.

Throughout the Bloomberg-Klein era of school reform (2002-2011), followed by
the Bloomberg-Walcott years (2011-2013), Haitian community practitioners, parents and
students watched the meager number of Haitian Creole programs get dismantled.
Concerned with the disappearance of these few but significant programs, and alarmed by
community stories of an increase in Haitian students drop out (including a rise in truancy
and entanglement with the law), the community-based group Flanbwayan Haitian
Literacy Project decided to conduct a small research study in 2011 at Tilden\(^3\) High
School in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn.

This research project represented yet another effort to reiterate to the system that
doing away with the structural dysfunctions that have plagued, and continue to

---

\(^3\) Tilden was one of the schools selected under the Bloomberg-Klein reform to be phased out and replace
by smaller schools to address the low performance of minority students, including the city’s of drop-out
crisis among that population. Flanbwayan investigated and assessed the conditions of the Haitian
population at Tilden, and published the report: “Going to School and Not Getting an Education”. Flanbwayan
found that out of the 90 or so Haitian students registered at Tilden, only 60 of them regularly
attended school. Moreover, it reported that: “Of those 60 ELLs [English Language Learners or Haitian
Creole-speaking students] who were still in school […] 44 of them did not graduate by June 2010 when the
school officially closed.” The organization concluded and confirmed in its report that the rising trends in
Haitian youngsters dropping out were real, and that the Haitian student population at Tilden High School
was representative of a widespread systemic problem. Flanbwayan went to make a total of nine
recommendations, from enrollment to basic literacy and math skills for Haitian newcomers identified as
Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) to teacher training.
undermine and (mis)educate Haitian children is unacceptable. Not providing these students with quality academic preparation, which includes their Haitian linguistic and cultural practices, maintains the crippling inequity—inequality and inhumanity long started with the horrors of slavery. The educational system must put in place a humanistic and comprehensive plan to prevent additional educational damage and neglect, or must do the right thing (as Georgette, the Haitian parent asked/said) for these children by:

1. Creating, sustaining and maintaining programs at all levels (elementary, middle and high schools) that leverage the academic, social, linguistic and cultural strengths of Haitian students and their families;

2. Providing courses in Haitian Creole language and history, music and art, as well as courses on the Middle Passage/Trans-Atlantic slave experience at all levels;

3. Monitoring programs to ensure effective implementation of policies and mandates, as well as adequate staffing;

4. Assuring equal access to all education programs, including gifted programs for Haitian Creole-speaking youngsters; and all other instructional and support services;

5. Providing appropriate and sufficient textbooks (English and Haitian Creole), as well as additional instructional materials, or, the development of such to support these children’s learning;

6. Hiring qualified Haitian staffing for all programming and services, including bilingual Haitian Creole teachers, guidance counselors, psychologists, speech therapists, social workers, and other support staff that are linguistically and culturally competent;

7. Working collaborative with Institutions of Higher Education that prepare educators to create/institute courses that expose teacher candidates to Haitian linguistic and cultural practices (Vodou, Rara, Vèvè, etc.), as well as to Haitian Creole, and to the African diasporan experience (i.e., slavery and colonization; the histories, languages, and cultures of African diasporans, the impact of race and racism on black and brown youngsters in society, etc.,);
8. Supporting educational research initiatives that specifically investigate the Haitian learners population;
9. Sustaining the work of community organizations and practitioners that advocate for, and support the education of Haitian students and their families.

Conclusion

_Pitit se richès._ (Children are riches.) _Haitian Proverb_

Being poor in a rich country can lead to ill-placed shame, pervasive despair, and anger.

_Jean Anyon, radical possibilities, 2005_

_If something needs fixing, lace up your shoes and do some organizing._

_President Obama Farewell Address, January 10, 2017_

This research study began by describing a set of Haitian linguistic and cultural practices used by Haitians. It built on the voices of young and old Haitians to capture how the people view and live these traditional doings in their daily lives. Haitian objects such as Vodou prayers, proverbs, folktales, literary texts from contemporary literature; and Rara and Vèvè are analyzed and highlighted for their cultural significance and value as intellectual assets of Haitians.

Many of the cultural practices herein analyzed are considered as the affairs of the Haitian masses and peasantry, but they remain important for the vast majority of Haitian people. And yet, the Haitian post-colonial ruling elite and the country’s intellectually privileged few have marginalized the people and these practices—linguistic and cultural practices that are critical spaces for understanding the Haitian experience.

Closely examined, these practices represent a quintessential repozwa, vault and repository, where Haitian people can put together significant pieces from pre-colonial/pre-Columbus time, and peer into their Taino and African ancestors’ origins, doings and visions of the world. These practices contain and have captured the historical
memory, ancestral stories of the Haitian progenitors during the slavery colonial era in their agentic acts as knowledge-makers and producers. Through this investigation, we have seen that these practices surge forth as unifying tools for the Haitian ancestors to resist colonial ideological dominance and cultural erasures. In post-colonial Haiti, these traditions continuously function as knowledge preservers and as instruments for Haitians to fuel their resiliency in the face of local and global challenges. Ultimately, this exploration into Haitian linguistic and cultural practices has helped uncover and shed light on Haitian philosophy, figured worlds, and ways of knowing and being in the world.

Along with the Haitian adolescent and parent participants interviewed for this study, we have argued that the exclusion, devaluation, and absence of Haitian cultural heritage in the schooling experiences of Haitian children is connected to the academic disengagement and poor confidence (as the Haitian youngster Geraldine reminds us) evidenced by the academic underproduction and underperformance of these children. We maintain that as long as the historical, linguistic and cultural knowledge of these students remain marginalized and relegated to footnotes in textbooks, the system will continue to fail Haitian children.

To compel the American school system to create, sustain and maintain an educational plan that comprehensively addresses the academic needs of Haitian children, their families and communities requires a project that reclaims of these children’s cultural inheritance and studies the effects of enslavement. To compel the system, including the New York City school system, to honor and maintain the educational rights of Haitian learners, requires that the Haitian community and its allies insist that the system executes, implements and respects the legal authority ordered, given and empowered by the 1954
Brown decision, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, along with all the local and national mandates and decrees that support these laws.

To remain silent and inactive or not to demand educational equality and equity for Haitians is to accept the current educational conditions of oppression. To remain silent and inactive to the widening educational disparity between minoritized youngsters and their white counterpart borders on immorality. Ignoring the isolated and under-resourced “apartheid schools” (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014), the engulfing poverty and daily violence that consume these children’s lives, the silence around their histories of enslavement and the linguistic and cultural practices that came about as a result is to accept the structural dysfunctions inside the education system. It is morally wrong.

Moving the needle in a positive direction and eliminating the dysfunctions within the system requires collective commitment to a structured, authentic and national project that advocates for the reassertion and enforcement of the legal authority and mandates that are already in the books. Resolving the American educational crisis that has been eating away at minoritized students, including Haitian learners, requires the collective involvement/engagement of all (leaders and teachers in the system, children and families, allies and advocates), demanding changes. It demands searching a way back to all the existing legal mandates, holding the fire under the foot of educational policymakers and leaders to be accountable for the current state of education for these minoritized children.

To change the educational conditions of these minoritized learners and to level the playing field, it is imperative that the history of enslavement and racism that is being ignored, the exclusion and demeaning of these children’s linguistic and cultural practices
that has crippled their production and performance, be recognized and rectified. It requires that society acknowledges and truly repairs the historical wrongs done to black and brown children through enslavement, and the ensuing years of segregation and racism. It requires real and systematic efforts, plans and programs to be put in place in order to discontinue the intellectual and social damage and destruction being done to these children by the educational system.

Changing the educational conditions of these children begins with every citizen recognizing and coming to consciousness that an educated population represents the major benchmark and measurement for any society’s advancement and progress. But an advanced society cannot leave anyone behind and must plan accordingly. For as long as Haitian students, their families and communities are drowned in poverty, our society cannot truly claim true progress and advancement.

Lastly, denying the linguistic and cultural needs of Haitian learners violates the rights of these children, and prevents them from developing into educated, well-adjusted, confident and contributing citizens of society. Haitian learners have similar needs to all other children. They seek a life of dignity: A life where their social and educational rights are respected. Haitian children and their families strive for a life where economic justice and opportunity are real. They seek a life where their existence is validated and appreciated. Haitian children deserve to know their truths. Like all minority children, Haitian children deserve a life where the color of their skin and their first and last names will not condemn them to a “separate”, unequal, and poor education, to a silencing of their voices, languages and cultures, and ultimately, ostracization to a life of poverty.


Bragg, Rick. (1994). Mission to Haiti: The troops; the Auschwitz of Haiti for 3


Dejwa, Menès. (Personal communication, 2016).


Dejwa, Menès. (Personal communication, 2016).


Gramsci, Antonio. (1971). *Selection from the prison notebooks*. Edited and translated by


http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/02/17/deaths-haiti-carnival/23538599/)


Madhere, Serge (Personal communication, May 10, 2012).


Yosso, Tara J. (2002) Toward a critical race curriculum, equity & excellence in education, 35:2, 93-107, DOI: 10.1080/713845283

