Diasporic Lakou: A Haitian Academic Explores Her Path to Haiti Pre- and Post-Earthquake

CHARLENE DÉSIR
The Empowerment Network, Global

In this essay, Charlene Désir reflects on her role as an academic from the Haitian diaspora and her journey to reconnect to her Haitian roots after the 2010 earthquake. Désir begins by exploring her family background and the centrality of lakou*—a sacred family space in which to connect to her ancestors and cultural ways of knowing. By centering the conversation on community and reciprocity, she considers the roles and responsibilities of academics in the diaspora to give back to their communities. This essay tells the story of her experiences in Saint-Raphael, Haiti, developing the Lakou Solèy Academic Enrichment and Cultural Arts Center. In examining her own role in her community—or* lakou*—Désir underscores the importance of using Haitian epistemology in the process of rebuilding Haiti.*

> In overthrowing me, you have cut down in Saint-Domingue [Haiti] only the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep.
>
> *Toussaint L'Overture (Haitian liberator), 1803.*

The Haitian narrative in the Americas has always been a story of perseverance. Since independence, Haiti has faced social, political, and environmental challenges and contradictions; the January 12, 2010, earthquake was a profound wound for the people of Haiti, but only the most recent one. For the Haitian diaspora, however—and particularly for Haitian academics—it raised a new set of complexities: what is our role and what is our responsibility in response to post-earthquake needs?

As Toussaint L'Ouverture stated so many years ago, the essence of liberty in Haiti runs very deep. It is a nation that will neither die nor surrender. Haitian culture has played a significant role in Haitian survival over the centuries. The second republic in the Americas following the United States, Haiti gained

Harvard Educational Review Vol. 81 No. 2 Summer 2011
Copyright © by the President and Fellows of Harvard College

independence after a successful slave revolt that was courageously fought for twelve years with limited arms but with a profound faith in and unmatched thirst for liberty.[1] Haiti's victory brought additional wealth to the United States, enabling it to acquire the land of the Louisiana Purchase.[2] Simultaneously, however, Haiti's independence created a larger threat to the institution of slavery, which continued to exist in the United States and all over the Americas. As a result, Haiti was blocked from international trade for fifty years through an embargo imposed by France and the United States. The embargo, along with a debt imposed by these foreign powers, created a financial crisis that has existed since Haiti's inception as a nation. Nonetheless, Haiti began to form alliances with other colonized nations, supplying slaves with arms to aid them in gaining their own independence. Still, Haiti remains the only country in the Americas to have gained its independence through a slave revolt.

Over the years, due to the lack of solid financial grounding and a dearth of opportunities to further develop its social structures, Haiti has struggled to build a financial and political infrastructure that would allow it to become truly independent and self-sufficient. After centuries of enslavement, its only model was often that of its colonizers, the French, along with the West African traditions that had merged over the years with the ways of knowing engendered by slavery. With so many internal contradictions and external barriers to participation in a global economy, presidents routinely failed. The Haitian people, adamant about the importance of a position they viewed as a true representation of the nation, would remove those in power—by force or even death.

Years of political uncertainty followed; in 1915 the United States intervened with a nineteen-year occupation. During that period, there was a shift from French to U.S. hegemony (Laguerre, 1998). The U.S. occupation challenged the spiritual way of life that had been a primary sustaining force for the majority of the nation since independence. Vodou[3] was attacked: many temples were destroyed and religious leaders were killed (Manigat, 2005). Since that time, Haitian knowledge, modes of perception, and interactions with the world have been misrepresented as superstitious, evil, and even satanic.

The Haitian people have continuously used their spiritual power as a collective weapon to fight for the security of Haiti as a nation. They have been challenged by many obstacles from outside Haiti, by corrupt internal leaders, and by natural disasters, such as hurricanes and the 2010 earthquake. Nonetheless, the people continue to survive on hope and with the same faith and intrinsic cultural tools that have been passed down from generation to generation since independence.

Many scholars of Haitian studies explain that the majority of Haitians, regardless of their religious affiliations, believe in Vodou. Even those who may not be active participants in the religion embrace Vodou as a social framework, relating to it as many nondevout Jews and Christians relate to the religion that has shaped their cultural heritage. Vodou provides a context of existing in the Haitian world that has sustained the survival of a people strained by so many

internal and external challenges. In the landmark text *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People,* Courlander (1960) explained the essence of Vodou and its central place in Haitian society:

> Vodou is clearly more than a ritual of the cult temple. It is an integrated system of concepts concerning human behavior, the relation of mankind to those who have lived before, and to the natural and supernatural forces of the universe. It relates the living to the dead and to those not yet born. It "explains" unpredictable events by showing them to be consistent with established principles. In short, it is a true religion which attempts to tie the unknown and thus create order where chaos existed before. (p. 9)

However, Vodou has been identified by outsiders over and over as a cult or satanic religion (Courlander, 1960; Laguerre, 1998; Moral, 1978; Zéphir, 2004). It is not surprising that the larger society would malign a religion that was created by slaves and sustained by their descendants. For this reason, many believers take part in Vodou religious rituals secretly.

It was not until my doctoral studies at Harvard, in the process of training to become an academic, that I consciously confronted the notion of being Haitian and reflected on my own epistemology. *How do I know what I know?* My knowledge stems from my cultural position, from the fact that I was raised in a Haitian family with cultural and spiritual beliefs that were specific and unique to the Haitian experience.

My illiterate grandmother was the head of the family. She always considered me a lucky child and nurtured me as her spiritual apprentice. I spent many hours praying with her and preparing for what I now, as an adult, understand were Vodou ceremonies. She never explained anything, but I watched and assisted. Every January 1, on the anniversary of Haitian independence, we would have a large family gathering. All the children would be dressed in new pajamas, and the adults often wore white. My grandmother would begin with a prayer, and the adults would sing and dance as we children watched with curiosity and a little bit of fear.

The fear stemmed from the arrival of an ancestor who would be channeled through my grandmother. Every year, it was a different ancestor. This ancestor would come and describe how the way of life had been when they lived in Haiti and tell us how they had survived challenges. The adults would pose questions as the children observed. The ancestor would provide insight and disclose areas of vulnerability that members of the family would confront during the following year, advising them as to what they should do when these adversities presented themselves. I often wondered where my grandmother was as these ancestors spoke through her. Every year, the ancestors would end by asking for corn to eat. Then they would say that they were tired and had to leave and would call for the children. The adults would line us up, and the ancestor would provide a final blessing for the future, touching the heads of each child. On the ancestor's departure, my grandmother would return to us,

appearing tired. We would then drink squash soup, taking part in a tradition observed in most households in Haiti and the diaspora. The soup is a symbolic remembrance of the success of the Haitian revolution, as the slaves could not partake of squash soup since squash was considered a vegetable too luxurious for slaves to eat.

We shared squash soup every January 1 in honor of our ancestors and as a remembrance of the strength of the Haitian people. As I write these lines, I smile and feel tears falling from my face. I am not sure if they are from my pride in these sacred family meetings, which maintained my sense of self, or from the shame and fear of exposing my family secret—recounting these events that others may perceive as inferior, crazy, or satanic. But, more profoundly, these sacred experiences have solidified my connection to both scholarship and cultural responsibility.

In her text *Migration and Vodou*, Richman (2005) explains that Haitians in the diaspora at some point will be confronted with the stereotypes associated with Vodou. As Haitian Americans, we are constantly bombarded with negative images of our country and the ignorant perceptions of the core ideals of being Haitian. As a Haitian child raised in Massachusetts, I never disclosed my family's ceremonies to anyone until this very moment, as I write this article. As a youngster, I only understood that these ceremonies were family traditions brought from Haiti—ceremonies for protection, good health, connecting with ancestors, and developing a stronger faith. These traditions and rituals that came from the family compound—the *lakou*—were not necessarily Vodou rituals but ceremonies that created a sacred family space in which to connect to our ancestors and cultural ways of knowing. I was never directly told that these were Vodou ceremonies, but I was told that they were secret and should not be discussed with anyone. In fact, we never spoke about the ceremonies once they ended. This secret, sacred space of my family lakou is what connected me to Haiti and, more importantly, made me who I am in this world.

Lakou is defined as a family and/or spiritual compound where work is shared (McAlister, 2002). Understanding the concept of lakou is central to understanding the social framework that exists in the Haitian tradition. As Smith (2001) explains it:

> Contemporary lakou(s) remain important and multifaceted centers for family and community life. As the headquarters of the extended-family economic activities, they are commercial centers; as dwellings for the lwas [Haitian gods] and the ancestors (who partake in rituals held for them there), they are religious and ancestral centers; and finally, as locations for daily interaction between neighbors and for organizational meetings, they are important community centers. (p. 80)

Michel (2009) further describes the significance of the modern lakou:

> Whereas the actual physical settings where large families lived and worked together for generations in the countryside might have new geographies, new boundaries and more complex locations that are visible or not, the Lakou, as

social mileu remains ever so present in modern Haiti, in both rural and urban settings. Real or imagined, today's lakou(s), are relational spaces that serve our communities, ensure participation and ownership in communal affairs, and provide pillars to build and develop projects and possibilities of all types that benefit the group.

In many ways, the lakou is more than a community; it is a theoretical and social framework and an integral part of the social fabric of Haiti. Within the community, there is a *poto mitan*—the center post—that brings strength to all parts of the surroundings, including all aspects of family and community life. As Haitians in the diaspora address the needs of Haiti, we are faced with the fact that many centers of strength are needed to assist in the rebuilding of the country. 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. It is essential now to expand the lakou to several different levels that will represent the entire community, including the diaspora, for the long-term work of rebuilding.

Courlander (1960) remarked that after the U.S. occupation, the traditional lakou was threatened as the population increased and land ownership decreased in Haiti. As young people began to leave Haiti in droves in search of more financial opportunities, some even reestablished lakou(s) in the diaspora. After the fall of the twenty-nine-year Duvalier dictatorship and the subsequent exile of the first democratically elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide, in 1991, Laguerre (1998) introduced the notion of diasporic citizenship. Grassroots organizations headed by those in the diaspora grew, and there was an unprecedented increase in economic aid to Haiti by those in the diaspora. A double allegiance formed between Haiti and the United States, as Haitians' sense of displacement was transformed into a reattachment to Haiti.

Becoming a Researcher in Haiti

The 2010 earthquake shook Haiti, and we continue to highlight the needs and pains of the nation even a year later. As in the early 1990s, there is a sense of urgency to recommit to the lakou. I am particularly interested in ways that academics can bring their experiences to support Haiti, and I believe that part of our work is to reinforce the importance of recognizing that the Haitian ways of knowing, doing, and operating within the lakou philosophy are central to the rebuilding of the nation. By virtue of my social and intellectual location, I hold myself responsible for exposing the ways Haitian epistemology has been maligned and advocating for its incorporation into the rebuilding efforts by sharing my own experiences.

In my work as a school psychologist in an urban public school in Massa-

chusetts from 1995 to 2000, I began devoting my scholarship to gaining a better understanding of the Haitian cultural background and the concept of lakou by developing close relationships with elementary and middle school Haitian bilingual students. These students were consistently referred for cognitive assessments because of perceived academic limitations. As I got to know them, it became apparent to me that their learning and their struggles could not be separated from Haitian culture and history and the context of their past and present lives. These students described extremely violent scenes that they had witnessed during the last embargo in Haiti. They had large gaps in their schooling because there was not one full year of school from 1986 to 1996 (FONEP, 1999; Gibbons, 1999).

As I listened to their stories, I went to administrators to explain that students' perceived academic and cognitive challenges could be linked to their experiences in Haiti. However, I was discouraged from exploring this line of inquiry and encouraged to continue testing. Frustrated, I decided to attend graduate school, an academic space that would provide a context of intellectual legitimacy from which to explore these students' needs and tell their stories. As many of my students in the United States had not been able to fully explain the specifics of their Haitian school experiences, my dissertation study became a six-year ethnography during which I worked with students toward reconstructing their academic lives prior to migration. It was my spiritual interpretation that these students had chosen me to be a *poto mitan* for them because I had become a cultural advocate: joining, witnessing, and interacting in their implicit lakou, which had become evident to me as a researcher and member of that community. It did not surprise me that I often found students in my office during their free periods and that I frequently received invitations to family events. Years after my research, I am still in contact with several of my students, now in their early twenties.

My research uncovered that Haitian culture was suppressed in the bilingual program because the school's ultimate purpose was to create a context that benefited the white majority. Being black, bilingual, and low socioeconomic status, the Haitian students satisfied several diversity-related requirements, allowing middle-class white students to make up the majority of the population. The middle-class white majority was well served by the school, while Haitian students' culture was undermined and their ways of learning and knowing ignored. When bilingual education ended in Massachusetts, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean language programs were maintained as dual immersion because they were deemed world languages. The Haitian program, based on Kreyol—one of the pillars of Haitian cultural survival and resistance—was shut down despite being second in size only to Spanish. In the United States, there is an ethnocentrism that often demeans the Haitian home, the Haitian community, the Haitian lakou. In school settings, this prejudice encourages young immigrants to distance themselves from Haitian ways, knowing, and cultural commitments (Désir, 2008).

Obtaining (Academic) Legitimacy in Haiti

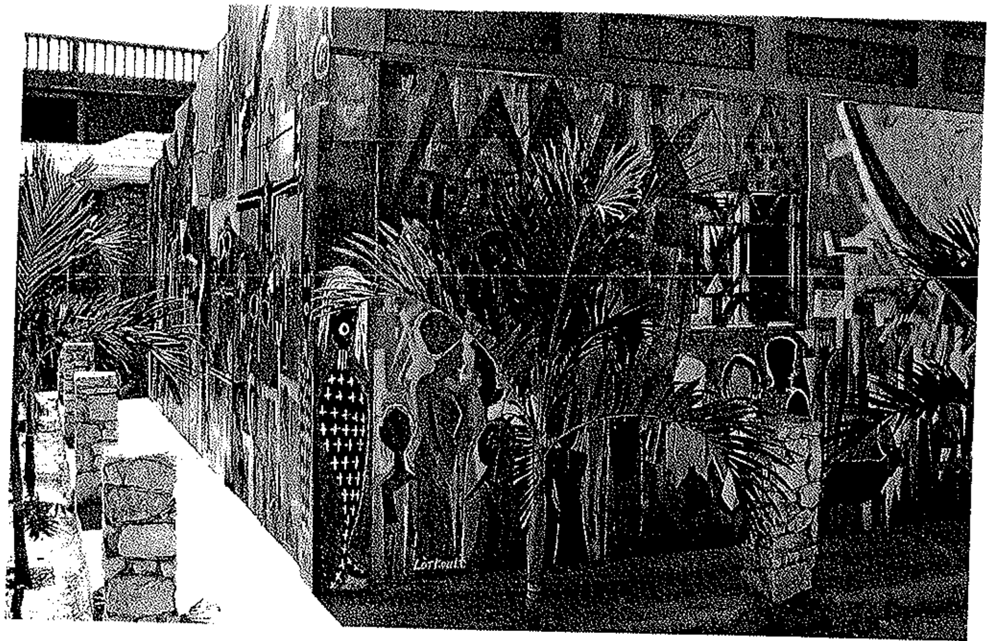
To begin my dissertation research, I spent six months in Haiti learning about the schools and the political issues surrounding children on the island. My goal was to better understand my students in the United States. I planned to interview a group of teens about their perceptions of being students in Haiti during and after the embargo. My first exchange in the field taught me that my academic training was only part of what it would take to support and understand Haitian students in Haiti. My cultural background turned out to be possibly my strongest asset. My understanding of and commitment to the communal way of life in Haiti and my embrace of the lakou mentality opened doors for me that might have otherwise stayed shut had I only relied on my academic tools.

On my first day interviewing, my student informants looked at my dark-brown face and stared at my locs. They listened to my accented Kreyol with what I perceived as eagerness mixed with curiosity. I asked to turn on the tape recorder for the focus group, and they agreed, but when I turned it on, no one said a word. Finally, three of the young ladies invited me to join them the next day to do my hair. I did not question their request; I arrived the following day. They washed my hair with well water and natural soap made in the community. They peeled the skin off aloe leaves and exposed the sticky insides. They took a bowl and began to mash the pulp into a liquid, which they used to meticulously roll my locs into neat twisted curls on top of my head. When they were done, they handed me a mirror. I looked at my reflection, and in that moment I knew that, as the students in the United States had done, these students in Haiti had chosen me to understand and support their education.

While there, I learned that because schools and students in Haiti are crucial to the nation as a whole, during times of unrest and instability they are particularly vulnerable and are often targets of politically motivated violence. Paul Bien Aimé, the minister of education at the time of the embargo during the 1990s, explained in an interview for my dissertation research that, because education is essential for liberation, advancement, and the reconstruction of Haiti, an attack on students meant a direct attack on the social structure of the country. It was clear to me that, for these reasons, I had to become a *poto mitan* for Haitian education. But the center post can only be inside the lakou, a part of the community.

The Lakou Solèy Academic Enrichment and Cultural Arts Center Walls of Hope Project

A central part of my work has always been my commitment to young people. The majority of the population in Haiti is under sixteen years old (UNICEF, 2011); thus, it is essential that youth take a leading role in rebuilding the nation. Traditional Haitian ways of sustaining and mastering harsh realities must be central in preparing the next generation to survive.



The Lakou Solèy Academic Enrichment and Cultural Arts Center

While I was collecting data from young people in the town of Saint Raphael, in the north of Haiti, several asked for a cultural and enrichment center. It was apparent that they did not have a physical space that they could claim for themselves and use for recreational or extracurricular activities. As a Haitian academic, and having witnessed similar needs in the United States, I was committed to supporting their dream. Their dream thus became my dream, and I worked on this for several years, creating small workshops every summer and using my personal funds to begin building the center. Seven years later, in September 2010, in post-earthquake Haiti, the Lakou Solèy Academic Enrichment and Cultural Arts Center opened its doors in Saint Raphael. The center's primary goal is to provide academic and art enrichment to students, and professional development to teachers. With the building still under construction, we worked on two major projects between April and August 2010: a series of teacher workshops on trauma and the Walls of Hope Youth project.

In July 2010, with the outside structure complete, we installed electrical wiring and plumbing for a small bathroom. We also wanted to create a mural outside of the center as a symbol of the hope and resilience of the Haitian people. We invited a group of students from the local schools interested in visual arts to paint the mural and also elicited the help of local artists and students from École National des Arts (ENARTS), the only art university in Haiti, which had collapsed after the earthquake. We thought their involvement would create a space for their own healing as well. A number of community residents also

offered their artistic skills to help design the mural. After an initial meeting with the students, we began a conversation about extending the mural to decorate all of the outside walls of the center. Over the next few weeks, a group of artists comprised of students and community members began painting the walls of the Lakou Solèy Center. They painted children reaching their hands to the sky, women embracing nature, and traditional Vodou scenes depicting Gede, who is the protector of children, the trickster, and the spirit that symbolizes existing in contradiction.

As the days passed, the colors seemed to jump off the walls as if they were three-dimensional. Members of the community would come and visit, staring at the walls, smiling and nodding their heads. One day, a woman who appeared to be on her way to the marketplace walked by, balancing on her head a large basket of vegetables and fruits to sell. She slowed her pace as she walked past the mural, looking at each image around the center walls as if acknowledging the effort in every drop of paint. Then she stopped and stood, and my gaze fell on the image that she was looking at—a female body, tall and slender like her own, hands extended as hers were as she held her basket: on her head she held farm goods; the faceless woman on the mural held the sun. I was reminded that Haiti is often depicted by artists and historians as a mother holding up a nation. The two women—one with the basket, the other on the mural—both mirrored the image of Haiti as woman caring for the bodies of her inhabitants with food—in the basket—and knowledge—represented by the sun's light. These two images represented my grandmother and so many other women who sustain Haiti in the midst of its multiple challenges and who birth the future. As the woman stood there, arms reaching up, she began, for me, to also represent the tree of liberty—another center post for the lakou—showing ownership of the center by mirroring the reflection that captured her story.

For the young people of St. Raphael, ownership of the center was also a common theme. I was pleased that they were taking ownership of the Lakou Solèy Center. As one student expressed it, "Si yon gwoup timoun vini St. Raphael nou ka di yo Sant Lakou Solèy se pou nou" [If there is a group of young people that come to St. Raphael, we can tell them that the Lakou Solèy Center is for us]. As the country's majority, young people must take an active role. Adults must provide access and modeling so that they can begin naturally to take on leadership roles in the future of Haiti. It is my hope that Lakou Solèy will provide this structure and opportunity.

My idea was further validated one morning when a group of young ladies approached the center with brooms, buckets, and mops. The center was not officially open because we were still cleaning and fixing minor issues in the modest three-room structure. These young ladies explained that they had come to clean the center; it was ready to be opened. We stepped aside and let them clean. They spent hours wiping, sweeping, and mopping in their bare feet. When they were done, they brought in chairs that had been donated by the church and aligned them in rows. They looked at the room, and together

they began to dance. One of the premises of the lakou concept is the actual physical work that takes place in a shared space; the young women not only did the work but also initiated the activity. The dancing reminded me of the days when my grandmother would facilitate our family ceremonies and I would watch the adults dance. This time the young people led the ceremony, while I prepared and provided the context and joined their dance. After this powerful opening ceremony and blessing, the Lakou Solèy Center was officially ready for the public. The following day, we opened the doors; children and adults came throughout the day to visit the center.

I brought my academic background to the Haitian context, but over seven years I was trained and molded by the young people of Haiti in their St. Raphael lakou. The students themselves claimed the space, demystifying the hierarchy of ownership, which is a central concept in the lakou tradition. The young people of St. Raphael have shown me that a culturally sensitive space begins with all members having ownership, mutual respect, responsibility, and loyalty. We all belong and we all take ownership. For six months, our staff worked with close to three hundred young people. I did not remember all of them, or may not have met all of them, because they were involved in various workshops over five months. But if I hesitated in remembering their names, they would explain, "Mwen se timoun Lakou Solèy" [I am a child of Lakou Solèy], and I would smile. This was and is a lakou for the young people—the future of Haiti—and I have helped build the center post.

Since the center officially opened, we have continued conducting monthly art workshops for students, offering tutoring services, and allowing the space to be used as a general recreation center for the young people. It is our goal to establish sustainable projects using the arts and to provide professional development and resources to the community. The Walls of Hope project and the center became more than symbols of hope and resilience. They are a center post that facilitates the empowerment of young people's imagination through the arts, leading, we hope, to the reimagined and bright future of Haiti that they would have helped create in their own lakou.

Let the Chosen People Come Forth: Teacher Workshops

On January 12, 2010, the earth shook for thirty-five seconds in Haiti, exposing the realities of the country and years of neglect to a public audience and thus raising the consciousness of many. The people of Haiti named the earthquake *goudougoudou*,[4] which is the sound that it made as the walls of homes shook. As Haitian academics watched these graphic images on the news, our hearts sank, and many of us joined alliances in order to connect with healing efforts. Our connections began in multiple ways. Gina Ulysse (2010) wrote a very powerful song, "Tranblé" [Shaken], which I often played for my own healing and understanding of this new commitment. She sings, "Tranble n ape tranble, tranble nou sot tranble, Ezili si nou tranble ankò pran nou. Kenbe pitit lakay

yo tranble n ape tranble" [Ezili (Mother of love), we are shaking—hold us and keep our children]. Her voice pierces through my body every time I hear it, a reminder that we Haitians are connected to a very powerful spiritual source that runs deep in our history and is a source of our resilience.

A part of Haiti's knowledge is intertwined with a deep spiritual belief that there are those who are chosen to work in the lakou. For these reasons, many Haitians are very skeptical about researchers and outsiders coming to support their rebuilding. Therefore, I have supported academic relief efforts only by invitation. Once schools in Haiti reopened after the earthquake, the regional director of schools in St. Raphael, who is my brother-in-law, invited me to conduct a workshop for teachers on how to support students who have been traumatized as a result of the earthquake.

In August 2010, fifty K–12 teachers and school administrators from five different schools in St. Raphael and the surrounding communities took part in a three-day workshop on trauma facilitated by me and my team: my colleague Pamela Hall, a community psychologist; Stephanie Staidle, an art therapist; and Kyrah Daniels, a graduate student of black studies with a focus in religion. Hall spoke only English, and of the other two team members, one spoke Kreyol with an accent and the other spoke some French. Despite my own accented Kreyol, I knew my previous work in the community would add legitimacy to my external knowledge.

The teachers greeted us as we walked into the room with a minigenerator, a projector, and a fan. They appeared excited at the idea of being exposed to Western theories that would help them support their students. They wanted to know what we knew in order to gain more understanding of their own practice. We were meeting in a classroom that had wooden desks and seats. The windows had no glass panes; each had small brick-sized opening for air to circulate. As I looked around the room, I could feel the sweat beads beginning to form around my brow. Some faces looked at us with curiosity, others with blank stares. I knew community was significant and that laying a common understanding would be paramount, as I had learned from my students years ago. I was entering their lakou. I stood before them with confidence but also with humility, with the understanding that as an outsider, I would have to convince them that we were there to exchange knowledge. I had to let them see who I was.

I began the workshop by explaining my connection to Haiti. I told them the story of how I was named after my grandmother, who was also raised in the north of Haiti. She decided to change her very Haitian name, Charlestine, to a more "American" one and came up with Charlene. I further explained that my name is different in English and in Kreyol: when I am in the United States, it is pronounced *Sharleen;* in Haiti, it's *Sharlen*—but in my spirit I am always Charlestine. The teachers smiled and began to share the stories of how they had received their names. This opening ritual bridged a cultural gap from the beginning of the workshop. Many of their own stories connected them

to school, learning, and becoming teachers. I entered a new realm and was accepted as a facilitator and a member. I also saw how essential the teachers' role and voices were to supporting students in St. Raphael.

Hall and I were the main facilitators, and we conducted the workshop both in English and Kreyol. This was my first Kreyol workshop in Haiti. I wanted to be respectful and to acknowledge that the teachers were the experts and that I was merely facilitating a conversation about trauma and children. We began the first group discussion by asking, "Since the earthquake, what reactions have you noticed from your students?" The teachers began to share different stories. The first to speak explained that schools were closed for nearly two months after the earthquake. He said that the majority of the children who died during the earthquake were in school at the time. For this reason, the teachers had difficulty convincing many students to return to school because they were afraid that their school buildings would collapse.

The loss of lives and family members caused an overcast of grief for St. Raphael. The community mourned a significant number of college students who lost their lives while in college in Port-au-Prince during the earthquake. Teachers also noted that they had seen an increase in impulsive behaviors among the teens. Their interpretation was that the students felt their lives could be changed and taken away in a matter of seconds. For some, this translated into reckless behavior. Throughout our time in St. Raphael, I saw more pregnant teens than I had ever noticed in the past. The teachers expressed that they lacked professional development and that the need to recognize the earthquake's psychological impact in the context of school was paramount. For this reason, they expressed gratitude that we came to conduct a workshop on trauma. We proceeded with the workshop, having established a common ground with the teachers. I felt positive that I had successfully gained entry into their lakou.

We went through the materials on grief, concerning behaviors, and acute trauma versus post–traumatic stress, and we discussed creating a healing context in school. Teachers reiterated that this process of healing would have to be long term and that they would need support to sustain their efforts. In response, we focused the next day of the project on creating lesson plans based on the information that we provided in the workshops. We soon found out that a majority of the teachers had some training in pedagogy, but most in the district did not use lesson plans in the traditional Western way. The teachers agreed that they wanted training in planning lessons.

The night before the lesson plan workshop, we created a presentation in Kreyol, translating a section from the syllabus of a global education course I had recently taught. We woke up eager the next morning, prepared to continue the work that had brought us to Haiti, letting the teachers guide our path. As we prepared to eat before heading to the workshop, one of the teachers arrived with traditional Haitian straw hats for the four of us. I assumed that he had come to sell us the hats; he smiled and said no, that these were gifts for

us to begin another day. We proceeded to the workshop site—our lakou—very proud, very humble, smiling, with our Haitian straw hats on our heads.

We engaged the teachers by explaining how lesson plans are used in the United States and asked them again if they wanted us to talk with them about lesson plans. They emphatically responded, *YES!*

We explained the concept of the lesson plan, gave examples, and even created a sample and brought in children volunteers to demonstrate the lesson. We were not sure if all aspects of the presentation were understood, as there were many blank expressions. Nonetheless, we encouraged the teachers to come up with lessons of their own based on the subjects of trauma and healing. The teachers decided to work in five different grade-level groups to create a collective lesson plan. We agreed that they would present the lessons to their students. We spent some time listening to the original ideas of each group's lesson. It was still not clear from their explanations if they were directly making the links between creating a formal lesson plan to address the topic of trauma and healing and implementing such a plan in practice. Clearly, this was less important than the participants' engagement with the group and the process. This in itself represented a great deal of learning, which they were applying to their particular context and their own lakou.

However, from the very first presentation, the teachers demonstrated complete sensitivity to the topic and, more importantly, commitment to the notion of cultural relevance. The lessons explored a range of issues dealing directly with the impact of the earthquake. One group addressed acceptance and inclusion of those with special needs; another from the upper high school had a lesson on defining the scientific causes of the earthquake and its physical, social, and psychological impacts. Two different groups addressed the importance of sustaining a healing relationship with the environment by protecting and preserving the natural elements that surround the community, including the people. One group of high school math teachers created a lesson plan where students would make an assessment of the different schools and buildings in the community and determine how many people use these structures on a given day. How were these buildings used and does the construction facilitate their usage?

Two lessons in particular stand out as demonstrating the care that the teachers put into their planning. One group of primary school teachers focused their lesson on kindergarten and first-grade students. They began the lesson by having the students sing a song about their ease in moving their bodies. Students wiggled their fingers, shook their heads back and forth, put their hands on their hips, and twisted sideways, back and forth. They smiled and danced as they sang. Then the teacher spoke about body parts, writing the names of the different body parts in Kreyol and French, the two official languages in Haiti. The students spelled the words in both languages and wrote them down on paper. Then they were asked to stand up and sing the song "Head, Shoulders,

Knees, and Toes" in Kreyol and French. Students were engaged in the song, and the teachers sang and danced along with them.

After this exercise, the teachers facilitated a conversation about members of the community who are now missing body parts. The students all recognized that they had seen disabled individuals in the school and in the community. A teacher asked if these people were less human because they were missing a body part. The students emphatically responded, "Non, yo menm jan avèk nou" [No, they are just like us]. She went on to provide various examples of disabled people and what they are capable of contributing to society. I was impressed at the sensitivity, the age appropriateness, and the active engagement of the students. The teachers then passed out blank paper, crayons, and colored pencils. They asked the students to draw pictures of people with a missing body part. One picture had a person with a missing arm; other figures had missing legs, another a missing eye. The teacher shared all the pictures with the whole class and engaged them in a final discussion about inclusion. She explained that all of the new disabled members of the community should be loved and respected. She said, "Yo pa diferan de nou . . . nou pa dwe ri, gade yo dwòl, ou byen pè yo. Nou aksepte yo nan lekòl nou e komimote nou" [They are not different from any of us. We should not laugh, stare, or be afraid. They are welcomed in our schools and in our communities]. The children agreed, laughed, smiled, and repeated, "Nou aksepte yo è nou renmen yo" [They are welcomed and they are loved]. All of the lesson plans took on the issue of trauma and focused on aspects of healing. All of the teachers used art and music to engage the students. Art is a central aspect of Haitian culture, Haitian knowing, and Haitian ways of apprehending the world. Since the creation of the Haitian state, art has been used to express social issues and transmit knowledge. In this lesson, it was used as a literacy tool and, more profoundly, as a healing tool.

The second notable lesson was presented by a group of middle school teachers, who began by having the students create a group poem about the environment. They then asked the students to go outside and choose something that had life and bring it back to the classroom. Students returned with flowers, plants, and branches. The teachers continued a conversation about what is alive in nature and then began a discussion in which they explained that humans are a very important part of nature and that even though we cannot control all natural disasters, we have a role in protecting nature. In order to further illustrate this notion, the teachers asked the students who were physically smallest to stand in the center of the class. They set apart the two physically largest students and asked the rest to create a circle and link their arms together like a chain, with the smaller students inside the chain and the two larger ones outside. They explained that the chain represented people who had to protect those who were more vulnerable from the larger forces outside the chain. They began to chant, "Ou pa ka kase chenn nou. Nou solid" [You

will not break our chain. We are strong], and had the students in the middle repeat, "Ou pa ka kase chenn nou. Nou solid" [You will not break our chain. We are strong]. The two physically largest students outside the circle were instructed to attempt to break the links of the other students' chain. As they tried, the linked students clutched their arms more tightly together and protected those in the center in a rhythmic movement, coordinating their movements, strategizing to counter the outside force. The exercise lasted a few minutes and the chain was not broken. The teachers ended the lesson with a conversation about the importance of not feeling helpless against nature: we are a part and, more important, a powerful protector of nature.

Again, this lesson's message went above and beyond what we had presented in our workshop. The teachers reinterpreted grieving and trauma in culturally relevant ways to create lessons grounded in healing, tolerance, empowerment, community relevance, and sustainability. They created a sense of academic and cultural knowing using the arts as a translator, engaging the students with poetry, dance, music, and the visual arts. It became clear to me that the arts are central in the learning process of our Haitian students. It also elucidated for me that teachers provided with basic professional development are able to create culturally appropriate lessons that encourage their students to connect to the material and expand their school knowledge into a deeper, internal way of understanding their world and their community.

Within the framework of lakou, the teachers are a center post that cannot be neglected. They are the guardians of the youth and, considering certain educational limitations within our Haitian families, are perhaps more significant than the parents in students' academic life. It is common for a parent to tell teachers, "My child is in your hands. Do with him as you would for your own child . . . discipline and spank her if you must." Some may view this as permission for corporal punishment, but a more appropriate translation would be, "I trust you; love my child as your child."

My first official workshop with teachers was completely out of my comfort zone: my elite Western training had to be translated in a way that fit culturally into this rural community. I discovered that I did not have to go deep into social and psychological theory in order to highlight the significance of healing and supporting students' social and psychological development. My commitment to and involvement in the community for the past seven years as a member of the St. Raphael lakou gave me the insight and the acceptance to carry out this work. In the teacher workshop, I came to the academic guardians of the students—those whom I ultimately view as the real teachers. Now, I am able to respectfully claim my space in their lakou.

Lessons Learned

Haiti continues to be a vulnerable country, with social, political, and environmental insecurities. Yet these challenges have never broken the spirit of

the Haitian people. The country has many contradictions; nonetheless, the people I have met in Haiti want to maintain a productive life, to educate their children, and to continue to mirror the courage that their ancestors demonstrated in winning their independence more than two hundred years ago. The teacher workshop and the Walls of Hope project, conducted with Haitian youth, were my education in community needs and my reconnection to the lakou in Haiti. It also reinforced the importance of perseverance and commitment on my end, as persistence allowed me to help bring about this common dream for a cultural center for the youth of St. Raphael. Indeed, the country can be rebuilt—one lakou at a time.

Claudine Michel (2010), a leading scholar in education and Vodou, explains the significance of the reconnection to Lakou:

> Ultimately lakou(s) are both means and ends that offer processes for effective intervention, opportunities for communal growth, and real possibilities for healing during post-earthquake Haiti. These communal frameworks offer great hope for rebalancing development, shifting political equations and rebuilding the country's social fabric as organic systems grounded in specific worldviews pertaining to the Haitian population and geared towards orienting and sustaining life for its progeny.

Those in the diaspora have historically sent cash remittances, but to be fully accepted in the lakou, there needs to be an actual time commitment to the community; service and engagement must be seen through a longitudinal lens. This lens requires self-reflection, humility, and a willingness to be led. Further, the population of Haiti has drastically changed in the last twenty years. The majority are under sixteen, and they deserve a social position of power. The academic diaspora must provide spaces of empowerment for these young people. As a person from the academic diaspora, I can attest that coming back to the lakou required a shift in social perceptions and an ability to look critically at Western training and its relevance to Haiti.

The social concept of lakou was evident in the lessons that teachers wrote and in the young people's feelings of ownership of the Lakou Solèy Academic Enrichment and Cultural Arts Center. What binds this community is a sense of cultural belonging and common ways of understanding and creating meaning from their circumstances. As the world continues to witness the post-earthquake situation and question how to contribute to the future of the nation, it is essential to invest in formal schooling in Haiti and to acknowledge the significant role that education plays in the rebuilding of the country, with the predominance of youths within the population. Furthermore, we must recognize and value Haitian knowledge and Haitian approaches to learning and teaching. Haitian arts played a significant role in my experiences with teachers and students after the earthquake, as a literacy tool and as healing tools. The knowledge of Haitian teachers and students must play a leading role in developing sustainable educational interventions and programs.

As teachers and students invited me to engage in their education lakou, I was accepted as part of the community of St. Raphael. There is a significant role for Haitian academics in the diaspora in this very important rebuilding process. At the 2010 Haitian Studies Conference, a female Haitian American college student posed a question that resonated with me: "Since the earthquake, we have been bombarded with images of Haiti's plight and the disrespect in how we continue to be treated—where do I go to begin my healing process?" I shook my head. I did not have an answer for her. As I wrote this paper, her words came back to me. My own experiences in Haiti, in the St. Raphael lakou, were my healing spaces. I felt privileged to be welcomed, in a liberating social and nontraditional academic space, by teachers and students in Haiti.

Since the 2010 earthquake, millions of dollars have been raised and donated to Haiti. Much of this money has not reached the people. Many schools and higher education institutions remain in ruins. A year later, the streets of Haiti are still filled with rubble. Over one million people remain displaced in tents, and thousands of children are praying for someone from abroad to relieve their physical suffering. We therefore must begin to reexamine what we consider support. The Haitian people need to strategize for themselves to reenvision a future for Haiti, a different future that includes a solid and relevant educational base for our children. Those in the diaspora, and others who want to help this community heal and rebuild, must fashion organic approaches that consider Haitian history, Haitian culture, and Haitian epistemology as central in the rebuilding process.

Notes

1. The revolution lasted from 1791 to 1803 and was led by Toussaint L'Overture. It is estimated that more than one hundred thousand slaves fought for two years against the powerful French army with limited arms and resources (James, 1963). The cruel and brutal conditions of slavery catalyzed this successful revolt.
2. Reinhardt (2005) writes that Napoleon's objective was to acquire the Louisiana Territory from Spain in 1800, but after the revolution in the colony of Saint Domingue (Haiti), he abandoned his plans for a transatlantic France.
3. *Vodou* derives from the Fon people of Dahomey (from Benin, Africa). It can be interpreted as "spirit"; another literal interpretation of *Vo* and *Du* is introspection into the unknown. *Vodun, vodou, vodoun,* or *vaudou* have all been used to designate the national religion of Haiti. According to the official Kreyol orthography, the proper spelling is *Vodou* (Bellegarde-Smith & Michel, 2006).
4. The use of an onomatopoeic nickname for the 2010 earthquake as a way to circumvent talking about the event itself is not atypical in the Haitian language (Bellegarde-Smith, 2011).

References

Bellegarde-Smith, P. (2011). A man-made disaster: The earthquake of January 12, 2010—A Haitian perspective. *Journal of Black Studies, 42*(2), 264–275.

Bellegarde-Smith, P., & Michel, C. (2006). *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, myth, and reality.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Courlander, H. (1960). *The drum and the hoe: Life and lore of the Haitian people.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Désir, C. (2008). Understanding the sending context of Haitian immigrant students. *Journal of Haitian Studies, 13*(2), 73–93.

Gibbons, E. (1999), *Sanctions in Haiti: Human rights and democracy under assault.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Fondation Haitienne d'Enseignement Privé [FONEP]. (1999). *Le contexte de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage a l'école fondamentale en Haiti.* Port-au-Prince: Author.

James, C. L. R. (1963). *The black Jacobians: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution.* Toronto: Random House.

Laguerre, M. (1998). *Diasporic citizenship: Haitian Americans in transnational America.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Manigat, M. (2005). *Leaders of Haiti: Historical overview.* Coconut Creek, FL: Educa Vision.

McAlister, E. (2002). *Rara: Vodou, power and performance in Haiti and its diaspora.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Michel, C. (2009, July). *Vodou: Theory and praxis in conversation; "Sak pase? N'a pe koute. dites donc, nous sommes à l'écoute" [Tell us, we're all ears].* Paper presented at the International Colloquium IX of the Congress of Santa Barbara (KOSANBA), Mirebalais, Haiti.

Michel, C. (2010, May). *Post-earthquake Haiti: The debasement of Haitian society and possibilities of new civil engagement.* Symposium conducted at the Flag Week meeting, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Moral, P. (1978). *Le paysan Haitien: Étude sur la vie rurale en Haiti.* Port-au-Prince: Les Editions Fardin.

Reinhardt, T. (2005). 200 years forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian revolution. *Journal of Black Studies, 35*(4), 246–261.

Richman, K. (2005). *Migration and Vodou.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Smith, J. (2001). *When the hands are many: Community organization and social change in rural Haiti.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Ulysse, G. (2010). "Tranblé." On *I am a storm: Songs and poems for Haiti.* CD. Hartford, CT: Tapework.

UNICEF. (2011). At a Glance: Haiti. Retrieved from www.unicef.org/infobycountry/haiti

Zéphir, F. (2004). *The Haitian American.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.