BOOK REVIEW

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*Haitians in New York City* is an admirable effort to reveal dimensions of the Haitian immigrant experience in the United States that have yet to receive full scholarly attention. Building upon the pioneering work of Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc (1994), Chierici (1991), Laguerre (1984), Miller (1984), Glick Schiller and Fouron (2001), Stepick (1998), and Stepick and Portes (1994)—works on the immigrant experience that highlight the challenges Haitians have faced to find political and economic security, and recognition as rights bearing subjects deserving of asylum in the U.S.—Pierre-Louis reveals the way that segments of a more established Haitian community have achieved a transnational lifestyle and identity that transcends the so-called boundaries of the state. The Haitian communities in the U.S., and in particular in New York, are gaining ground as viable political forces whose influence is growing both at “home” in Haiti, and at “home” (4) in the United States. Integral to Pierre-Louis’s analysis are questions about the state itself as a political entity and the challenge that individuals’ transnationalism poses to the power of either the sending or receiving state.

It is crucial to note that Pierre-Louis is writing from the discipline of political science rather than anthropology. He also writes from his own experience as a
François Pierre-Louis Jr.’s *Haitians in New York City: Transnationalism and Hometown Associations*

Haitian immigrant to the United States who has successfully forged the path of transnational “citizenship.” Although his study does employ both qualitative and quantitative methods, it is not for the most part ethnography in the traditional sense that would employ life histories or extended exposés of individuals, or that would provide extended processual analyses of historic events (with the exception of the concluding chapter). Nor is it exactly a history. While the entity of study through which Pierre-Louis discusses these issues is the hometown association, what is presented is a meditation on Haitian history, politics, and the transformation of its diasporic citizenry from the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries. Pierre-Louis’s history of activism with the Haitian refugee population in the U.S. and his insider position as a member of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s first cabinet certainly provide much of the source material for the book’s statements about the Haitian experience and the political and economic upheavals that Haiti continues to experience.

Chapter one gives a short overview of how Mexican, Dominican, and Haitian immigrant associations flourish to different degrees according to the politics of their reception by the United States, as well as the extent to which immigrants are focused upon integration with their “host” country or to politics in the sending state. Indeed, sending states also vary in their capacity to support or partner with hometown associations. According to Pierre-Louis this difference correlates with the level of democracy and effective bureaucratization the sending state has achieved. He makes the crucial point in this chapter that not only do hometown associations act as political forces in the sending state, strengthening links between nongovernmental associations in Haiti and in the U.S., they are also crucial tools for maintaining and reinforcing the distinctiveness of the ethnic group. In the Haitian case asserting linguistic and cultural difference from other groups of African descent is a strategy to shield the community from the racial oppression historically targeted towards African Americans, a point to which Pierre-Louis returns throughout the book. They have increased from ten associations in the 1970s to forty plus organizations in the year 2000, an increase that may indicate as much about the Haitian community’s need for support in New York City as it does about the increased possibility to act transnationally in Haiti.

Chapter two discusses how hometown associations are evidence of democratic trends within Haitian civil society. Haitian leaders exiled during the repressive Duvalier regime formed many of these organizations to enable Haitians abroad to associate without an expressly political (anti-Duvalierist) agenda. They proliferated after the election of the first democratically elect-
ed president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in part because of his recognition of the importance of the Haitian diaspora. The chapter also reviews debates about the contributions and costs of immigrant communities in the United States and the disparate treatment of Haitians within U.S. foreign policy—a policy that tends to categorize poor Haitian immigrants as economic migrants rather than political refugees. This overview is important given the current conservative political climate in which policy reforms are sought to curb illegal immigration and to debate the merits of permitting illegal aliens to acquire citizenship. Pierre-Louis seeks to correct the impression of the Haitian immigrant community as one of destitution and highlights the professional skill, high level of education, and social capital of a large segment of initial entrants who arrived before the 1990s. As waves of Haitians settled in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, Brooklyn was one area of high concentration of the population because of the support of the Catholic Church, its affordable housing, and a critical mass of Haitian immigrants who replicated the extended family and mutual aid network patterns that existed in Haiti.

Pierre-Louis notes that as time progressed an issue linking Haitian civil society organizations in New York was the extent to which they focused on integrating in the US versus focusing on homeland politics—the repressive Duvalier regime and a potential return of political exiles—a spectrum that at times correlated with the political right and left. The political right and left also differed on the extent to which they were willing to lobby the US government to take action in Haiti. With the ouster of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986, hometown associations developed to address issues beyond those of political development; although, Pierre-Louis affirms, “Haitian politics permeates the structure and function of the hometown associations and other Haitian groups in the community” (44).

Chapter three outlines the activities of the hometown association beyond their humanitarian work in Haiti—activities ranging from emergency assistance, to ongoing infrastructural support, social and economic development, health and education programs, among others—and in this chapter the reader hears some of the voices of these association members describing some of these activities. Pierre-Louis discusses the ways that these alliances in local communities in Haiti create and reinforce social networks transnationally and domestically between rural and urban areas (49, 55–58). They also, however, appear to reinforce or maintain existing patron-client relationships and the power, prestige, and social capital that local and transnational elite have which are important to those who return to Haiti (51). In the US these associ-
ations have been useful in building and mobilizing the trust that exists between residents of the same town (in Haiti) in the face of a broader Haitian “culture of mistrust among individuals” that has existed on the basis of class or color differences (58). Pierre-Louis also calls attention to parallel weaknesses that exist between the structure and function of local Haitian partner organizations and those of the Haitian state that can hamper the success of the hometown association: “a lack of technical capacity to supervise and implement programs, bureaucratic red tape, and corruption” (60). He suggests that it is important that associations hold the state accountable while providing services in order that they not deplete their own resources.

These issues are discussed throughout chapter four, a chapter that revisits the birth of the Haitian state and the domestic and foreign policies that from its inception placed that state and the majority of the populace in conflict (62). Key elements in this chapter are critiques of the Duvalier regime for its role in fomenting division in the relations between homeland and expatriate Haitians and critiques of the Aristide administrations for inadequately improving these relations; although, Pierre-Louis is careful to define the diverging political forces that have comprised partisans of each government. Most interesting in this chapter, however, is Pierre-Louis’s assessment of the second ouster of President Aristide—one that leaves the reader wishing that the author had been able to elaborate further.

Chapter five is most transparent in terms of Pierre-Louis’s methodology and data analysis. It develops the discussion begun in chapter three of social trust, networking, and class among Haitians in the US through an analysis of survey and census data. While the sample responding to the survey is somewhat small in terms of a sociological analysis, the composition of the respondents confirms many other assertions Pierre-Louis has made about the ways hometown associations reproduce the class, gender, status, and social capital patterns found in Haiti in the diaspora. Missing from this chapter is a sense of the hometown association in action that would ordinarily accompany an explicit ethnographic approach to the study; however, the survey responses included in the text provide a sense of the symbolic importance of Haiti as “homeland.” It would also be interesting to see in what ways these associations responded to the refugee crisis in the 1990s, as the majority of Haitian exiles during that period were from the poorer majority.

Chapter six explores further the way that hometown associations enable diasporic Haitians to reinforce an identity that is distinct in the face of racial discrimination against individuals of African descent in the US, despite a his-
tory of collaboration and support between these two groups (104). Pierre-
Louis emphasizes, however, that when the need arises Haitians do join forces
with African Americans to combat violations of civil and human rights as hap-
pened in the cases of Abner Louima and Patrick Dorismond.

Chapter seven provides examples of ways in which the Haitian community
in the US has become more adept at influencing local politics in New York City
through the emphasis on their distinct history and identity; however, the
chapter does point out the ambiguity of identity for second and subsequent
generation Haitians who are more easily identified as African American. The
way that ethnic differences among immigrant groups of Caribbean descent
can clash with the agenda of the African American community in the political
realm is portrayed convincingly by an extended analysis of a congressional
campaign that pitted Haitian and English speaking Caribbean communities
against those of African Americans. Although these alliances have been fluid
according to the political issue facing the minority community at the time, it
is an indication of the growing political clout of Haitian American citizens in
the US. The analysis is also the most well documented and detailed in the text.

Conclusion
Indeed, the hometown association as a lived social form remains somewhat
opaque at the book’s conclusion: we are aware that it is largely an institution
that capitalizes upon and reproduces the traditional social cleavages of class
and gender through its practices in the U.S. and through its humanitarian
efforts abroad. As an historical development of networks within a broader
social movement for change within Haiti and the Haitian diaspora, however,
the importance of the hometown association is clear. While the scholarly
reader might wish for more thorough documentation of Pierre-Louis’s asser-
tions in order to provide novices to Haitian history, culture, and politics with
material resources that substantiate claims that were certainly the result of
firsthand experience, the text straddles the line between history, memoir,
ethnography and political critique in interesting ways that engage the reader
to desire to learn more about this unique community.
REFERENCES