Saving children, saving Haiti? Child vulnerability and narratives of the nation

Diane M Hoffman
University of Virginia, USA

Abstract

Long before the earthquake in Haiti on 12 January 2010, but particularly since, international media and humanitarian groups have drawn attention to the 'vulnerable child' in Haiti, a child often portrayed as needing 'saving'. Focusing in particular on the *restavèk* (child domestic laborer), this article first explores the ways in which such children are represented as vulnerable and victimized, despite emerging ethnographic evidence on children's lived experience that paints a rather different picture. It then argues that far from being inconsequential, however, representations of children's vulnerability enable a critique of the Haitian culture and nation itself as fundamentally flawed and in need of saving through the interventions of the international order. Raising the question of for whom and for what purposes such projects of critique and saving exist, the article suggests that the saving of Haiti's children can be seen as a way to position the Haitian nation within a universalized and moralizing narrative of maturation/development that ultimately is not so much about meeting Haiti's (and its children's) needs as it is about satisfying the needs and desires of the more powerful in terms of their own security, prosperity and global dominance.

Keywords

> If I can help by taking a child into my home I am willing so please advise me of what to do and how can I help.
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> Hello my name is Jen. My husband and I have four children. We want to adopt from Haiti. There are three children I've seen on TV who I am in constant prayer for, and who I want to adopt. My heart is deeply burdened and I want these children.
>
> Hi I am a mother of 3 . . . an American citizen. I would like to get more info on how to adopt in Haiti, please help.
>
> (Mills, 2010)

Corresponding author:
Diane M Hoffman, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, 405 Emmet St, Charlottesville, VA 22904, USA
Email: dmh3a@cms.mail.virginia.edu

These are but a few of the over 800 internet posts to one of the first US Department of State announcements about the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti. In the aftermath of the quake, offers of money, donations of time, but most importantly, offers to adopt Haitian children swamped internet blogs, chat rooms and the media. People wrote asking how they could get their backhoe to Haiti, or how they could put their experience in construction to use. But most of all, they wrote asking how they could 'save' Haitian children.

A closer look at responses to the disaster reveals a deep irony, however: well-meaning helpers seem as desperate for help as those they would help: 'My heart is burdened – I want this child!' 'Help me adopt!' 'Help me to get the information I need!' The needs of the poor Haitian orphan – whose vulnerability was so readily apparent and dramatically underlined – were positioned in a discourse framed by the personal wants and needs of Americans. As captured in the Haiti Child Rescue Mission plan, 'God has laid upon our hearts the need to go now' (New Life Children's Refuge, 2010).[1]

Based on pilot field visits to Haiti in 2007 and 2008 and analysis of social commentary, media and advocacy literature pertaining to children in Haiti over the period from 2007 to 2011, this article considers the ways in which the vulnerable Haitian *child* has been constructed by media, aid and advocacy organizations, and the relationship between notions of vulnerability, ethnographic work on the lived realities of 'vulnerable' children in Haiti and longstanding narratives on Haitian culture. I suggest that current representations of Haitian childhood as vulnerable and victimized offer a window through which to explore the larger themes of Haitian national development in the global arena.

Background

I situate my analysis within an emergent anthropology of childhood (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin, 2007; Bock et al., 2008), and in particular the growing anthropological literature on aid and humanitarian work that has focused on deconstructing notions of childhood vulnerability (Cheney, 2010a, 2010b; Epstein, 2010; Henderson, 2006; Kendall, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2006). Much recent ethnographic research on children in situations of extreme marginalization suggests that images of the 'vulnerable, abandoned, delinquent, deviant, or marginal' child reflect more the values and assumptions of a culturally bound and class-based discourse of childhood than they do actual indicators of child physical and mental well-being (Panter-Brick, 2001: 83; see also Aptekar, 1991; Hecht, 1998). As many scholars have pointed out, the idea of child vulnerability has its roots in international discourses of children's rights that reflect an idealized, universalized child, whose immaturity creates dependence and innocence, and whose proper maturation demands adult protection and intervention. Yet this image of vulnerability often meshes uncomfortably with community understandings of appropriate childhoods in many parts of the world, undermining local practices of childcare and upbringing, disrupting local communities and creating new conflicts over resources (Bornstein, 2003; Cheney, 2010a, 2010b; Dahl, 2009: Epstein, 2010; Nieuwenhuys, 2001).[2] A prominent theme in this research is the mismatch between representations of children as socially dependent and in need of 'rescuing' and the experiences of children themselves who show a great deal of agency in navigating the difficult circumstances of their lives. In the case of Haiti in particular, ethnographic work on street children provides numerous

examples of how children actively create social support networks, manage critical resources and engage in political processes in their daily struggles to survive (Bernat, 1999; Kovats-Bernat, 2006).

The dominance of humanitarian representations that obscure the contexts of children's lives suggests that it is important to consider the larger significance of particular representations of vulnerable children, and how such representations facilitate cultural, moral and political processes of globalization. A number of scholars have shown how the vulnerable child represents a nexus for the working out of projects of aid that are both moral and economic in character (e.g. Bornstein, 2003, 2009; Dahl, 2009; Hart, 2006; Malkki, 1996; Nieuwenhuys, 2001, 2005; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998). This work emphasizes that the 'saving of children' is not only about individual action and engagement in projects of spiritual and community benefit, but also about the ways in which salvationary enterprise intertwines with global economy and political development, in which children are often the most convenient focus or measure for interventional practices ostensibly designed to foster social betterment. In this sense, representations of child vulnerability cannot be separated from the larger politics of childhood that often informs the ideologies and practices of international aid and development. Though this theme is not new, as I hope to show, it is particularly salient in the case of Haiti, where the vulnerable child figures prominently in national and international narration of Haitian culture and nationhood.

NGOs, orphans and *restavèks*: The landscape of child rescue in Haiti

In Haiti, child rescue occurs in a context that has been powerfully characterized by themes of social suffering and social trauma, in which status inequality, extreme poverty and political oppression figure prominently (Farmer, 2003; James, 2004, 2010). While relatively little ethnographic attention has been paid in this literature to children and childhood as topics of legitimate interest in their own right (which in some ways is surprising given that 43 percent of the population is under the age of 18), children have, however, figured prominently in the agendas of thousands of faith-based groups, charitable organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have come to occupy Haiti over the last 50 years. Often called 'The Republic of NGOs', the country is estimated to have between 3000 and 10,000 NGOs present, perhaps the highest per capita concentration of NGOs anywhere in the world (Dupuy, 2011; United States Institute of Peace, 2010). The sheer scale and complexity of this non-governmental aid, characterized by non-coordination of efforts, exclusion of Haitian voices and institutions and competition among aid organizations, has been critiqued as a major cause of the state of underdevelopment that has plagued the country (Dupuy, 2011; Schwartz, 2008; United States Institute of Peace, 2010).[3]

Against this complicated landscape, the attempted rescue in February 2010 by American Baptist missionaries of 33 Haitian children left 'orphaned' by the disaster became a poster case for humanitarian sentiment gone wrong. As stated in the group's rescue plan, they ultimately aimed to 'gather 100 orphans from the streets and collapsed orphanages', and then take them over the border to the Dominican Republic, where they

would be housed in a mission-owned facility as they waited to be adopted into families in the US.[4] As was widely reported, all 33 of the so-called 'orphans' in question actually had parents, reflecting a relatively common practice of caretakers who cannot adequately provide for their children of sending them to orphanages. The orphan rescue story was but one of thousands of post-earthquake media reports and commentary that focused on the plight of orphaned and vulnerable children in Haiti.

The fact that the children were not *really* orphans, yet had been living in orphanages, brought into the media spotlight two troubling realities: first, there was the shock that parents might be faced with such extraordinary poverty that they would willingly send their children away to an orphanage. In some cases the 'parent/s who did not have the resources to care' also verged on the moral condemnation of the parents who perhaps 'did not choose to care' or made some other morally reprehensible choice (such as 'having too many kids in the first place', in the words of some of those with whom I discussed this phenomenon).

But at the heart of the story was the even more troubling ambiguity of the 'vulnerable' child in Haiti: the orphan was, in sum, not what he or she appeared to be. Images of orphans who were not orphans disrupted the clarity of the categories used to generate and support humanitarian action; if these children are not orphans, then how do we help? Whom should we help? To make matters worse, it was not only orphans who needed help. There was another category of child – the *restavèk* – the child domestic servant/slave – who was, if one could imagine it, even worse off. Unlike the orphan, who may be unfortunate but still a 'normal' category of child, the *restavèk* was by comparison 'out of bounds' (in Chin's [2003] terms) – the 'enslaved' child, the living antithesis of the most fundamental notions of human rights and appropriate childhoods. While orphans might be considered the 'visible vulnerable' (in that the status is acknowledged and even sought after for the benefits it potentially provides [Cheney, 2010b; Kendall, 2010]) the *restavèks* are the invisible vulnerable – the 'children of shadows', the 'forgotten children', or the 'lost children', to use some of the descriptions common in the international media and advocacy literature (e.g. Cadet, 1998; Kramer, 2001; PADF, 2009; Padgett, 2001; Skinner, 2008; UNICEF, 2006). Their invisibility is directly related to their disparaged and marginalized status in a society where the very word is considered a term of insult.[5] Anecdotal accounts typically describe the *restavèk* as a child who wears rags, sleeps on cardboard or a sheet under a kitchen table, sustains physical, sexual and psychological abuse, and is kept virtually imprisoned in a household where he or she labors incessantly. In Haiti, the *restavèk* has been considered the lowest of the low, his or her very existence often denied.[6]

Local realities and global discourse: Representing vulnerability

Given this picture of abject victimization, the *restavèk* represents a particularly compelling lens through which to explore the ways in which global representations of child vulnerability interact with local knowledge and practice.[7] In fact it is impossible to understand the *restavèk* without considering local constructs of childhood, yet this has been an area in which there has been very little scholarly work. As Chin (2003: 11) observes,

> Cultural inquiry into Haitian notions of childhood remains yet to be done; local forms of Haitian childhood are neither well documented nor well understood. . . . It seems clear [however] that *restavèks* constitute a separate category of child. This category of child is peculiarly Haitian.

Leaving aside the question for the moment of what may or may not be unique about Haitian *restavèks* compared to other forms of child domestic labor globally,[8] the lack of serious attention to cultural formations of Haitian childhood has no doubt fueled the easy representation of children as victimized that dominates international media and charity appeals.

My preliminary research indicates that popular representations of the *restavèk* system fail to consider the importance of culturally nuanced themes of kinship, labor, learning and personhood that work together to contextualize the practice. These themes center on the normality and indeed desirability of distributed forms of childcare in which households are flexible, kin ties can be cemented or created through shared resources (including children's labor as well as companionship) and value is attached to informal learning and socialization outside the family. This informal socialization is important both for the development of culturally valued forms of personhood as well as for social mobility in the absence of formal schooling. Though it is important not to deny the significance of poverty and lack of access to formal education as key factors in the practice, as well as the fact that some children may suffer extreme exploitation, my inquiries suggest that informal learning and kinship considerations constitute powerful cultural rationales for the *restavèk* practice that extend significantly beyond poverty. In support of this interpretation, the most recent study of the *restavèk* phenomenon in the Port-au-Prince area (PADF, 2009) shows that 11 percent of households in impoverished Cite Soleil that currently had *restavèks* had sent their *own* children into *restavèk* placement elsewhere, suggesting that what we are seeing is a practice of *child circulation* motivated by more than purely economic needs and constraints.[9]

In fact, informal discussions with 60 *restavèk* children in southwest Haiti revealed that almost all viewed leaving home to join another household as a chance to *improve* their lives. Contrary to popular images of *restavèks* as passive victims of adults who 'send them away' because of poverty or sell them against their will to traffickers, these children stressed that they themselves wanted to leave.[10] At the same time, a majority also said that in their current homes they could not go to school – a disappointment that far outweighed the frequent corporal punishment they received. Many said they would move to an orphanage if they could, mostly because orphanages were thought to provide more schooling and less beating (as well as a chance, perhaps, of being adopted by a foreign family).[11]

As children themselves indicated, and as anecdotal accounts suggest, *restavèk* placements that make good on the promise or hope of schooling are relatively rare. It is thus important to look beyond the emphasis on formal schooling as a rationale for the practice to consider the value attached to the informal training or guidance ('*formasion*') the child is expected to receive in the new household. Such informal learning involves becoming competent in a variety of skills (with high levels of competency valued and sought after as protection against corporal punishment) as well as becoming accustomed to differing norms of family governance and discipline. It represents a kind of socialization for

personhood that can only be acquired through the experience of living in a non-parental household. For males in particular, it is thought to support the development of a serious disposition that can counter the dangers of becoming a 'vagabond', meaning a lazy, worthless person, a good-for-nothing. Far from becoming a victim, then, becoming a *restavèk* was 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 and that can perhaps later be used for social mobility (a similar point is made by Sommerfelt, 2002: 70–2). These notions of informal training are also embodied in traditional norms of childcare in Haiti based in the *lakou* (clustered households), systems of social organization that have traditionally emphasized multiple caregiving, flexible household membership and shared labor and resources (Edmond et al., 2007). Informal educational rationales are also probably present in the as yet relatively unexplored connection between Vodou and childhood in Haiti, where, as Michel (2006) observes, 'everyone takes the roles of teacher and learner' through non-formal exchanges, where both adults and children can be teachers as well as learners.[12] Though it is likely that some children moved to new households because they were fleeing abuse in their former homes, the important point is that children became *restavèks* (or negotiated new household placements) in a manner suggesting an active effort to confront the difficulties of their situations – not the kind of passive victimization commonly portrayed in charity and advocacy literature.

This theme of child agency has been echoed in an extensive ethnographic literature on street children and child laborers around the world that illustrates large gaps between the subjective realities of child laborers and representations of them that emphasize their victimization at the hands of adults (Camacho, 1999; Davies, 2008; Jacquemin, 2006; Klocker, 2007; Leinaweaver, 2007; Nieuwenhuys, 2003, 2005). Though it is difficult to reconcile vulnerability with agency when children face severe constraints imposed both by poverty as well as cultural expectations, as Klocker (2007) suggests, for many children, there is a space in which agency coexists alongside vulnerability. Refusing to recognize *restavèk* children's agency abstracts the practice from its cultural context and obscures the extent to which children exert efforts to respond to and deal with their situations, paradoxically reinforcing their vulnerability as marginalized, passive and unskilled social burdens.

Vulnerable children and narratives of the nation

In part, the orphan-to-*restavèk* narrative that emerged post-earthquake across the media and aid organizations raised troubling complexities regarding the status of children in Haiti. On the one hand, there was a powerful desire among many individuals and groups (including both Americans and Haitians, and many orphanage staff) to 'save' Haitian children from ongoing vulnerability by removing them from Haiti via international adoption.[13] On the other hand, international agencies such as UNICEF, Save the Children and other professional groups strongly advocated keeping children in Haiti, since unregulated overseas adoptions enhanced children's vulnerability to illegal trafficking as well as the negative developmental outcomes associated with separation from homes and communities. As one advocate of the latter position put it, 'If you save Haiti's children

IN Haiti . . .You can save Haiti' (Bataille, 2010). Similar arguments could be found in the media (e.g. Padgett, 2010, 'Save them, don't just take them'). For Haitian children, then, there was no escape from vulnerability – it was everywhere, and each side was committed to saving children from it in its own way.

Yet the very idea that Haiti's children need *saving* in the first place was never questioned, nor was the larger idea of 'saving Haiti'. One could and probably ought to ask, saved from what, by whom and for what purposes? At one level, especially in the post-earthquake period, saving the vulnerable child depended on fixing a state whose social welfare system was so 'broken' it was 'unable to care for its own' (e.g. Balsari et al., 2010; Herson, 2010). Thus, one major focus for post-earthquake rescue efforts (following international conventions of best practice in child welfare) was 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 (not always true, obviously, in the case of *restavèks*).[14] As UNICEF (2011) somewhat ruefully observed, commenting on the one-year progress of post-disaster family tracing and reunification efforts, 40 percent of the children registered so far had been 'separated' *before* the quake, highlighting the 'deep-seated child protection challenges' facing the country. The natural conclusion to be drawn from this, according to UNICEF and other aid organizations (including Haitian ones), was that only when Haiti could professionalize and regulate its social work sector would it become a place 'fit for children' (UNICEF, 2011: 25).

In another perhaps even more powerful way, the vulnerable Haitian child has come to embody all that is wrong with Haitian culture itself, especially its practices of childrearing and education, widely characterized as damaging and abusive. Projects of development and social reconstruction in Haiti have long been predicated on international standards of a 'good childhood' in which parents and children live together in fixed, stable family units, parents protect children, children go to school and parents make sure children have adequate leisure time (Archambault, 2010; Valentin and Meinert, 2009). Against this ideal, large numbers of orphans, child migration, child labor, flexible households and non-parental care have emerged as troubling impediments. These are taken as evidence that there is something deeply wrong with the larger culture that permitted and legitimized practices seen universally as detrimental toward children.

This theme is evident most powerfully in the extensive critiques of the culture of Haitian childrearing and education that have long been used to explain the failure of Haitian civil society and national development. Reflecting a theme that has emerged with particular resonance in post-earthquake social commentary, Brooks writes in *The New York Times* (basing his argument in Lawrence Harrison's critiques of the role of culture in development) that Haiti 'suffers from a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences, such as the voodoo religion, which spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile. . . . Responsibility is often not internalized. Child rearing practices often involve neglect in the early years and harsh retribution when kids hit 9 or 10' (Brooks, 2010).

Brooks' comments have been roundly criticized by many (see Wilentz [2010] for an example), but his theme is present, albeit in far less inflammatory forms, in the many descriptions of Haitian culture and education that can be found across the child advocacy

and humanitarian assistance literature. In these contexts, Haitian culture and education are described in unabashedly moralistic terms as 'authoritarian' and 'violent', and as a result Haitians are often described as 'unaware' of concepts of democratic civil society, with limited capacity to self-govern, or even to reason.[15] For example:

> [Among Haitians there is] widespread lack of awareness of citizen rights and responsibilities, and limited understanding of self-governing processes. (Carneal and Pozniak, 2004: 31)

> There is so much that I appreciate about Haitian culture . . . but the extreme authoritarian practices around education . . . are not among them. (Engle, 2009)

> In Haiti, the violence exerted on children seems quite a normal thing. . . . The family circle . . . is the first place where [the child] encounters violence. . . . The child grows up in an environment punctuated by brutal scenes. (Merveille, 2002)

Regardless of one's personal views regarding the wide acceptance of 'authoritarian' education and corporal punishment in Haitian schools and families, there are major difficulties with these characterizations. First, they fail to consider the cultural contextualizations of pain, care and learning that often accompany what looks easily dismissible as 'authoritarian' or 'violent' childrearing and education. A rich ethnographic literature on the place of authority and corporal experience in childrearing and learning shows that culturally valued notions of care are often erased or ignored in universalizing discourses of rights or blanket moral condemnations of corporal punishment.[16] Second, they critique Haitian cultural practices against an assumed norm of enlightened or civilized behavior accepted by educated people everywhere. It may be true that Haitian education is teacher-centered, didactic and plagued with problems of quality, but as much research shows, didactic models of instruction are the norm in many parts of the world, and within their communities are often highly respected.[17] To single Haiti out in this way when such practices are equally common elsewhere reflects the extent to which the nation and its culture are implicitly linked to notions of deficiency and backwardness. Finally, the widespread use of 'authoritarian' in descriptions of education and childrearing is a culturally dismissive judgment that fails to capture historical realities as well as local cultural values and beliefs, including the presence of alternative non-hierarchical approaches to learning, strong traditions of critique present in the culture at large and notions concerning social respect. Characterizations such as these represent Haitian culture as pathological or corrupt, reinforcing Haiti's subordinate position relative to the more 'developed' world.[18]

It is clear, however, that an anthropological relativism that respects cultural difference and attempts to understand a cultural practice as logical in its own context does not obligate one to defend it on moral or ethical grounds. In a field dominated by advocacy (as Haiti most definitely is), where images of suffering children provide a powerful justification for 'saving' efforts, ethnographic emphasis on *restavèk* children's agency, for example, can itself have moral implications. It can appear to blame them for their condition – or worse, be used as a defense for the system that oppresses them. It can also in some cases undermine efforts to provide genuinely needed assistance.[19]

There is another level at which ethical and moral questions require consideration, however. As many scholars have observed, the figure of the child is especially useful in

global and local processes of development that involve the making and remaking of moral worlds (Castaneda, 2002). If applied to the case of Haiti, one might argue that the vulnerable child is a figuration upon which a particular kind of moralizing national and global agenda for development is written. Because the child her or himself indexes a process of becoming/maturation, defined by its potentiality, the child who fails to develop properly 'figures' the larger failure of the nation to reach its developmental goals. This maturational motif can also be identified in what other scholars have called the moral hegemony of development and aid discourse that positions the 'young South' as ward of the 'adult North', in which nations themselves require appropriate parental interventions and upbringing, echoing earlier discourses on 'child-like races' in need of 'civilizing' interventions (Valentin and Meinert, 2009). It thus serves an important function in hegemonic practices of representation that position societies and nations within international development and aid frameworks grounded in universalizing moralities.

When one considers the larger historical and political context of Haiti, this moral positioning is not, in the end, just about 'maturing' a nation. It is also about the needs and desires of the powerful to secure a world safe for their own interests and survival. In the same way that Americans wanted to save child victims of the earthquake through adoption, and thereby positioned them in a discourse about their own wants and needs, the project of saving the Haitian child reflects a larger discourse of desire on the part of the United States and other powerful donor nations to shape a Haiti aligned with (inter)national interests and needs. This Haiti is the adopted child who is brought home; its differences/pathologies erased, its otherness domesticated, in the service of the security and political economy of dominant nations.

'Poor orphans' and 'child slaves', then, as metaphors for the nation itself in need of rescue, provide a powerful justification for the saving interventions of the international order – one that is ironically itself already implicated in the very victimization it so decries. As child victims become focal points for the enactment of certain visions of protected childhood, they offer a moral terrain for the exercise of salvation, grounded in both genuine desires to offer increased individual opportunity to those less fortunate, as well as more hidden but nonetheless powerful needs of the rescuers themselves to shape the world in ways that assure the continuation of their own privilege. As Haiti faces the future, its children in the cross-currents of national goals, personal needs and global imperatives, it remains to be seen what kind of childhood, and what sort of nation, will emerge from this contested landscape.

Funding

Notes

1. In 2007 an American missionary in Haiti told me he and his family had come because they had felt the 'burden' of Haiti. Initially struck by the phrase, I have since heard it used on numerous occasions. While it was meant to convey, I suppose, a sense of personal, God-given responsibility to relieve suffering (and save souls), to me the distinctive use of the word 'burden' evokes a more unfortunate association with the 'white man's burden' (Rudyard Kipling, 1899).

2. For example, Bornstein (2003) shows how aid to children via sponsorship programs, while undoubtedly providing individual children with benefits that would otherwise be unattainable, also reconfigures and often disrupts local lives and communities, as it intensifies perceptions of lack and fuels jealousies that sometimes increase the perception of distance – the very goal that humanitarianism itself is designed to combat.

3. As Ferguson (1994) observes in the case of Lesotho, the bureaucratic enterprise of development aid and assistance generates its own discourse and knowledge, constructing its object in certain ways that have regular effects, while simultaneously masking its own political interventions. To some extent this 'depoliticization' also appears to be active in Haiti, working to entrench the reach and power of NGOs, while enabling them to ignore or deny the political effects of their activities.

4. The missionaries were charged with kidnapping, jailed in Haiti and eventually released, but not before the case had created an international uproar. The group's leader admitted that they did not have the proper documentation to take the children over the border, but that they were only trying to 'help the victims' (ABC News, 2010). The intention to 'gather children from the streets' as if one were picking up trash is interesting in its own right, perhaps to be seen as part of the lens of privilege in which the street represents a no-man's land where order, belonging and identity are non-existent, rather than a place (as Kovats-Bernat [2006] shows so well) where important life-sustaining activity happens and where identity is importantly situated in networks of social relations. The 'children as trash' theme is not infrequent in charity appeals for Haitian orphanages: e.g. 'Every week hundreds of babies and children are abandoned in Haiti. Shortly after birth they are left in hospitals, shop doorways, alleys, or simply *dumped in the street*' (Million Member Assembly, n.d.; emphasis added).

5. See Hoffman (2010) for a more complete account of the representation of *restavèks* and the debates surrounding this term.

6. Estimates of the number of *restavèks* vary but the UNICEF (2006) figure of 300,000 is the most widely reported, representing about one in 10 children. The Pan American Development Foundation provides a more recent estimate of 225,000 in Port-au-Prince (PADF, 2009), though this number does not take into account those who live in rural areas throughout the country. Though media and charity appeals often describe *restavèks* as mostly girls who are sent from poor rural families to wealthy urban ones, they are found proportionately throughout the country, receiving families are only marginally less poor than sending families, and the gender ratio in the capital (where girls constitute about two-thirds of the *restavèk* population) does not hold in the countryside, where the gender ratio is more equal (Sommerfelt, 2002).

7. In this article I offer only tentative findings and interpretations, since I have not yet been able to conduct the long-term fieldwork in Haiti that is necessary for a better understanding of this phenomenon.

8. Since extensive ethnographic work on childhood and on *restavèk* in particular in Haiti has not yet been done, it is difficult to determine conclusively whether and to what degree it is unique to Haiti or shares much with systems of child domestic labor in other countries. There are many aspects of the system that do seem common elsewhere, but it is equally likely that, as Chin suggests, there are elements that make it uniquely Haitian. Further comparative study is needed.

9. Leinaweaver (2008) provides a powerful analysis of the importance of kin ties in the practices of child circulation in Peru.

10. Some children are trafficked, particularly across the border with the Dominican Republic, but the extent to which trafficking occurs is unknown. According to Sommerfelt (2002), it is probably less than what is commonly assumed. It is possible that children's affirmations in discussions with me that they wanted to become *restavèks* might be evidence that the

children rationalized their status, perhaps as a psychological defense mechanism, or as a way to impress an outsider. Since I was introduced to the children simply as a visitor who wanted to learn more about Haitian children's lives, and did not have a chance to get to know them better, it is difficult to know how they really perceived me. They did not seem shy, however, in responding thoughtfully to my questions, even though one Haitian American later told me the children 'would never tell the truth', especially not to an 'outsider'.

11. In fact, the movement of *restavèks* into (and perhaps out of) orphanages is a phenomenon I suspected was far more common than acknowledged. One person suggested that if I really wanted to study *restavèks* I should go to orphanages, since that was where many ended up.

12. Kovats-Bernat (personal communication) is currently working on this topic.

13. In fact, overseas adoption has long been a desired outcome for orphanage children. One readily hears stories of parents who deliberately 'make their children available' by placing them in orphanages.

14. Nor was it necessarily true that orphans and *restavèks* wanted to be reunited with their 'families', although images of crying children wandering streets alone can't help but make one think so.

15. I've had missionaries and other aid workers in Haiti tell me that Haitians 'think like children', have no concept of democracy and are incapable of even 'basic reasoning'. Such claims are hard to reconcile with longstanding cultural traditions such as the *konbit* (agricultural work parties) or the critical social commentary of *chante pwen* ('pointing songs') (as described by Smith, 2001). It is interesting to reflect on what would happen if the word 'authoritarian' in these narratives were to be replaced with the word 'authoritative' or even 'respectful'.

16. Archambault (2009) provides an excellent discussion of the meanings surrounding corporal punishment in Kenya – meanings that are overlooked and in fact run directly counter to the globalizing models of family that are widely promoted by international actors; Frankenberg et al. (2010) make a similar argument with regard to Tanzania.

17. For example, Boyle (2007), who describes how Quranic memorization constitutes a sacred activity intimately related to ideals of and for learning and spiritual development.

18. As James observes, a similar process worked to transform what were strategies of war to a critique of Haitian culture as 'naturally violent and depraved. . . . 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 willfully refusing to follow a democratic path' (James, 2004: 133–4).

19. Though it is possible that immediate assistance efforts could be harmed, the larger picture of aid is more complex; and, in fact, an argument can be made that what would be most transformative on a larger scale is a shift toward recognition of children's agency and capacities, rather than views and practices that perpetually define them as burdens and threats to a social system already taxed to capacity. In this way, support systems more attuned to the realities of children's experiences can be built (Hoffman, 2010).

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