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Haitian Immigrants and African- American Relations: Ethnic Dilemmas in a Racially-Stratified Society

By Gemima M. Remy

Immigrants of Afro-Caribbean descent have been arriving and settling in the United States in relatively large numbers since the end of World War II.¹ Between 1961 and 1970, the Immigration and Naturalization Service recorded over 37,000 Haitians residing legally in this country.² A decade later, there were close to 59,000 Haitians in the U.S. By 1990, the figure rose to 140,200.³ In 1991 and 1992 alone, 47,500 and 11,000 Haitians were admitted to the United States, respectively.⁴ It must be noted that these figures do not include the vast number of undocumented Haitian immigrants which is believed to be around 400,000.⁵ Given current trends in Haitian migration, it is estimated that their population will rise to one million by the turn of the century.

Lured by promises of worried-free social and economic living conditions, these newly-arrived immigrants have brought "their tired, their poor, their huddled masses yearning to breathe free" to the land of opportunity.⁶ In so doing, they have had to adapt to a society that is structurally and culturally different from their own. They have not only had to learn and develop new linguistic abilities, employment skills and resettlement patterns, they have also had to come to grips with the issue of race and ethnicity inherent in the fabric of American culture. How have Haitian immigrants managed to maintain their unique cultural characteristics while adjusting into the American mosaic?

This article focuses on Haitian immigrants and how they have attempted to interpret their migration experience and ascribed racial and ethnic status in the U.S. It is argued that the legal and economic positions of Haitian immigrants have not only impacted their perceptions and understanding of their living conditions in this country, but they have also compelled them to reassess their self-definition as a distinct group of individuals with their own history, culture, nationality, and racial identity. Like many other Caribbean immigrants, Haitians "suffer double invisibility...as immigrants and black immigrants or double visibility as blacks in the eyes of whites and as foreigners in the eyes of native-born blacks."⁷ But, what is the cultural meaning of migration for Haitians? What consequences, both positive and negative, has migration had on Haitian values and belief



systems? And, what are the implications for ethnic relations in this country? No account of Haitian life in the U.S. would be complete in the absence of a historical analysis of Haitian migration experiences, and the social and political conditions that have dictated their departure from their homeland in search of the "promised land."

Haitian Migration to the U.S.: A Historical Overview

Haitian migration to the U.S. can be divided into four distinct periods, each associated with a wave of political unrest and economic depression within the country.⁸ The first "wave" of migration took place between 1957 and 1964 when the vast majority of Haitian immigrants who came to the U.S. during that period were either from the political and economic elites or from the newly-emerging "Black bourgeoisie" in Haiti. These Haitians fled the country when Dr. François ("Papa Doc") Duvalier was elected president and soon began a regime of terror where opponents of the newly-elected government were either jailed or murdered. Upon migrating to the U.S., these immigrants were not set on adapting to the American society. They envisioned the temporary flight from their homeland as a first step in overthrowing the president. To their dismay, their efforts to oust the Haitian dictator were in vain mainly because the Duvalier regime was fully supported by the U.S. government which, at the time, attempted to portray Duvalier as "the best hope for stability and decent government in Haiti."⁹ As a result, these first-wave immigrants were forced to remain in the U.S. and to abandon social and political privileges, power, and wealth which they had amassed in their homeland.

The second wave of Haitian migration occurred between 1965 and 1972¹⁰ and coincided with the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. The vast majority of Haitians who emigrated to the U.S. during that period

were mostly skilled and from the lower and middle classes. They arrived on American shores due to declining economic and political conditions in Haiti, more liberal U.S. immigration laws, and the needs of American businesses to restock their labor force which was severely depleted by the Vietnam War.¹¹

When Jean-Claude (“Baby Doc”) Duvalier succeeded his father following the death of the latter in 1971, he promised the country an economic revival and a less brutal administration than that of his predecessor. However, stagnant economic conditions soon began to push many Haitians who resided in rural areas to move to Port-au-Prince, the capital city, in search of employment and a better standard of living. Although some succeeded in obtaining jobs, those who benefited the most from the economic revitalization fueled by American capital into the country were the rich and powerful.

Unable to return to the rural areas or to obtain visas through legal means, many of these Haitians left the country illegally (i.e., by boat), thus beginning the third wave of migration which lasted from 1972 to 1982. These immigrants came to be known in the U.S. as the Haitian “boat people.” Unlike their predecessors, however, the reception that they received from the American public was lukewarm. Because a majority of these immigrants were largely uneducated and from low socio-economic backgrounds, the American media began to portray them as “ragged, impoverished, illiterate and pitiful individuals.”¹² Anti-immigrant propaganda, coupled with a decline in the American economy during the same period, served as a driving force behind the portrayal of Haitian immigrants as “thugs,” “needy,” and unwanted people who came to the U.S. to “steal” jobs away from Americans.

Haitians “suffer...double visibility as blacks in the eyes of whites and as foreigners in the eyes of native-born blacks.”

On February 7, 1986, pressed by both internal anti-government revolts (from young Haitian students and workers who were angry at the Duvalier regime) and external pressure (from the U.S. and other countries that could no longer guarantee continued support and protection for Haitian government officials), Jean-Claude Duvalier was forced to resign and flee the country. Many Haitians living abroad saw his departure as an opportunity for repatriation. Unfortunately, they quickly realized that although Jean-Claude had left the country, oppression and Duvalierism had not. As the political terror and persecution escalated in the country, many left the island, thus giving rise to the fourth surge of Haitian immigrants arriving by boat on Florida shores.

Raymond A. Mohl has stated that “[t]he arrival of the Haitians [in Miami] has created tensions; they have received a less than enthusiastic welcome. Haitian

supporters [have] suggested a double standard in American immigration policy—one which welcomes mainly White refugees from Cuban communism but rejects Black immigrants from Haiti. The Immigration and Naturalization Service has refused to accept Haitian requests for political asylum, claiming they are economic rather than political refugees. As a result most Cuban ‘marielitos’ went free almost immediately [upon their arrival in Miami] but several thousand Haitians were jailed in camps in Miami, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere, in some cases for more than a year.”¹³

Hoping to put an end to the long reign of political terror and economic repression, many Haitians went to the polls on November 19, 1987. Backed by the elite who feared a freely-elected president in Haiti, the Tontons Macoutes (the Haitian secret police) were ordered to slaughter as many voters as possible. The next few years following the election saw a period in which the country was governed by a horde of “puppet” presidents who were either elected by the Haitian army or gained power through coups d’état. Then, on December 16, 1991, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected president with 67 percent of the votes. For the first time in its history, Haiti, the first black independent nation in the Western Hemisphere, had a democratically-elected president. But, on September 29, 1992, the army staged a coup that forced Aristide into exile, thereby resuming yet another mass exodus of Haitian refugees to the United States. Aristide returned to Haiti a few years later to finish serving his presidential term and relegated power to the current President of Haiti, René Préval, in February 1996.

Haiti-U.S. Relations

Historically, the United States has maintained an on-and-off, love-and-hate and exploitive relationship with Haiti for centuries. Following Haiti’s hard-won independence on January 1, 1804, it took the U.S. close to 60 years to finally recognize Haiti as a free republic.¹⁴ Such a recognition, however, was not obtained without a few strings attached. Adopting a “gunboat diplomacy” towards the country, the U.S. sought to keep a tight rein on the military, political, and economic affairs of Haiti—a strategy that eventually culminated in the military occupation of the island from 1915 to 1934.¹⁵ More recently, the United States military intervention in Haiti has raised some eyebrows regarding the U.S. political and economic diplomacy towards the country.

Although America has always had a strained relationship with Haiti, what many people may not be aware of is that Haiti significantly contributed to the development of the United States as a democratic country. Historical accounts reveal that several Haitians took part in the American struggle for independence and fought in such battles as the 1779 engagement at Savannah.¹⁶ Moreover, many Haitians shed “their blood in Georgia, Virginia and Florida...[in the American] fight for freedom and independence.” In 1824, the Haitian government raised about \$300,000 to liberate and bring back to Haiti

some 6,000 black Americans so that they might live in “in freedom and dignity.”¹⁷

Haitian-African American Relations

Haitian[s]...face problems with [African Americans] because they speak with an accent and blacks see them as people who have a lot of money when they see them buying houses in a short time. This leads to conflict. One reason is blacks are jealous. [Haitians] are here buying houses, they have two or three jobs, they have no free time....Black people are saying, ‘How do they do it?’...They say, ‘I live like this for three generations. It took us a while to get a house, a car.’¹⁸

[Haitians] want to be accepted as different from [African Americans]...All West Indians say they have no segregation in their home. They are better off in their home....Once they enter this country,...Haitians...are told that the blacks are lower status. So they do not get close to us...[T]hey like to stick to the white side and want white people’s approval and evaluate things from the white view. They want to get the white respect and not the black respect....They are brainwashed.¹⁹

These quotes, from a Haitian immigrant and an African American, respectively, exemplify some of the attitudes and stereotypes held by many African Americans and Haitian immigrants toward each other, and which may have negatively impacted the nature of their relationship. While most Haitian immigrants have a tendency to view African Americans as rude, ill-mannered, unambitious, and rejecting of Caribbean blacks, some African Americans tend to perceive Haitians as condescending “foreign blacks” who behave as if their culture, level of education, and manners are superior to those of black Americans.

Though it can be argued that Haitians are phenotypically indistinguishable from African Americans (i.e., they’re blacks), Haitians, like African Americans, have a different history and different cultural values, customs and beliefs which have shaped their perceptions and attitudes toward American society. Due to the racial stratification inherent in the American society, however, once they migrate to this country, Haitian immigrants are not only categorized as “blacks,” but they are likely to be subjected to similar discriminatory practices as African Americans and other blacks from the West Indies.

As Philip Kasinitz has pointed out, in the United States, “all persons of *any* known or discernable African ancestry, regardless of [physical] characteristics, are considered ‘blacks’ and have been subject to all of the social and legal disadvantages that this implies.”²⁰ Moreover, Michel Laguerre has asserted that, unlike many English-speaking Caribbean immigrants, Haitians suffer

from a “triple minority status as blacks, foreign, and French- and Creole-speaking” people.²¹ What, then, are the costs and benefits of being characterized as either a racial or an ethnic group? What are the implications for ethnic relations between African Americans and Haitian immigrants?

Several plausible arguments have been offered to help explain the nature of the strained relationship that seems to exist between Haitians and African Americans. First, since Haitians and African Americans, as already mentioned, are very much alike in physical appearance, American institutions have tended to lump them together as “blacks” thereby robbing both groups of their distinct ethnic customs, beliefs, and value systems. Faced with a conflict between their self-definition and the definition assigned to them by American institutions, some Haitians have reacted by redefining themselves as immigrants, thereby differentiating themselves from African Americans.

In reality, even though the two groups are phenotypically similar to each other, Haitian immigrants cannot easily assimilate into the black American culture due to linguistic and cultural barriers. Additionally, since many African Americans are apt to view Haitian immigrants as taking away the gains they have accrued in this country, Haitians have been put on the defensive, thus making it harder for African Americans to open up their arms and welcome Haitians into their existing communities.

This is not to say, however, that *all* Haitians shun assimilationist tendencies. Some Haitian parents, for instance, upon arriving in the U.S., push their children to learn and interact in English only and discourage the use of Haitian-Creole materials in the classroom. To these individuals, upward mobility can only be attained through the mastery of the English language and the adoption of middle-class values that are deemed necessary to succeed in the U.S. All the while, many such immigrants try very hard to preserve certain aspects of the Haitian culture (e.g., food, music) that serve as integral links to their homeland. One interesting result of this attempt at maintaining a balance between the home culture and the host society is that while some first-generation Haitian immigrants isolate themselves from the African-American community, their U.S.-born offspring are becoming more and more similar to children of African Americans in terms of the style of clothes they wear, the music they like to listen to, the food they prefer to eat, and so forth. Needless to say, such a development has given rise to tremendous inter-generational conflicts.

It has been suggested that many Haitian immigrants may not share a sense of common purpose and goal with black Americans for basically two reasons: (1) Haitians see themselves as “voluntary immigrants,” and (2) view their stay in this country as temporary.²² Having come from a country where jobs are scarce, Haitians have looked to the United States as a land of economic opportunity and have made the best of what the country has to offer them. In their quest for economic self-

sufficiency and personal freedom, Haitian immigrants show a tendency not to compare their economic situation with that of the white majority or the black minority. Instead, they are more likely to compare their economic gains with Haitians living in the U.S. and in Haiti. In so doing, they “do not feel [a sense of] deprivation and denial in the face of discrimination” in this country as do some African Americans.²³

Some of the other factors that have contributed to the development of a sense of isolation on the part of Haitian immigrants include the fact that newly-arrived Haitians tend to move right into fairly well-established Haitian communities in places such as New York City, Miami, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago. More often than not, the new immigrants are employed in the same line of work as their friends and relatives, live in the same neighborhoods, buy their foods and other supplies at supermarkets and stores where other Haitians shop, and interact mostly with other Haitians at social functions.²⁴

Furthermore, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s has had a significant impact on the nature of race relations in this country. As a result of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Housing Act of 1967, discriminatory practices are somewhat more subtle than they were three decades earlier. Thus, many newly-arrived Haitian immigrants have not learned to view American society in terms of race relations. Behaviors which most African Americans would label as racist are not necessarily interpreted as such by newly-arrived Haitians. This does not imply that Haitian immigrants are not discriminated against in this country. But, when faced with prejudicial treatment, they are more likely to interpret these experiences as “individual prejudice” as opposed to blaming a system or society that is viewed by many as extremely racist.

Where Do We Go From Here?

It is clear from this review that there are certain stereotypical attitudes held by both Haitian immigrants and African Americans which may have hindered opportunities for intergroup interaction and coalition. In order to enhance relations between Haitians and African Americans, both groups need to be cognizant of the historical context in which they exist and the contributions they have made over the years to their current status as “blacks” living in a racially-stratified society. Haitians, in particular, have to realize that regardless of how “temporary” their stay in this country may be, their population has steadily increased over the past three decades (and will continue to rise into the next century). Consequently, they must begin to adopt what Flore Zéphir has termed a “settler strategy” which would require them to become more pro-active while residing in the U.S.²⁵ Although at first this strategy may seem threatening, Haitian immigrants need to understand that “[a]daptation to a new country, by no means, implies a denial of one’s nation of origin and cultural distinctiveness. It simply means being willing to learn and appreciate differences while taking pride in and valuing one’s own heritage.”²⁶

An important step toward improving Haitians’ and African Americans’ perceptions of each other is for the former to familiarize themselves with the African-American experience, culture, and unique history. Similarly, African Americans have to become more educated about their Haitian neighbors. One clear benefit for enhancing ethnic relations between African Americans and Haitian immigrants is that in developing a common sense of shared history and awareness of distinct ethnic identities, both groups will be in a powerful position to challenge the status quo in race relations in this country. The increasing number of Haitian immigrants in the U.S. should not be viewed as a threat, but as an asset for building coalitions and fostering harmonious relationships and interactions among blacks of African-American descent and those of Afro-Caribbean ancestry. For, as one Haitian proverb goes: *Men anpil, chay pa lou* (Many hands put together make a heavy load more manageable); in other words, there is strength in numbers.

Notes

¹Georges Fouron, *Haitian Immigrants in the U.S.: Migration and Identity* (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1989).

²Immigration and Naturalization Service, *1993 Statistical Abstract of the United States*. Also see Flore Zéphir, *Haitian Immigrants in Black America: A Sociological and Sociolinguistic Portrait* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1996), 5-7.

³*Ibid.*, 5-7.

⁴Immigration and Naturalization Service, *1992 Statistical Yearbook*. Also see Zéphir, *Haitian Immigrants in Black America*, 5-7.

⁵Michel S. Laguerre, *American Odyssey: Haitians in New York City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 25.

⁶Zéphir, *Haitian Immigrants in Black America*, 4.

⁷Roy Simón Bryce-Laporte, “Black Immigrants: The Experience of Invisibility and Inequality,” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3, 54.

⁸Fouron, *Haitian Immigrants in the U.S.*

⁹Robert I. Rotberg, *Haiti: The Politics of Squalor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1971), 196.

¹⁰Fouron, *Haitian Immigrants in the U.S.*, 22.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹²*Ibid.*, 24.

¹³Raymond A. Mohl, “An Ethnic ‘Boiling Pot’: Cubans and Haitians in Miami,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 51-74.

¹⁴Jake C. Miller, *The Plight of Haitian Refugees* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984), 54-55.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁶George P. Clark, “The Role of the Haitian Volunteers at Savannah in 1779: An Attempt at An Objective View,” *Phylon*, vol. 41 (December 1980): 356-66.

¹⁷“Why Haitians Seek Political Asylum,” *New York Times* (Letter to the Editor), November 5, 1979, p. A18.

¹⁸Tekle Mariam Woldemikael, *Becoming Black American: Haitians and American Institutions in Evanston, Illinois* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1989), 40-41.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 40.

²⁰Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 33.

²¹Laguerre, *American Odyssey*, 9.

²²Tekle Woldemikael, “A Case Study of Race Consciousness Among Haitian Immigrants,” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, (December 1989): 236.

²³*Ibid.*, 237.

²⁴Woldemikael, *Becoming Black American*, 34.

²⁵Zéphir, *Haitian Immigrants in Black America*, 96.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 96.

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