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Re/assembling the Imaginary: Counter-Narratives of Haiti's Transnational Textile Industry

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, Haiti's *zòn franch* (dislocated sites where garments are assembled and processed for export to the North), have reconstructed bonds of coloniality through structural violence. Despite over two hundred years of Haitian independence from French colonial rule, and over 80 years since the US occupation of Haiti, these "ports", exempt from tax and duties, are often viewed locally as self-contained non-independent islands that reproduce a colonial logic of transnational wealth extraction. Mixing voices from ethnographic fieldwork and literature, this article examines the creative resistance of Black women garment workers in Northern Haiti. It sees their opposition to a precarious local textiles industry, to substandard labor conditions in the *zòn franch* and to increased climate vulnerability as a legacy of Black Haitian women's continuous resistance to plantation slavery. I conceptualize the combination of informal livelihood strategies the women deploy as a form of what Haitian anthropologist and artist Gina Athena Ulysse calls *rasanblaj* (2015), or the re/assembly or regrouping of ideas, things, people. For Black women workers viewed as disposable by outsiders and a wealthy elite, self-organized textile-based initiatives not only tackle ecological issues such as waste management, but also extend social and educational benefits to the local community.

Keywords: garment assembly, colonial, creative resistance, *rasanblaj*, environmental sustainability

Introduction

Since the 1970s, the state-sponsored "off-shore economy" of garment assembly in Haiti has re-modelled historical patterns of colonial extraction and labor exploitation to meet contemporary capitalist needs. Deterritorialized enclaves of cheap labor, or *zòn franch* as they are called in Haitian Kreyól, are structured on the uneven racial and gendered

economies (and geographies) of colonial domination and servitude (Quijano 2000; Mckittrick 2013), and are thus entangled and implicated in the *longue durée* of colonialism. For Aníbal Quijano, in today's global arrangement, racist distributions of forms of work reproduce the Eurocentric racist classifications of colonial capitalism, whereby salaries were associated with whiteness (2000, 217). Put differently, racial difference, white supremacy, and the colonial control of commodity production for export have been integral to the development and sustainment of a Eurocentered capitalist modernity. Haiti's *zòn franch* are duty-free export processing zones. In their exclusive service to external markets, sustained by Black Haitian labor, they reinforce the longstanding Eurocentric project of modernity and neoliberal narratives of development.¹ The northern Caracol Industrial Park discussed in this paper embodies a palimpsest, mapped onto old plantation land, that over the course of time since the fifteenth century has witnessed anti-Black violence, dispossession, and dehumanizing systems that serve Euro-American markets. Sited at a crossroads for exchanges between multiple continents, these highly mobile global portals, like the foreign-owned maquiladoras of Mexico, cross (*franchi*) cultural and linguistic borders and the legal restrictions of states with ease. Thanks to preferential trade agreements, cheaply made commodities and capital traverse highly permeable national geo-political borders. By contrast, the garment assembly industry constrains and controls the mobility of local workers, who are subordinately positioned within hierarchies of race, class and gender. The Caribbean has historically been viewed as a region of mobility, displacement, and flux. Yet it is also a place of multiple

¹ The *zòn franch* neglect local demand for manufactured goods: in 2020, during the first waves of the global Covid-19 pandemic, Haitian factories produced personal protective equipment (masks and scrubs) for shipment overseas despite a severe lack of domestic resources and facilities to tackle the pandemic (Hammond 2020).

immobilities: enslavement, indenture, incarceration, and the colonial plantation (Sheller 2020).

Spatially, the plantation enclave was designed as a “*lieu clos*” (closed place), as Édouard Glissant noted (1990, 78). The negative effects of its architectures of racialized confinement of labor (Shabazz 2015), its visual technologies of surveillance and control (Mirzoeff 2011), and its disruptive and invasive landscape (Bellegarde-Smith 2004, 106) are not located solely in the present. These features are legacies of slavery, which, as Katherine McKittrick argues, continue to actively structure “black geographies” today (2013, 2). The work of scholars (Wynter 1971; Anglade 1982; Trouillot 2002; Casimir 2001; Mintz 1962, 1974) on the organization of plantation land and the marginalization of formerly enslaved people *andeyò* (outside), who relocated to less favorable land or garden plots following Haitian independence in 1804, has highlighted the new administration’s neglect of indigenous egalitarian knowledge systems (including agriculture, crafts, the arts) in the post-emancipation period in Haiti. Haitian scholar, Jean Casimir, identifies the survival of these post-extractive peasant models as a counter-plantation system (2001) that challenges the exploitation and oppression of an export-oriented colonial society. As scholars have argued (Werner 2016, 134; Alexander 2005), this export-led model and its geographies of plantation coloniality have been reworked via the offshore production sites of the contemporary garment industry, where conditions of production replicate racialized and gendered regimes of labor exploitation and ecological devastation. M. Jacqui Alexander defines this colonial continuum as a form of “ideological trafficking between old and new empires”, whereby “particular kinds of class relations . . . are reproduced . . . , both for the ascendant corporate class and for the class that makes its ascendancy possible: large numbers of women . . . who work in export processing zones and ‘free trade’ zones all across the globe” (2005, 101). As this essay seeks to show, this continuum of shuttling

between past and current imperialisms, reproduced by foreign corporations and Haiti's manufacturing elite, has informed Haitian women's organizing strategies (104) as they navigate life within the contemporary plantation.

This article aims to analyze a global garment industry built on the backs of laboring Black women's bodies in Haiti as a legacy of the layered spatialized histories of the colonial plantation, as well as its extractive export-oriented model and the continued imperialisms (including international aid intervention) that have propelled wealth inequality and environmental degradation in the region. This approach, grounded in contemporary Haitian realities, reveals how Black Haitian women deploy transgenerational textile practices in a counter-plantation logic to resist the global supply chain. I seek to complement existing ethnographic and feminist scholarship on the racialized "bordering" and containment of export processing zones in the Americas (Alexander 2005; Werner 2016, 146; Schuller 2012) by interweaving fictional and non-fictional voices of garment worker experiences of survival. The conjunction of fictional and real-world narratives I explore—drawn from Dominican-American author Angie Cruz's novel *Let it Rain Coffee* (2006) and the experiences of the community *Pwojè Patchwork* in Ouanaminthe on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic—reveals how workers deploy creative craft strategies in the face of the patterned repetitions of the plantation system and the colonialist productivity of the global supply chain. *Pwojè Patchwork* is a community project where Haitian women workers have recycled factory offcuts of fabric produced at the Dominican-owned CODEVI industrial park. I conceptualize this salvage work as a form of *rasanblaj*, a Kreyól concept deployed by Haitian-born anthropologist, activist and artist Gina Athena Ulysse to mean an "assembly, compilation, enlisting, regrouping (of ideas, things, people, spirits)" (2015). Within the racial confinement of the *zòn franch*,

both narratives involve women who imagine and rehearse future modes of resistance to the precarity of garment worker lives lived at the bottom of the supply chain. Worker lives, deemed disposable by foreign garment manufacturers and the Haitian elite, are lived out amongst the textile waste or *fatras* of transnational manufacturing.² Offshored and out of sight, exploited workers make what bell hooks proposed as small-scale creative detours that “nourish one’s capacity to resist” and offer “the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (1990, 150). The imagined worlds and collective practices foregrounded here concern the survival of self, but also transmit radical perspectives from Haiti to future generations. As women practice new ways of being, “theorizing becomes an existential necessity” (Alexander 2005, 106).³

Literary and Ethnographic Fieldwork as *Rasanblaj*

This project connects fictional worlds and real-world narratives of garment worker resistance by compiling and reassembling written, spoken and place-based experiences. I mix voices from literary texts with those from ethnographic fieldwork to better understand the role of place and the violent geographies of containment and *displacement* that have shaped Black women’s identities, particularly in the northern region of Haiti, which is impacted by the often fraught geopolitical seam of its border with the Dominican Republic. From 2016 to 2018, I conducted fieldwork between Cap-Haïtien through to the border

² The problem of the inadequate disposal of manufacturing *fatras* (waste) is particularly acute in the urban areas surrounding Haiti’s *zòn franch*. Textile waste left to compact into the earth or burnt at factory sites emits polluting greenhouse gases into the environment, dangerous to public health.

³ I was grateful for discussion of this balance between fictional and non-fictional creative worlds at our Textile and Place conference panel “Strategies of Sustenance”, particularly in relation to the work of fellow panellist Amy Twigger Holroyd.

towns of Ouanaminthe in Haiti, and Dajabón in the Dominican Republic.⁴ The research focused on two areas of textile work in Haiti: in the formal sector, low paid garment work in *zòn franch* and in the informal sector, the secondhand clothing industry. I used several qualitative research methods, which included one-to-one interviews under cloth canopies by the side of markets in Cap-Haïtien and Dajabón, semi-structured interviews with factory managers in air-conditioned offices, days spent observing and learning alongside portside seamstresses, and focus groups with textile and garment union coordinators and members. With the exception of the factory management meetings, all of these conversations were in Kreyòl. This localized and vernacular research became fundamental to my understanding of containment, im/mobility and place in the northern region. It became clear, as I will discuss here, that the creative livelihood strategies employed by Haitian women garment and textile workers and by community organizations and their conscious resistance to exploitative labor conditions in the northern region are deeply linked to a northern topography of Black liberation and resistance, as a consequence of the region's legacies of slavery, colonial extraction and foreign occupations.

Making Haiti the “Taiwan of the Caribbean”

Under the dictatorship of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier in the 1980s, the strategy of export-based economic development through offshore garment assembly, first envisioned by his father, François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, was enforced by the same nexus of lenders

⁴ This research project was approved by Cardiff University School of Modern Languages Ethics Committee on 26th October 2016. I conducted over forty interviews with textile workers and factory managers in Port-au-Prince and northern Haiti. Since the pandemic, this research has largely focused on how COVID-19 has further compounded structural inequalities in Haiti, exposing the hidden precarity and perceived disposability of Haitian garment workers.

omnipresent in the region today: the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. During a 1969 visit from the US vice president Nelson Rockefeller, François Duvalier insisted: “Haiti could be a great reservoir of manual labor for Americans establishing re-export industries because it is closer, more reliable and easier [sic] than Hong Kong” (Trouillot 1990, 200). In the early 1980s, this Taiwanization of Haiti as an export-led development strategy involving closer ties with the US, was promoted by aid workers, foreign investors, journalists and the USAID (DeWind and Kinley 1988, 61; Katz 2013, 47). Key regions of transnational garment production—North America, Europe, Southeast Asia—began to use their own respective peripheries for low-cost labor-intensive assembly production (Heron 2002, 756). Haiti, historically regarded as being on the periphery of the periphery in the capitalist global order (along with other islands, Jamaica in particular) saw a significant increase in employment in the apparel sector during this period.⁵ Haiti was designated as a recipient state of president Reagan’s Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) introduced in February 1982, and this was written into law as the Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act (CBERA) in 1984.

This new legislation promised “security through development” (Heron 2002, 757) and offered duty-free trade incentives to the Caribbean region, forging closer US-Caribbean economic relations. The CBI trade package was subject to certain production restrictions, which enabled US garment manufacturers to take advantage of low wages in Caribbean and Central American states for standardized assembly work. The higher value-

⁵ Following Haitian independence in 1804, the US, fearing the spread of revolt throughout slave plantations in the southern states, imposed a trade embargo that shunned and isolated the new nation, preventing its participation in international commerce. France only recognized Haitian independence in 1825, in order to guarantee Haiti’s payment of a crippling debt (150 million francs) as compensation for lost income to plantation owners and their former enslavers (Daut 2021).

added operations (spinning, weaving, cutting, dying, finishing) had to be carried out in the US, which ensured the exclusive use of US fabrics (Heron 2002, 757) whilst actively discouraging the development of “full package” production in the Caribbean.⁶ As Faye Harrison puts it, the Caribbean became “an offshore site for branch plants that are not generating the backward linkages and horizontal integration necessary for stimulating the domestic sectors of [local economies]” (2008, 186).

Political instability, US economic sanctions (1991-1994) and a UN trade embargo (1994) damaged the clothing industry in Haiti throughout the 1990s, as did increased competition from Central America, particularly Honduras and Nicaragua. In an attempt to revive the sector, the US introduced a series of trade laws from 2006 onwards. The Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement Act (HOPE), introduced in 2005, was revised in 2008 to allow Haiti’s neighbor to the east, the Dominican Republic, to benefit from duty-free conditions if the garments were partially produced in Haiti. Yarn could be spun and cloth woven in the Dominican Republic, sewn in Haiti, dyed and finished across the border in the Dominican Republic and then shipped out of Dominican ports to North America. In the hope of making Haiti an appealing choice for manufacturers supplying the US and Canadian markets, the 2010 Haiti Economic Lift Program (HELP) Act extended the HOPE II trade preferences to 2020 (now due to expire in 2025). These preferential trade agreements ensure that multinational suppliers and their capital are highly mobile. Labor has become geographically dispersed, yet “pooled” into islands of production within a vertically structured transnational textile industry that spans language and culture. Oriented to a US market, trade provisions and laws, designed to isolate garment assembly and prevent the growth of an integrated Haitian garment sector, have

⁶ This placed the US in competition with Asia: apparel imports from East Asia decreased significantly during the 1990s, while the share from the conveniently located Caribbean and Central America grew over the same period (Heron 2002).

failed to deliver long-term economic benefits. The invisible borders, one-way trade liberalization agreements and spatial inequalities fomented between the US and Caribbean nations under the CBI (Trouillot 1990; Werner 2016) and their myriad iterations since the 1980s have also propelled Haiti's increased dependency on secondhand clothing imports. The organization and growth of this global commercial trade in foreign "hand-me-downs," known locally as "pèpè," cannot be decoupled from histories of imperial extraction, trade liberalization, enslavement and the colonial containment of the plantation.

The Containment of Haitian Workers: Transnational Economic Security

Over the past 30 years, Haiti's garment assembly production and the expansion of the country's *zòn franch* have been key features of local and international narratives of development. In his role as UN special advisor on Haiti, despite having visited the country for only 5 days, in 2009, Oxford University economist Paul Collier wrote a report entitled "Haiti: from Natural Catastrophe to Economic Security." The report was published following the 2008 food crisis, which was caused by inflation and intensified by structural adjustment programs, and also by the country's centralization of power and wealth in Port-au-Prince since the 1960s, particularly during the Duvaliers' rule (Trouillot 1990). The migration of rural populations following promises of better work in garment assembly manufacturing in urban zones had damaged Haiti's domestic agricultural production, forcing food prices to increase dramatically. In his report, Collier argued that Haiti could easily become globally competitive in the garment industry. Comparing Haiti to Bangladesh, he claimed that reinvestment in this sector would provide several hundred thousand jobs for Haitians in just a few years. Concerning the dispersal of export processing zones around the country, Collier framed these clusters of firms as "islands of

excellence” that avoided the need to “improve standards across the entire country” (11).⁷ The promotion of garment assembly production in these isolated zones of northern intervention was designed to curb “the overriding aspiration of youth . . . to get a visa to emigrate”, which Collier portrays as “manifestly destructive.” Such anti-Black practices of containment (Shabazz 2015; Werner 2015, 149) and Collier’s fears around migration of Haitians are rooted in nineteenth-century European perceptions of the first self-governing Black republic of Haiti as a threat to “Western Civilization” and the colonial order (Trouillot 1995; García-Peña 2016). The Collier report would become a blueprint for those planning Haiti’s future, including Bill Clinton, then Special Envoy to Haiti, who was advising the Haitian government at this time (Katz 2013).

On 12 January 2010, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti, killing over 200,000 people and leaving 1.5 million people homeless. Built in 2012, on a site some 300km north of the earthquake’s epicenter in Léogâne, the Caracol Industrial Park became the showcase “reconstruction” project for the Haitian government and international investors: the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), US policymakers and the Clinton Foundation. New York Times journalist, Deborah Sontag, called it “earthquake relief where Haiti wasn’t broken” (2012). The majority of workers at Caracol are women, forced to accept low wage, insecure factory work, sewing cheaply made garments (and more recently PPE for export to the North), for global corporations and Northern consumers. Historically, Haitian women’s bodies have been racialized and gendered through state violence and economic exploitation, both during slavery and as a consequence of ongoing transnational imperialisms (Charles 1995; Schuller 2015). At a time when Atlantic slavery controlled the

⁷ Collier’s vision of decentralization, which reduces population pressures on the land and supports environmental sustainability (17), has not translated into a sustainable solution, as most garment workers still travel long distances to work in the *zòn franch* and there is little evidence of migration from Port-au-Prince to the northern towns.

circulation of fashionable textiles, the lives of African captives were valued in relation to *pieces* of cotton fabric produced in Europe and India (Dobie 2010, 103): now, their descendants labor in intensive textile and garment production sites that generate North Atlantic and local elite wealth.⁸

Under the guise of imperial modernity and European “development,” this landscape has been deforested, mapped, sown and placed under surveillance since the fifteenth century. The park is built on the palimpsestic and highly fertile land of a once prosperous French plantation economy in the north of Haiti in the eighteenth century. The sedimented layers of the Caracol site reveal that export-oriented experiments and foreign exploitation in this area pre-date the post-war development of export-oriented assembly industry (Bellegarde-Smith 2004). The Caracol Bay area is home to several significant indigenous Taíno sites; it is where the first Spanish settlement, Fort La Navidad, was founded by Columbus in 1492. The US Occupation of Haiti from 1915-34 utterly depleted Haiti’s economy and natural resources. In 1926, the American firm DeCoppet and Doremus began the seizure of more than 12,000 acres of fertile land in the north-eastern region to grow sisal or *pit* (Perdue, 2000), a coarse leaf fiber used to make rope, cordage and woven textiles for export to North America. The Dauphin plantation in Fort Liberté, like the Caracol Park today, functioned as a typical colonial enclave with an extractive plantation system in service to the metropolitan economy (Castor 1988, 215). This major foreign investment in the north-eastern province displaced families from their land, increasing migration to Port-au-Prince or abroad and exacerbating poverty in rural communities. At nearby Chabert, US invaders established a prison labor camp for Haitians opposing the

⁸ In 1722, Jean-Baptiste Labat designates a healthy African adult as ‘un Nègre pièce d’Inde’ or ‘India cloth Negro’ (193).

regime, and Caco rebel leader Charlemagne Peralte was buried here in late 1919 (Bellegarde 1937; Dubois, 2012).

At the same time, the Northern province has produced important sites of revolution, resistance and reparative sacred ritual: Boïs Caïman, where enslaved people gathered and organized to revolt against their French and Creole masters, led by Boukman Dutty and Cécile Fatiman on 14 August 1791; Vertières, on the outskirts, the site of the last battle of the Haitian revolution and victory against Napoleon's army; the Bréda plantation, where Black revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture was born; and Fort Liberté, where Black general Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed Haitian independence in 1804. The uprisings in the Northern province ruptured the closed spatial organization of France's plantation system in a spectacular fashion.

Displacement and Environmental Degradation

Today the Caracol plant is located on a site of ecological importance: it uses as its waste waterway the river that runs into the nearby fragile Caracol bay, home to one of the last mangrove forests of Haiti and its coral reefs. Before they were displaced to make way for the garment assembly plant, farmers in the Caracol valley grew plaintain, beans, corn and manioc on the rich agricultural land. Since the 1980s, export-oriented assembly industry has contributed to a decline in Haitian agricultural production; attracted by the promise of better wages, agricultural workers relocated to Port-au-Prince to work in the manufacturing sector (Shamsie 2010; Trouillot 1990). While these assembly industries employed mainly women workers, it is important to note that in Haiti women play a central role in farming, in particular the marketing and food distribution networks (Trouillot 1990). This movement towards cities caused a rise in food prices as peasant food production declined.

Since the 1980s, just as imports of used clothing have harmed domestic clothing manufacture, subsidized rice imports from the US (nicknamed *diri Myami* or Miami Rice) have had a devastating effect on domestic Haitian rice production.⁹ The influx of subsidized cheap food imports from other countries, along with structural adjustment programs that were introduced as a condition of foreign debt renegotiation, further marginalized the Haitian rural majority, those who speak Kreyòl and are still known as *moun andeyò* (Trouillot 1990, 81), meaning “people outside” of transnational power and wealth.

[Figure 1 near here]

At Caracol, Haitian workers sort textile offcuts or rejected garments into bins labelled *tache*/stain, *defect twal*/fabric defect and *imposib*/impossible (figure 1), and the fabric then enters a disposal cycle at the site of manufacture itself. The South Korean garment supplier and principal tenant of the Caracol park has an incinerator and burns their scrap fabric to produce steam for their iron presses. The fabrics used in production are made predominantly from synthetic fibers, which have been criticized for their higher greenhouse gas emissions during manufacture, their non-biodegradability and toxic pollutant emissions during waste management (Muthu 2014).

Caracol as Containment and Border Control

Many of the garment workers at Caracol previously worked in informal commerce as street vendors, and several stated that they could provide for their families better before. During an interview in Limonade in August 2017, Wilna, who works at Caracol, and is the

⁹ See Beverley Bell’s conversations with farmers from the Artibonite Valley (2013, 128-129). As one farmer explains: “Since foreign rice has invaded Haiti, we plant our rice, but we can’t sell it.”

women's spokesperson of the local union (Sendika Ouvriye Vanyan S&H Global/SOVASHG) explained to me:

Sou tet mwen m'gen 5 an map travay, 5 an map envesti pou ti-moun yo. M'gen yon objeaktif pou kite paske yo pa trete'm byen. Nan faktori m'ka mouri, m'ka tonbe malad pa infeksyon, pa cancer . . . nou pa respire byen, nou ka tonbe konsa..men m' pa gen kob pou m'rive fe komès, pou di jodiya map pran de bwat soulye, valiz pèpè. Ou oblije ou *rete la*.

I have five years under my belt, five years I have been investing in my children. I have reason to quit because they don't treat me well. In the factory I could die, I could get ill from an infection, get cancer . . . it is difficult to breathe, we could collapse like that . . . but I don't have money to start trading, to say today I am going to take a bale of shoes, a case of pèpè [secondhand clothing]. You have to stay where you are.¹⁰

As Wilna describes the challenge of obtaining capital to begin alternative informal activities, despite her current wage-earning role, her words convey how the structural inequalities and ideologies of the global assembly line are designed to keep Black women workers productive, but immobile, in the same place, in Wilna's words "*rete la*".

The containment of the *zòn franch* reproduces the colonality of a deeply racialized border control, recalling the colonial containment of Black Haitian bodies in motion. As Mimi Sheller reminds us, the Caribbean has historically been a mobile region, constantly in flux, yet also "a place of many immobilities: enslavement, indenture, the plantation,

¹⁰ Pseudonyms have been used for all interlocutors, unless participants explicitly consented to their names being used.

penal colonies, incarceration, detention, military bases, and camps” (2020, 17). The boundary-keeping of the plantation enclave was circumscribed in law by the Code noir.¹¹ The Code noir constrained the circulation of enslaved people beyond the borders of the plantation. Article XVI, for example, forbade enslaved people with different masters to gather by day or night, underlining the colonizer’s constant fear of the threat of border-crossing *marronage* and the rebellion it could incite. As Rashad Shabazz reminds us in *Spatializing Blackness*: “The plantation—the place of ‘uneven colonial’ and racial rule—drew its power in part from its ability to contain and incapacitate Black people. Using fear, intimidation, and spatial isolation, slave owners were able to make the larger geography outside the plantation places of illegal occupation for slaves” (2015, 6). Shabazz’s concept of architectures of confinement and landscapes that become prisonized speaks to how the threat of Haitian Blackness and its migration is controlled alternately via the establishment of borders for desperate Haitian workers and the dissolution of neoliberal trade borders.

Bordering the Imaginary: Counter-Narratives to Containment

The forced displacement of farmers at Caracol, which is linked to increased food insecurity in the region, repeats earlier experiments, in particular the deracination of Haitian farmers from the fertile Maribaroux region during the construction of Haiti’s first border trade zone, la Compagnie de développement industriel (CODEVI). In 2003, when he was under pressure to fulfil election promises to create jobs, President Aristide sanctioned a Dominican garment supplier to establish factories in the Haitian border town of Ouanaminthe with the support of a 23-million US dollar loan from the World Bank

¹¹ Authorized by Louis XIV in 1685, the *Code noir* comprised 60 articles outlining the terms of the French colonial order of slavery in the Americas.

(Schuller 2012). Once constructed, the *zòn franch* did not deliver the basic labor conditions that had been promised to the workers and a long struggle between Haitian unions and Dominican management ensued.

Haiti and the Dominican Republic have shared a history fraught with racialized conflict, violent conquest and resistance. Edwidge Danticat, in her 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones*, describes the 300km border between the neighboring countries, a legacy of the colonial division of the island between the French and the Spanish, as a “veil that not many people can wear” (264). Set during the dictatorship of President Rafael Trujillo (1930-1961) in the Dominican Republic, the novel narrates the events of the 1937 Haitian massacre, when Trujillo’s militia were ordered to kill Haitians living along the Dominican-Haitian border zone. The racialized binary casting of poor Black Haiti against the lighter-skinned and what would eventually become the more economically developed Dominican Republic was sustained by the colonial ideology of the “threat of Haiti”. Present-day Dominican anti-Haitianism can be traced to the nineteenth-century isolation of the new republic and the global anti-Haitianism that prevailed following Haiti’s defeat of European powers (García-Peña 2016).

Angie Cruz’s 2005 novel *Let it Rain Coffee* imagines another narrative of worker resistance in the Dominican Republic: it tells the story of the Colón family in three different time periods (the 1920s, the 1960s and the 1990s) and their eventual emigration from the Dominican Republic to the US. Following a shipwreck in the 1920s, Don Chan is washed up on the shores of the Dominican Republic as a young boy and adopted by the Colón family. He negotiates his new Dominican identity by connecting to the soil of the island, and, in the 1960s, starts an agricultural collective, to feed his community who are exploited by the capitalist factories. He leads the collective with Miraluz, an anti-Trujillo revolutionary who calls for a Dominican Toussaint Louverture, to step forward and lead

their struggle for liberation. When one of the group challenges her use of Haiti as an example, Miraluz reminds her fellow campesinos that many Dominicans, including the dictator Trujillo himself, have Haiti in their blood.

In the 1990s, Miraluz is now working in the free trade zone. As the repetitive routine of skill segmentation and overwork takes its toll, the very place that “collectivizes women’s labor” (Alexander 2005, 102) provides the context for a group of women to exert control over their work lives. Miraluz describes the physical and mental environment of the factory as an oppressive container:

Insults, ideas, anger raged inside of her and made her body swell up. Soon the seat at the sewing machine started to feel smaller, her clothes tighter. . . . The crotch on her jeans was riding up on her and the shirts sent to her from abroad stained quickly at the armpits. Her clothes were rebelling against her.

Miraluz was convinced that the factory was also shrinking. Some said that Miraluz’s preoccupation was making her bigger, or that the piles of bras on her sewing table were getting higher, or maybe the ceiling was gradually descending due to rain that didn’t cease or the weight of the fluorescent lights. Maybe the manufacturer was hiring more people, adding more sewing machines, and thus the space was more crowded . . . She was having a hard time breathing and it wasn’t just the lint in the air. (Cruz 2005, 221-222)

The women assemble their accrued knowledge to start their own revolutionary clothing label, *El Secreto de Victoria*, a slow form of resistance to the “piles of Victoria’s Secret labels” they repetitively sew into the seams of intricately assembled bras, knickers and camisoles, piece after piece, day after day. Miraluz leads the group of women in this salvaging of skills: “She sewed a sleeve, a bra strap, a seam of a crotch, wondering what all

the pieces she put together looked like as a whole . . . I can make pockets and collars, but to sew? It was possible that together, they could manage to make something to wear” (226).

The global fashion industry has relied on the bodies and labor of black and brown women to produce wealth. Cruz’s narrative counters the ways in which multinationals have erased the work of women garment workers, regarding it as supplementary, temporary and unskilled, and it challenges the perception that women workers are less likely than men to rebel against exploitative labor conditions.

[Figure 2 near here]

The Praxis of *Rasanblaj* as Rehumanisation

By way of a real-life example, at the CODEVI trade zone at the border, Haitian women workers, using their cross-border knowledge, have drawn inspiration from a Dominican tradition of making donkey saddles out of woven scraps of fabric, recycling factory floor remnants that are increasingly made up of synthetics that are notoriously difficult to re-use (figure 2). Mining their material and tactile knowledge, they began to produce rugs, tablecloths and motorcycle saddles, weaving and knotting fabric remnants into the plastic loose-weave sacks used to import Miami rice, the debris of neoliberal financial restructuring. The women began selling the crafted goods in Dominican markets; some of the knotted rugs and mats were even bought by the Dominican garment supplier to furnish the housing village provided for the factories’ Dominican and foreign management in Dajabón. The recycled rugs, as innovative cross-border symbols of hospitality and resistance to anti-Haitian discourse, not only created alternative economic communities for

the women but, as local community organizer Yannick Etienne of *Batay Ouvriye*, a grassroots organization working for peasant workers' rights, explains:

Sa enteresan anpil paske li ede ekonomi an. Sa ede fanm yo non selman pou yo mete tèt yo ansanm, men tou pou yo kapab rantre lajan, fè rasanbleman sikososyal nan komonite yo, nan ede yo libere tèt yo epi kreye yon lespri gwoup nan mitan yo. Nan zòn sa yo, sèl aktivite sosyal ki genyen, sèl amizman ki genyen se Legliz la (Santiago 2014, 150).¹²

It is very interesting because it helps the economy. It helps women not only to put their heads together, but also to make money, and create a psychosocial union in the community, by helping them to liberate their minds and create a sense of group unity amongst them. In this zone, the church is the only social activity there is, the only recreation.

Like the fictional *El Secreto de Victoria*, Pwojè Patchwork also offered a means of countering the segmented skills training of piecework. Designed to optimize productivity, piecework has been a feature of garment factories since the Industrial Revolution and is a legacy of colonial and imperial vocational education that classified workers according to material skill and prepared them for factory work. As M. Jacqui Alexander and others (Fanon 1952; Tuhiwai Smith 2012) have argued: “colonization has produced fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels” (Alexander 281).¹³ Through the resistant *rasanblaj* of “segregated and compartmentalized selves” (282), the piecing together of interdependent skills, and their collective transmission to other women, which

¹² Interview with Agencia de Información Fray Tito para América Latina (ADITAL).

¹³ A preoccupation with fracture and reassembly is at the centre of Gina Athena Ulysse's digital gathering on Caribbean “*rasanblaj*”, published via *e-misférica*.

recalls anti-colonial crafts practiced at the periphery of the plantation, the social and affective benefits of this process outweigh the micro-economic gains.

When I met with Yannick in Ouanaminthe in 2017, she showed me samples of some of the rugs and emphasized the importance of recycling to this initiative. Rather than making facile associations between economic necessity, resourcefulness and Blackness in this context (a connection that has been adeptly critiqued elsewhere, in the context of recycled narratives of Haitian poverty: Frohnapfel 2020), here I focus instead on how this project aims to improve both the physical environment and the mental environment of participants. Haitian workers, themselves rendered disposable, live their lives amidst the remnants of industrial modernity. The project debunks the assumption put forward by Joanne McNeil in her article “The Afterlife of American Clothes” (*Reason*, July 25, 2008), in reference to the food crisis, that “the country has far worse problems to deal with than litter”, a demeaning and dehumanizing contradiction for Haitians who see their environment becoming polluted as a result of transnational textile manufacturing, the profits of which are channeled elsewhere.

In opposition to the insecurity and immobility of low-wage, precarious zones of the export garment industry and the accompanying skill segmentation and environmental degradation, Haitian women agents assemble strategies of “commercial versatility” (Mintz 1964, 281), to care and provide for their families. Sewing school uniforms, baking celebration cakes, and selling rugs made from factory offcuts are all examples of how multiple informal activities work together to improve livelihood security. This mode of entrepreneurial *rasanblaj*, far from being a romanticized assemblage of Creole fragments, involves a slow anti-colonial re-organization, rooted in transgenerational craft knowledges

that evolved on the margins of the plantation economy. This community organization and its resistance to exploitative conditions of transnational garment production are informed not only by spatial and economic legacies of enslavement, containment, foreign occupations and aid intervention, but also by the particular histories of social relations, solidarity and Black self-determination that have shaped conceptions of place in Haiti's northern region.

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Figure 1: Fabric control at an S & H Global (SAE-A) factory in Caracol, 2017. Photo by Charlotte Hammond.



Figure 2 Motorcycle saddle cover made from fabric cutoffs in Dajabòn. Photograph by Charlotte Hammond.