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“Sak Passé?”: Haitian Diasporic Subjectivity in St. Louis

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Toward a Better Understanding of…

“Sak Passé?”:
Haitian Diasporic Subjectivity in St. Louis
Joelle Julien

Mentors: Joachim Faust and Bret Gustafson

Research on diasporic subjectivity by Lily Cho and Paul Brodwin, among other theorists, suggests that diasporas are locally produced, subjective conditions, not simply groups of people. Rather, we should think about diasporic communities as states of existence, collective experiences and conditions of life that are shaped by internal and external power relations in both the homeland and the receiving community. This ethnographic research uses the idea of diasporic subjectivities to explore the disparate experiences of Haitians who immigrated to St. Louis during the Duvalier dictatorship in the 1960s and Haitians who immigrated to St. Louis after the coup d’état of President Jean Bertrand Aristide in 1991. Through in-depth interviews this generational study examines the changing local social dynamics within the Haitian diasporic community in St. Louis as a lens to understanding how ideas about Haitianess are reproduced in the diaspora. The research is particularly focused on how patterns of Haitian cultural tropes such the choice of language use, and the presumed rigidity of class identification have influenced individual and group behavior in this particular community. Despite the apparent cultural similarities between Haitians in St. Louis, by analyzing competing discourses of shared Haitianess and discourses on lines of difference, the research refutes the common scholarly perception of a singular Haitian diasporic community. I suggest that differences in Haitian consciousness have contributed to a multi-layered Haitian community in St. Louis. This research thus adds to the knowledge of Haitian diasporic subjectivities and the flexibility of cultural tropes, and to the understanding of why people may not exhibit solidarity in diasporic communities.