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Tapping into Cultural Resources: A Case for Haitian Resiliency and Viability Outside of Haiti and in the American Classroom

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Within a relatively short period of time, measuring less than four decades, Haitians have become indelible cultural contributors to the unique ethnic makeup of the United States. Their historical journey from being the first Black republic in the Western Hemisphere to being the poorest country of that same region is a testament to their successes and hardships as a nation and a people. However, much can still be discovered about the Haitian people and their continual endeavors towards the uplift of their country and themselves. As one of the premier destinations of the Haitian Diaspora, the United States is a key site in illustrating the characteristics of resiliency and viability that have sustained Haitians through their tumultuous history.

Haitians, as a burgeoning ethnic immigrant group in the United States, were faced with new sets of challenges in acculturating to American society. Condemned by President Regan in 1981 as being unauthorized immigrants who posed a “serious national problem detrimental to the United States” (Shell-Weiss, 2009, 212), “no other immigrant group suffered more U.S. government prejudice and discrimination than Haitians” (Stepick et al., 2001, 236-37). Haitian refugees were racialized as criminals. Mark Dow (2008) posits that “what these policies have in common is their justifying the mistreatment of disfavored groups by applying certain labels to them” (29). He further explains this process of racialism by stating “if you categorize a person in a certain way, that person’s rights and protection are gone, you can do anything to a person” (35). The interdiction policies of Haitian refugee vessels by the U.S. Coast Guard, the high rate of incarceration of undocumented Haitians who made it to U.S. shores, and high disapproval rates of political asylum reinforce this notion (Stepick et al., 2001, 239).

Ironically, Haitians were among the smallest groups legally immigrating to the United States due to Congress’ Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act and the Cuban Refugee Act of 1966, which provided preferential treatment and federal loans and subsidies to these groups. Haitians who were able to make it on shore were held at the Krome Detention Center with limited access to Creole interpreters or legal aid to assist in their cases. Although the National Council of Churches and Miami’s Haitian Refugee Center sued and won on behalf of Haitians receiving refugee rights, the Florida district of Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) deported many of the 3,000 Haitians who assumed their protection, and only one percent of their cases was referred to the high commissioner. Moreover, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) stigmatization of Haitians severely impacted the ability of Haitian immigrants to obtain jobs in the United States. The CDC’s categorization of Haitians as AIDS carriers, followed by the FDA banning Haitians from donating blood, created a restricted labor market for Haitian immigrants that only yielded “back of the house” jobs within the informal labor sector. The culmination of the aforementioned events created a highly prejudicial social climate that made Haitian acculturation particularly difficult.

Alongside racially discriminatory immigration policies, biting stereotypes, and difficulty entering the labor market, Haitian students continue to struggle to achieve at the same levels of their immigrant peers. “Haitian families have high expectations for schooling in the United

States, beliefs that were brought from Haiti” (Lilly, 2009, 48). Ironically, though “both Haitian students and their parents have high and stable educational aspirations” (Stepick et al., 2001, 254), only a small number of Haitian students achieve those aspirations. According to research conducted by Alex Stepick and his colleagues concerning Haitian and Haitian American adolescents, “overall Haitians have the lowest levels of academic achievement, and achievement appeared to decline as students advanced through high school” (261). These low-level achievements affect both Haitian-born immigrant students as well as American-born, second-generation Haitian students, but for different reasons. In her 2004 dissertation, Lovie E. B. Lilly presents some of the obstacles Haitian immigrants face in reaching academic success. Lilly (2009) cites a combination of lack of understanding of Haiti and Haitian culture and the stereotyping that often follows, language diversity or the lack of English proficiency, minimal or no academic documentation of previous school records, and unfamiliarity with the Haitian educational system as some of the administrative obstacles for newly immigrated Haitian students’ academic achievement (60). Furthermore, issues such as students’ access to schooling in Haiti influences how well they might perform in the American education system. Because education is privatized in Haiti and has the propensity to “perpetuate a class system” (38), there are situations in which many incoming Haitian students from lower socioeconomic statuses have had very little or no schooling due to the financial hardships they might have imposed on their families. Therefore, they must acclimate not only to an entirely new society, but also to a foreign classroom environment. Without proper intervention strategies, academic hardships are a bleak reality for newly immigrated Haitian students.

Second-generation Haitians, who consist of students born in the United States or immigrated at a very early age, also face a unique set of circumstances that hinder academic achievement. Using the concept of context of reception, Stepick frames the academic struggles of second-generation Haitian students around their identity struggles of being Haitian and American. Context of reception examines how government policies, local labor market conditions, and local social relationships affect how immigrant groups are received by the host country. Stepick states that “the extraordinary negative context of reception confronted by Haitians, along with the relatively low levels of parental human capital, sets in motion the intense dynamic of Haitian youths’ identity struggle” (260). Parental human capital is defined as the education and work experience of immigrant parents that specifically affect the educational outcomes of children (232-33). In regards to parental human capital, Stepick posits that children whose parents have high educational levels are much more likely to do well, while children of immigrant parents who never had the opportunity for high educational levels in their home country struggle in the U.S. education system. According to their findings, prejudice, discrimination, and low parental human capital diminish the academic achievement of Haitian students. The amalgamation of low parental capital and the negative context of reception of Haitian immigrants result in cultural dissonance among Haitian youths. The shifts in identity invariably have a negative impact on Haitians academic achievement:

Cultural dissonance—a situation in which parents and children possess dissonant cultural views of appropriate ideas and behaviors—manifests in social psychological outcomes such as youths’ ethnic identity self-labeling, perceptions of discrimination and diminished second generation educational achievement (233-34).

For Haitian-American youth, the negative context of reception of Haitians in conjunction with low parental capital results in the presence of cultural dissonance that functions to disrupt typical patterns of acculturation and explicate why American-born Haitian students, who come from a culture of high educational aspirations, continue to have poor academic performances and struggle with forming identities.

In an effort to bridge the achievement gap between Haitian students and their American counterparts, there needs to be continual assessment of the conditions contributing to the poor academic achievement of Haitian and Haitian-American students. This is especially critical because, as an ethnic group, Haitians notably exhibit a desire to capitalize on the educational opportunities afforded within the United States. The historical journey of Haiti is a tapestry that demonstrates how the Haitian people manifest resiliency in times of difficulty and how that resiliency lends itself to creating viability and, ultimately, agency. From this understanding of Haiti's cultural resources, I argue that Haitian students are already inculcated with the heritage of achieving academically. It is just a matter of incorporating these resources into the academic space to improve their chances of success. Thus, some of the questions that should be addressed are: 1) What are some concrete historical examples that support the claim of Haitian resiliency and viability as a cultural resource; and 2) How can Haiti's rich cultural resources of resilience and sustained viability transfer into tangible practices and strategies to improve Haitian academic achievement in the U. S. education system?

The term cultural resource in this context is used to define the system of beliefs and characteristics of a culture that influence the members of that culture's outlook and determine attitudes in different situations. Haiti's cultural resources are its propensity to resilience, evidenced by Haiti's sustained viability in the United States despite racially motivated obstacles. My standpoint is that Haiti's cultural resources of resiliency and viability stems from: 1) its pride in being the first and only successful slave revolt against western imperialism; 2) prioritizing the survival and betterment of its people; and most importantly, 3) the high value placed on education as a tool for uplifting the oppressed and creating agency for change. Supporting claims of Haiti's cultural resources requires a unique varied methodology that best captures the unique aspects of Haitian culture.

Analyses of Haiti's history often patronize two opposing binaries: Haiti's current ailing condition can be attributed to the manipulation and exploitation of foreign powers or to the belief that Haiti "has been a victim of its leaders" (Schuller, 2007, 143). Haiti has evolved into "the outcast of the international community, jeopardized by the racism and greed of the developing imperial powers" (Dayan, 2004, 158). Major events cited to support the victimization school of thought are the 150-million-franc indemnity France imposed before recognizing Haiti as an independent state, the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934 that opened up Haitian land for private, foreign ownership, and later U.S. discriminatory immigration practices against Haitians fleeing the island from the Duvalier regime.

For those who believe in Haiti's self-imposed deterioration, history is used to establish Haiti's patterns of implosion. These events delineate themes of Haiti suffering under the consequences of centuries of inept rulers, racism and exploitation, and misappropriation of foreign aid. Examples include Toussaint L'Ouverture's self-imposed proclamation of being Governor-for-Life in 1801 (a precedent followed by future Haitians leaders) (Schuller, 2007). In addition, racism generated by mulatto elites (and even some Black leaders) towards the Black masses is cited to have kept the majority of Haitians oppressed and was the contributing factor to Haiti's poverty as a whole (Girard, 2005, 205-06). Girard recounts how Haiti's founding fathers,

such as L'Ouverture and Dessalines, maintained the plantation systems and harsh labor practices, even after ousting France, and implemented policies that privileged rich elites and oppressed the poor. It is that legacy that outlasts colonialism and plagues Haiti today.

Mark Schuller's interpretation of Haiti's history is conducive to the goals of this paper because it presents a model that provides a space for articulating Haitian resiliency and agency. In his article, "Haiti's 200-Year Ménage-à-Trois: Globalization, the State and Civil Society," Schuller aptly posits that Haiti's history should no longer be framed between these trajectories of "state versus society" or "global versus local" (Schuller, 2007) because they are incompatible binaries that often overlook a third perspective of agency of Haiti's poor. Haiti's history then serves as model for Schuller to introduce a tripartite framework, "one that tracks and theorizes the participation of sets of actors at three levels: global, state and 'civil society' (or the 'people')" (146). By navigating Haitian history through the actions of the oppressed poor, one is able to have a better grasp of its cultural resources.

Schuller states that "contemporary written accounts focus disproportionate attention on national or international elite actors missing the activities and perspectives of subaltern actors" (158). Dating back as early as the colonial period, the poor masses of Haiti have long exercised resistance and agency. Schuller points to the reluctance of the literature to highlight the stance that the poor masses had taken against L'Ouverture after he "had taken their loyalty for granted" (159), which led to his eventual demise by French forces. This pattern was to be repeated again with rulers such Jean-Jacques Dessalines and King Christophe, who had oppressed the poor, Black masses. Women were also active in organizing "visible peaceful protests against the Occupation [of the United States in Haiti] that encouraged other dissent" (161) and fought for suffrage rights in 1950. Some of the most impressive acts of resiliency and agency occurred during the infamous Duvalier regime, which lasted from 1957-1986. With the violent suppression of a student protest in Gonaives in 1985, Haiti's poor climaxed to its breaking point and formed popular organizations (OPs) (161), resulting in the eventual ousting of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986. Haiti's history is rich with events that support the notion of Haitian predisposed resiliency. Whether one engages Haiti using the victimhood or self-destruct trope, what does remain clear is that historical perspective, at times, functions as a political engine that marginalizes the perceptions of Haiti and Haitians abroad. Furthermore, both perspectives hinder the academic achievement of Haitian students because they elicit lowered expectations from administration or faculty members. The context of reception becomes biased by the slanted views of the country as either powerless or inept and is a great disadvantage for incoming Haitian and Haitian-Americans students. The interpretation of Haitian history by administration and faculty is critical in the success of their Haitians students. If they are apprised of the historical existence of Haiti's cultural resources, strategies and practices will more likely be geared towards helping Haitian and Haitian-American students reach their full academic potential.

Resiliency and viability are also historically present when observing the responses of Haitian students to political adversity. In the latter part of the twentieth century, Haiti's politically unstable climate was especially violent towards students. During the Duvalier regime, the educated population was seen as a political threat, and a concerted effort was made to target schools and children. This practice was also perpetuated during the ousting of Aristides in the early 1990s. Opponents of Aristides's Lavalas Movement terrorized schools and forced schools to disband under the threat of violence. Students attended school sporadically and under constant threat. Pressure was exerted on institutions where there were children to frighten, to paralyze

and to pressure the population (Desir, 2007). Charlene Desir's "Understanding the Sending Context of Haitian Immigrant Students" develops the concept of the "privileged poor," which is applicable to the goals of this paper. The term is used to describe "poor Haitians who manage to achieve an education [and] become part of a privileged minority, even though they may suffer the same material deprivations as their uneducated neighbors" (86). Desir's findings report that students were able to view themselves as political targets and as agents of change despite the deliberate hindrances to their education. Haitian students understood the power they possessed as educated, young people who represented the poor masses (89). Agathe, an interview subject who was a student during the anti-Aristides violence, asserted, "they did not want us to grow up to be anything in the future... They came to bother us because we wanted to be useful to the country in the future" (89). Another student reaffirmed, "we would become somebody in the future and be capable of helping the people. [The opposition] wanted to remain the only one in power" (89). Desir's concept of the privileged poor is relevant for Haitian students situated within the United States educational system. The notion of agency for the poor through reverence of education can be remitted to newly immigrated Haitian and Haitian-American students. The children of the privileged poor recognize the importance and necessity of education. That urgency is just as pressing for Haitian students in the United States for many of the same reasons. By showing students that Haitian agency is rooted in the continual pursuit of education, education in the United States becomes a cultural investment for themselves and for their heritage.

Finally, examining Haitians' transnational practices as diasporic citizens in the United States and their homeland reinforces claims of Haitian resiliency and viability. These cultural resources are demonstrated by the active role that the Diaspora (a term used to "identify the hundreds of thousands of Haitians living in many countries of the world") had in influencing the spaces of their homeland and host country (Danticat, 2001, xiv). Miguel Laguerre's (1998) research investigates the emergence of diasporic citizenship by examining Haitian migration to the United States and how that migration has solidified a transnational relationship between Haiti, the U.S., and those who stake claim to both nations. Laguerre defines diasporic citizenship as "the situation of the individual who lives outside the boundaries of the nation-state to which he or she had formerly held allegiance and who [gains] experiences through transnational migration" (12). Laguerre argues that transnational practices—"the ability of immigrants to influence and participate in the political, social and civil processes in both the sending and the receiving countries" (187)—reshape American society with each new wave of immigrants and turns the United States into a center that radiates linkages with satellite countries (7).

The transnational practices of Haitians function to illustrate how Haitian resiliency and viability morph on American soil. One of the most perceivable transnational practices is the act of remittance. "It is estimated that the Haitian diaspora in the U.S. sends an average of \$400 million to Haiti each year" (Laguerre, 1998, 108). The act of remittance demonstrates not only that Haitian immigrants are invested in their homeland, but also that they are able to make sacrifices in order for those remittances to occur. Laguerre compares the relationship between the host household and the homeland household to "a firm which may consist of a headquarters-household linked to one or more subsidiary-households" (95). Laguerre uses the headquarters/subsidiary relationship to establish the dependency of both parties in survival. The headquarters, which is situated in Haiti, accrues the means to transport its family to the United States and keep them stable while they are settling. The subsidiary then becomes responsible for supporting the headquarters-household financially once they have become established in the

United States. The viability component is activated in this process. Subsequently, to ensure the survival of the family, relatives pool together resources while in Haiti to provide the opportunity for migration. Once they emigrate from Haiti, immigrant families must develop the financial means to reciprocate the initial familial support. Haitian immigrants have assayed various venues to ensure economic and cultural longevity. Businesses such as restaurants, bakeries, shipping firms, grocery stores, and the music industry provide “an expanded market for the sale of Haitian products in the United States and of U. S. products in Haiti,” thus allowing “some to prosper in their business ventures, to be upwardly mobile in American society, to provide jobs to compatriots, and to be key figures in the formation of agglomeration economies in diverse diasporic sites” (126).

Haitian media operating in the United States also preserves the culture and keeps Haitian immigrants connected to their homeland. “The immigrant press serves...to maintain contact and understanding between the home countries and their scattered members in every part of the United States” (Laguerre, 1998, 129). In addition to maintaining the link between immigrants in the U.S. and Haiti, Laguerre posits that the media and press function to mediate between Haitian and American culture. “Journalists inform listeners about things they must learn to survive in the United States... Information on immigration issues, voting and the background of presidential, legislative and mayoral candidates are also provided” (138). The media also takes on the role of the “spokesperson on behalf of their communities... Both government and non-government agencies make information available to the media so they can share it with their communities” (138). Haitians, therefore, have access to the political realm of American society and have a voice as constituents. And finally, the media works to solidify the diasporic community. “It is the mirror through which the diaspora looks at itself. It helps maintain the community as a whole precisely because it reflects the struggle of the diaspora and reflects its interests” (138). Laguerre cites how papers such as the New York *Haiti-Observateur* “allowed diverse groups access to the newspaper and thereby crystallized zones of cooperation among the immigrants and some unity among a considerable segment of the population, and it served as an anti-Duvalier opposition paper” (139). As a result, the media became an effective instrument for exemplifying Haitian viability because, as diasporic citizens, Haitians had a space to retain cultural references, be active in the political arena, and participate in the politics of their homeland.

The variations in Haitian transnational practices also help prove that these qualities are malleable and can be manipulated to benefit Haitians in the educational systems. Within the United States, Haiti’s cultural resources have carved niches in the American economy by creating a demand for Haitian goods and products for immigrant and American populations. Families of the subsidiary-household sacrifice budgets and amass funds to send remittances to the headquarters-household still situated in Haiti. They utilize the opportunity of betterment in the United States to help improve the conditions of families still struggling in Haiti. Finally, the media facilitates a means to maintain the culture as well as manifest a political presence in the United States. So there is little doubt that Haiti’s cultural resources are viable outside the island and motivate the transnational practices of Haitian diasporic citizenship.

The real challenge lies in transposing these resources into public education where they would benefit the multitude of Haitian and Haitian-American students who have yet to reach their academic potential. One of the first suggestions for the conversion of resiliency and viability into teaching practices is to provide administrators and faculty a better and comprehensive understanding of the culture from which these students come. Schools with a high percentage of Haitian immigrant and Haitian-American students should have a team ready

to educate and provide resources to the teachers and guidance counselors of this group. Similar to Lilly's (2009) proposed Foreign Student Advocacy team, the purpose of the team would be to offer immediate assistance to foreign-born students and eliminate negative stereotypes that might seep into the school environment. The recommendation for breaking down the negative stereotypes associated with Haitian students involves a top-down approach. Teachers and counselors should be among the first to receive a comprehensive history of Haiti, one that is not limited to the victimhood versus self-destruction binary, but one that enhances the notion of Haitian resiliency. The advocacy team should primarily target teachers and counselors because of their impact on student learning. If a teacher or counselor has the preconception that Haitian students are not teachable or incapable of adapting to American public education, the curriculum becomes irrelevant. In order for students to receive the best chances for achievement, their teachers must also believe that they are capable of doing so. Thus, having the advocacy team as a resource is invaluable to augmenting chances of success because it would work to contextualize the historical Haitian experience and heritage of resiliency and reverence towards education.

In regards to tapping into the cultural resource of viability, schools must invest in media resources. They have proven to be effective in reaching the broader diaspora audience and getting them actively involved in issues that are of particular interests to them. Ways of doing this could include placing school bulletins or newsletters in local Haitian publications. This is important for parents who might feel intimidated by the school because of language barriers or lack of knowledge of the education system. Publishing newsletters and bulletins in Haitian-Creole helps assert that parents can attain the proper information to make decisions for their children and that the school chooses to value their cultural heritage by adapting a mode of communication into their language.

Finally, the curriculum itself plays an important role in helping to boost academic achievement among Haitian students. Bilingual education is a helpful resource that allows newly immigrated students to learn and adapt to the school's systems using their own language. However, what is to happen to those students once they mainstream, or to Haitian-American students who do not suffer under the burdens of the language barrier? Haiti and its impact on American society should not be limited to bilingualism in ESL classes. The ultimate testament to viability is having the Haitian experience represented in the historical, cultural, and literary subjects being taught. For a Haitian or Haitian American to encounter Haiti in classroom curriculum (outside its usual categorization as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere) activates a sense of belonging in American society. Not only will Haitian students have a better grasp of their stance as members of American society, but their peers will also learn to break the stigmatization of Haitians as illegal immigrants who lack the agency to save themselves.

Discussions about Haiti are complex and generate feelings of adoration for the first independent Black republic as well as disbelief at Haiti's continual struggles. However, it is important to keep in mind that Haiti's disadvantaged have continued to strive towards the resurrection of their homeland. The dialogue formed around Haitians and the context in which they are sent and received all play critical roles in the achievements of the children of the Haitian diaspora. Recognizing the cultural resources of Haitians, through their feats in history and their adjustment to American culture, is important in order to construct successful strategies towards improving the academic performance of Haitian students, as well as their sense of belonging as newly integrated citizens in American society.

Wideline Seraphin, the daughter of Haitian immigrant parents, was born and raised in Miami, Florida. Schooling experiences as a Haitian-American student spurred her research interests in the development of the Haitian and Haitian-American identity within the American public education system. She is a second-year master's student in the department of African American and African Diaspora Studies. Thesis research topics include transnational practices of the Haitian Diaspora and implementing best practices to improve the academic performance of Haitian students.

Reflection

While engaging in research for this project, I could not help but feel overwhelmed by the egregious conditions that Haitian immigrants have faced and continue to face in modern-day America. What further concerned me was the implications of this treatment on Haitian and Haitian-American students. As a Haitian American, I will continue to strive for upholding the rights of Haitians within the United States. History has demonstrated time and again that Haitians have a resource of resiliency, though battered, that continues to push them upward. As a field, Black Studies provides a space in which the story of the Black immigrant is not stifled and its efforts remain unflagging in challenging the forces that continue to marginalize people of color.

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