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41st Caribbean Studies Association Conference, 6-11 June, 2016, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

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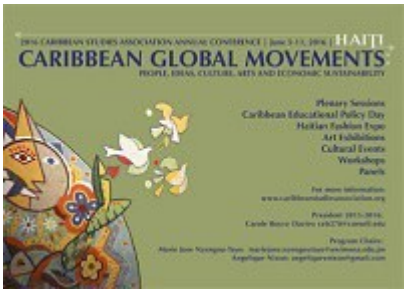

"We're making history here in Haiti," says CAROLE BOYCE DAVIES (Cornell University, Ithaca), the current president of the Caribbean Studies Association (CSA), in her opening address. This "historical moment" is characterized by a mingling of different scholars from the Caribbean, the United States, South America, Africa, Australia, and Europe. Officially four different languages are part of the conference — French, English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole — and all of them are used throughout the conference. The multitude of languages shall lead to productive encounters and mirrors the cultural and linguistic realities of the Caribbean. Choosing Haiti for the venue invokes the history of the slave rebellion and revolution led by Toussaint Louverture, but at the same time the disastrous earthquake from 2010, which is still very much present in the every-day life of Port-au-Prince. Both these aspects — the history of revolution and rebellion and the reaction to natural disasters and global warming — have influenced the Caribbean and continued to influence this conference.

Two adjectives adequately summarize the CSA conference: multidisciplinary and transnational. Most of the panels pair a distinctly Caribbean and a transnational perspective. The CSA conference draws a colorful, multinational picture of the Caribbean, which unites different languages and nations. The chosen venue however (the Marriott Hotel) did not contribute to this uniting experience. One cannot but notice the drastic and stark contrast between the life inside the hotel and the everyday life of Haitian people outside of it. Saying this, the described contrast came up repeatedly during the conference in conversations between panels, as almost all the attendees experienced this as disturbing.

The Citadelle and Jacmel

Apart from the conference, the CSA organized trips to the countryside to allow attendees to visit places like the Citadelle Laferrière and the coastal town of Jacmel. Both places give an insight into the history and culture of Haiti. The Citadelle and the nearby Sans-Souci Palace — one of the largest fortresses in the Americas — bear witness to the successful fight for independence against France in the beginning of the 19th century.

It was built to keep Haiti safe from colonial invasion and remains a reminder of the first successful slave rebellion in the Caribbean. The colonial heritage is also traceable in Jacmel, which was built by the Spanish in 1504 and later repopulated by the French. The buildings, albeit largely destroyed through the earthquake, are influenced by French colonial architecture. During both trips, the tour guides emphasize Haiti's colonial past, yet not without expressing pride about having won their freedom. Here, the past reaches into the present and this merging sets the tone for the CSA conference in the following days.

Post-earthquake Haiti

In the opening session titled "Louvri Bayè pou 'Caribbean Global Movements'", LIZABETH PARAVISINI-GEBERT (Vassar College, Arlington) addresses the post-earthquake predicaments the Haitians had to deal with in the previous weeks and months. Paravisini-Gebert herself came to Haiti a couple of weeks after the earthquake and she masterfully illustrates these experiences in her talk. She states that after the earthquake no economic growth was possible in Haiti. This natural disaster was a warning against global warming and climate change, addressing all nations in the Caribbean. She raises the question of which impact this can have on future developments in the Caribbean, particularly regarding health issues and their consequences for the Caribbean economy, which is largely dependent on tourism. This tourism relies heavily on the sea and the coasts, Paravisini-Gebert argues, and connects the Caribbean nations with each other. For this reason the access to fresh water and a secure living environment is paramount for Haiti. She also harshly criticizes the depiction of the Haitians as "hopeless victims" rendered powerless facing this natural disaster. Poverty was not a natural condition in Haiti, but had been imposed on them, first by the colonizers and systems of plantation slavery, then by capitalism and now by natural disaster. Paravisini-Gebert addresses several key issues, which reappear again and again throughout the conference; namely Haitian history, including the history of the transatlantic slave trade, plantation slavery and the Haitian Revolution, economic difficulties in pre- and post-earthquake Haiti, and mobilities as well as movements and how they connect the Caribbean states.

Caribbean Feminism(s)

Often the panels at the conference highlight these issues through a feminist perspective. The panel "Re-Envisioning Caribbean Feminisms for the 21st Century" offers reflexive critiques of the silences, elisions and failures of Caribbean feminisms. PATRICIA MOHAMMED (UWI St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago) opens this panel and draws up a map of feminisms in the Caribbean. For her project she compiled an archive of a special collection dedicated to Caribbean feminisms. She subdivides this group into different branches such as women's movements, state feminisms and gender policies, and academic feminism. Her work attempts to create a body of thought and activism which dedicates itself to an emerging Indo-Caribbean feminism while contrasting epistemologies of mainstream feminism.

The following speaker, ADWOA ONUORA (Mona, University of West Indies, Kingston), argues that Caribbean Feminism is a distinct category within feminist theory and needs to be addressed as such. This theory then must allow for flexibility in which Caribbean feminism proposes alternatives to the current social order. MARY KENNY (Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic) also emphasizes a gendered perspective on Haitian migration in Brazil via presenting the conditions of labor, which she argues are divided by classical gender categories. Female migrants are mostly forced into gendered jobs, such as working as maids, working with children, cooking, and cleaning. Men, however, are solely recruited for hard labor. Both branches are characterized by underpayment or no payment at all. She argues that Haitian migrants are employed under "slave-like conditions" which are often no betterment compared to the post-earthquake conditions they experienced in Haiti.

Haitian Vodou as a Form of Resistance

Eventually, a distinctly Haitian perspective is introduced through the topic of Vodou. In his keynote address, EROL JOSUE (Director of Bureau National d'Ethnologie, Port-au-Prince), a Vodou priest himself, stresses the importance of Vodou religion for Haitian culture and its direct link to African ancestry. He sees the key to current political, social, and racial issues in remembering the past of Haiti, including the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery. By saying this he challenges and subverts a colonial perspective, as he does not use the word "slave" — he states that this word simply does not exist in Vodou. He further speaks of "the ocean given the name Atlantic" to highlight the artificial constructions of names and concepts. Stylistically, he breaks up the genre of presenting a paper or talk by mixing English spoken elements with sung elements in Haitian Creole.

Vodou is also discussed at another panel named "Haitian Vodou, Identity, Aesthetics, and Sexuality", which shows the manifold influences this spiritual belief holds in Haiti and beyond. NIXON CLEOPHAT (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana) speaks of the Vodou aesthetics as a collective story of the historical oppressed, which embodies the terrors of slavery — an experience he

portrays as a life between living and dead. He asks how it is possible that the Haitians survive and endure to live in a "hellish state of being" and directly answers his question with Vodou. The Haitians use Vodou as an instrument to survive, which enables them to enter their past and memory, and at the same time cope with current situations; something he directly relates to living in post-earthquake Haiti. Here, music plays a central role and again connects the past with the present. Not only can it be used to express both sorrow and joy, but historically it gave strength to slave ancestors, as well. The Vodou music empowered the enslaved people, as the songs reflect the ongoing oppressions in society. Today, the Vodou elements can be found in modernized forms in folk and popular music. Here, according to Cleophat, Vodou is a source of existence for those who live at the margins. What characterizes Vodou is that it is not institutionalized but rather a part of nature. A state of being it managed to maintain even during colonialism.

The multifaceted history of colonialism runs through most of the conference and, together with the profound awareness of the continuing problems in Haiti, highlights the need to address and readdress this history while focusing on the very immediate consequences that affect Haitians to this day.

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Editor's Note: In a previous version of this report NIXON CLEOPHAT was incorrectly portrayed by using feminine pronouns (she/her).