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Moving Children in Haiti: Some Hypotheses on Kinship, Labor, and Personhood in the Haitian Context

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As many have noted, Haiti is a nation where implementing visions of best practice in education is incredibly difficult. The country faces pervasive poverty, limited access to schooling, little infrastructure development, dysfunctional welfare systems, and extreme social inequality. If all of these issues were salient before the earthquake, they have become even more pressing in its aftermath. In a report on the progress one year after the quake, UNICEF (2011) was cautiously hopeful, but at the same time described Haiti as a nation that will require a great deal of intervention before it becomes a place "fit for children" (p. 25). Nonetheless, post-earthquake Haiti has seen a great effort on the part of humanitarian agencies to implement prescribed international conventions. A major part of these efforts has focused on the creation of registries to identify and track lost children and reunite them with their surviving relatives, prioritizing the goal of family reunification premised on the assumption that families are the best protective environments for children. Commenting on the one-year progress of post-disaster family tracing and reunification efforts, UNICEF somewhat ruefully observed that 40% of the children registered so far had been separated *before* the quake, highlighting just how "deep-seated the child protection challenges are" that the country currently faces (p. 12).

These concerns—while well-intentioned—fail to consider the local circumstances that shape Haitian childhood. In particular, they fail to take into account the local contexts that govern the lives of *restavèk*, those children who leave their biological parents to live in a different household as domestic servants. As I have discussed previously (Hoffman 2010, 2011), research on *restavèk* is an exceedingly difficult undertaking, as scholarship is necessarily positioned within—and sometimes against—misleading representations that are powerfully shaped by politics, advocacy, and charity.

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Restavèk are often portrayed as among the most vulnerable children in Haiti, and particularly so since the earthquake. At the same time, as a construct enmeshed in international social discourse, humanitarian aid, and development, the "vulnerable child" reflects on a larger politics of culture that positions the Haitian nation, like the child, as being in need of "saving" (Hoffman, 2011; see also James, 2004). This salvific discourse builds on representations of Haitian culture and society as fundamentally deficient, corrupt, anti-democratic, authoritarian, and violent. While poor infrastructure development, poverty, economic need, and political insecurity are sometimes a part of this picture, the structural narrative is often downplayed in favor of negative cultural characterizations, particularly when it comes to the consideration of Haitian childrearing practices and education.

The cultural and ethical questions that international discourse, humanitarian aid, and development work raise are undeniably significant. However, before these questions can be answered, scholars must have a fuller conception of *restavèk* practice and the local contexts that create and sustain childhood mobility in Haiti. This article argues that the *restavèk* system cannot be understood apart from its links to Haitian notions of childhood, kinship, learning, and personhood, and that in the absence of careful cultural and social contextualization it is often sensationalized in ways that are not conducive to a better and broader view of social transformation in Haiti. Only after this careful social contextualization can we generate more informed and enlightened approaches toward generating solutions to the problems that Haitian children face.

Background: Reframing Agency and Vulnerability in the Anthropology of Childhood

In recent years, the anthropology of childhood has generated a rich literature on the place of labor in childhood that has successfully challenged many of the stereotypes surrounding this topic, especially notions that labor victimizes children, leaves them with "no childhood," harms their health and development, and represents the loss of critical periods of development that should be devoted to socialization and learning. While there are certainly cases where negative effects such as these can be seen, large scale generalizations and blanket condemnations of child labor, as Boyden et al. (1998), Meyers (1999), and White (1999) point out, often ignore the great variations across cultural and societal contexts that in fact characterize child labor, often with ineffective and even counter-productive results. Ethnographic work suggests that children's labor is linked to learning and socialization as children are engaged, often voluntarily, with activities that

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contribute to family income and well-being, establishing and maintaining social networks, and seeking out opportunities for social mobility, often in the absence of access to formal schooling (Aptekar, 1991; Camacho, 1999; Davies, 2008; Nieuwenhuys, 2003, 2005; Offit, 2008; Leinaweaver, 2008).[1]

Reframing questions of child labor within ethnographic work on childhood aligns with larger concerns over issues of agency and vulnerability in research and representation of children's lives (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Bock et al., 2008; Hart, 2006). In particular, it suggests that the construct of the "vulnerable" child itself requires careful cultural contextualization, for it often conceals the ways children can and do exert a great deal of agency when dealing with the difficult circumstances they face (Cheney, 2010a, 2010b; Epstein, 2010; Jacquemin, 2006; Reynolds et al., 2006). One strand in this research illustrates how assumptions about children's victimization and lack of agency often uncomfortably position children and their families as beneficiaries of aid and development projects, disrupting local practices of childcare and upbringing, thus creating new conflicts over resources (Bornstein, 2003; Cheney, 2010a, 2010b; Dahl, 2009; Epstein, 2010; Henderson, 2006). What this work reveals is a great need for research on children that avoids assumptions about agency or victimization; research should instead seek a more child-focused, contextually informed, and locally grounded interpretation of how agency and vulnerability are variably constructed in discourse and social practice and how they can coexist in children's lives (see Klockner, 2007).

As Chin (2003) has observed, sustained anthropological inquiry into Haitian childhood has yet to be done. With a few major exceptions (notably Hatløy's [2005] work did on *restavèk*; Kovats-Bernat's [2006] work on Haitian street children; and Schwartz's [2009] work on rural Haitian families), Haitian childhood and children's perspectives have not received the attention they deserve. Studies conducted by organizations such as FAFO (Sommerfeldt, 2002), USAID (Smucker & Murray, 2004), and the Pan-American Development Foundation (PADF, 2009) have provided some additional data and helped to contextualize the contemporary situation of child domestic laborers in particular, yet there remains a large gulf in our understanding of children's experiences in Haiti and the role that sociocultural factors play in the lives of children who are commonly characterized as "vulnerable" and marginalized. This dearth of scholarly inquiry has no doubt contributed to the ease with which stereotyped and anecdotal representations of childhood in Haiti have dominated both Haitian and international consciousness (see Schwartz, 2011).

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Contexts of and for Child Mobility in Haiti

With 43% of its population under 18 years of age, Haiti has one of the youngest populations in the world (UNICEF, 2012). According to Perry et al. (2007), it also has one of the most mobile populations, as "children are frequently moved from one household to another and away from one or both of their biological parents because of the death of a parent, instability of conjugal unions, changing locations for agricultural work, or opportunities for income generation in other areas" (p. 244). Youth surveys also confirm high levels of movement and migration within Haiti and across the border to the Dominican Republic, often in search of better educational and work opportunities (Lunde, 2010).

A number of studies have also suggested that this mobility involves both formal and informal fosterage arrangements, leading to a significant number of children not growing up in the care of biological parents. According to one study, 32% of the children surveyed were not living in a household headed by a biological parent (PADF, 2009, p. 17). According to Justesen and Verner (2007), using data from the first Living Conditions Survey of Haiti, only one in three children (aged 0-14) lives with both biological parents. A second survey of the living conditions of the youth in Haiti (Lunde, 2010), shows that in a sample of randomly selected youth age 10-24, 64% reported having moved away from their birth household, with more than half having moved *before* age ten. Among those who moved, 56% had moved two or more times, with as many as seven moves recorded (Lunde, 2010, p. 116-117). Lunde and Justesen and Verner also suggest that there are strong positive motivating factors for domestic migration among Haitian youth, since such migration increases the probability of being employed. However, high levels of migration have affected family structure, with more than half of all households headed by females (Justesen and Verner, p. 33). While migration to urban centers appears to be most common and offers increased educational and employment opportunities, migration patterns in Haiti also include urban to rural movement as well as rural to rural movement. Couples who are separated, for example, will send children to one another; some parents will send children to the countryside from an urban area so that the parents can work (Brand, 2004, p. 41).[2]

Within the broad category of mobile children in Haiti are the *restavèk,* a group that has widely captured the international media and humanitarian spotlight, especially since the 2010 earthquake. It is not clear how many children are *restavèk* in Haiti, but UNICEF's 2006 estimate (one of the most widely cited) was about one in ten, though an earlier study revealed a lower

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number (Sommerfeldt, 2002); and in the post-quake period many assume it has increased, though there is little available documentation. The most recent available survey, which focused principally on low-income urban areas in Haiti, showed that 30% of households surveyed had *restavèk* present (PADF, 2009). The practice has a long history, going back at least to the 1930s, when it was documented by Melville Herskovits (1937), and it is most often explained as a response to poverty: parents so poor they cannot provide for their children, are thus compelled to send them elsewhere.

International media and various NGO and advocacy channels represent the *restavèk* as "child slaves" who are victims of physical and emotional abuse and denied the basic human rights of care and education. In this discourse, the *restavèk* is the ultimate victim. A *restavèk* is a child discarded by society, who wears rags, sleeps on cardboard or a sheet under a kitchen table, and sustains constant beatings—with whips specially designed for this purpose sold in markets. He or she may also sustain sexual abuse. In this discourse, a *restavèk* supposedly experiences virtual imprisonment in a household where he or she has no access to formal schooling.

Yet opinions are wildly divided when it comes to this representation, both within Haiti and internationally (Hoffman, 2010, 2011). While it is important not to deny that some children can and do suffer from abusive punishments (including sexual abuse), at the same time, it is also important to recognize that there has been so little research on the system that it is difficult to make any valid claims regarding the prevalence of abuse. Assertions about the system being equivalent to "slavery" have been seen as highly exaggerated and inflammatory (see Brand, 2004; Moncrieffe, 2006; Schwartz, 2011; Wagner, 2008).[3]

Part of the difficulty of coming to terms with this practice is the slippery nature of the status itself. Sommerfeldt (2002) and PADF (2009) suggest that there are a variety of situations in which children may be working and living in non-natal households, including boarding situations in which a child may play the role of a *restavèk* but without bearing the label. In fact, treatment of children born to the house and those not born to the house—the primary axis, officially, that should distinguish *restavèk* from non-*restavèk*—is in reality not as clear as is often thought.[4] Similarly, Hatløy (2005) observed that while child domestic workers generally tend to have a higher work burden and insufficient education compared to other groups of children, there were no striking differences in terms of health conditions, nutrition, sleep, and punishment. What is certain is that the label itself is derogatory (it can be a term of insult); it thus reflects class

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and status issues that surround personhood and family life in Haiti. Yet the manner in which status is constructed and enacted suggests a great deal of fluidity and flexibility.

While natal household poverty and lack of access to education are certainly the most oft-cited reasons behind children moving into *restavèk* status, they may not tell the whole story. In fact, the PADF study (2009) revealed that in impoverished Cité Soleil, 11% of the families who kept *restavèk* had sent their *own* children to be *restavèk* elsewhere.[5] Additionally, the study showed that in low-income areas, relatively more affluent households were just as likely as lower and middle income households to send children into *restavèk* placement (PADF, 2009, p. 28).[6] These facts suggest that the system may be both a response to poverty as well as being tied to culturally legitimated practices of child fosterage that go beyond poverty to include important considerations of kinship, labor, and learning that are not as easily understood or readily articulated. Resource constraints undoubtedly contribute to the practice of sending children away, but there is, as Schwartz (2009) points out, an equally strong economic motivation to *receive* children into the family. Furthermore, as I will suggest, the labor value of children is not the only important thing; there are also important affective dimensions involved that mitigate a purely exploitative view of fosterage practices associated with child domestic labor.

Fosterage: Family, Household, and Kinship in the *Restavèk* System

Traditionally, a defining feature of Haitian rural life was the clustered household (*lakou*), a system in which multiple related households would share a yard, as well as labor and childcare responsibilities (Edmond, Randolph, & Richard, 2007). The *lakou* also refers to the multi-generational and extended family households that may not only reside together but that also exist as an important feature of Haitian life in terms of its significance for individual identification and belonging. Under the official authority of a family or tutelary head (who in some cases may be a Vodou priest or priestess), the *lakou* serves multiple functions as an economic, spiritual, and educational center, where children grow up exposed to a diverse array of individuals and through this diversity ideally acquire culturally valued aspects of identity and personhood. Although Edmond, Randolph, and Richard suggest that the *lakou* is currently disappearing in Haiti, particularly in urban areas, as a result of the stresses of modernization and globalization, it remains an important part of the lives of rural Haitians and for Haitians in the diaspora (Richman, 2005). The importance of the *lakou* suggests that it may be a primary context for exploration of practices

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of child fosterage.

My informal discussions with nearly 30 *restavèk* children living in Southwest Haiti in 2011 provide insights into the potential importance of the extended family in the practices surrounding the *restavèk* system.[7] In the vast majority of cases the children had lost a parent or both parents, either through death or divorce/separation. Subsequently, female relatives (very frequently a mother's sister) would facilitate the transfer of the child to a new household, seeking suitable placements through kin-based social networks. In a number of cases, if a child's father died, the mother would then give the child to her own sister to be raised in the sister's household. It was also common for potential caretakers to express a need or desire for a child; many children said that a relative such as an aunt had "asked for" them. Although female relatives would often serve as go-betweens in arranging children's transfers to the homes of other kin, not all children were moved to homes of relatives.[8]

The prevalence in children's talk of kin-negotiated moves occasioned by household disruption suggests that the *restavèk* system is closely intertwined with kinship relations and potentially with needs and/or desires related to building or sustaining extended family networks. While moves may be precipitated by a sudden change in the economic circumstances of the original household, it is difficult to separate economic "push" factors from affective and intangible values associated with the very notion of a household. A child's move may be just as much related to economic as well as affective needs and expectations of a receiving household, as well as with the loss of a relationship in the sending household. In the house where I stayed, for example, there were at least two (and possibly three) *restavèk* children: one, D., a girl of 19, another girl, S., 13, and a third child, K., three, who "worked" by tending to simple chores such as carrying a small bucket or pushing a broom. The 13-year old, S., said she was Madame's niece; the younger girl was a godchild whose mother, in fact, was living next door.[9] S. worked endlessly from early morning till night, at the beck and call of the Madame of the house, and she also tended to the little girl, taking care of her exclusively, sleeping with her in a small tent out back of the house which she was quite happy to show me.

Despite this workload, her relationship with the Madame was not without moments of companionship and even affection, both given and received. One evening, when I arrived home, I found her sitting on the Madame's lap, cuddling. Although I did not interview her formally, in one conversation S. explained, "Madame wanted me, that's why I came." In addition, a male "cousin" (who may or may not have been a biological

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cousin) stayed at the house, and sought part-time work and odd jobs when he could. In all these cases, labor on behalf of the household seemed to be a critical part of "belonging" to the house. Labor seemed to be tied into companionship and potentially even to the creation of kin ties. In this sense the adult who "needs" a child speaks not only in terms of needing the child's labor, but also more intangibly in terms of needing companionship and care and more abstractly perhaps in terms of growing the relationships that constitute an extended household.[10]

The importance of the household was highlighted by the fact that the children expressed very clearly that they belonged to the *house*—not to an individual within the household. None of the children spoke of being personally "owned" by the master of the house, as a slave might be. Rather, the children emphasized that they belonged to the house and that they worked for the house. The meaning of these assertions also requires much more analysis and interpretation. Further, when asked to draw their houses ("*lakay ou*"), about half of the children drew multiple units, evoking the *lakou,* and sometimes they drew individual houses with branches coming out, as if they were alive and growing—and in a very real sense they were. Assuredly these points require much more contextualization, particularly with regard to the interaction of biological, household, and status factors in affecting and conditioning *restavèk* experience. Nevertheless, the primary locus for children's consciousness appeared to be the household. Individuals (including children) may come and go as household "members" depending on need or contribution, "growing" the household as a unit of social relatedness. In fact, the system cannot be separated from patterns of family constitution and reconstitution.[11]

Mobility, Agency and Ambition

A second set of hypotheses that emerged concerned interconnected ideas related to children's agency and ambitions for social mobility. What was most surprising, given the media and advocacy discourse which paints the *restavèk* as a passive "victim" sent away against his or her will, was that the vast majority of children I spoke with (about 88%) said that when the opportunity arose, they agreed to move and actually *wanted* to become a *restavèk* in a new household. There were a variety of reasons given: for some, the move was a personal choice to leave a parent who was not "helping" them; for others, they "liked" the new area better than where they had been living; for still others, the move was seen as a chance to leave a desperate home situation and to improve their life chances, and, possibly, to go to school.[12] When talking about the move, it is perhaps also significant that nearly all the children used the active voice (i.e., "I left my

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mother" or "I left my family," instead of saying "I was sent..." or "I was taken..."), thus evoking their own will in the process. There were also cases where children made multiple moves on their own volition, particularly when they discovered that their situation at the first household was not what they had hoped for.[13]

In terms of access to schooling, a very unclear picture emerged. Very few of the children I spoke with were actually able to write more than a few words in response to basic questions; most said that they had only one to five-years of schooling.[14] Yet, what was most striking across the board was the high level of ambition that nearly all the children had for a future career or occupation. Girls wanted to be nurses, seamstresses, pastry chefs; boys wanted to be mechanics, farmers, bricklayers, furniture makers, construction foremen, even doctors. Personally, I was struck by the seriousness of their goals and their immense faith that they could attain them; this was not the picture of the abject child whose only hope for the future was to eventually eke out a living on the street, or join a gang (which is often what the popular media discourse would have us believe).

Clearly, despite the absence of formal schooling, the children did not suffer from lack of ambition; further, their moves to new households were seen as opening up doors of opportunity that would not be present if they remained in their homes of origin.[15] It is, of course, difficult to reconcile children's ambitions with the stark reality that they face—that nearly all children in Haiti face—growing up in a society where access to education is difficult at best and unemployment rates are high. One interpretation is that the children's ambition is a defense against despair and/or a healthy psychological response that might be tied to personal resilience.

A second possibility is that part of the unspoken value attached to *restavèk* placement is a kind of informal socialization to personhood that such an experience provides. This informal training or guidance ("*fòmasyon*") that the child is expected to receive in the new household involves becoming competent in a variety of skills (with high levels of competency valued and sought after, perhaps, as protection against corporal punishment) as well as becoming accustomed to differing norms of family governance and discipline. Far from becoming a victim, then, becoming a *restavèk* is seen as a chance to "become someone," in the words of the children I spoke with, to move up in the world and to acquire a disposition and capabilities that cannot be attained while remaining in the natal household, skills that can perhaps later be used for social mobility (Sommerfeldt, 2002, pp. 70-72).

A third possibility, related to the second, is that there is in fact a real economic or social mobility return from *restavèk* placement. This

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hypothesis obviously requires further research, although there are data from high poverty areas in Sub-Saharan Africa that do suggest that the common assumption that fostered children are automatically "at risk" and disadvantaged compared to biological children in terms of health, education, and occupational outcomes is mistaken (Verhoef and Morelli, 2007). Citing numerous studies and their own work in Cameroon on fostered children, Verhoef and Morelli conclude that circumstances surrounding fosterage arrangements—rather than fostering itself—function to produce different outcomes for children. Some of the circumstances examined (e.g., whether or not the child is fostered to a maternal or paternal relative) may be of potentially great relevance in understanding the kinds of experiences facing Haitian children.[16]

The deeper question in all of this concerns the children's identities and perhaps their struggles to overcome the social stigma they have as *restavèk* and to "become someone." Their ambition for the future is personal but also familial and, dare one say, national. I had a sense that despite their stigmatized position within Haitian society, they could and do resist the implication that they are worthless; indeed, their very ambition is a response to that dismissal thought. The question of how social status figures into children's ambition and goals to contribute to society is a pressing one, for it can make the difference in how policy and institutions reconceptualize their approaches to children and their welfare in Haiti.

Labor, learning and personhood: Directions for the Future

Claudine Michel (1996) powerfully directs our attention to the "educational character of Haitian Vodou." Writing about the Vodou worldview, Michel notes, "Teaching takes place everywhere and everything represents an opportunity for learning... Everyone takes the role of teacher and learner in a process of exchanges and dialogues with family members, the community, and the spirits" (p. 285, 286). If this is true, then our current approach to exploring education in Haiti, so narrowly focused on schools, needs to open up to more broadly consider alternative avenues for learning that exist in Haitians' daily lives, particularly the lives of children. There is much to be said for exploring the kinds of informal learning that happen as children acquire valued skills through their work and participation in households as well as in practices related more directly to healing and spirituality; the latter represent as yet unexplored venues for understanding the extent to which labor and learning are enmeshed and linked directly to core values surrounding personhood: respect, hard work, self-direction, responsibility, and endurance, among others. A better knowledge of how children engage with the world as learners outside the

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formal arenas of the school—particularly given the extent to which access to schooling remains problematic for so many—would encourage new thinking about alternatives to formal schooling via informal and non-formal teaching and learning.

More than that, perhaps, it might help to counter the damaging negative portrayals of Haitian childrearing and education that are so prominent in the media and advocacy discourse. It is undeniably difficult to reconcile vulnerability with agency when children face severe constraints imposed both by poverty as well as cultural expectations. But, as Klocker (2007) suggests, there is a space in which agency co-exists alongside vulnerability. We need to understand the locally-situated meanings and practices that shape vulnerability, as well as to question its hold on our consciousness (see also Cheney, 2010). Jacquemin (2004) observes with regard to her research on child domestic workers in Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa, "If we listen to what the little maids have to say, we immediately break the mould in which the child is just a victim of terrible socioeconomic circumstances or heir to 'traditional' practices. Give the little maids the floor, let them speak up for themselves, as individuals, then at least we have treated them as persons in their own right" (2004, p. 385). Indeed, ethnographic studies of children's engagement in social and cultural practices across a wide variety of cultures and contexts suggest that being a competent learner in out-of-school contexts may be widely associated with identities of agency that allow children to position themselves as competent performers in cultural worlds (Goodnow, 1988; Holland et al., 1998; Holland and Leander, 2004).

Obviously, there is a great need for further study of many of the issues raised here. We know that extreme social disparagement and marginalization surround the concept of *restavèk*, and social class and status are in Haiti tied deeply to attainment of a formal education. But if *restavèk* children's capacities as learners, their ambitions regarding their futures, and their roles in creating and expanding the network of care and obligation, key to personhood in Haitian families, were more widely recognized, we could begin to move away from victim narratives to focus on their tremendous capacities for learning and survival, and use what we have learned from them to develop policies to support them in their lives out of school. Identifying learning, agency, and positive outcomes in spite of extremely difficult constraints is not to defend the system. Rather, it is the most potent critique of that system, for failing to recognize the strengths of its "least capable," and thus continually reinforcing their subaltern status. If we can do this, then we will be one step closer toward learning ways to help that are more attuned to children's lives, and thus more genuinely transformative.

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Notes

[1] Leinaweaver's (2008) ethnographic study on child circulation in Peru—where, as in Haiti, children commonly move to other households to work as domestic laborers in exchange for shelter, food, and occasionally access to schooling—illustrates the important ways in which movement of children among and between households of relatives and strangers constitutes an important strategy for personal social and economic mobility as well as for cultivating more intangible social bonds and networks.

[2] Mobile children exist in part because mobile adults exist; mobility for purposes of work or labor is certainly a factor in Haiti as it is elsewhere, but there are also other important structural factors that encourage high levels of adult mobility (small landholdings and rules regarding the sale and inheritance of land, for example) and relatively high degrees of conjugal mobility (Berggren et al., 1995). Conjugal and economic mobility in turn condition child mobility; which, for some, "can be seen as a strength carried over from the African cultural setting or as a detrimental consequence of highly unstable conjugal unions and family mobility in Haiti" (p. 2).

[3] When explaining the focus of my research, I have found Haitians living in Haiti and in the diaspora have immediately attempted to correct what they assume, and often rightly so, are the highly negative stereotypes that non-Haitians have of the *restavèk* system. I have also encountered others (Haitian as well as non-Haitian) who argue that the system is an abomination, and even that efforts to do research are intrinsically unethical, as they risk highlighting the "good" cases of *restavèk* while obscuring the overall horrors of the system.

[4] According to the PADF (2009) report, "*restavèk* treatment is more fluid than generally reported, and not defined simply by *restavèk* status" (p. 31). Generally speaking, all children are required to work in Haitian households, and boarders may work as much as *restavèk*, while children born to the house generally work the least. However, some of the data from my interviews suggest that biological children may be treated as harshly as or even more harshly than *restavèk*/boarders; this suggests that "being a child of the house" and "belonging to the house" may be flexible constructs subject to moderating factors independent of biological status. Another way to consider this may be that biological relation may be just one manner in which kin ties can be recognized, alongside created or negotiated ties. The latter may result from shared resources, in which labor and informal teaching/learning play a critical role.

[5] In her study of fosterage in Sierra Leone, for example, Bledsoe (1990) observed simultaneous in-fostering and out-fostering, which had explicit considerations of social status, educational opportunity, and general social "development" behind them, with the latter evoking an ideal of a child being pulled up to the level of the family in which he or she was in-fostered.

[6] Although PADF (2009) notes that the flow of children is still generally from less affluent to more affluent households, the relative difference in household

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affluence tends to be slight (p. 29).

[7] The ideas reported here are tentative, as they are based on informal discussions with *restavèk*, preliminary to formal ethnographic research that I hope to conduct. The latter will involve, eventually, extensive individual interviews with children and adult caretakers, as well as other community members, observations, household survey data, and other quantitative survey based data. Group discussions lasting about 1.5 hours were conducted in Kreyòl, with partial translation into French, and were facilitated by local Haitian contacts (including youth community workers and schoolteachers). The gender ratio was 60% female, 40% male, and age range was between 10 and 23 (with the higher age surprising, again, as this contradicts the popular image of *restavek* aging out at about age 15).

[8] Part of the difficulty is determining whether the use of a kin term such as "*matant*" (my aunt) or "cousin" really reflects a blood relationship, as they are often used for persons who are not biologically related. It is common for Haitians to introduce a child as "my son," for example, even in the absence of a blood relationship or a legal adoption. Such "kinship" is, I suspect, created through raising a good child who unselfishly contributes his or her work/labor toward the welfare of the household, regardless of the presence or absence of a blood tie.

[9] I was puzzled by this arrangement because for all intents and purposes the child could have readily still lived with her mother/her mother's household, and visited her godparent during the day (if, for example, the mother needed help with childcare) instead of being sent next door permanently where she would be sleeping in a tent. However, there were undoubtedly a number of other factors that shaped this situation, not all of them obvious (including the nature of the godparent relationship and the relative economic status of the families involved). In this case I also suspect that there was a powerful educational/social opportunity rationale: the girl could experience a kind of informal learning and socialization in the new household, and be exposed to a wider social network that represented potentially increased social opportunity/mobility.

[10] This point speaks perhaps to the larger picture of the way children and childhood are conceptualized in Haitian society. Obviously a lot more work needs to be done in this area, as Chin (2003) points out.

[11] In her ethnographic study of labor and community organization in rural Haiti, Smith (2001) observed a pervasive emphasis on collective or shared work effort, reflected in traditional community organizations and practices, as well as in general cultural beliefs about the desirability of sharing labor with others. Collaboration was highly desirable, even for activities that did not require it; moreover, children were observed participating alongside adults in a variety of tasks (e.g., processing coffee). Although Smith's focus was not on children, it is likely that had it been, a robust picture of children's participation in domestic work would have emerged, and *restavèk* are likely to have been major

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participants.

[12] Some children are trafficked, particularly across the border into the Dominican Republic, but the extent to which trafficking occurs is unknown. According to Sommerfeldt (2002), it is probably less than what is commonly assumed. It is possible that children's affirmations that they wanted to become *restavèk* might be evidence that the children rationalized their status, perhaps as a psychological defense mechanism, or as a way to impress an outsider, though the consistency of their response and the way it resonates with ethnographic research on children in domestic service in other parts of the world suggests that there is reason to believe them.

[13] For example, one girl, already living with her aunt, decided she no longer wanted to stay, and with the help of her own mother, she moved to yet another family. In another case, a boy left the first family he had been with because they didn't let him attend school and then moved to a second household. Smucker and Murray (2004) also note "a growing pattern of child 'independence' at tender ages, commonly age 10 or above and sometimes younger, whereby children are separated from family and manage their lives, in varying degrees, on their own... [including] unschooled children who left home *of their own volition* in search of food, employment, or living arrangements with another family" (pp. 13,14).

[14] According to a schoolmaster in one area, about 50% of the local *restavèk* were sent to school. (I could not confirm this estimate.) According to him, some parents will send the child for a while but then stop, especially if the child does not work well at home, or if they cannot afford school fees.

[15] Again, Leinaweaver (2008) identifies a similar rationale in her work on child domestic laborers in Peru.

[16] Foster children in Cameroon are known colloquially as "children who can fetch water," a term tellingly evocative with regard to the Haitian case, as this is indeed commonly a job performed by *restavèk*.

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