Terrains of blood and nation: Haitian transnational social fields

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Abstract

As have a growing number of political leaders of emigrant-sending countries, Haitian government officials and immigrant leaders have envisioned Haiti as a transnational nation-state. This article explores the ways in which the vision of Haiti as a transnational nation builds upon the experiences, needs and aspirations of both persons living in Haiti and those who have settled in the United States. Using a concept of ‘transnational social field’, we examine how family obligations and the experiences of immigration are understood through a language of blood and descent that links individuals to broader concepts of a transnational homeland. Rather than celebrating transnational connections, this essay concludes by warning that the ideologies which undergird ‘long distance nationalism’ are problematic.

Keywords: Blood; transnational migration; nationalism; Haitian; identity; social field.

Helen used the occasion of an interview in 1996 to make a passionate appeal to the Haitian diaspora from those living in Haiti. Boldly she took our tape recorder in her own hands and said:

Those who are listening to my voice, I urge you to concentrate and remember what country you left behind. It is not for you to ally with other countries, other nations to destroy your brothers and sisters, to beat them, to kill them, to humiliate them, to do things that they don’t like. My brother, see the one on the ground, see the one who has nothing, help him out. Those who are sick, help them as you can. All the bad ideas and bad things, remove them from your lives. Change your heart and then the country will find a solution.

Nineteen years old, living in a household linked to the United States through a stream of remittances, Helen is part of the ever-growing population of Haiti connected through family networks to persons who have migrated and settled abroad. Yet, her cry of appeal is based on a broader sense of kinship. Note that Helen identifies those who are ‘left behind’
in the ‘country’ as ‘brothers and sisters’. And she defines all those living abroad both as a family and as a nation, who continue to have obligations to those they ‘left behind’.

Indeed, the ties of family obligation often structure the lives of Haitian immigrants in the United States and are part of a broader set of immigrant experiences that link family ties to Haiti as homeland and nation. Picture Yvette, age fifty, thin, greying, in the middle of planning her second trip back to Haiti since she left home thirteen years before. The constant demands of the extensive network of kin and friends she left behind has meant that Yvette rarely has enough money left to visit Haiti herself. However, an event was about to take place in Haiti that Yvette did not want to miss: the birth of a niece’s second child. Childless herself, having spent her life supporting other kin rather than either marrying or having children of her own, it had been Yvette who had paid for her niece Madeline’s schooling and then, when she had made a good marriage, had provided Madeline with an elaborate wedding.

While she waited for the birth of the child, who was very much the fruit of her labour, Yvette prepared an extensive layette. The baby would have everything a baby needed according to the current conceptions of such things in Queens, New York. The undershirts and stretch jumpers were ready, the basket for the new born, the blankets and sheets, crib toys and stuffed animals. Finally the phone call came, but the news was not what she expected. Madeline had died in childbirth and Madeline’s child had died with her. Yvette’s help was needed, not to celebrate a birth, but to pay for a double funeral. Yvette arrived, and together with her brother William, who lives in Boston, arranged, attended and paid for the double funeral.

But sometimes the fact that Yvette is embedded in an extended transnational family network that joins together various localities in Haiti, New York City and Montreal in a single social space brings Yvette great joy. A year after the funeral, she sat in Washington, DC, with nineteen other kinfolk and family friends, some of whom had flown in from Haiti and Canada, to watch Sandra, Yvette’s cousin’s daughter, graduate from law school. When Sandra was handed her law school diploma, Yvette, who was sitting next to Nina at the time, and who is usually quite proper and somewhat shy with strangers, jumped up and yelled ‘Haiti!’ ‘Haiti!’

surprising even herself. Sandra’s victory in obtaining a law school degree from a prestigious university in the United States is Yvette’s. It is also Haiti’s, and Haiti now exists wherever Haitians settle. Yvette’s continuing home ties involve her in Haiti in ways that connect individual life strategies and daily decisions with broad political forces that are redefining the theory and practices of nation-states.

Helen’s address to Haitian immigrants abroad and Yvette’s invocation of Haiti at Sandra’s graduation encompass those in Haiti and those of Haitian descent in the United States in a common transnational political
project that reconceptualizes Haiti as a transnational nation. Haiti is becoming one of a number of emigrant-sending countries that are redefining themselves so that both nation and state are perceived to be transnational—extending beyond the territorial borders of the country. Increasing numbers of countries, including Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, Portugal and Greece have been redefining their relationships to emigrant populations and their descendants in ways that confer continuing membership on emigrants and their descendants permanently settled elsewhere, whether or not the emigrants have taken on the citizenship of other states (Feldman-Bianco 1992; Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Santos 1996; Grahm 1997; Sánchez 1997; Smith 1997; Guarnizo 1998; Margolis 1998, forthcoming). In so doing, the governments of these emigrant sending states and their resettled populations are defying the commonly held view that the population of a state resides within its territorial boundaries and that a state represents the population of a nation which shares language, culture, national identity as well as residence within a common territory (Hobsbawm 1992). They are also demonstrating that in the wake of globalization, states are not withering away. Instead, states are reformulating not only their institutional practices but also their national ideologies to adapt to the rapid movement of capital, people and ideas that are accompanying the restructuring of global capitalist relationships (Camilleri and Falk 1992; Sassen 1996; Panitch 1997).

While there has been some ground-breaking research about the newly emerging practices and ideologies of the transnational nation-state and its relationship to immigrant populations in the United States, much more systematic study is in order (Feldman-Bianco 1992; Grahm 1997; Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Smith 1998). The future research agenda includes: (1) historical comparisons with past efforts of nation-states to extend their domain beyond their territorial borders; (2) systematic comparison of the contemporary transnational nation-state building projects; and (3) analyses of the degree to which these contemporary political projects reflect the needs and aspirations of various sectors of the population of the emigrant-sending state and of the resettled emigrants.1

In this article we explore the ways in which individuals such as Yvette and Helen begin to identify with a transnational homeland and the political projects of politicians and government officials. While our inquiry focuses on Haiti and the historical particularities of the Haitian experience, we believe that the questions we ask and the analysis we present can be applied usefully to the study of transnational nation-state building globally. We examine how the individual concerns of persons such as Yvette and Helen become connected to nationalist rhetoric and state policies that reach across national borders. Why does Yvette, immersed in her job, her church and her family in New York identify with Haiti? And why does she identify the triumphs of her family with Haiti? What
does all this tell us about immigrant incorporation in sending and receiving societies? And how, why and to what extent, do persons such as Helen, who have lived all their lives in Haiti, learn to see themselves connected to persons of Haitian origin settled abroad, even when they have become citizens of other countries or were born in those countries? How widely shared is Helen’s notion that such persons are her family and nation? Is there a difference in the acceptance of a concept of a Haiti as a transnational nation between those who are enmeshed in ongoing transnational networks and those who have no such personal ties? In answering these questions we shall also look at the relationship between state and nation in Haiti, although we reserve an in-depth exploration of this topic for a future date.²

Our purpose is to describe as well as to analyse. We are troubled by aspects of the transnational political projects that are emerging not only among Haitians but also among a significant and vocal section of many other immigrant populations, as well as among political leaders or government officials of many emigrant sending states. Transnational politics are being built on a concept of national identity rooted in concepts of blood and descent. These concepts foster racism and national chauvinism by revitalizing and popularizing links between the concepts of race and nation that exclude those defined as racially different from access to citizenship, rights and territory. In addition, in the transnational project of states such as Haiti, the efforts to build a transnational nation-state and portray Haitians abroad as the hope of the nation divert attention from the reasons for Haiti’s continuing economic and political crisis.

Transnational social fields: definitions and data

A growing number of migration scholars have been documenting transnational migration.³ The emerging study of transnational migration is part of the trend to study transnational processes and globalization.⁴ Because these terms are being used widely but imprecisely, it is important to specify how we are using them. For us, the term globalization is best employed for the contemporary rapid and deregulated flows of capital that are restructuring patterns of investment, production, labour deployment and consumption (Mittleman 1997, pp. 230–31). In the course of this economic restructuring ideas, technology, and goods and services of all sorts are moving rapidly throughout the world. Such flows can be termed ‘global’ in their scope and impact. In contrast, certain movements of people, ideas and objects are best defined as transnational rather than global (Glick Schiller 1997; Mato 1997). Contemporary transnational processes reflect globalization but are more limited in scope. Transnational political, economic, social, and cultural processes (1) extend beyond the borders of a particular state but are shaped by the
policies and institutional practices of a particular and limited set of states; and (2) include actors that are not states.

Transnational migration is a pattern of migration in which persons, although they move across international borders, settle and establish ongoing social relations in a new state, maintain ongoing social connections within the polity from which they originated. In transnational migration, persons literally live their lives across international borders. Such persons are best identified as ‘transmigrants’, that is, persons who migrate and yet maintain or establish familial, economic, religious, political or social relations in the state from which they moved, even as they also forge such relationships in the new state or states in which they settle (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1992, p. 1). They live within a ‘transnational social field’ that includes the state from which they originated and the one in which they settled (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994). A social field can be defined as an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks. It is a more encompassing term than that of network which is best applied to chains of social relationship specific to each person (Barnes 1954; Epstein 1969; Mitchell 1969; Noble 1973).

The concept ‘transnational social field’ allows us a conceptual and methodological entry point into the investigation of broader social, economic and political processes through which migrating populations are embedded in more than one society and to which they react (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994). Because it focuses our attention on human interaction and situations of personal social relationship, the concept of social field facilitates an analysis of the processes by which immigrants continue to be part of the fabric of daily life in their home state including its political processes, while they simultaneously become part of the work force, contribute to neighbourhood activities, serve as members of school and community boards and enter into US politics. This process of simultaneous incorporation has begun to be studied by a growing number of scholars of international migration to the United States (Feldman-Bianco 1992; Smith 1994; Lessinger 1995; Pessar 1996; Guarnizo and Smith 1998). The social relationships that form the substance of transnational social fields include egalitarian, unequal, and exploitative relationships that often encompass immigrants, persons born in the country of origin who never migrated, and persons born in the country of settlement of many different ethnic backgrounds. Comparative research is needed to explore the composition of the networks that make up transnational social fields and the relationship between the composition of these fields and the continuity of transnational connections.

In this article we are interested in transmigrants and in their interconnection with persons in Haiti and with Haiti as a polity. We focus on the formation of a transnational Haitian identity through which persons
declare themselves to be a part of Haiti, whether they are incorporated in the United States or living within the territory of Haiti. These declarations of identity take the form of actions and words that signal a commitment to the current day survival, prosperity, independence and reputation of Haiti. By specifying demonstrable commitments to Haiti on the part of persons of Haitian origin living abroad, we highlight that we are concerned with public acts rather than private sentiments. Such commitments include following political developments in Haiti through the media, defending Haiti in conversations with co-workers and friends, participating in activities organized to provide resources for the development of Haiti, or campaigning for candidates for public office in Haiti. These commitments differ from public identification with a Haitian cultural heritage that has become a part of a ‘multicultural America’. A multicultural form of identification, which we have labelled ‘ethnic’, (Glick Schiller 1975; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1990) is encouraged by US political leaders or educators when they portray immigrants as having ‘roots’ in other lands but are now fully ‘American’. Depending on the context, advertising a Haitian identity through the display of bumper stickers, flags and buttons may be signally various, different and sometimes overlapping types of identification. The display of a Haitian flag, for example, can be an indication of ethnic pride, or a display of traditional Haitian nationalism that sees Haiti as territorially bounded, or an emerging transnational view of Haiti.

The data in this essay come from ongoing research about Haitian immigration to New York City and Haitian identity politics that began in 1969, and continued through three decades of participant observation. Our interest in immigrant identities and belonging were shaped by Georges’ vantage point as a first-generation Haitian transmigrant and Nina’s perspective as the granddaughter of a Russian Jewish immigrant who maintained her transnational family ties for almost sixty years. We draw on surveys and in-depth interviews we conducted in New York in 1985–1986 and 1996–97, and in Haiti in 1989, 1991, 1995 and 1996. In Haiti, we interviewed people in the vicinity of Port-au-Prince, the capital city of Haiti, and Aux Cayes, an important regional town. Both locations have experienced large migrations from rural areas in the past two decades. Most of the quotations and descriptive statistics in this article are from the 109 persons we interviewed in 1996, using a snowball sample whose starting points included persons with varying class backgrounds. Thirty-two per cent of the sample had not been abroad but had received support or regular communication from family abroad, 30 per cent had neither been abroad nor had received support or communications from family abroad, and 33 per cent had returned from living abroad but continued to maintain some form of connection abroad. The sample included seventy-one men and thirty-eight women who ranged in age from fourteen to seventy-eight.
Haitian identities within a transnational social field

Since the 1960s significant numbers of Haitians have settled in the United States, Canada, France and the Bahamas. An estimated 1.5 million persons from Haiti or of Haitian descent live outside of Haiti, while Haiti itself has a population of approximately 7,200,000 people (Jean-Pierre 1994, p. 56; Economist Intelligence Unit 1997, p. 41). However, the United States settlement has been by far the most numerically and politically significant. From 1959 to 1993, some 302,458 Haitians entered the United States with permanent resident visas, and 1,381,240 Haitians arrived with non-immigrant visas, most of these coming with tourist visas (US Immigration and Naturalization Service 1996). Until the 1990s, a great number of the immigrants who arrived with tourist visitors were able to regularize their status and became permanent residents. In addition, between 1971 and 1981, more than 60,000 Haitians arrived in south Florida by small wooden sailboats, and many of them eventually gained permanent resident status.

The largest Haitian settlements in the United States are in south Florida and the New York metropolitan area. New York City was the initial location of settlement and in 1994, 30 per cent of the newly arrived legal immigrants continued to settle there (US Immigration and Naturalization Service 1996, p. 65). In 1990, 34 per cent of the population worked in service occupations, 21 per cent as factory operatives, 21 per cent as clerical or technical workers, 9 per cent as professionals, 5 per cent as managers, and 3 per cent as farm workers. While individual income has been relatively low, since most immigrants live in households with two or more working adults, mean household income reached $32,161 by 1989 (US Census 1990, pp. 235, 299).

Although Haitian immigrants often link the beginnings of their massive migration to the United States to the arrival in New York of political exiles from the Haitian upper class who fled when François Duvalier came to power in 1957, the immigration statistics beginning in the 1950s document a multi-class migration of both men and women. The migration was precipitated not only by the vicious repression of all political dissent but also by global economic changes that spurred first rural to urban migration, and then international migration in a number of countries around the world including Haiti. Occupying the western third of the island of Hispaniola, almost 70 per cent of Haitians still live in the countryside, although Haiti’s integration into the world economy has meant that Haiti is an importer of food as well as manufactured goods (World Bank 1996, p. 147; Development Data Group 1996, p. 228).

From the very beginning of the migration, a large number of Haitian immigrants lived their lives across borders making decisions about expenditures and consumption, child-rearing, employment, and interpersonal relationships within a network of family members and friends.
that included persons in Haiti, Canada and in the United States (Laguerre 1984, 1994; Stepick 1998). Whether or not they themselves travelled back to Haiti, their interactions with persons in Haiti and with persons who visited Haiti situated Haitian immigrants in transnational social fields (Fouron and Glick Schiller 1997; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1998).

An intersection of many factors explains the reason why so many Haitian immigrants such as Yvette continue year after year to sustain a broad network of people in Haiti that sometimes includes kinfolk they barely know and non-kin who are old friends or neighbours. First of all, there is the economic insecurity of daily life in the United States. Now firmly embedded within the restructured global economy, even when there is little unemployment, the United States no longer offers job security for most people. Yvette fears downsizing. If her position as a mail clerk is eliminated in some form of corporate reorganization, she thinks it unlikely that she will find another decent job. Maintaining ties to Haiti allows Yvette and many other Haitian immigrants to hedge their bets about their economic future in the United States. By investing their earnings in property, businesses and social relations in Haiti, immigrants forge other economic possibilities for themselves in homelands where US dollars have significant purchasing power.

Sending remittances is also an edge against a lonely old age or disability in New York. Yvette plans to retire to Haiti. It is a place to which she can return and live life as an elder in a land where the elderly are still shown some respect and are cared for by the family. If she becomes an American citizen, she can go ‘home’ to Haiti with the steady and secure income from her Social Security account and be a person of some substance there. In contrast, in US culture elder family members are defined as a ‘burden’ by social services and family members alike (Doty 1986).

The insecurity of life in the United States is not the only reason why immigrants such as Yvette send remittances. There are also the dynamics of social status (Goldring 1998). She may be living her life in a cousin’s basement in Queens because of the constant obligations to send remittances to Haiti but transnational family obligations have their rewards. In the United States, Yvette may be just another ageing black woman, but in Haiti she is a somebody. In the United States her earnings make no social mark, even if she were to hoard them or spend them on consumer goods. But to the extensive network of people she has been supporting in Haiti, Yvette is a person of substance. On her two trips back home, she was treated as a visiting dignitory.

But none of this explains why Yvette, immersed in her job, her church and her family in New York identifies with Haiti and why she identifies the triumphs of her family with Haiti, connecting her personal networks to broader political processes and identifications. Nor are any of the factors listed above the ones that Yvette uses to explain her continuing
identification with Haiti. To understand the ways and means by which Haitian personal networks become connected to broader national identities that extend transnationally, we must examine Haitian transnational social fields where the connections between the personal and the political are forged.

In part, Yvette’s continuing identification with Haiti is based on a pride in Haiti as the first black republic and the nation that won its independence by a successful slave rebellion against French colonialism in 1804. For almost 200 years, the Haitian state, although mistrusted by most of the people, has popularized national symbols in ways that led persons of all classes in Haiti to identify with the Haitian nation but not necessarily with the state (Trouillot 1990). The dissemination of national symbolism came to be a central activity of the state under the Duvalier dictatorship which lasted from 1957 to 1986. A knowledge of Haitian history and personal identification with it are what most Haitian immigrants share. While both theorists of nationalism (Connor 1978) and scholars of Haiti (Trouillot 1990; Averill 1997) have warned that identification with a nation cannot be taken to imply loyalty to or affection for a state, we found a more complex situation. The widespread dissemination of the Haitian historical narrative left many Haitians holding high expectations for their state, yet distrusting or fearing their government.

Moreover, while historical mythology and rituals of nationhood have been shared by all classes in Haiti and have linked them to a pride in nation, these nation-state building processes have not necessarily linked Haitians to one another. Class divisions in Haiti have historically been sharp with the divisions between the classes signalled through colour and language, with the dominant class, although it contained prominent black families, was identified as mulattos and French-speaking, while the poor were portrayed as black and Kreyòl-speaking (Buchanan 1980; Dupuy 1990; Nicholls 1996).

The US based experiences of being Haitian

Consequently, Haitians often arrive in the United States divided by sharp and antagonistic class divisions but also with a clear notion of Haiti as a nation. Unlike many immigrants from rural Europe who came to the United States between 1840 and 1915 (Connor 1990) or from some other rural areas of the world without a national identity, today Haitians arrive with their own national identity. However, once in the United States, Haitians have found that, regardless of their subjective identity or skin colour, they are black and that in the United States to be black is to be identified as African-American (Bryce-Laporte 1972; Fouron 1983; Charles 1990a, 1990b). Haitian immigrants have also learned upon their arrival, or arrive already informed by their personal networks and by US media available in Haiti, that African-Americans have been allocated to
a social location at the bottom of the United States against which others in the society have learned to measure their social standing (Baldwin 1971; Omi and Winant 1986; Roediger 1991; Delgado 1995).

In the first two decades of mass immigration, Haitians of all backgrounds tended to counter the US social positioning and the accompanying set of stereotypes associated with blackness by identifying themselves as ‘French’. However, given the class divisions existing in Haiti and despite the history of nation-building we have just traced, Haitian immigrants did not initially envision themselves as a community nor did they immediately take on a public identity as Haitian.

By contrast, in the New York metropolitan area, where they settled in increasingly large numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, Haitians found a civic culture that fostered both racial and ethnic communal identification. With the encouragement of a number of institutions, the Catholic and Protestant Churches, the Democratic Party, philanthropic institutions such as the Ford Foundation, and the New York City Board of Education, aspiring political leaders from the Haitian black middle class constructed Haitians as a distinct ethnic ‘community’ within the United States (Glick Schiller 1975, 1977; Glick Schiller et al. 1987a, 1987b). Emerging ‘community’ leaders adopted the vocabulary of cultural pluralism which encouraged the Haitian immigrants to find their place within the ‘US ethnic mosaic’ and to contribute to the cultural richness of the US. In this narrative of identity, Haiti became a location for cultural roots but not for ongoing and enduring political identification (Glick Schiller and Furon 1990).

In their daily life, Haitian immigrants actually take on many identities. Our interviews with Haitian leaders in 1987 revealed the same pattern that we observed among those who participated in religious, philanthropic, athletic, cultural, economic, or social activities that were labelled as ‘Haitian’. People had more than one public identity: black, Christian, Haitian nationalist, Haitian ethnic, Masonic, French, African or African-American could all be overlapping, non-contradictory identities. At the same time, even when there was the possibility of repression by the Duvalier regime in Haiti for ties to Haiti, the majority of organizations conducted activities in Haiti or saw their activities in the United States as contributing to the future of Haiti. Our interaction over extended periods of time with persons who never participated in organized ‘Haitian’ activities revealed a similar pattern of multiple identification combined with personal transnational networks that extended to Haiti. At the same time, Haitian immigrants in New York became increasingly aware that they could publicly differentiate themselves from African-Americans by claiming membership in a separate Haitian ethnic community.

Since her arrival in 1985, Yvette has experienced being identified as Haitian, as part of her daily life, in the workplace, at Catholic Masses and church services, and in her home. Consequently, her identification with
Haiti reflects not only her enculturation in Haiti but her experiences with the political structures and cultural understanding that are part of the day-by-day experience of living in New York. Her co-workers show her travel articles about Haiti and newspaper clippings about events in Haiti, and they reflect together on what is happening to Haitians in New York. She goes to a Catholic church that has organized a Kreyòl Mass and where priests and the parish newsletters and announcements constantly refer to ‘the Haitian community’. She is identified as a Haitian in the English lessons she is taking to become a citizen and to more readily obtain another job if she faces corporate downsizing and displacement. As she cooks for the cousins she lives with in Queens, she listens to Haitian radio and television programmes. She learns about attacks on ‘the Haitian community’, such as the false labelling of Haitians as carriers of the AIDS virus and police violence against Haitian immigrants and participates in community-wide mobilizations against such violence. The media and the church connect her both to a US-based Haitian ethnic identity and to the political and economic rhetoric of Haiti. They provide her with advice on how to adapt to life in the United States and create a framework within which she can participate in the discussions concerning the latest events in Haiti.\textsuperscript{12}

However, it is important to emphasize the experiences in the United States that impel immigrants such as Georges to tune into Haitian radio stations, although they have become fluent in English. Immigrants from Haiti received messages from US society that simultaneously may include them within a multicultural America and yet exclude them as racially outside of the whiteness of the US mainstream. Yvette, as we indicated above, is currently working to improve her English so that she can become a citizen. But how naturalized can she feel in a land in which her claim to be an American is modified by the words ‘black’ or ‘African’ that in the United States allocate her to an inferior social location? Georges, although he is a US citizen and college professor, is routinely stopped by the police as he drives through the white suburban neighbourhood in which his university is located. Both Yvette and Georges know that in Haiti the word for all human beings is nèg–black.\textsuperscript{13} The security Yvette seeks from Haiti becomes extended from personal networks to the security of belonging to a black, but proud nation. This aspect of belonging to Haiti, ‘the first black republic’ has been stressed to us by both first- and second-generation immigrants. As a second-generation college student told Georges in interviews in 1997 ‘Haiti is a place where they expect something of you, where they appreciate you, where they don’t discriminate against you’. Another student, also born in the US, continued the theme: ‘When I go home, there is no discrimination. I don’t feel it’. In this imagining of Haiti, the actual lines of colour and class that are a daily reality to those who have never left Haiti are ignored, unknown, or forgotten.\textsuperscript{14}
The changing locations of Haiti

Despite their personal transnational ties and their continuing interest in Haiti’s political life and despite the fact that many people planned to eventually return home, until 1986, neither Haitian immigrants nor those living in Haiti had a vocabulary or identity politics to describe and valorize these connections. The identity politics that Haitian immigrants found in the United States constructed for them a US-based ethnicity that discouraged and did not acknowledge their continuing home ties. Haiti was not understood to be a transnational nation by Haitian immigrant leaders, Haitian politicians in Haiti, the Haitian media, and Haitian immigrants such as Yvette. Most Haitians in the United States, whether they participated in organized Haitian activities or remained distant from formal organizations, tended to remain loyal to Haiti and expected to return home eventually (Fouron 1983, 1984). If you became an American citizen, people feared that this would be interpreted as meaning that you had become disloyal to Haiti, so most people hid the fact that they had become naturalized even from their closest friends. You might have multiple identities but it was generally believed that you could have only one political loyalty, and that loyalty would determine ultimately where you would physically reside. For most Haitians, it was not regarded as possible to become permanently settled in the United States and remain committed to Haiti or simultaneously be politically engaged in US and Haitian politics, although both in their daily lives and in various organizational activities Haitian immigrants were doing just that.

In addition, Haitians did not bring with them a migration tradition that valorized these connections. Although Haitian international migration began at the end of the nineteenth century with migration to Cuba and the Dominican Republic, these migrations were generally periodic labour migrations and were conceptualized that way. Because post-1950s emigrants contained political opponents of the Duvalier regime, the Haitian government defined emigrants as traitors, scum and enemies of the nation. First François Duvalier, and then his son Jean Claude, who in 1971 became President after his father had died, argued that by ‘choosing’ to live abroad, Haitian immigrants had become kamoken, suspect and disloyal elements. Worse still, those Haitians who had adopted other nationalities had become apatrid, betrayers of their racial and national legacies. Organized contacts with Haitians abroad were discouraged; it was rumoured that government spies were present at all cultural activities sponsored by Haitian organizations in New York. On their part, Haitian anti-Duvalier activists in the United States negatively sanctioned remittances that immigrants sent home to support families as actions that helped maintain the Duvalier regime. Finally, when the anti-Duvalier activist began to use the word diaspora, it was a way of constructing an identity for all the immigrants as exiles and political refugees whose goal
was to return home to rebuild Haiti (Glick Schiller et al. 1987b). In this context, most people in Haiti or most immigrants either did not know the word diaspora or avoided using it. In our 1987 interviews with ninety-three leaders of Haitian organizations in the New York metropolitan area, only the leaders of explicitly political organizations acknowledged being familiar with the word ‘diaspora’.

The effort of the various political leadership until the 1990s to confine Haitian national identity to residence within Haitian territory had deep historical roots in Haiti. From the first Haitian Constitution in 1805 until 1918 (during the first US occupation of Haiti) when Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then the Acting US Secretary of the Navy, rewrote the Haitian Constitution, foreigners could not own land in Haiti. The language used to differentiate foreigner and Haitian in the 1805 Constitution was a language of race (Trouillot 1990). Haitians were nèg (humans/blacks); foreigners, whatever their complexion and phenotype, were blan (white, non-Haitians, aliens). But these were understood as constructed rather than inherited categories. All persons, whatever their origins who were born or become citizens of Haiti can be nèg which carries the connotation of human being/citizen. This belief that Haitian identity is linked to residence in Haitian territory was echoed in Haitian religious beliefs. In fact, those who ‘served the spirits (lwa)’ (the Haitian name for what foreigners have called voodoo) generally still believe that initiation as a priest or priestess can be completed only on Haitian soil (Brown 1991; Richman 1992a).

However, there are other aspects of the Haitian concept of nation that provided a basis for legitimating ongoing connections between Haiti and its emigrant population, and upon which political leaders could construct a concept of Haiti as a transnational state. The reconceptualization of Haiti as a nation-state existing wherever Haitians settle has some basis in deeply held beliefs of Haitians of all classes about the ties of blood that link family and nation. Even before political leaders began to acknowledge Haitians living abroad as a continuing part of the Haitian body politic, impoverished people in Haiti who survived on remittances sent by family were making such claims.

By the 1980s remittances had become crucial to the Haitian economy. And even though data on the total amount of remittances sent to Haiti are very scattered, by all accounts, the flow of cash, food and consumer items from the diaspora to Haiti is crucial to the daily survival of persons throughout Haiti. Surveys conducted in New York and Miami in the mid-1980s indicated that 90 per cent of Haitian immigrants send money to Haiti (DeWind 1987; Stepick 1998, pp. 29–30). Immigrants reported that they sent an average of $100 cash each month to Haiti, in addition to the value of other goods they sent periodically. The majority of observers believe that in most years the money that Haitians abroad send back to Haiti ‘exceeds what the country makes in foreign exchange’ (Ridgeway
1994, p. 60). In a country in which the gross national product per capita was reported to be $250 dollars a year in 1995, where an estimated 50 per cent of the population was malnourished, and where only 45 per cent of the labour force was employed (Development Data Group 1996; World Bank 1996), the transnational ties that people in Haiti have to those abroad are literally the difference between life and death. Persons living in Haiti who receive remittances from abroad become vital centres of broad networks of redistribution. A mechanic we interviewed described the pressure to redistribute whatever resources one has: ‘There is no work at all in Haiti. In the provinces, in the towns, there are no jobs . . . You would have to be very hard-hearted, not at all human, not to help a lot of people’ (Interview 010–96).

The money that Yvette sends from New York to one of her surviving nieces in a suburb of Port-au-Prince does far more than support Yvette’s family and personal network. Her niece uses the money to rent a house with a stove and cistern and it allows her to buy water, food and cooking fuel. Impoverished persons in the neighbourhood with no support from abroad use the cistern for bathing, share in the drinking water, and recycle her cast-off goods. All of them have a stake in defining for themselves a relationship to Haitians abroad that legitimate and motivate the flow of money and goods to Haiti.

In 1989 we conducted a set of interviews among a network of thirteen people living in the vicinity of Port-au-Prince who were supported by remittances sent from family members abroad. Members of this network used an ideology of blood to explain the continuing connection between Haitians living abroad and those in Haiti. They also asserted that Haitians living abroad continued to be part of Haiti, even if they became naturalized American citizens.

Standing in his yard among the bedlam of scrawny chickens scavaging for meagre scraps, remnants of a rural past which still provided some protection against hunger in the urban density of Port-au-Prince, Edner, a fifty-nine-year-old painter said:

A person is still a Haitian [if he becomes a citizen of another country]. His blood is still Haitian blood. It is only the person’s title and name that changed. The person’s skin is still Haitian and besides that the person was born in Haiti, and even if that person doesn’t consider himself Haitian the whites in the country where he’s living still consider him Haitian. Therefore I don’t think a person should reject his country’.

Almost as if reading from the same script, a second man, whose children sent remittances from the United States, explained:

There are those who go there and naturalize themselves and become
citizens of the country which they are living in but they never forget their country . . . [Even if s/he is an American citizen] s/he is always a Haitian, the blood remains Haitian.

Beginning in 1991 the political narrative began to change. On the day of his inauguration as President, Jean-Bertrand Aristide welcomed Haitians living abroad as the 10th department, speaking as if they were an equivalent of France’s overseas departments. This gesture is important to consider, because Aristide took that initiative even though the Haitian Constitution had not been amended to extend to the overseas Haitian populations the benefits and privileges of double nationality as enjoyed by many Latin Americans and Caribbean expatriates (Richman 1992b). Through this rhetoric, Aristide, acting as Haiti’s head of state, was reclaiming all Haitian immigrants and all persons of Haitian descent living abroad, no matter what their legal citizenship or place of birth, as part and parcel of the Haitian nation-state (Aristide 1991). Since that time, aspiring political leaders in the diaspora and some major political figures in Haiti have begun to speak as if Haiti were a transnational polity that incorporates all persons of Haitian descent wherever they have settled. Yet, the concept still has no standing in Haitian law, although pressures emanating from both the diaspora and Haiti are being exerted upon the Haitian legislature to address the topic. However, the Haitian government has set up institutions such as the Ministry of Haitians Living Abroad specifically to mobilize those of Haitian descent who live abroad to contribute politically and economically to Haiti.

Returning to Haiti in 1995 and 1996 when Haitian political leaders in both the United States and Haiti were conceptualizing the Haitian transnational nation-state, we found widespread evidence of the use of concept of descent, often in the language of blood, to link together transnational ties of family and nation. Eighty-three per cent of our respondents in 1996 believed that Haitians always remained Haitian, whatever their legal citizenship. The majority of these persons (56 per cent) believed that the person remained completely Haitian and volunteered concepts of blood to explain this continuity, despite changes in culture and legal citizenship. Another 32 per cent stated that a person stays partially Haitian, even if legally a citizen of another country. The fervour with which many people spoke about the links between those living in Haiti and those who had emigrated and lived abroad matched the intensity, even the ferocity, of the most fiery political leader.

It was this ferocity that can be felt in the appeal that Helen made to the diaspora. Helen is a slender intense young woman whose father is a kilitivatè (peasant), whose mother sells meat in the market, and whose sister sends remittances for the household she left in Aux Cayes. Helen responded readily when we asked her about whether those abroad were still Haitians.
A person who is living abroad for a long time is a Haitian. Even if you are naturalized (as an American) you keep your Haitian blood. The only way they can keep you from being Haitian is if they cut your meat and took all your blood out.

This continuity of Haitian identity was said to hold after persons became legally naturalized. Raoul Lalane is a thirty-three-year-old man who is supported by his three brothers and two sisters who live in New York and California. They consistently send money for the rent, clothes, shoes. This income is supplemented by the work that his wife does cooking and selling food to an engineering firm on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. They have one child and live in a poor but not totally impoverished neighbourhood right outside Port-au Prince. For Raoul, ‘Even if you naturalize, you are still Haitian. . . it is the same. For me, . . . it is in the blood’. Of his brother who has become an American citizen he said: ‘Inside of him, my brother stays Haitian. He is Haitian even if changes his nationality’.

Those who did not receive remittances could be equally adamant. Typical was the response of an impoverished unemployed young man designated by his friends as ‘Reziye’ (Resigned) who was so poor that he slept in a tree and used the washing facilities in the house of Yvette’s niece—a house for which Yvette pays the rent. ‘They don’t change even if they naturalized because they have the blood. Even if they naturalize and become citizens (of another country) they have Haitian blood in them. They love Haiti’.

Contrary to what we observed in 1985 in New York, in 1996, in Haiti, we found a widespread and almost a uniform knowledge of the word ‘diaspora’ which, by that time, had become incorporated into Kreyòl to mean all Haitians living abroad. The implication that those abroad were obligated to return home had been abandoned. The obligation of the diaspora was now to help Haiti. Respondents differed in their judgement about how effective this assistance had been. While many acknowledged that diaspora Haitians did help their family, they also stated that they had failed in their obligations to help the nation as a whole. Underlying this criticism was the view that helping the nation as a whole was part of the responsibility of the diaspora.

The implications of ties of blood and nation

Our findings indicate that by moving along different paths that follow the contours of their different social class and political experiences, a large and vocal sector of Haitian immigrants and Haitians in Haiti are arriving at a common commitment to build a transnational Haiti. The basis for such politics is embedded within the daily life of Haitian immigrants in the United States and of persons living in Haiti. However, people in the
United States and Haiti live daily lives within different local contexts, although they share a transnational social field.

Haitian immigrants living in the United States, who face the racial barriers of daily life in an unwelcoming country, claim continuing participation in the Haitian nation to which they are connected through blood and descent, even while acknowledging that they have permanently settled in the United States. As for those born in the United States, while they are less likely to speak directly of blood ties, they claim membership in the Haitian nation through heroic ancestors as well as through strong family ties (Furon and Glick Schiller 1998). Meanwhile people who never left Haiti build on widely-held ideas of blood ties to conceptualize Haiti as a transnational nation. The ties of blood provide them with a living bridge that can connect them to a space of greater opportunity. Haiti itself becomes a transnational polity that extends beyond its territorial boundaries, encompassing persons of Haitian ancestry wherever they are located and whatever legal citizenship they may hold. They told us in more or less the same words that ‘the blood remains Haitian’.

At the beginning of this article we proposed the concept of social field as an entry point that enabled us to trace the ways in which persons linked together through social networks, but living within different political systems, came to see themselves as Haitians and part of a Haitian nation that stretches transnationally. The concept of social field has served as more than a metaphor of spatialization. It allowed us to observe a terrain of social relationships in which personal experiences and family strategies of surviving difficult economic circumstances and improving social position serve as the soil on which a broader language of national identity takes root and flourishes. The exchanges of information, money, goods and services along networks that cross national borders are made and legitimated in a political language that ties family, blood and nation into a revitalized concept of homeland. We traced the ways in which people who live within the territorial boundaries of Haiti and who do not cross borders, together with persons living outside the country’s boundaries, form their political public identities and commitments in relationship to their transnational connections. The rhetoric of political leaders about obligations to ancestors, family and homeland, whether these messages take the form of radio, telecommunications, or print media, are mediated within this domain of social relations.

The concept of social field takes us past the conceptual impasse generated by theoreticians who began to postulate that transnational processes, because they were not grounded in the territory of a single state, somehow created a ‘third space’, a zone detached from any nation-state and a zone that foreshadowed the demise of the nation-state (Kearney 1991; Bhabha 1994; Gutiérrez 1997).19 This type of theorizing misses three critical points that have emerged from our examination of Haitian transnational social fields as they are experienced by Haitian immigrants
and by persons who have never left Haiti. First of all, family migration strategies that cross national borders may be legitimated by and may serve to reinforce values that link family to nation. Yvette’s triumphant invocation of the Haitian nation on the occasion of her cousin’s daughter’s graduation is an instance of ‘long distance nationalism’ (Anderson 1992). Rather than being part of an explicitly political activity, long distance nationalists often engage in impassioned politics within the domain of domestic activities and family rites of passage such as weddings, funerals, births and graduations. Therefore political identifications of transmigrants are not disembodied sentimental imaginations, but are rooted in the personal obligations of family.

Secondly, transnational networks do not necessarily run counter to nationalism; migration may even heighten nationalism. Helen’s experience as the recipient of remittances from family members, and her belief that a solution to Haiti’s problems lies with those who have left, strengthened her sense of belonging to a Haitian nation, but it was a transnational nation. Finally, transnational connections can be coupled with concepts of a nation-state which extends beyond the territorial borders of the state (Sørensen 1998). For those who live in the United States and who are racialized as strangers in a strange land, the source of personal salvation may lie not in the United States, but within the territorial borders of Haiti. However, you can be a part of Haiti while you are living in the United States. For those living under terrible conditions in Haiti, the future may be envisaged as migration to the United States. But if Haiti is a transnational nation, to live in the United States does not mean you are not a part of Haiti. These disparate hopes and personal means of resisting exploitative relations, poverty, economic insecurity and racism enmesh persons in both locations in a common political project that is linked to actual states and their political leadership and nationalist dialogues.

The view of the transnational immigrant experience from the point of view of individual actors presented in this article provides us with a research agenda. It calls us to examine more fully the relationship between the personal and the political, so that we can document the degree to which the cultural politics of the ancestral state and the immigrant receiving state become part of the experience of both men and women within transnational social fields. Within this, we can see the way in which women such as Yvette through their transnational ‘kin work’ (Di Leonardo 1984) may be directly participating in processes of social reproduction that are at the foundation of the building of transnational nation-states.

At the same time, the understandings that emerge from this analysis of transnational social fields and the politics they are producing also serve as a warning for those of us who are searching for political spaces within which to analyse current economic and political structures and build
struggles for social justice. First of all, we cannot be content to celebrate individual strategies of transnational resistance to exploitation, or the multiple or multicultural identities of immigrants. The designation of nationality on the basis of ancestry divides the world’s people into racially distinct and forever separate populations. Political leaders around the world have used and still use this conception of nation as race as a justification for war and genocide. There are links between practices of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and the ideologies of blood and descent that are used to legitimate national identities that stretch across national borders (Ignatieff 1993).

Moreover, in the case of Haiti, efforts to build a transnational nation-state and portray the diaspora as the hope of the nation channel energy and resources away from struggles for social and economic justice. These efforts also divert attention from the root causes of Haiti’s continuing economic and political crisis. The ideology of the transnational nation-state engages impoverished people in a nationalist rhetoric that obscures US neo-colonial policies towards Haiti and the continuing collaboration between dominant classes in Haiti and foreign financial and industrial capital (Dupuy 1997). As a form of nationalist discourse, it continues to reinforce the idea that the world is composed of independent nation-states, albeit in an altered form, in which national populations live both inside and outside the national territory. The constant barrage of nationalist rhetoric has not prepared people to address the penetration of global capital, which makes national independence for small countries such as Haiti a rhetorical flourish that has little to do with its political realities. In Haiti, it may well be impeding the maintenance of a grass-roots movement by placing peoples’ hopes in the diaspora as the solution to the problems that Haiti faces. In the United States, transnationalism may affect negatively grass-roots struggles by lessening the immigrants’ impetus and incentives to participate in US national and broadly based campaigns to achieve social justice and equality of opportunities for all.

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Notes


2. The word state indicates a sovereign system of government within a particular territory. In contrast the word nation evokes the sense of peoplehood, of a historically constructed identification of a particular population that has come to use markers of common language, culture, or history to distinguish it from other national groups. To speak of a nation-state is to imply that persons identify both with their state and with their nation. Governments in the twentieth century have generally sought legitimacy as the representative of the nation, but nation-state building is everywhere an ongoing process (Gellner 1983; Connor 1990). When we talk about Haiti as a nation-state we are referring to government rhetoric rather than to a widely accepted concept.


5. Aux Cayes is Georges’ home town.

6. Although in our interviews in Haiti in 1996 we asked about connections with Haitians abroad, most of our respondents replied in terms of Haitians settled in the United States, even if their personal networks extended into other countries.

7. In south Florida, Miami has a dense Haitian neighbourhood widely known as ‘Little Haiti’. In the New York Metropolitan area, a tri-state region that includes parts of the states of Connecticut, New Jersey and New York, the highest density of Haitian settlement is in New York City. Sizeable Haitian settlements exist in Boston, MA, Orlando FL, and Washington, DC. However, Haitian immigrants have been willing to settle wherever they can locate employment including cities in California and Illinois.

8. The median household income was $25,254 (US Census 1990 p. 299).

9. Knowledge of Haitian history and identification with the Haitian nation, especially of the heroes of the Haitian revolution, is widespread in Haiti, despite the fact that more that 50% of the population is illiterate (Trouillot 1990; Development Data Group 1996 pp. 225).

10. See Trouillot 1990; Nicholls 1996; Fouron and Glick Schiller 1997; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1998; and Fouron 1998 for further discussion of class, colour, and the relationship between state and nation in Haiti. In an expanded version of this article, available to readers upon request, and in our forthcoming book, we trace the relationship between family and nation.

11. Persons from the towns and small cities of Haiti also have more localized identities and home town associations, known as ‘regional associations’, that have been flourishing in the United States and Canada since the 1980s.
This message was often communicated in Kreyòl, the language spoken in home situations by almost all Haitians but, until the initiation of Haitian radio and television programmes in New York, an idiom rarely used in public spaces by educated people.

More recently almost all US immigrants are experiencing a sense of exclusion, not only from anti-immigrant sentiments but also from legislation. Legislative lines are being drawn that provide fewer rights for those who are legal residents or claim citizenship through naturalization rather than by birth (DeSipio and De la Garza 1998, pp. 95–124).

The variation in the identities of second-generation black immigrants reported by Waters (1994), with a significant section of this generation reporting some identity with their ancestral land, can be understood in relationship to the transnational social field within which many young people born in the United States live.

Musicians such as Ti Manno envisioned Haiti as a transnational social and political space even before political leaders were willing to reconceptualize the boundaries of the state (Glick Schiller and Fouron 1990).

In general, Haitian scholars and scholars of Haitian migration were also rather slow to examine the implications of Haitian immigrants’ transnational ties (Woldemikael 1989; Dupuy 1990; Portes and Stepick 1993). But for important statements on Haitian transnational ties see Richman (1992a, 1992b) and Charles (1990, 1992). George Anglade, a Haitian intellectual who lived in exile in Canada until the overthrow of the Duvalier regime, was the first to use the term ‘the 10th department’, for the continuing incorporation of Haitians abroad into Haiti.

From the time Haiti was a French colony, the mulatto élite which went to Europe to study always returned to Haiti to live. Aristide’s campaign manager for his 1990 presidential campaign reported that two-thirds of the 300,000 dollars he raised for the campaign came from the diaspora (Jean-Pierre 1994, p. 59). Aristide often spoke of the ‘bank of the diaspora’ (Richman 1992b, p. 196).

For a similar criticism of the belief that transnational migration creates some form of ‘third space’ see Guarnizo and Smith 1998, pp. 11–15.

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