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Expressions of gender and sexual non- normativity in Haiti: Preliminary research

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Relevant Terms

The Haitian sexual/ gender system incorporates masisi, madivin, makomer, mix, LGBT individuals, and normative sexuality/gender. For the purpose of this project, I will focus on masisi, madivin, and LGBT because they are the most well-represented (terms) in the literature and in the space of Haiti.

Masisi is used to define non-normative sexuality and gender in males. It, of course, has variations in gender, sexual orientation, sexual behavior, as with all other categories.

Madivin is non-normative sexuality and gender categorization of females. As of yet, Queer women of Haiti remained invisibilized and their submerged subjectivities continue to push this research along. However, I would be remiss if I were to not mention that I use the term with reservation as I have yet to encounter members of the Haitian population who incorporate use of the term in their identity.

Objectives of Trip?

1. Establish contact with relevant minoritarian activist organizations
2. Explore possible observation sites
3. Establish a general sense of milieu in order to better facilitate an extended stay at research site in the future

Activist Group contact



Founding
members of the
group KOURAJ

I met with the members of KOURAJ on three separate occasions.

KOURAJ is the most recognized group in Haiti and abroad, so their interviews were very helpful in guiding my research for the future.

Information Garnered from Interviews

Members of KOURAJ related to me that most of their sexual acts, or contacts, must be undertaken in private. Additionally, they explained their sexual relationships as being implicitly polyamorous due to the secretive nature of their relationships and their inability to sustain extended communication and both intimate and non-intimate relationships with their partners openly. Admittedly, the secretive nature of their coupling reinforces heterosexuality and reinforces the heterosexuality of spaces throughout Haiti. The putatively monogamous dynamic of heterosexual relationships is, of course, inflected with men, who are an *kachèt*, that have non-monogamous queer sex, ultimately reaffirming monogamy as a heteronormative ideal. The double life of these males is referred to as “*vie official et vie officieuse*,” or one’s official life and their unofficial life.

Identification...

A concluding statement can be made of the distinction of the words masisi and homosexual. Masisi identification, Jeudy maintains, invokes a lower socioeconomic standing. He relates the dichotomy as the masse versus the élite. So, while masisi subjectivity is clearly inflected with multiple class subjectivities, “homosexual,” is still oppositional to these plural subjectivities. As masisi is innately a Haitian sexual orientation, homosexual seems to be indicative of more Northern experiences of sexuality/gender nonconformity. Haiti’s sexuality and gender system is plural and boundless. This reality is no doubt attenuated by the fact that Haitian Creole is void of gender specific nouns/adjectives/verbs. While I have proven that terms of the gender system maintain fluid boundaries, they in fact allow for the clearest representation of Haitian society. You will have noticed by now that madivin, the female category has not been discussed at this point. My discussion of madivin subjectivity will follow in an attempt to expose gaps in the literature and queer activist discourse.

Diasporic Network

The diasporic network is also a factor in the visibility of sexual/gender variance. “The diaspora do not want to aid family members when a kid is gay.” Considering that even among Haitians living in the capital city of Port-au-Prince, diasporic funds serve as the colonne *vertébrale* (backbone) of the economy, the aid of the Haiti’s eleventh department is integral to the survival of families.

Further research needs to be done of the extent to which gender performativity affects migration practices and the effects of gender on economic standing. Family structures nevertheless reflect the limited availability of jobs and one can imagine that this moderates the level to which women are willing to perform sexual/gender nonconformity.

Observation Site: Yanvalou Restaurant



Research conducted prior led me to believe that this would be a great site to conduct participant observation.

Clearing up Misconceptions

I had believed that the bulk of my research would be conducted at Yanvalou, a restaurant recently opened with the sole purpose of providing a safe space for LGBT.

I visited the site four times and was confused as to why I did not find the contingent of non-normative sexuality expression I expected. I spoke to some Queer men, who seemed to “speak” the language of Queer I had identified as having the potential to lead to interviews, but it appears that despite the funds acquired by American donors in a Kickstarter® campaign for that reason, the restaurant was sold to proprietors who are non-compliant with the previously stated Queer-friendly mission.

One member of Kouraj stated “Je préfère vous rencontrer à l'hotel oloffson au lieu du restaurant Yanvalou parce qu'on a **eu un problème avec les nouveaux propriétaires de Yanvalou...**”

Social Milieu

En marche: Port-au-Prince





Social Environment

Field Notes *we drove through streets with no pavement for miles. traffic is backed up because there are no street signs (not until we reached vv michelle), no actual rhyme or reason to the movement of traffic. people rush up on you with their cars to get through and if you back down, they cut in front of you ... so no one backs down. there were a couple of moments that got pretty dicey, but i think its just something that takes practice. people here aren't used to getting where they need to get very quickly, so everyone is already tired. already upset, tempers run high. there was too many fights at the airport for the baggage carries (\$2), people expected not to get any but they were still indignant about whether having them.*

While in Haiti during my stay I realized it would most likely be beneficial to have a driver and/or some sort of guide for future returns. Having someone who works closely or is familiar with non-normative communities (i.e Queer organizations, Feminists group, AIDS organizations) will be vital for future visit as initial mentioning of the topic of my research had to be handle very lightly with my hosts and even some members of the general public.

Field Notes *everywhere smells like a fire burning. i don't know how many people burn firewood for light/heat but the whole island smells like it. even when we were at the airport.*

at the airport (for next time):

must make sure i have someone to pick me up. traffic will be horrible so they should get there before me or i should be prepared to wait. i remember all the people i saw waiting for arrivals. some there the entire time i stood waiting for Contact to arrive. Maybe they were wanting for standby flight arrivals. there was a woman i met from philly, who was nice. i wish i got to hang out with her ... anyway she warned us about the people who will try to help you even if you don't need help ... i guess this means i need to travel light the next time i arrive as well.

It will be best in future to prepare to keep in mind that I will be expected (as a foreigner) to tip people everywhere I go. Similarly, after being nearly mugged twice in one day, it would be best to keep away specific