

The linguistic construction of Haitian transnational communities in the United States: A work in progress

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Abstract

Haitian populations undergo a series of sociocultural adaptations and reinvention as they organize their lives and construct viable communities of practice (Eckert 2006; Hanks 1996) along the northeastern region of the United States, particularly in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Language as the engine of socialization plays a significant role in the formation of these given ethnic enclaves. In this working paper, I use both micro and macro analyses in order to discuss several features of Haitian immigrants' social organization, with an eye on the commutative functions of language and culture as powerful instruments in the creative process as well as the resulting product of community formation. This integrative approach may lead to the necessary critical studies that will grant us a greater understanding of the Haitian diasporic communities in the United States.

For many decades, studies about Haiti and its people have largely focused on the problems and calamities and misfortunes in the lives of these people, who have historically maintained and reaffirmed their African identity with pride and dignity. What makes this work in progress different is that it moves away from the traditional research models and analyses that emphasize problems and clamor disabling discourses about Haitian immigrants. Instead, it underscores the creative processes and practices of Haitian immigrants as well as the enormous contributions these folks have made in furthering the social, economic and political advancement of the United States. In sum, findings from this work may help to open up new pathways for research and hammer out alternative models for the study of the African Diaspora in general and of Haiti and its people in particular.

Keywords: Haitian immigrants; Haitian Creole; social networks; ethnic identity; community organization; communicative practice.

1. Introduction

Duranti (1997:82) defines a community of practice as the “product of the communicative activities engaged in by a given group of people.” For those interested in ecological and transnational studies, Haitian communities of practices in the United States constitute an important object of study, particularly as these folks make social and linguistic adjustments, reaffirm their cultural identity, and redistribute the traditions of their native land in the host society. In this working paper, I am guided by practice theory (Eckert 2006; Hanks 1996; Bourdieu 1991; Foucault 2012; Giddens 1984) while also applying principles from ethnographic fieldwork (Rollwagen 1975; Blommaert & Jie 2010) in combination with insights gained from sociolinguistic studies about the interactional

nature of language and communicative practices (Gumperz 2000; Hymes 1986; Schiffman 1996; Wardhaugh 1998), in the hope that in due course we can develop the necessary critical lens for viewing and interpreting the sociocultural adaptations that Haitian populations make as they organize their lives and construct viable social networks in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. This integrative approach to inquiry has been developed by a broad array of researchers, ranging from those who attempt to use participant-observation as praxis within the framework of grounded theory (Hurtado 2003; Cuban 2003; Trueba 1999; Scheurich 1997) to those who adopt a model of micro-macro integrative theory to interpret what is happening historically, politically, and demographically in a given community (Guajardo & Guajardo 2004; Buchanan-Stafford 1987; Lather 1986; Laguerre 1984; Buchanan, Albert & Beaulieu 2010). With that particular epistemology in mind, my research endeavors to increase understanding regarding the ways in which Haitian immigrants use Kreyòl (Haitian Creole) as a powerful tool to organize their lives and create communities of practices along the northeastern seaboard region of the United States. Findings from this inquiry, so far, suggest that Haitian immigrants are making significant contributions to the social, economic, and political development of the United States. Considering that Haitians are members of the much larger African diaspora, it is hoped that knowledge gained about Haitian communities in the United States may help to increase understanding about other African and Caribbean communities based in this country and beyond.

2. Haitian migration to the United States

Recently examined historical documents show that traders, skilled laborers, soldiers, educators, and academics were among the first groups of people to migrate from Haiti to the United States (Kroesler 2002; Paumgarten 2009). According to Paumgarten (2009: 56), “the first Black man” and “non-Native American” recorded in New York City history was a trader named Jan Rodrigues, the son of a Portuguese sailor and an African woman from the Island of Hispaniola. Jan Rodrigues was a crewman, left behind by a Dutch ship in 1612. He made his living as a translator while also selling ironware to the Native Americans. Some 162 years later, a militia comprised of 543 soldiers from Saint Domingue (Haiti) joined forces with American troops in 1775 to fight the British in the battle at Savannah, Georgia, during the American Revolution. Some of those freed men stayed in the United States, but others returned to Haiti and became leaders in the Haitian Revolution (Clark 1980; Bynum 2007). From 1793 to 1804, while forcing the French colonists out of the western part of Hispaniola, the slave rebellion also caused a large group White Creoles and their Black slaves to migrate north to the United States (Sawyer Lee 2004). In sum, high peak migration from Haiti to the United States has been recorded in four major historical periods: (1) from 1793 to 1804; (2) from the 1950s to the 1960s; (3) from the 1970s to the 1980s; and (4) from the 1980s to 1990s (Laguerre 1984; Catanese 1999; Zéphir 2001). In all instances, large numbers of both documented and undocumented Haitians entered the United States by boat and by plane in order to start a new life alone or to join relatives already settled in the country¹ (Foner 1987; MacDonald

¹ It is important to note, however, that migration from Haiti to the United States has historically been conflictive (Maguire 2003), particularly in times where discriminatory practices and race-based policy specifically targeted people of Haitian ancestry seeking to make a living in the United States. Both the

& MacDonald 1964). While chronicling this history, it is equally important to keep in mind that Haitian immigrants are industrious people who have not only sought to improve their lives in the United States, but they have also contributed their fair share to the social, economic, and political development of American society, even though their contributions remain relatively unacknowledged.² Noteworthy, people of Haitian roots continue to construct viable communities of practices primarily in Florida, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut and Georgia through their participation in economic enterprises, social and cultural activities as well as political actions.

In order to understand Haitian immigrants' community building efforts in the United States, earlier studies gave much attention to the dynamic interplay of complex social struggles and complicated political phenomena influencing the long-standing migration history of this population, including: (1) human rights abuses (Lundhal 1979), (2) political persecutions (Laguerre 1984), and (3) economic injustices (Lundhal 1980; Laguerre 1984). Drawing from these sociohistorical perspectives on the formation of Haitian diasporic communities in the United States (Laguerre 1984; Lundhal 1980; Foner 2006), this paper, however, argues that migration from Haiti has in time and place contributed to making American society what Vertovec (2007) calls a super-diversity. That is, a country that appeals as a safe haven to many different kinds of peoples seeking to improve the quality of their lives. By the same token, it is equally important to keep in mind that these immigrants bring along their cultural assets and linguistic tools, which enable them to maintain their identity wherever they go. Some demographic data may help to explain how this population has been able to establish cultural and linguistic enclaves along the northeastern seaboard region of the United States.

3. The Haitian diaspora of the Northeastern United States

People of Haitian descent have settled along the United States' eastern seaboard, from Florida to Maine, creating the greatest concentration of Haitian Creole speaking populations outside of Haiti. By conservative estimates, Haitian-Americans in the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut constitute a population well over 400,000 persons. Table 1 shows estimates of the Haitian population in New York (NY), New Jersey (NJ) and Connecticut (CT) based on data published by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2010.

immigration policies barring the so-called Haitian *boat people* from entering the United States in the 1980s as well as the discriminatory policy of the Food and Drug Administration precluding Haitians from donating blood in the same era are two prime examples that adequately illustrate these tensions.

² I am thinking of contribution such as the founding of Chicago by Jean-Baptiste Point du Sable, an *émigré* from Haiti (Laguerre 1984); the influences of Haitian agents in the failed rebellions of enslaved populations in Virginia and the Carolinas in the 1800s (Egerton 1993: 21-22; Foner 2006: 259; Kolchin 1994: 78-81); the participation of Haitian immigrants in the Pan-African repatriation movement of Marcus Garvey in the 1920s (Foner 1987: 133) to the Black literary movement during the Harlem renaissance (Laguerre 1984); the exploits of five Haitian-born pilots who were among the renowned Tuskegee Airmen in World War II (Cassagnol 2004); the relatively unacknowledged participation of intellectuals and students from Haiti in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s; the little-known involvement of Haitian immigrants in the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement; and the unprecedented participation of foreign-born and U.S.-born Haitian voters in the elections of both President William J. Clinton and President Barack H. Obama respectively.

States	US Census 2010 Figures
New York	from 191,000 or more
New Jersey	from 50,000 to 99,999
Connecticut	from 10,000 to 41,999

Table 1: Estimates of People of Haitian Ancestry in NY, NJ, and CT

The American Community Survey (ACS) published estimates of 830,000 people who self-identified as having Haitian ancestry resided in the United States in 2009. The ACS explained that it asked each person surveyed to write in his or her “ancestry or ethnic origin,” and from the data collected it was able to count those who self-reported as “Haitian,” a term that the report used interchangeably with the term “Haitian population” in order to refer to people who claimed Haitian ancestry. The report also noted, “The U.S. Census Bureau broadly defines ancestry as the ethnic origin, descent, roots, heritage or place of birth of the person or of the person’s ancestor” (Buchanan, Albert & Beaulieu 2010:1). While we adopt this broad definition as a working tool in accounting for people of Haitian origin, we also find it inadequate as far as not including Haitian Creole and Haitian cultural traditions as important variables in identifying Haitian populations in the United States.

Arguably, a Haitian population cannot exist without speaking *Kreyòl* (Haitian Creole) and maintaining the cultural practices of folks from Haiti. Bryce-LaPorte (1979) notes that Haitian immigrants are “triple minority” because they are foreigners, they speak a language that no other immigrant group speaks, and they are black. Similarly, Buchanan-Stafford (1987:131) explains: “[Haitian immigrants] are a minority within a minority, often viewed simply as black by the white majority, but, at the same time, distinguished within the black population from other black immigrants and from black Americans by cultural and linguistic characteristics.” We find the respective descriptions of the Haitian immigrant population by Bryce-LaPorte and Buchanan-Stafford relatively more fitting for this work, because they emphasize language, social relations and social space over ethnicity and ancestral birthplace in describing these communities of practices.

The U.S. Census 2010 counted the Haitian population in New York State at 191,000 inhabitants, showing an increase of 31,000 people from the number it published a decade earlier in the 2000 census.³ The New York-based Haitian population is distributed mainly in counties and boroughs such as Westchester, Nassau, Suffolk, Suffern, Rockland, Manhattan, Queens, and Brooklyn. People of Haitian heritage in Rockland County establish cultural and linguistic niches primarily in the villages of Spring Valley (estimated at more than 30,000) and Nanuet (more than 10,000). New York City has the largest share of Haitian Creole speakers in New York State. Thus, New York City is widely recognized as the cradle of the Haitian Diaspora, because it is the

³ Community leaders claim much higher estimates (about 300,000) for people of Haitian origin in New York State.

locus where Haitians first began to organize their lives and construct communities in the United State (Laguerre 1984), thus preserving both their native language and culture in the process of living in this diasporic context.

The U.S. Census Bureau in 2010 projected the Haitian population in New Jersey to range from 50,000 to 100,000.⁴ Haitian Creole speakers in New Jersey maintain a high level of visibility and construct communities in Newark, East Orange, Elizabeth, Irvington, and Asbury Park among other urban areas in this state. Concomitantly, the U.S. Census Bureau in 2010 recorded a fast growing Haitian population in Connecticut, ranging from 10,000 to 41,000, predominantly in the areas of Fairfield, Stamford, New Haven, Hartford, and Greenwich. More than half of the Connecticut-based Haitian population resides in Fairfield and Stamford. A number of seminal studies have shown that Haitians in the tri-state area mainly reside in racially-mixed urban areas, particularly among African-Americans and other immigrant populations from the Caribbean (Bryce-LaPorte 1979; Buchanan-Stafford 1987), and those findings are consistent with recent observations about people of Haitian roots have had a significant impact in the tri-state area. Arguably, Haitian Creole and cultural practices from Haiti constitute the distinctive features setting the Haitians apart from all other populations.

Haitians in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut create different kinds of social networks to accommodate their linguistic, cultural, psychosocial, spiritual, and various other needs. Key among these networks are: (a) the creation of religious institutions that use Haitian Creole as the primary medium for communication; (b) the broadcasting of community-based radio and television programs in Haitian Creole; and (c) the chartering of civic associations, technical assistance centers, after-school programs, and cultural activities directed at Haitian families.

4. Haitian-Americans' social networks and communicative practices

While people of Haitian ancestry have been integrated into the fabric of American society, they continue to maintain characteristics that are distinctly Haitian (in strict ethnolinguistic terms). As stated earlier, one of the prominent features distinguishing this population from other ethnic groups is Kreyòl (Haitian Creole), which some 10 million people of Haitian heritage can claim as their native language. Arguably, Haitian Creole remains the strongest marker of national and cultural identity among Haitian speech communities in Haiti and abroad. Table 2 shows the results of a recent survey by Buchanan and Beaulieu (2010) which attest to the importance of Creole in these Haitian diasporic communities. Their survey confirms observations made earlier by Bryce-Laporte (1993) and Buchanan-Stafford (1987).

	Haitian Population	Total Population
Foreign birth	59%	13%
Family Households	79%	67%
Average Household Size	3.7 persons	2.6 persons

⁴ Also, those who live and work among this ethnic group suggest much higher estimates.

Males holders of Bachelor's degree or higher	18.3	28.4
Female holders of bachelor's degree or higher	18.2	27.4
Individuals below poverty	19.6%	14.3%
Population 5 years and over who speak a heritage language	81.2%	20.0%

Table 2: Sociodemographic data of people of Haitian Ancestry in NY, NJ, and CT

Nearly 60 % of the Haitian-American population were born outside of the United States, and more than 81% of this population (ages 5 years old and over) speak Haitian Creole at home. In some cases, this language has been utilized to facilitate meaningful educational experiences for schoolchildren in bilingual education programs as well as access to social services. Equally important, Creole is a mobilizing tool not only in the performance of day-to-day transactions among Haitians in the United States and Haiti, but it is also a rallying medium in the formation and preservation of Haitian cultural identity. By contrast, the French language seems to be losing ground in the Haitian diaspora not only in terms of its diminishing uses in transactions among transnational Haitians, but also in terms of its improbability of becoming a heritage language among children of Haitian ancestry in the United States and other countries.

Whether they are living in Haiti or in the diaspora, Haitians are overwhelmingly a people of faith. The strongest indicator of Haitian immigrants constructing communities in the New York tri-state area is the proliferation of religious institutions in communities with sizable populations of Kreyòl-speaking Haitians. Some of these worship places are housed in retail spaces with holding capacity ranging from 100 to 150 persons, others congregate in refurbished theater houses with occupancy ranging anywhere from 250 to 1,000 persons. It must be noted that Vodoun practitioners actively create sanctuaries or shrines for religious activities in the apartments and basements of privately-owned houses and apartment buildings throughout the tri-state area. On any given Saturday or Sunday, Haitians of various religious persuasions attend worship services at different time of the day or the night. In these gatherings, Haitian Creole is used more frequently than French and English (among the Protestants and the Catholics). Vodoun practitioners exclusively utilize Kreyòl.

A good number of Christian assemblies develop Bible study programs and other faith-based activities entirely in English for Haitian-American youths, who generally do not know how to read and write Haitian Creole. Many American churches and a growing number of mosques that have large groups of Haitian immigrants among their memberships allow worship services and prayer groups in Haitian Creole. In general, worship places bring Haitians of various socioeconomic statuses together. In these spaces, religion and Kreyòl help create the strongest sense of community. Religious organizations in the Haitian diaspora tend to play a variety of functions, including providing spiritual, psychological, emotional, moral, educational, political, financial, and tactical support to families, and individuals, and organizations (Opitz 2002). To what degree the use of Haitian Creole particularly contributes to creating a strong sense of community among Haitians in the United States is a question that requires further study.

Focusing on diasporic Haitian's communicative practices, I have been able to make a number of informal and formal observations. Information directed at this community seems best be received if broadcasted on community radio stations and television programs in both English and Kreyòl. Since 1981, the United States government has made it public policy to communicate important information to the Haitian community in Haitian Creole. Haitian news networks constitute one of the most prominent signs that Haitian immigrants create speech communities in the northeastern region. Taxicab drivers in all three states serve as second-source journalists who report news about Haiti in various informal public gathering places, such as taxi stands, restaurants, barber shops, and money transfer locations throughout the tri-state area. Haitian taxicab drivers are seemingly always tuned in to news from Haiti. Additionally, they gather information from within the Haitian diasporic communities. Cell phones and short-wave radios function as their main news wires for these taxicab drivers.

There are more than fifteen community-based radio and television programs that utilize Haitian Creole to deliver news about Haiti and other parts of the world to these Haitian enclaves. Some of the radio programs air daily on short wave frequency modulation. Others broadcast weekly as paid programming on public broadcasting systems. A growing number of radio and television programs are becoming accessible via the Internet and cable subscriptions only. The weekly newspapers (e.g., *Haiti Observateur*, *Haiti Progrès*, *Haiti En Marche*, *Haitian Times*, *Haiti Liberté*, and *Connecticut Haitian Voice*) publish articles and advertisements mostly in French and some in English, but very few in Haitian Creole. In contrast, the radio and television programming is mostly packaged in Haitian Creole, some in French, and a few in English. Generally speaking, in the New York tri-state area, the broadcasting of television and radio programs are directed mostly at a Creolophone audience while the publication and distribution of local newspapers is directed at a French readership.

Drawing from Bourdieu's (1991) theoretical approach to understanding language, we propose that Haitian Creole is not only used as a tool for facilitating social interactions, but it is also a unifying force bringing communities of practice together. Gradually, people of Haitian origin as well as non-Haitians are utilizing Haitian Creole to interact, seek information, and join online forums on Haitian politics, language and culture, the arts and other areas of interest. Social media (Facebook and Twitter, among others) have become widely popular among educated Haitians and the youth, and new technologies such as mobile phones and the Internet have brought down communication costs between Haitian immigrants and their families and friends in Haiti, strengthened networks, and tightened transnational ties among Haitians in the diaspora and in Haiti. Ultimately, these recent developments have increased the overall capabilities and socioeconomic aspirations of populations of Haitian heritage to construct and maintain thriving communities of practices wherever they settle. One of the most remarkable aspects of these forms of social interactions is the increasing presence of Haitian Creole (in its varied orthographic forms) in online platforms. Indeed, Haitian-American youths have shown unprecedented interest in issues related to Haitian Creole, Haiti's history, customs, religion, and politics. Thus, Haitian Creole gains some ground in this new communicative domain. This is a rising phenomenon among diasporic youth that deserves its own separate scholarly attention.

While Haitian immigrants continue to integrate themselves into the social, economic and political life of the American society, they also keep close ties to their homeland. Haitian immigrants in the tri-state area are constantly tuning to news about Haiti. In addition to sending money⁵ and goods to Haiti, they send text messages, email, and call relatives and friends on the island on a regular basis. In short, advances in communication technology seem to allow for greater freedom of information and increased opportunities for the exchange of ideas and transnational activities among Haitians in the diaspora and in Haiti.

5. New avenues of research

While immigrant communities are, in many respects, microcosms of the relatively larger contexts where they evolve (Barnes 1977, Foner 1987, Buchanan-Stafford 1987), these small scale communities are nonetheless unique in their own right.⁶ As agents of change, on the one hand, Haitian immigrant communities along the United States' eastern seaboard seem to adopt features of the new and larger social environment where they live. On the other hand, as preservers of culture, Haitian immigrants redistribute the values and traditions of their native land even while they organize and conduct their social, economic, and political activities in the host society. One wonders if these transnational phenomena are receiving sufficient scholarly attention.

The present inquiry is guided by the tenets of practice theory (Eckert 2006; Hanks 1996; Bourdieu 1991), which provides social scientists and philosophers with tools to make sense of the most mundane aspects of everyday life as well as highly structured activities within communities of practices (Rouse 2006). In order to broaden its scope, it has also drawn from perspectives in ethnographic fieldwork (Blommaert & Jie 2010) and sociolinguistic studies (Hymes 1986; Gumperz 2000) while also incorporating insights from social semiotics (Thibault, 1991; Kress and van Leuwen, 2001; Kress and Hodge, 1988) as it examines the construction of Haitian communities of practices and their transnational networks in the United States. It concludes that Haitian immigrants along the Northeastern U.S. are generally engaged in a series of sociological processes and social practices in place and time, where Haitian Creole plays crucial roles not only in terms of its instrumental uses in facilitating various forms of communications and in generating what Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens and other practice theorists might call social capitals (i.e., religious institutions, civic organizations, media outlets, transnational networks and more), but it also fulfills essential roles in the preservation of linguistic and cultural identity among Haitian populations in the diaspora and in Haiti. In my research, I seek to examine how people of Haitian origin conduct their lives and form communities of practices in a number of economically, culturally, and linguistically diverse cities within the New York tri-state area. We need to focus more attention on this immigrant population, which for many decades has been actively transforming the social, economic

⁵ It is estimated that, since 2006, Haitian immigrants annually send remittances to Haiti amounting to more than \$2.4 billion.

⁶ Rollwagen (1975), who conducted ethnographic research among Puerto Ricans in Rochester, New York, warned about studies that assumed that the lives of immigrants would be exactly the same regardless of the city where they settled. Rollwagen (1975) argued that availability of resources and opportunities in American cities would account for striking differences among immigrants from the same cultural backgrounds who settled in those urban environments (cited in Foner 1987:5).

and political landscapes of the northeastern U.S. Moreover, while much attention is devoted to the ubiquitous linguistic divide⁷ among those that marginalize Kreyòl as an exceptionally limited tool for education and socioeconomic development and those that fiercely come to its defense, very little is discussed about the unifying role of this language in relatively stable and widespread patterns of social relations among members of the Haitian diaspora. In my dual role as participant and observer in these communities of practice, I have attempted to share tacit knowledge in explicit form by drafting this précis, which arguably calls attention to some hidden aspects of social practices among Haitians in the New York tri-state area. Further research is needed in order to understand how the transnational networks, the grassroots organizing and advocacy strategies, the political and ideological challenges, and the effects of the global economy on the migratory movement, the size, and the unique character of Haitian communities in the United States. Invariably, the scrutiny of the role that Haitian Creole plays in the maintenance of Haitian immigrants' linguistic and cultural identity, their sociological processes and social activities will be central to our future research.

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⁷ See DeGraff (2006).

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