

**WHEN THE ONE WHO BEARS THE SCARS IS
THE ONE WHO STRIKES THE BLOW:
HISTORY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND HAITI'S *RESTAVÈKS***

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ABSTRACT

LAURA WAGNER: *When the One Who Bears the Scars is the One Who Strikes the Blow: History, Human Rights, and Haiti's Restavèks*
(Under the direction of Michele Rivkin-Fish and Peter Redfield)

The practice of keeping *restavèks*, or unpaid domestic child laborers, in Haiti has come under scrutiny by both human rights activists and journalists, many of whom describe it as a form of slavery. While this description is not entirely inaccurate and may also be useful, it fails to reflect the variability of treatment of *restavèks*, the complex ways in which power is exercised, the ways in which people occupy “oppressor” and “oppressed” roles simultaneously, the various local understandings of *restavèk* relationships and human rights, and the particular historical meanings and memories attached to slavery in Haiti. By critically examining descriptions of *restavèks* in activist and journalistic discourse, and analyzing the data collected during my fieldwork in the Haitian community in South Florida, I point to more syncretic and inclusive ways of understanding and reforming the practice of keeping *restavèks*.

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Bay kou bliye, pote mak sonje.

The one who strikes the blow forgets, the one who bears the scars remembers.

Haitian Proverb

I. Introduction

Mwen, pitit lamizè
Mwen, pitit lasoufrans
Mwen, restavèk
Domestik, tyoul

I am a child of misery
A child of suffering
A child-servant
A domestic, an errand boy

- Jan Mapou, “Zonbi”

Controversy surrounds informal relationships of child domestic labor in contemporary Haiti. These children are most commonly known by the Haitian Creole word *restavèk*, from the French *rester avec* (to stay with). Generally, *restavèks* hail from the denuded, infertile countryside where their families—peasant subsistence farmers—cannot provide for them. In hopes that urban life in any form will be better than these harsh rural conditions, families send their children to work as unpaid domestics in Haitian cities. It is estimated that Haiti has more than 300,000 *restavèks*, of whom three-quarters are female (UNICEF 2006). *Restavèks* are reported to vary in age from as young as four years old (Slavin 1996) to their teens.

I define the practice of keeping *restavèks* as diverse kinds of “relationships” rather than as one uniform “system.” While many of these relationships possess common general characteristics, *restavèk* experiences are also extremely variable and subjective. Treatment of *restavèks* runs the gamut from explicit physical, emotional, and sexual abuse to nearly-

familial rapport. Some *restavèks* attend school for part of the day and receive more than adequate nutrition and clothing; others receive scraps to eat, rags to wear, and no schooling. The “trafficking” of *restavèks* – insofar as it can be defined as “trafficking” – is likewise informal and inconsistent. In some cases, known intermediaries negotiate between poor rural families who cannot provide for their children and the urban households in search of domestic workers; in other cases, the exchange is less structured and more circumstantial. The families who keep *restavèks* do not exercise formal ownership over them, and the practice is in effect unregulated.

Notwithstanding the euphemistic quality of “staying with,” the word *restavèk* has negative connotations for many Haitians. For some, it refers only to children who are explicitly mistreated by the families with whom they stay, rather than children sent to live with relatively well-off relatives or friends, who provide for the child’s needs in exchange for household chores –a common phenomenon in Haiti. For purposes of this paper, I do not attempt to distinguish various types of unpaid domestic child labor, largely because it exists on a continuum, rather than at two easily-differentiated poles. The difference between “mistreated” and “well-treated” child domestics is partly a function of subjective understanding and rationalization, or of semantics, rather than a purely empirical one. For this reason, I define all Haitian unpaid child domestics as *restavèks*, with the caveat that that single word embraces a wide spectrum of realities.

This paper problematizes the ways that the practice of keeping *restavèks* is depicted in activist and journalist discourse as “child slavery” and an explicit human rights abuse, using, as a springboard, the perspectives of several Haitian-born, South Florida-based consultants. I argue that while this representation is useful on some levels, it also delimits

the issue in key ways and frequently comes into conflict with the complex, deep role that the historical memory of slavery and liberation plays in Haitian conceptualizations of contemporary human rights abuses. My research suggests that representations of the *restavèk* phenomenon, and much academic writing on Haiti in general, oversimplifies the dichotomy between oppressors and the oppressed, and erases the more subtle and nuanced manifestations of structural violence.

II. Methodology

The idea for this research took root before I entered graduate school. From 2004 to 2006 I lived in Miami, working first in community organizing and then in public health. In order to communicate with my Haitian-born patients, and so that I might understand the intense and passionate discussions of Haitian politics that resounded in my workmates' cubicles, and in my patients' living rooms, I began to learn Haitian Creole, first by taking classes, and subsequently by osmosis. But once I began to understand the heated political discussions—punctuated by proverbs, jokes, and the disapproving inhalation of air through teeth—I could not reconcile how different people, many of whom I found likable and apparently decent, could have such widely divergent views of Haiti and its leaders. On any given day, I might hear different people refer to the same politician as a mass-murderer, a terrorist, and a hero. Frustrated by my inability to discern who the “good guys” were, I demanded of one Haitian friend, a doctor at the health facility where I worked, that he explain his country to me. He replied, “If you want to understand Haiti, you need to understand the *restavèks*.” And he wrote the word, feverishly, on a Post-It note from a drug-company, and underlined it eleven times, so hard that the pen nearly perforated the page.

In the summer of 2007, I conducted twenty-one interviews of Haitian-born people living in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties, South Florida. These consultants represented various socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds, and had immigrated to the United States anywhere from a few months to decades prior. (See Appendix 1 for detailed biographical profiles.) I began by interviewing friends, former colleagues, and pre-existing contacts and then, through snowball sampling, identified more consultants. I was also

fortunate to be granted access to the clients of a well-known grassroots women's advocacy group and a bookstore/cultural center, both in Miami's Little Haiti, which allowed me interview and discuss my research ideas with a broader representation of the Haitian immigrant population. I conducted the interviews (see Appendix 2 for interview scripts) in English and Haitian Creole, frequently in some combination, according to the consultants' preferences. (One consequence of this is that people who spoke English—generally their third language—appear less articulate than people whose words are translated from Creole.) While interviews carried out in the *dyaspora* may not accurately represent contemporary Haiti, there are benefits to doing ethnographic fieldwork in Miami. My pre-existing contacts and relationships with people in Miami allowed me to establish a more immediate rapport. Moreover, people may speak more openly about sensitive issues outside of the context in which these events take place or are in contention (Maternowska 2006: 15). While I originally intended this research to be a broad survey of Haitian consultants of diverse and representative backgrounds, in the course of analyzing the data, it increasingly became a study of, for lack of a better term, the Haitian “middle class” – an attempt, at least in part, to understand the exercise of power by focusing on those who wield it. To date, it has been the rural peasantry and displaced rural-urban migrants who have been the subject of nearly all ethnographies of Haiti, both those that focus on social justice issues and structural inequality (Farmer 1992, Smith 2001, Maternowska 2006), and those that concentrate on folk customs and religion (in particular *vodoun*) (Brodwin 1996, Davis 1986). My research, which owes a great deal to these earlier ethnographies, attempts to deepen the discourse by incorporating the attitudes and opinions of people who have been less frequently and less intricately represented in those studies.

It is a peculiar though not uncommon experience that many of one's consultants may also be one's friends. Grateful for the trust, support, and generosity of these friends-*cum-*

consultants, both when I first lived and worked in Miami and during this fieldwork experience, I am conscious of the need to use their words, stories, and opinions both critically and fairly. My sympathy towards the people I interviewed informs my arguments, but does not confine them. The regard and affection I feel for my interlocutors, many of whom kept *restavèks* when they lived in Haiti, enriches my analysis and allows me to see them as complex individuals, rather than as undifferentiated members of a catchall “oppressor class.” I endeavour to analyze their justifications and explanations thoughtfully and considerately, without myself being bound by those same justifications.

III. Representations of *Restavèks* in Activist and Journalist Discourse

“*Where Slaves Revolted, Slavery Thrives*” (Hoag 2001). This is the headline of a BusinessWeek article detailing the *restavèks*’ plight. Journalistic and activist discourse makes much of the fact that in Haiti – celebrated as the world’s first independent black republic and the only nation to emerge from a successful slave rebellion—modern “slavery” persists to this day. Most illustrations of individual *restavèks* in popular media (Hoag 2001, Slavin 2004, Caistor 2007, Kay 2007) depict them as miserable creatures representing certain tropes (female, emotionally scarred, physically abused); similarly, many, though not all, activist organizations represent Haiti’s *restavèks* as modern slaves.

In this paper, I intentionally do not draw a clear line between “activist” and “journalistic” discourse. Representations of *restavèks* by journalistic sources—primarily print media, but other media as well—assume a tone of urgency designed to spur the reader to action, and chiefly cite as their sources representatives of activist organizations. Conversely, activist organizations like the National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR) post and provide links to sympathetic journalistic accounts of *restavèks*. Thus, while journalism may generally aspire to inform the reader dispassionately, we must acknowledge the overlap between its goals and the advocacy goals of the activists, and how activism and journalism inform and shape each other’s representations of *restavèks*.

The New York-based rights organization Dwa Fanm (“Women’s Rights” in Haitian Creole), which runs, among other things, a Restavek Project, defines the term as “the Haitian system of child domestic slavery” (Dwa Fanm 2002). A spokeswoman from the International Organization for Migration describes the keeping of *restavèks* as “child slavery

pure and simple" (Caistor 2007). Kevin Bales, activist-sociologist and president of the international NGO Free the Slaves, is somewhat more nuanced, writing that in *restavèk* practices, "ownership is not asserted, but strict control, enforced by violence, is maintained over the child. The domestic services performed by the enslaved child provide a sizable return on the investment in 'upkeep.' It is a culturally-approved way of dealing with 'extra' children; some are treated well, but for most it is a kind of slavery that lasts until adulthood" (Bales 2004: 21).

Journalistic representations of *restavèks* are, like activist depictions, effective in some ways and flawed in others. Both involve assumptions and implications that warrant interrogation. The BBC, for instance, describes the situation thus: "Haiti was the first country in the Americas to abolish slavery, when it won its independence in 1804 after a struggle led by Toussaint Louverture. But thousands live a life of near-slave labour because of poverty and social breakdown" (Caistor 2007). While rightly underscoring the central role of poverty, the BBC representation assumes that the *restavèk* phenomenon and plantation slave labor are readily comparable, and that "poverty" and "social breakdown" are precise terms, and the only identifiable causes of the phenomenon. It further suggests that the *restavèk* phenomenon is a fairly recent development, attributable to the collapse of a pre-existing social order, rather than a phenomenon with deep historical roots and complex, multiple meanings. Another news article introduces the *restavèk* thus: "Céline moved from the lush mountainside farmlands of southwestern Haiti to the teeming middle class Port-au-Prince slum of Carrefour" (Slavin 1996: 119). This portrayal is also inaccurate. The "mountainside farmlands" of rural Haiti are not lush – the countryside is notoriously eroded and infertile – and "teeming middle-class slum" is as much a contradiction in terms in Haiti as it is in the United States. This representation idealizes rural Haiti, while slotting the slum-dwellers who keep *restavèks* into a more acceptable "middle-class" oppressor category –

simultaneously downplaying the structural issues that are central to the *restavèk* system (i.e., that peasant families cannot survive off the land because it is devastated and barren) while implying a more clearly-delineated oppressor/oppressed binary. And a Time Magazine article begins with this description:

Michele wishes now that she had grown up in her squalid Haitian birth city of Port-de-Paix. When she was a young girl, her impoverished parents sent her to live with her more affluent aunt and uncle in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, with the promise of a better future. She got instead an old mattress in a closet, 18 hours a day of cooking, cleaning and waiting on her aunt's large family, and years of beatings and sexual abuse by her cousins. Her slavery continued when, a few years later, she was forced to emigrate with her Port-au-Prince family to Miami and then move with them to New York City. They kept her illiterate, denying her schooling even in the U.S. (Padgett 2001).

Padgett's article, while unusual in its depiction of intra-familial and transnational aspects of the *restavèk* practice, nonetheless uses the word "slavery" casually, and hyperbolically refers to Port-de-Paix as a universally "squalid city" to emphasize the disparity between the *restavèk* and her oppressors. Representations of *restavèks* in both activist and journalistic discourse hinge on a strict divide between oppressors and oppressed, defining them as poor children who serve in the homes of the rich. Jean-Robert Cadet, a former *restavèk* whose autobiography – part memoir and part call to action – has been criticised (by, among others, some of my consultants) as being embellished or unrepresentative, says, point-blank, that "restavecs are slave children who belong to well-to-do families" (Cadet 1998: 4). While journalists and activists compare *restavèk* labor to slavery, largely because of Haiti's unique historical relationship with slavery, it might also be useful to consider it a form of unpaid servitude, along the lines of indenture, which, until recently, was a common and socially-acceptable practice in many parts of the world, including the United States.

Why is the *restavèk-as-slave* the most prominent representation, the one most gripping, effective and affecting? Why do news articles about *restavèks* begin with the same

formula: the child, cleaved from her birth family, recounting horrific physical and emotional abuse at the hands of an affluent family? Perhaps it is because children are the quintessential blameless victims, because “women and children embody a special kind of powerlessness... children have come to embody, more easily than adults, the universality of a bare humanity” (Malkki 1995: 11). *Restavèks* – who are not merely children, but (for the most part) female children—are more sympathetic, less threatening images of Haitian chaos and suffering than the angry, persecuted adolescent males who join militias in the Cité Soleil shantytown (Deibert 2005). Unmistakable, unambiguous victimization: it is a sensationalist storyline that moves one to feeling, and, the storyteller hopes, spurs one to action. It is even more poignant when slavery and victimization occur in a land that has staked so much of its national identity on its self-liberation from slavery. For journalists who want an eye-catching headline, for activists or humanitarian organizations that seek to raise awareness and money, the comparison to pre-Revolution slavery is an effective one. Later in this paper, I discuss the benefits and disadvantages of this comparison.

While opinions and interpretations of the practice of keeping *restavèks* diverge, the discussion has not reached the level of debate. It is, rather, an outcry by advocates, met only by silence from those who keep *restavèks*. Based on my interview data, I suggest two main reasons for the one-sidedness of the public discussion. People who keep *restavèks* are not “legitimate speakers,” possessing no symbolic capital in this regard (Bourdieu 1997), and are therefore silenced or excluded, or at least not prioritized. Furthermore, owing to a complex web of historical and psychosocial factors, the potentially abusive realities (and the resulting debate-worthiness) of *restavèk* relationships are “misrecognized” (Bourdieu 1977) by the people who experience them. I begin by analyzing the relationship between human rights discourse and the *restavèk* phenomenon, and especially the tension between critical

representations and the local realities of participants in the practice, beginning with the framework of moral universalism and cultural relativism.

IV. Relativism, Universalism, and Conceptualizations of *Restavèks*

The relationship between cultural relativism and moral universalism is a salient theme in anthropological discussion of human rights, frequently presented as an irresolvable tension between idealist notions of universal human rights, and the realities of local contexts and subjectivities. Anthropologists have identified several facets of this debate, of which I note only some: the dangers of essentializing “culture” when individual “cultures” are in fact heterogeneous, permeable, and stratified; the myriad ways in which different groups with varying agendas and aims take up the mantle of “cultural relativism”; and how “human rights” may itself be understood and analyzed as a “culture” (J. Cowan et al. 2001). The somewhat unsatisfying conclusion of discussions of universalism and relativism is that the anthropologist must resign herself to an ongoing process of negotiation that leaves her “to err uncomfortably between the two poles” (Dembour 2001: 59).

On the most fundamental level of the universalism-relativism debate, the *restavèk* practice gives rise to two images that are pitted against one another. For activists and journalists, it is an unconscionable example of child labor and an outright human rights abuse. For some Haitians, it is a culturally-approved, appropriate way to provide for children in a low-resource setting. Both extremes are problematic, leave little room for nuance, and can be manipulated by actors with disparate agendas. Thus, while some may rationalize the *restavèk* phenomenon as a cultural practice, such relativistic justifications can be criticized for confusing “culture” with poverty (Montgomery 2001) or structural violence (Farmer 2003). Rather than situating the *restavèk* phenomenon in the context of deprivation and inequality, proponents of a relativist viewpoint ascribe it to something more benign – a

cultural norm. Moreover, it is often the case that “the rhetoric of cultural relativism appears to have been motivated by a political opportunism which has little to do with a concern for cultural values” (J. Cowan et al. 2001: 7).

By the same token, however, the rhetoric of universal rights can be motivated by political opportunism as well. Aristide’s Fanmi Lavalas political party employed the rhetoric “*reklame dwa-w*” (“reclaim your rights”) as part of its campaign against abusive domestic practices, including the keeping of *restavèks*. In 2003, Haiti passed legislation to end the practice—an empty gesture, as the legislation did not also target the underlying structural inequalities.¹ In fact, laws outlawing the *restavèk* practice have been on the books since 1958, to no effect (International Labour Organisation 1996). This is consistent with anthropologist Heather Montgomery’s arguments about the failure of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to protect child prostitutes in Thailand, where Article 34, which seeks to “protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse,” is “quoted in isolation, decontextualizing sexual abuse and presenting it as the paramount difficulty that poor children face, without linking it to issues of power, cultural background, and discrimination” (Montgomery 2001: 87). In short, the emphasis on human rights law serves to mask or draw attention away from the structural factors that underlie human rights abuses.

Meanwhile, as shown by the rhetorical and symbolic use of *dwa* (rights), human rights discourse can itself be viewed as a “culture.” As noted above, within this culture, certain types of people (former *restavèks*, representatives of human rights and advocacy

¹ That the ban on keeping *restavèks* had no significant discernible benefit for the children does not mean that there was no beneficial symbolic or political effect for Aristide’s Lavalas party. Dieula, a seventy-six year old peasant farmer from the north of Haiti, was dismissive when I asked her about *restavèks*. “Oh, *restavèks*?” she replied. “That was very bad. But they don’t exist anymore. Aristide fixed it.” She smiled at me, pleased, and asked “Do you know Aristide?” I replied, a bit obtusely, that I knew who he was but did not know him personally. She produced a faded, worn picture from her purse: Aristide, carried like an amulet or an image of the Savior.

groups) are legitimate speakers, whereas others (people of any socioeconomic class who keep *restavèks*) are not. Another feature of the culture of human rights is that suffering must be “packaged” in particular fashions. Anthropologist Erica James writes of the ways in which victims of political violence in Haiti during the junta years of 1991-1994 were “implicitly required to perform their suffering in order for it to be ‘recognized’ in a variety of institutional and clinical contexts” (E. James 2004: 129). Similarly, the *restavèk* system must be couched in certain terms, portrayed in a certain way, to constitute a legitimate human rights claim that warrants international attention. In 2004, for instance, Dwa Fanm decided not to renew a federal grant for its Restavek Project after twenty female former *restavèks* refused to register as victims of human trafficking, a designation that would have conferred asylum status and the ability to remain in the United States. According to the director of Dwa Fanm, “As soon as we said, ‘You have to report it, we have to report it so you can be certified,’ they said ‘Never mind, I’ve changed my mind’” (Kay 2007). Whatever these women’s motivations for refusing to register as victims of trafficking (the director suggests fear of retribution), recognition of these women’s suffering was dependent on labelling that suffering in specific, institutionally-approved ways, using language that classifies it as slavery.

The controversy surrounding *restavèks* transcends the apparent dualism of “culture” versus “rights.” It is necessary, now, to interrogate how the practice is conceptualized in local realities and subjectivities.

V. “Not With the Spirit of Having Slaves”: My Fieldwork

“The anthropological study tends to resemble a morality investigation.”
– Didier Fassin, *When Bodies Remember*

My ethnographic work explores how people from Haiti conceptualize and understand the practice of keeping *restavèks* and how these conceptualizations interact with activist and journalistic discourse. I examine the normativity of the *restavèk* phenomenon, and, relatedly, against the backdrop of universalism vs. relativism, the ways in which some Haitians justify (or perhaps misrecognize) the keeping of *restavèks* as a potential social good. Questions of how Haitian people’s complex and intense relationship with their nation’s history shapes contemporary human rights issues and definitions of “slavery,” and of how historical differential power relations have been reproduced in *restavèk* relationships, frame this discussion.

For many Haitians, keeping *restavèks* is not a simple matter of abuse; they often perceive the practice as providing the children with opportunities lacking in rural Haiti. As I noted at the beginning of this paper, treatment of *restavèks* is extremely variable. Extrapolating from her perceptions of childhood recollections of her family’s *restavèk*, Carole, a fifty-year-old health care worker and nursing student originally from Carrefour-Feuilles, explained that

for some of them it’s a better life. It’s a better life comparing to the way they were living. In a sense, meaning they get to have clothes. Because this woman, I remember my mother used to say, came, she had a shirt and no shoes. And if you provide them—I’m not saying that—but it’s a better life than if they were living in the country and running around naked and eating probably a mango for the whole day. At least they are there, they are helping, and they get to eat food.

She continued, “And you have the *restavek* where the families, they send them to school. I know one guy, he was quote-unquote ‘staying with’ someone, and he used to go to school at night, and then he become very successful. I think he’s an accountant or whatever. There are some good stories.”

Marie, a forty-eight-year-old health care worker from Pétion-Ville who was a physician in Haiti, described it very similarly, speaking about her own family’s treatment of their *restavèks*.

If I remember when I was young, we have people who weren’t--wouldn’t get paid, and they were little child. Okay? When I say “little” let’s say “adolescent,” okay? They don’t get paid, they didn’t get paid, but we send them—they have to do some work at home, but in the afternoon they have to go to school. It was the policy - it was my home policy. They have to go to school in the evening and they have to do a lot of things during the day. But not the big thing at home, like cooking. Cooking was for the [paid] servant, for the maid. But they were helping people in the house. They get food and they get—they have food, they have a room to stay, they have clothes, and we send them to school.

Definitions of “mistreatment” are subjective, and the line between explanation and rationalization is tenuous. Carole elaborated on the description of the *restavèk* her family kept when she was a child:

I know she was from Jérémie, but I don’t know how my father... acquired her, if you want to say that. I remember ever since I was a little girl she was there. She’s older than me, you know, but she’s way older than me, but she wasn’t—I was a baby, I was a small child but she was probably a teenager. But she was there, taking care of the household and whatever. But I never seen them mistreating her in that sense. She wasn’t getting the same thing that I was getting, she was... they used to send her to school and she used to eat, but not eating at the table with us, you understand what I’m saying?

Carole is a warm and extraordinarily generous person. She dreads working with AIDS patients—not out of fear or disgust, but because she cannot attain the professional detachment that would prevent her heart from being broken. She loves and dotes on young

children, and sometimes calls me by a fond Haitian diminutive, Lolo. And yet in this moment, her language took on a curious tone that vacillated between defensiveness and confession. She used the word “acquired” – self-consciously, wryly – with all its commodifying implications and all its subtext of slavery. She quickly denied that her family mistreated their *restavèk*, then admitted that they made her eat separately and gave her inferior treatment. She may define mistreatment narrowly, as consisting only of overt abuse, misrecognizing how subtler forms of marginalization affect the children. The deception may also be a conscious one, an attempt on the part of a decent person to justify morally ambiguous behavior. Marcel, a forty-nine year-old health administrator from Port-au-Prince, gave a similar description, and links the benevolent treatment of some individual *restavèks* to their possession of human rights.

They [*restavèks*] have rights. This is different from slave. They have rights, because some people treat them very well, depending on the moral of the person. Some people treat them like their own son—some don’t, to tell you the truth. Some people put them at school – they cannot go to school during the day, they have what you call night school, they send them to night school... Probably they won’t eat at the same table as the person, but they provide them a place to eat... They sleep on a *nat* [a mat made of palm leaves], but it’s better than on the floor.

The widespread opinion that *restavèk* relationships are not invariably abusive is related to the normativity of keeping *restavèks*. In discussing normativity, many of my interlocutors also broached the topic of how their views had changed. As Vanessa, a twenty-one-year-old community college student, described her childhood, “back then, to me, it was very normal to have two or three servants, but now, thinking about it, I would... have things differently.” For Vanessa, moving to the United States and becoming a young adult made her aware of the inequalities of unpaid servitude. From the point of view of Yves, a forty-seven-year-old union electrician and student, the change was less a personal realization than

a political and cultural shift. “If you’re living in Haiti at that time, it was normal, it was normal way of life. But as we’ve gotten... as the world has gotten a little more educated, and we don’t try to demean people, we try to make sure that people get progressive.” And Carole seemed to reconsider the ethics of keeping *restavèks* during the course of our conversation. She mused

You’re making me aware of something I took for granted. It was like a norm to have someone, a little girl or someone my age doing errands for me. It was okay. But now looking back, I think maybe it was—we weren’t taking advantage of her, but [*pause*] this child probably should have stayed home with her family and eat the mango and probably would be happier or I don’t know. The life would be different. But would it be better? I don’t know.

The apparent ease with which my interlocutors reevaluated the morality and normativity of keeping *restavèks* puts a different cast on their assertions that many *restavèks* are well-treated. They may genuinely see the *restavèk* relationship as potentially charitable and beneficial. Nevertheless, they expressed reservations about the morality of the practice and its potential to “demean” (in Yves’s words). In fact, a small number of interlocutors explicitly challenged the idea of culturally relativist arguments for the practice’s normativity. Bernard, a forty-four year old physician from Canapé Vert in Port-au-Prince, disparaged the invocation of “culture” to rationalize the *restavèk* phenomenon. “Obviously everybody can hide abuse under the umbrella of cultural belief or the illusion or the lie of offering a better life to a poor girl. Just because you offer a meal to someone should not give you the right to force her or him into slavery. I guess I would prefer to starve hungry then being fed while kept into bondage.”

My interlocutors agreed that the practice of keeping *restavèks* is not limited to the privileged classes, but is prevalent among nearly all socioeconomic strata.. Nattasha, a thirty-year-old receptionist from Aux Cayes, explained that “the upper and middle class

people have [unpaid] domestic workers and paid servants in their homes. People who can't afford to pay someone to work in their homes have unpaid servants." When I asked Clara, an information analyst from Port-de-Paix in her forties, who keeps unpaid servants, she echoed this sentiment, claiming that nearly all urban residents keep *restavèks* because *restavèks* require so few resources.

Unpaid servant - to me, everybody. Everybody - the majority of the people that live in the city. Almost a hundred percent. Because these little kids, usually they come from very very poor families in the rural area, so they bring them so at least they could have food to eat, they could have a place to stay. Most likely *everybody* can afford to have an unpaid servant, so long as you could feed that person a little bit of food and give that person a place to sleep, you could have one. Paid servant, too - the majority of the people, but less than the unpaid servant because you have to pay them a little bit of money, so this you will find more in the more... I'm not saying the high class, because even the middle class, also, even the lower class, if they can eat they can have servant. It's very rare to go to Haiti to find a house without a servant. Very rare.

However, my interlocutors differed significantly in their opinions about who is more likely to mistreat *restavéks*. Some, like Clara, believed that the rich were more likely to be abusers, though she was careful not to oversimplify the situation.

From my experience the richer, the more wealthy the family is, I think - I'm not saying, I'm not generalizing - but to me the more wealthy the family is, and then the more they mistreat that child. This is my experience. And then the less wealthy, and then this is, the more care they give to that child. I'm not saying that everybody is doing that, but I've seen that.

In the course of my conversation with Marie, she became increasingly thoughtful about her previously-narrow definition of slavery, and reflective about her own privileged position. She is well-educated and comparatively wealthy, and prefers to speak "good French" to Creole. With her notions of propriety and manners, she frequently put me to shame—chiding me for wrinkles in my clothes or (absurdly, to me) for carrying a bottle of juice outside without first placing it in a paper bag. Marie is also a kind, sympathetic, and

spiritual person, who is often affected deeply by the patients she serves. When I asked her if there was a difference between how wealthier and poorer people treat *restavèks*, she answered slowly, pensively, and was nearly moved to tears.

Marie: You know, sometimes you will never think people, wealthy.... It's like, they have those *Ti Sentaniz*² to, when they have any problem, and they want to do something bad, to express their anger, okay, it was like that. And sometimes they were abused by the parents, the children, everyone, okay, *everyone*. And when I found out those stuff, I think, I think it was really sad, because I never imagined [*unintelligible*]... When you were talking about slaves, this is what you are thinking about those people.

Laura: That's what I'm thinking, or that's what you're thinking?

Marie: [*Pause, thinking*] When you asked me about slaves, I told you I was thinking about those people [*gestures with hand, a backwards wave*].

Laura: By "those people" you mean "in the past, before the Revolution?"

Marie: Yes. So if you want to compare them, you can compare them.

Laura: What rights does a slave have?

Marie: What rights? [*Quietly*] To be alive. I never thought about that. But I think that's the only right that we give them. To be alive.

Marie's words are remarkable. Her indictment of those members of the privileged classes who abuse *restavèks*, coupled with her incredulity that wealthy and cultured people could do such things, points to a double-bind. Her gradual comparison of abused *restavèks* with pre-Revolution slaves grew out of our conversation; initially, she, like several other interlocutors, had defined slavery in historically-specific ways. It indicates that the comparison to pre-Revolution slavery is neither unfounded nor inaccessible to the Haitian elites, but rather that the association is not always immediate. Finally, Marie's unprompted invocation of *we* in response to the question of whether slaves have rights – "this is the only right we give them" – is startling. I meant only to ask about slavery in general; she explicitly aligned herself and

² "Ti Sentaniz" (Little Sainte-Anise) is the title character of a radio play by prominent Haitian writer and humorist Maurice Sixto, which chided Haitians for their treatment of *restavèks*. Today, "Ti Sentaniz" is synonymous with "*restavèk*," although perhaps less jarring and abrasive to some. Foyer Maurice Sixto is an organization in Port-au-Prince that serves runaway *restavèks*.

Haitians in similarly-privileged positions with slaveholders, and conflated the practice of keeping *restavèks* with the institution of slavery. Her reference to the right “to be alive” harkens, once again, to the *zoë-bios* divide (Agamben 2000): slaves and *restavèks* possess bare life, and nothing more.

Several other informants, however, felt that the poor were more likely to abuse *restavèks*. Carole – who, like Clara above, expressed her desire not to essentialize—conveyed this attitude clearly.

I think the lower socioeconomic, they don't treat them... I'm not making excuse to say that the upper... this is a general... I don't want to make a general statement saying that. But I know for a fact there are some, if we want to call “*restavéks*” - which I don't like, I don't like that word, but it exists, people use that. I don't think... I know some people, well-to-do, when they have the *restavèk* they send them to school, they get married, they help them... The person who's poor and has a *restavèk* and then doesn't have a lot of education, how do you think he's going to treat that person [the *restavèk*]?

On one hand, the more privileged classes may be so detached from the plight of the poor that they cannot sympathize, whereas the urban poor, still enmired in poverty themselves, are more understanding of *restavèk* children. On the other hand, the privileged classes have more resources (accompanied, perhaps, by a sense of *noblesse oblige*), whereas the urban poor who keep *restavèks* are less able to take care of them.

That the poor keep *restavèks*, and may mistreat them, points to how people reproduce the same inequalities and power differentials that they experience; one can occupy “oppressor” and “oppressed” roles simultaneously. Marie, who previously described her shock and dismay at learning how some privileged people treat their *restavèks*, placed this into context. “You know sometimes you have someone working for you, and this maid has someone, has a child or another servant [working for her]. Poor people have poor people

working for them. So... to tell you how bad it is. Because those people who work for those people, for those maids, how come they can get paid decently?"

But, according to some of my interlocutors, this is not merely a contemporary phenomenon; it is entrenched in Haiti's relationship to the past. Not only do some segments of the Haitian poor reproduce these inequalities (like the maids who keep *restavèks*), but some Haitian people themselves reproduce historical inequalities. Marcel described the *restavèk* practice as a replication of the power structures the *colons* exerted over the slaves, while Clara explained how the "mentality" of oppression among Haitian elites is historically determined.

That Ti Sentaniz business, I said you will find it most likely—those kids are mistreated by the wealthy—because remember the slaves, they were not wealthy. Like you're talking about Dessalines, was from the very very low... So what happened is people that has the opportunity, and then this is one mentality that they have, that cause the country to be like that. If they want to be better, some Haitians they want to be better than you...they try to be, no matter what, to be way better than you. So they will not help you grow, they try to push you down so they can always be on the top.

My interlocutors' relationships with the past were paradoxical. History was ever-present and alive in their daily lives, and yet many interlocutors drew a fairly sharp division between the idealised past and the imperfect present. When I mentioned, in the course of my conversation with Marie, that I had read somewhere that Toussaint had himself kept slaves, she responded indignantly. "I don't think so! He has people working with him but I don't think it was with the spirit of having slaves. No, something has changed. I know he has people working *for* him, but not under him." Marie identifies an indefinable qualitative difference between slave labor and other forms of labor – a "spirit of having slaves" quite apart from semantic definitions of the word itself – is fascinating. And in Marie's conceptualization, the person of Toussaint is unassailable, impervious to retrospective criticism.

The people whom I interviewed in Miami defined “slavery” in historically-specific ways. Their immediate association was the forced unpaid plantation labor that the French had imposed on Africans and their descendants in pre-Revolution Saint-Domingue. For Clara, slavery was separate from her lived experience. When I asked her “What does the word ‘slavery’ mean to you?” she claimed no particular expertise on the subject, beginning, “Well, from what I heard, from what I read in my Haitian history book, because I never lived during that time so I really don’t know what I could tell you...” Similarly, Carole stated, “In my opinion, slave means someone from history, really,” while Marie defined slavery as “someone who is working in really harmful conditions, don’t get paid, mistreated. If I refer to the past history of Haiti, this is what it is.”

Many of my interlocutors discussed slavery in terms of rights, in a variety of ways. The most common response was that slaves lack the right to self-determination or choice. “To my understanding, that slave is a person who has no rights and they cannot decide, just like they were an object owned by somebody that could decide for them, and they have no right to talk, no right to decide and no right on anything,” explained Clara. Rosaline, a thirty-year-old security guard from Arcahaie, said “Slaves have no rights. The *patwòn* [boss] tells them what to do. They are always under their command.” Discussions of rights are complicated by Haiti’s historical context. Yves drew attention, somewhat circuitously, to the ways in which considerations of rights and slavery are “silenced” by Haitians’ conceptualizations of their emancipatory history.

Laura: Does a slave have rights?

Yves: Whatever culture dominates one at that time, I guess they create their own laws. You know, but in Haiti it was different, since we took our independence, the thought never come to my mind.

Laura: What doesn’t?

Yves: Like slavery, that doesn’t come to my mind. We abolished it, we got rid of it. But I do think that it was just a way of one group dominating

another, and they create their own laws. So I guess the slave doesn't have rights.

History played a central role in many interlocutors' understanding of their identities and such contemporary issues as the *restavèk* phenomenon. Some saw the practice of keeping *restavèks*, and other forms of inequality, as antithetical to and irreconcilable with Haiti's national identity. Clara became very passionate when explaining how she believes Haiti has betrayed the intentions and designs of the revolutionary heroes.

We have a great, great history. I mean, if you, if I remember, when I was in school and they were telling us, they used to tell us what these people do, Dessalines, Toussaint. To be slaves and then to lead the country, they say that Haiti is one of the first black countries.... We had a very great history, but it's sad that we don't keep it going. The way it's going, these people who work so hard, and like they said people like the Haitian historian, if those people now [could see us] they would be very mad and frustrated with us because this country should not be... *[trails off]*

Like Clara, Marcel lamented the disconnect between Haiti's past and its present. When I asked him about *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité*, the revolutionary ideals on which Haiti was founded, he responded, "It was those people, our ancestors, this is what they thought for us. This is what the legacy they want to leave for us. That's why I told you there wasn't any follow-up. I think that today if our ancestors was to come back again, they would probably, they would be unhappy."

Others described the betrayal of Haiti's revolutionary mandate as having plagued the nation nearly since its inception, but in so doing also reinforced the heroic status of its founders. Speaking of instability in Haiti, Vanessa remarked sardonically, "Well, it started after they killed Dessalines, I'd say. Which was about, what 200 years ago? It's been going downhill from then." Shortly after reacting fervidly to my suggestion that Toussaint had kept slaves, Marie went on to further separate Haiti's legendary past from its unenviable present—by distancing and contrasting the mentality of contemporary Haitians from that of their

revolutionary forebears. “We are proud of [the Revolution], and still bragging, because I think it was the best part of our history. But, you don’t see that we still have in us, the spirit, the ideal... the spirit, the motive that those people had, we don’t have it. I think in Haiti now, we have a tendency to... to give up. You don’t feel that we are going to fight to change things.”

My consultants expressed an overwhelming hopelessness about Haiti’s future. Indeed, the most commonly-cited reason my consultants gave for having come to the United States in recent years was ever-present threat in Haiti of physical violence, kidnapping, and political retribution – known as *insekirite* (insecurity). Almost without exception my middle- and upper-class Haitian acquaintances in Miami had experienced *insekirite* in Haiti – either firsthand or among their families and friends – in the form of carjackings, gun violence, torture, and the “disappearances” which have characterized early twenty-first century Haiti, especially since Aristide’s 2004 ouster. Marcel, who immigrated to the United States once and for all after being shot, said simply, “This happens to a lot of professionals in Haiti, and most of them have to leave.” For them, their education and social status is a source of peril and eventual displacement. Marie explained, “You have heard about all those killings, kidnappings: that’s why [I left Haiti]. I wasn’t, personally, a target, thanks God... but I didn’t want to become a victim, so that’s why.”

When I developed the methodology, I saw that many of my interview questions focused on negative ideas like slavery, servitude, and national problems. In an attempt to make room for optimism, I tacked on, practically as an afterthought, “What is Haiti’s greatest hope?”

Carole replied wryly.

Hm! The biggest hope? [sucks teeth thoughtfully] Hm! The biggest hope! Do I have hope for Haiti? [pause] I stopped thinking about hope for Haiti, really, to tell you the truth. Mmmm... because it’s getting worse, it’s getting

worse and worse. I don't know. I don't see... maybe I'm a pessimist. I don't know. I don't see any silver lining, what they call, behind the cloudy day, or something like that? I don't know. I can't.... You know, this is a *good* question! Maybe I should ponder. You know, because it never came to mind, because I don't see it! And this is a shame, for me, a Haitian, to say that.

Marie paused for a long moment when I posed the question to her, then laughed awkwardly. Finally she replied, very quietly, "We can pray for the country. I don't see how things are going to change. There are so many problems in this country. And the level of poverty is so high. I don't know what to do. The hope for Haiti is a miracle. A miracle. Believe me, it needs a miracle."

VI. Rethinking the Dichotomy between Oppressor and Oppressed

“Ka, I don’t deserve a statue,” he says again, this time much more slowly, “not a whole one, at least. You see, Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey.”

– Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*

Traditionally, scholarly discussion of class in Haiti has defined a sharp and bipolar division between rich and poor. Such dichotomies can be misleading as regards the practice of keeping *restavèks*. While “the ethics of victimhood generate victims only where victims are obviously blameless” (Ignatieff 1998: 24), the *restavèk* phenomenon is a situation in which the perceived binary of victim and victimizer is unsettlingly dubious.

James Leyburn’s dated but enduring classic, *The Haitian People*, divides Haiti into two discrete, mutually exclusive “castes” (Leyburn 1941) – the educated, largely light-skinned elite, who live in cities, practice Catholicism, speak French, and hold positions of power and authority; and the rural peasantry, who are illiterate and dark-skinned, practice *vodoun*, speak Haitian Creole, and live in abject poverty (Leyburn 1941). In the nearly seventy years since the publication of Leyburn’s work, many scholarly descriptions of the Haitian class system have reiterated his opinion. In 2001, for instance, anthropologist Jennie Smith echoed Leyburn’s portrayal of a fundamental and dualistic divide, writing that

...despite many gradations of wealth that may be identified among Haiti’s population, the differences and distances that exist between its (most powerful) urban rich and its (most populous) rural poor are striking... Whereas members of Haiti’s tiny upper crust boast levels of affluence that would humble many U.S. millionaires, most Haitian peasants live in grinding poverty. Whereas the elite have reaped the benefits of the best educational institutions in Europe and the Americas, the majority of peasants are unable to read and write. Whereas the wealthy fly to Paris, Montreal and Miami to shop for clothes and receive high-tech medical care, the poor suffer chronic hunger

and malnutrition, and die from diseases that have long been easily treatable. Whereas many elites pride themselves on their light complexions, peasants are assumed to be (and most are) dark. Whereas the elite sector is concentrated in the capital city of Port-au-Prince, peasants tend to reside in the scattered rural settlements of the mountainous countryside (Smith, 2001: 12).

This characterization of Haitian class divisions, while based on real inequalities in resource distribution, is oversimplified. The Haitian peasantry do, by and large, live in desperate conditions with few prospects of upward little or no hope for social mobility; to them the lifestyles of the very rich or even the middle classes are unthinkable. Nonetheless, scholars have repudiated Leyburn's characterization of Haitian society as a "caste" system as "a gross misrepresentation" (Nicholls 1979: 38). Moreover, it is not enough simply to acknowledge, as Smith does, that gradations of wealth exist in Haitian society, but then to concentrate only on the differences between the super-elite and the most abject poor. That approach erases the lives, struggles, and complicated roles of the people in between, and reduces "the poor" to an undifferentiated mass. It neglects the middle classes, who live fairly comfortably but with the looming threat of *insekirite* (insecurity, or violence, characterized in recent years by kidnappings [Deibert 2003]); who generally have enough to eat and wear, but whose lifestyles would not, to borrow Smith's hyperbole, "humble US millionaires." Smith's approach ignores the urban poor – the people, often migrants from rural areas, who inhabit Cité Soleil and other urban shantytowns (Farmer 1992), who, despite their undeniable poverty, may, according to my interview data, occupy a position of power relative to more recent migrants from rural areas, e.g. the *restavèks*. It also simplifies the complicated and often contradictory roles that skin color plays – and has played, historically – in Haitian society (Nicholls 1979, Trouillot 1990).

Considering first Haiti's socioeconomic class divisions, while statistical evidence is scarce and weak, it suggests that income inequality may have been overstated. According to development economist Mats Lundahl's analysis of census and income data from the 1950s

to the 1990s, assumptions and deficient methodology render data on income distribution in Haiti arbitrary, sketchy, and often biased (Lundahl 1996). While several elements of the Haitian population suffer from poverty and deprivation, some analysts believe that land distribution in Haiti may in fact be more equal than in Latin America as a whole, and that many earlier economic surveys, through miscalculation and a misunderstanding of the non-wage components of “labor incomes,” overstate the degree to which wealth, land and income are concentrated in the hands of the so-called “wealthy” (Lundahl 1996).

Qualitatively-speaking, Haitian middle- and upper-classes, while not subject to the same deprivation that afflicts the peasantry (including peasants displaced to urban shantytowns), nonetheless perceive their own circumstances as precarious. As discussed above, they fear the ongoing *insekirite* – the violence, torture and “disappearances” which are a constant threat to Haitians of all backgrounds, especially the politically-connected middle and upper classes (Fatton 2002, Deibert 2003). The frequency and severity of violence and *insekirite* in Haiti also point to the fluidity of oppressor/oppressed categorizations. Anthropologist M. Catherine Maternowska, reflecting on her own experience as a victim of carjacking and kidnapping by destitute and disenfranchised gunmen on Haiti’s national highway, writes that “the people I care so much about as victims can also be victimizers” (Maternowska 2006: 181).

One other aspect of the rich/poor dichotomy bears repetition. As I illustrated previously, my interlocutors claimed that people of nearly all urban socioeconomic classes keep *restavèks*, because, put starkly, these children—unpaid, requiring, in some cases at least, nothing more than a floor to sleep on and a small amount of food—entail very little investment. Furthermore, my interlocutors disagreed over whether mistreatment of *restavèks* is more likely to occur at the hands of the wealthy or the poor. These understandings contradict the prevailing representations of poor children labouring in the homes of the rich.

Considering next divisions within Haiti based on skin color, it is inaccurate to characterize Haiti, as do Leyburn and Smith, as dualistically divided between dark-and light-skinned groups, or as typically “racist.” Skin color has a complicated and sometimes inconsistent role in Haitian society. The oft-invoked proverb “*Milat pòv se nèg; nèg rich se milat*” (“The poor mulatto is black; the rich black person is mulatto”) is both telling and incomplete: it correctly points to skin color’s mutability and dependence on relations of wealth and power, yet understates the ways in which blackness has been positively construed at various points in Haitian history. On one hand, blackness (and Haiti’s status as the “first independent black republic”) is crucial to Haitian historical identity and national pride (Nicholls 1979, Trouillot 1990). Cultural *négritude* (which promoted “African” traditions and customs over European ones) and its descendant political movement, *noirisme* (which advocated worldwide black solidarity, urged the redistribution of wealth from *milat* elites to the black masses, and further lionized men like Dessalines and Toussaint), placed a nationalistic emphasis on blackness (Nicholls 1974). On the other hand, during the more than two years I lived in Miami, I observed implicitly-racist throwaway remarks like “She’s dark-skinned, *but* pretty!” and comments about the desirability of “soft” hair and the relative attractiveness of *milat* individuals. It is true that in Haiti lighter-skinned people disproportionately (but not exclusively) occupy positions of power and wealth (Nicholls 1979). However, most of my “middle class” interlocutors were not light-skinned. They self-identified as dark-skinned, and had a wide range of feelings about it. Marie traced the origins of her evangelical Christianity to her lighter-skinned mother removing her from Catholic school because the nuns were cruel to dark-skinned children like her; nonetheless, to this day, she speaks admiringly of the beauty of lighter-skinned *milats*. Dark-skinned Vanessa has a *milat* mother with some reputed Polish ancestry, but her father is a renowned visual artist in

Haiti who espouses *noirist* ideology in his art and his politics; she grew up surrounded by paintings of dazzling dark-skinned women.

While Cadet connects skin color and social status to the *restavèk* phenomenon, writing that “children of the elite are often recognized by their light skin and the fine quality of their clothes” while “children of the poor often have very dark skin”(Cadet 1998: 3-4), this dualism is too simple. It is true that skin color is an important social marker, but it is not an inflexible or status-determinative one. The power relations of the *restavèk* phenomenon cannot be reduced to a clear-cut matter of skin color, for this would ignore the various and complicated roles that skin color has historically played in Haitian society and politics, and the different kinds of social capital associated with light and dark skins in different epochs.

Finally, considering the division between rural and urban Haiti, *restavèk* relationships point to the possibly misleading ways in which we conceptualize the power divide between the two. While journalist and activist discourse describes *restavèks* as children from the countryside who toil in the homes of city dwellers, this description minimizes the fact that the majority of the inhabitants of urban shantytowns are themselves migrants (or descendants of migrants) from the harsh and uncultivable countryside (Farmer 1992).

In sum, representations of human rights and social justice issues in Haiti often hinge on a Manichaeian divide between rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed, victim and victimizer. Renowned physician-anthropologist Paul Farmer, whose work straddles academia, activism, and popular writing, has used these supposed dualities to great effect in raising money for and awareness of Haitian peasants and their struggles within systems of structural violence; however, one can also argue that “the stark flaw in Farmer’s analysis of Haiti [is] that he viewed people as either victims, to be helped and protected, or victimizers, to be denounced” (Deibert 2005: 296). I apply this critique of Farmer to activist and journalistic discourse on *restavèks*. To be sure, dualistic representations are often effective in

eliciting sympathy and drawing attention to inequality and structural violence. However, representing only the most severe power differentials in *restavèk* practices silences the voices of many people, and actually obscures the more insidious machinations of structural violence: that inequality and abuse are a diffuse web rather than vertical chain; that the oppressed can be oppressors and the oppressors, oppressed; that the people who bear the scars can also inflict the blows. In the next two sections, I examine how dualistic representations of the *restavèk* phenomenon – in particular the comparison to slavery – are both productive and non-productive.

VII. The Advantages of Critiquing *Restavèk* Relationships as Slavery

As I have demonstrated, characterizing *restavèks* as slaves and depicting human rights abuses as based on a strict oppressor-oppressed divide serves the rhetorical purposes of generating sympathy for consummate victims (Ignatieff 1998). The comparison to slavery also highlights certain aspects of the *restavèk* practice: that it is a form of coercive labor, that it is characterized by certain power differentials, and that it bears the potential for various kinds of abuse, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as subtle psychosocial trauma resulting from constant subjugation. The degree to which *restavèk* relationships are abusive depends, of course, on whether one limits one's definition of abuse to overt mistreatment. If some *restavèks* are fed and clothed, sent to school, and not subjected to physical or sexual abuse, does this invalidate their identities as victims of human rights abuse?³ In other words, is there something inherently disempowering about the mere status of being a *restavèk*, of being unpaid, of being marginalized, which should qualify it as a human rights abuse regardless of whether the child is visibly mistreated?

Characterizing *restavèk* relationships as a form of slavery also highlights the fact that it is a form of unpaid labor, which has various attendant material and symbolic meanings. It allows us to see justifications for the keeping of *restavèks* as what sociologist Orlando Patterson terms the “idiom of power,” a “way to clothe [power’s] beastliness, some idiom through which it can be made immediately palatable to those who exercise it... the principal

³ A similar question was asked, for that matter, of plantation slaves who were relatively content with their lot; it was argued that “however cruel was the slave traffic, the African slave in America was happier than in his own African civilisation” [C. James 1989: 6-7].

way in which power is immediately interpreted in socially and cognitively acceptable terms” (Patterson 1982: 18). Defining *restavèk* relationships as a form of slavery makes explicit the fundamentally coercive nature of these relationships—which may be veiled in arguments about “well-treated” *restavèks*. As a corollary, defining *restavèk* relationships as slavery more directly links abuse to the children’s status as unpaid laborers. Certain types of abuse—physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual—are more immediately associated with slavery than with “domestic work.” Furthermore, defining *restavèk* relationships as slavery draws attention to the inherently disempowering nature of unpaid labor, marginalization and the mere status of being poor—a dimension of disempowerment, as an active process bound up in structural violence, quite separate from inquiries into the ways in which a *particular* child may be treated or mistreated.

In addition, defining *restavèks* as specifically *modern* slaves sheds light on other dimensions of the phenomenon. According to sociologist and activist Kevin Bales, the informality and lack of regulation that characterize the *restavèk* practice actually increase the potential for abuse, “appropriat[ing] the economic value of individuals while keeping them under complete coercive control—but without asserting ownership or accepting responsibility for their survival” (Bales 2004: 25).

Finally, defining the practice of keeping *restavèks* as slavery underscores how modern Haitians may reproduce historical relations of power, authority, and labor, drawing attention to the fact that this is not an isolated phenomenon springing only from contemporary poverty and unrest. In fact, Haiti has, from the very moment of its inception as an independent state, replicated the same kinds of power structures that defined it as a French colony. Haitian historian and public intellectual Jean Price-Mars maintained that in the early days of the republic, “there was only a substitution of masters... As for the common people in whose name the creation of the principle of equality had been proclaimed...their situation,

in a century of liberty and political independence, was that of servitude minus the presence of the *Code Noir* [slave laws] and the whip of the commander” (Price-Mars 1983: 105). On one hand, linking the practice of *restavèks* and Haitian historicity is useful in contextualizing it; on the other hand, the comparison strikes at the heart and pride of many Haitians who have a very specific way of relating to their country’s history, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

VIII. The Limitations of Critiquing *Restavèk* Relationships as Slavery

Se mwen k' konnen sa ou ye pou mwen

Mèsi, papa Desalin

Si m' youn nonm

Se pou m' di : mèsi, Desalin

Si m' ouvè je-m gade

Se gras a ou, Desalin

Si m' leve tèt mwen pou m' mache

Se gras a ou, Desalin

Only I know what you mean to me

Thank you, Father Dessalines

If I am a whole human being today

I have to say: Thank you Father Dessalines

If I can open my eyes and look at my surroundings

It is thanks to you, Dessalines

If I walk with my head up high

It is thanks to you, Dessalines

-Feliks Moriso-Lewa (Félix Morisseau-Leroy), "Mési Papa Desalin"

In overthrowing me, you have cut down in Saint-Domingue only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots, for they are numerous.

- Attributed to Toussaint Louverture (commonly seen in Miami's Little Haiti)

The characterization of the *restavèk* phenomenon as a form of slavery, and especially the comparison to or conflation with pre-Revolution plantation slavery, may inhibit open, productive, and inclusive discussion of *restavèk* relationships and their associated human rights issues. The comparison is problematic on the "material" level (having to do with the very institutions and how they function) and the "symbolic" level (having to do with the ways that people interpret, conceptualize, and remember the institutions). I will outline the former, and dwell in greater detail on the latter.

On a tangible level, *restavèk* labor and plantation slavery differ. The predominantly economic and profit-based motivations of plantation slavery (Mintz 1989) stand in contrast to *restavèk* relationships, which, according to my consultants, have more to do with status than financial gain. Plantation slavery involved the direct ownership of laborers, while *restavèk* labor (as I have discussed already) consists of indirect or coercive control. Plantation slavery primarily consisted of black Africans and their descendants labouring for white French colonists (though not exclusively, as some black freemen and *gens de couleur* kept slaves [Nicholls 1979, Dubois 2004, Heintz 2005]), while *restavèk* labor consists of the descendants of black Africans labouring for the descendants of black Africans. Plantation slavery was part of a linked global economy and burgeoning capitalism (Mintz 1985), while the *restavèk* practice is a comparatively isolated local phenomenon, albeit present in the *dyaspora* (Padgett 2001, Kay 2007, Caistor 2007). Finally, plantation slavery and domestic labor in contemporary Haiti differ qualitatively, antithetical to anthropological sensibilities though it may be to “compare suffering.” Labor on sugar plantations was singularly backbreaking, cruel, and lethal (Mintz 1985).

Having enumerated the “concrete” ways in which *restavèk* labor differs from plantation slavery, it is necessary to discuss the ways in which this comparison is fraught on a symbolic or interpretive level. As I showed above, my Haitian-born consultants had a very historically-specific definition of the word “slavery.” They immediately associated the word with pre-Revolution Saint-Domingue, French colonialism, and plantation labor. This association is important because most Haitians have an intense and abiding sense of pride in Haiti’s history and its national heroes. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot reflects that “I grew up in a family where history sat at the dinner table” (Trouillot 2005: xvii). This is not unique to Trouillot, or to those who, like him, hail from Haiti’s small but influential intellectual elite. History is alive in Haiti, and in Haitian communities in the *dyaspora*.

Place names reflecting the revolution and its heroes dot the Haitian map: Fort Liberté, Pétionville, Cap Haïtien (no longer Cap François). Landmarks stand stonily in the countryside (the haunting Citadelle Laferrière, the fortress built under the direction of King Henri Christophe to resist the French and demonstrate black superiority, and the nearby ruins of his palace, Sans-Souci) and rise on city street corners (innumerable statues and monuments to the forefathers whose names are virtually synonymous with the Haitian Revolution). Events and victories are evoked reverentially, a single word encapsulating a complex web of meaning: Vertières—the last and defining battle of the Haitian Revolution. The national anthem, the Dessalinienne, implores, “*Notre passé nous crie!*” (“Our past cries out to us!”) In South Florida, too, Haitian history is alive and woven, sometimes subtly and sometimes explicitly, into the fabric of everyday life. When I first moved to Miami in 2004, red and blue banners⁴ hung from light poles to herald the bicentennial of Haitian independence. Boulevards named for Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Toussaint Louverture traverse the heart of Little Haiti. Elaborate posters of the *Héros de l’indépendance et Chefs d’état d’Haïti* (Heroes of Independence and Chiefs of State of Haiti) adorn Haitian-owned businesses, restaurants and shops. As the conversations with my consultants suggest, this relationship with history is central to the ways in which Haitians self-identify and define their nation.

The notion of a modern-day Haitian “slavery,” as the practice of keeping *restavèks* is sometimes described, is incompatible with the historical mythology that surrounds the Haitian Revolution. Haitian interpretations and understandings of slavery and the Revolution can be viewed as a “mythico-history” as defined by anthropologist Liisa Malkki, because it “represent[s] not only a description of the past, nor even merely an evaluation of the past, but

⁴ The Haitian flag is red and blue – the colors of the French flag with the white cut out, representing the violent removal of the *colons*.

a subversive recasting and reinterpretation of it in fundamentally moral terms” (Malkki 1995: 54). In Haiti, the mythico-history is the triumph of the black slaves-*cum*-revolutionaries-*cum*-founding fathers over the oppressive white French colonizers and slave-owners. To label it a mythico-history is not to adopt a strict constructivist viewpoint whereby people’s understandings of history are labelled false or fictional. Rather, it is meant to look critically at what these particular memories are and how they have been produced. Conceptualizations of the Haitian Revolution in moral terms have been encouraged by the dominant trends in historiography. According to Trouillot, “most of the literature produced in Haiti remains respectful – too respectful, I would say—of the revolutionary leaders who led the masses of former slaves to freedom and independence” (Trouillot 1995: 105).

The lionization of Haiti’s revolutionary leaders is not limited to Haitian historiography. *The Black Jacobins*, by Trinidadian Marxist intellectual C.L.R James, is one of the definitive histories of the Haitian Revolution. In it, Toussaint is glorified as a hero and a martyr: “Slavery dulls the intellect and degrades the character of the slave. There was nothing of that dullness of degradation in Toussaint” (C. James 1963: 91). But Toussaint was, in truth, a complex and sometimes ambivalent character, as were Dessalines, Christophe, Pétion and the other revolutionary heroes, who were divided amongst themselves by color (black versus *milat*) (Dubois 2004, Heintz 2005), and who, when faced with the task of invigorating the economy of a newly-independent and war-ravaged land, reproduced many of the labor structures that had characterized pre-Revolution Haiti, for “rational” reasons that immediately took on deep symbolic meaning. “An authoritarian labor system was more likely to lead to increased productivity in the export sector and generate local accumulation of capital. On the other hand, militarized agriculture, and even milder forms of the plantation system, conflicted with the masses’ vision of freedom and thus with the fundamental principle of liberty around which the nation was built” (Trouillot 1989: 50). This

multidimensionality is absent from the mythico-history of the Haitian Revolution, which is glorious, emancipatory, and Manichaeic; and which defines the nation of Haiti fundamentally.



Intersection of Louverture and Pétion, Mirebalais
Photo credit: Laura Wagner



View from within Sans-Souci
Photo credit: Laura Wagner



Child amid the revolutionary heroes, Vertières
Photo credit: Laura Wagner



UN troops atop the heroes of the Haitian Revolution, Gonaïves
Photo credit: Laura Wagner

To relate the practice of keeping *restavèks* to the colonial institution of slavery is to challenge the veracity and validity of the mythico-history, and of the national cosmos. Given that “images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order” (Connerton 1989: 3), what do these moralistic interpretations of the Haitian Revolution accomplish in contemporary Haiti, in general and with regards to the *restavèk* system in particular? Trouillot’s explanation resonates once again with Patterson’s notion of the “idiom of power.”

Since the early nineteenth century, the Haitian elites have chosen to respond to racist denigration with an epic discourse lauding *their* revolution. The epic of 1791-1804 nurtures among them a positive image of blackness quite useful in a white-dominated world. But the epic is equally useful on the home front. It is one of the rare historical alibis of these elites, an indispensable reference to their claims of power. (Trouillot 1995: 105).

Since its inception, the nation of Haiti has struggled against challenges to its legitimacy. Better known today as the “poorest country in the Western hemisphere” than for its genesis in slave rebellion and its identity as the “first independent black republic,” Haiti is a so-called failed state. For more than two centuries, Haiti has been represented as a nation of backward former slaves who quickly reverted to savagery after proving incapable of self-governance. Erica James writes that “to some degree Haiti and Haitians continue to be symbols of horror, violence, pathology, and the chaos of a nation that the United States views as wilfully refusing to follow a democratic path” (E. James 2004: 134). As historian Pedro San Miguel has observed, Haiti has been “in the eyes of the world...the supreme abomination” (San Miguel 2005: 75). Underlying the definition of the *restavèk* phenomenon as slavery, and its characterization as a human rights violation, there appears to be a subtext supportive of these representations – that Haiti has failed to fulfill its revolutionary and emancipatory mandate. Moreover, the comparison to slavery—rather than to indenture or other forms of unequal domestic labor that might be more familiar or accessible to Western

observers⁵—further exoticizes and “others” Haiti, distancing it from “developed” and “democratic” Western countries.

In sum, defining *restavèks* as slaves highlights the hypocrisy and cruelty that supposedly characterize contemporary Haiti – the bitter irony that a nation that locates its genesis in the casting-off of colonial slavery has replicated the same power imbalances that defined its pre-Revolution society.

⁵ One should not overlook the central role that similar institutions have historically played in U.S. domestic life. In 19th century pre-industrial United States, for example, children were a common source of unskilled household labour and most arduous tasks were assigned to domestic servants (R.S. Cowan 1983: 29).

IX. Further Considerations

Restavèks are unique because of Haiti's complicated historical identity and relationship to slavery; nevertheless, as some of my consultants pointed out, unpaid domestic child labor exists worldwide, everywhere from East Africa (Dickinson 2003) to South Asia (Haviland 2007). It would be valuable to compare differing systems of unpaid domestic child servitude and people's attitudes about it in varying economic, cultural, social, and historical contexts. In subsequent research, I would also like to explore in greater detail the relationship, differences, and similarities between the *restavèk* system and paid domestic labor in Haiti, as well as people's conceptualizations of these two practices, and to situate the relationship between the two within the larger worldwide context of domestic labor and inequality.

This paper explores several themes that are relevant to medical anthropologists – issues of power, human rights, violence, and oppression—and yet it is not an explicitly “medical” discussion. Health and human rights are inextricably linked (Kleinman 1995), and as I develop and expand this research, I hope to delve more deeply into the relationships between power and health as they relate to the *restavèk* phenomenon. Several of my consultants asserted that sexual abuse is one of the worst potential consequences of the *restavèk* system. A survey of household domestic violence in Port au Prince found that 9.6 percent of all female *restavèks* were victims of sexual assault, and that female *restavèks* were four and a half times more likely to be victims of sexual assault than other girls (Kolbe and Hutson 2006). Furthermore, even if sexual abuse is not overt or readily classified, the power dynamics of domesticity and servitude render notions of consent questionable or even

meaningless; it may be useful to examine pre-existing definitions of consensual and transactive sex in human rights discourse (Adams and Pigg 2005). Among Haitian women in the shantytown of Cité Soleil, “women’s power in the realm of sexuality is almost always directed toward financial gain. Every woman interviewed told me they were not in a relationship for love or sexual enjoyment” (Maternowska 2006: 50). Studying the sexual abuse of *restavèks* has implications for gender violence *qua* health, and for pathologies that are associated with poverty and gender inequality: domestic labor is a main risk factor for HIV among Haitian women (Farmer 2003). Problematizing strict oppressor/oppressed dichotomies may deepen understandings of the relationship between structural violence and health.

X. Conclusion

We wish to use history only insofar as it serves living.
-- Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Use and Abuses of History for Life"

Nèg di san fè.
People talk but don't act.
-- Haitian Proverb

On the last day of my fieldwork, I sat in the waiting room of a well-known Haitian women's advocacy organization in Miami, where I had been granted permission to interview clients. I had brought a box of *paté ayisyen* – flaky Haitian pastries filled with salted codfish – and several clients and I sat chatting on hard plastic chairs, brushing crumbs off our laps and into our hands, delicately wrapping the crumbling *paté* in napkins to raise them to our lips. The older Haitian ladies seemed to find my eager, accented Creole endearing, and I told the few tame, *granmaman*-appropriate jokes I knew. Pleased with my rapport-building, I broached the topic of my research with a chic, English-speaking young woman, telling her that I was an anthropology student studying what Haitian people of different backgrounds thought about the *restavèk* phenomenon. She looked me in the eye, coldly, and shifted in her chair. "Are you going to do something to help these children?"

Anthropological critique, taken to its extreme, is a form of nihilism; critical of everything, we are immobilized, believing in and doing nothing. I want very much for my research to have a purpose, a "life" of its own beyond the academic realm. This woman's words stung, for they cut to the core of my concerns about my research of *restavèks*: that my work might amount to abstract critical thinking about very real human suffering, but might do nothing to "help these children." I now believe, however, that this research contributes to a richer understanding of the *restavèk* phenomenon, and to more syncretic and inclusive ways

of formulating human rights discourse around the issue. Anthropologist Sally Engle Merry writes that “human rights ideas are more readily adopted if they are packaged in familiar terms, but they are more transformational if they challenge existing assumptions about power and relationships” (Merry 2006: 5). My analysis of the rhetoric around *restavèks* reflects this idea. The familiar trope of slavery and the depiction of a Manichaean binary renders the *restavèk* issue comprehensible and legitimate for certain kinds of human rights activists and sympathetic audiences, and may challenge the prevailing mythico-history around the Haitian Revolution, slavery, and liberty. At the same time, these same representations of the *restavèk* phenomenon alienate Haitians who keep *restavèks*, who identify as the descendants of heroic rebel slaves, rather than as slave holders, and who fail to contest the dominant assumption that structural violence neatly parses the world into oppressors and oppressed. My research suggests that more productive interventions will take into account these multiple, complex understanding of the *restavèk* practice.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Biographical Profiles

Note: All names have been changed, and some identifying details have been omitted.

Alexandre

33 years old, from Saut d'Eau in the Central Plateau, where his family are farmers. He moved to Miami in 2003. He currently works in health care and attends community college to become an X-ray technician.

Barnaby

32-year old farmer, from Saint Louis du Nord. He came to the United States in 2006. After our interview, I helped him fill out paperwork to request amnesty.

Bernard

45 years old, from the Canapé Vert area of Port-au-Prince. He came to the United States in the 1990s, for his medical residency. In both Haiti and the United States, he has worked as a physician.

Camille

40 years old, from Cap Haïtien. She moved to the United States in 1977, as a child with her family. She has a college degree and is a social worker.

Carole

50-year-old from Carrefour-Feuilles. She moved to the United States in 1972, as a child, with her family. In Haiti, she was a student. In South Florida, she works in health care and attends school to become a registered nurse. Her highest level of education is an Associate's Degree.

Charles

68 year old custodial worker, born in the Bahamas but raised in l'Île de la Tortue (Tortuga Island). He moved to the United States in the 1970s. He has an elementary education.

Clara

In her 40s, from Port-de-Paix. She moved to the United States in 1983, as a teenager, with her family. In Haiti, she was a student. In South Florida, she works in information and data entry. Her highest level of education is a Bachelor's degree.

Claude

50-year-old clerical worker in the healthcare field, from Pétion-Ville. He came moved to the United States in 1973 as a teenager because "I came and I stayed" (*mwen vini ak rete*). He attended college for two years.

Dieula

76-year-old from a small rural community in northern Haiti. She came to South Florida in 2007, a few weeks before the interview took place. In Haiti, she was a peasant farmer with little education.

Fritz

69-year-old singer, dancer, storyteller, writer and social worker from Port-au-Prince. He moved to Miami in 1982, where he is a community leader and renowned artist in Little Haiti. He has college degrees both from Haiti and the U.S. Unfortunately, our interview was cut short because he was needed for a dance rehearsal.

Henrick

42 years old, originally from Léogane but more recently from Port-au-Prince. He moved to the United States in 2000, because of persecution. In Haiti, he worked as a physician. In South Florida, he worked in the health care field, until his employment was terminated because he was found to be undocumented.

Joseph

41-year-old from Port-au-Prince. He moved to the United States permanently in 1994, after Aristide's accession because "the country wasn't big enough for the both of us." In Haiti, he was a physician. In Miami, he currently works as a high school science teacher.

Luckson

37 years old, from Sanfil (an area of Port-au-Prince near Cité Soleil). He came to the United States in October 2004 because of persecution. In Haiti, he worked as an electrician. In South Florida, he works as an electrician (in TV and radio repair) and performs Christian music.

Marcel

49 years old, from Port-au-Prince. He had travelled back and forth to the United States frequently, but moved to South Florida permanently in 2005 after being shot in the period of *insekirite* following Aristide's ouster. In Haiti, he worked as a physician. In South Florida, he works in healthcare administration.

Marie

48-year-old from Pétion-Ville. She moved to the United States permanently in 2000, but had travelled to the US periodically since the age of 14. She cites "insecurity" as the reason for immigrating. In Haiti, she was a physician. In South Florida, she works in the health care field and is earning a nursing degree. Her highest level of education in Haiti is an MD, in the US, a BN.

Nattasha

30 years old, from Aux Cayes. She moved to the United States in 1997, seeking asylum. She was a student in Haiti. In South Florida, she works in health care. She has some college education.

Rosaline

30 years old, from Arcahaie. She moved to the United States in 1998, to attend school. In Haiti, she was a student. In South Florida, she is a security guard and is presently in her first year of community college.

Thierry

63 years old, from Port de Paix. He arrived in the United States in 1989, and explains that he immigrated “for a change. I was not seeking asylum. I came here legally with a visa.” In Haiti, he worked as a dentist. In South Florida, he works in health care.

Vanessa

21-year-old from Pétion-Ville. She moved to the United States in 2000, at age 14, with her mother following her parents’ divorce. In Haiti, she was a high school student. In South Florida, she attends community college.

Yves

47 years old, from Carrefour-Feuilles. He came to the United States in 1972, as a child, with his family. In Haiti, he was a student. In South Florida, he works as a union electrician and is also a nursing student. He has three years of college.

Appendix 2 – Interview Questions (English and Haitian Creole)

Demographic information:

- Age:
- Sex:
- Year of arrival in United States:
- Place of origin in Haiti:
- Occupation in Haiti (if any):
- Occupation in the US (if any):
- Reason for emigrating:
- Highest level of education (if any):
- Preferred pseudonym (if any):

Ethnographic Questions:

1. What does “slave” mean to you?
2. What does “servant” mean to you?
3. What does it mean to be paid for one’s work? What is the difference between a person who is paid for his or her work, and one who is unpaid?
4. What rights does a slave have?
5. What rights does a servant have?
6. What is childhood like in Haiti? How does childhood differ in Haiti and in the United States?
7. What happens when children are sent to live with families other than their own?
8. What kinds of people have domestic workers in their homes? What kind of person has paid servants (bòn, jeran lakou) and what kind of person has unpaid servants (“restavèks”)?
9. In your opinion, what are the biggest problems facing Haiti? What are the causes?
10. In your opinion, what is the greatest hope for Haitians in Haiti?
11. How do people from Haiti think and feel about their country’s history?

Infomasyon demografik:

Laj:

Sèks:

Ane ki ou rive nan Etazini:

Kibo ou fèt nan Ayiti (vil, pwovens):

Okipasyon nan Ayiti (si ou genyen):

Okipasyon nan Etazini (si ou genyen):

Poukisa ou te vini Etazini?

Kombyen ane nan lekòl ou genyen/ki nivo lekòl ou genyen (si ou genyen):

Eske-w gen youn fo nom prefere ki mwen dwe itilize nan ekriti-mwen?

Kesyon antropolojik:

1. Ki sa mo “esklav” vle di pou ou menm?
2. Ki sa mo “sèvitè” oswa “servant” (jeran lakou, bòn) vle di pou ou menm?
3. Ki diferans ou fè ak moun kap travay pou lajan ak lòt kap travay san lajan?
4. Eske youn esklav gen dwa? Ki dwa youn esklav genyen?
5. Eske youn sèvitè (jeran lakou, bòn) oswa servant gen dwa? Ki dwa li genyen?
6. Kouman timoun an Ayiti ap viv? Ki diferans ki genyen ent timoun kap vivi Etazini ak timoun ki ap viv Ayiti?
7. Ki sa ki fè youn timoun al ete ak lòt moun/lòt fanmi?
8. Ki jan de moun genyen moun k’ap travay domestic? Ki jan de moun genyen bòn, ak ki jan de moun gen timoun rete ak li?
9. Daprè ou, ki pi pwo pwoblem youn Ayisyen ka rankontre nan peyi-l?
10. Daprè ou, ki espwa ki genyen pou youn moun k’ap viv Ayiti?
11. Ki fyètè youn Ayisyen genyen pou listwa peyi-li?

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