

RACHÉ MANYOK BAY TÉ-A BLANCHE: DEFORESTATION IN HAITI AND THE
POWER OF AN IMAGE

by

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisors, Dr. William O'Brien and Dr. Wairimũ Njambi, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Honors College and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences.

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ABSTRACT

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Media representations perpetuate stereotyped images of Haiti and Haitians. Such expressions typically emphasize extreme poverty, mismanagement, exploitation, hopelessness, and also environmental degradation. The environmental image of Haiti is that it is massively deforested, and the connection of deforestation to poverty and other problems has been captured in an iconic aerial photograph of the Haitian and Dominican Republic (DR) border. First appearing in *National Geographic* in 1987 and replicated since in various sources, the image displays a stark contrast between the tropical lushness of the DR and a desert-like Haiti, stripped of its vegetation. The stark image in effect dichotomizes a supposedly dysfunctional Haiti with a normally-functioning DR. This study analyzes the “mythologies” that are reinforced by the photo and the discourse surrounding it, which produces an accepted story of the way Haiti “is.” Going beyond such stereotypes, the study considers ways of rewriting such depictions to account for greater complexity.

Dedication

To my late maternal and paternal grandmothers, Marie Remercie Joseph and Maria Fadael, whose lives continue to motivate me and who are responsible for blessing me with my wonderful parents.

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Introduction

The literal meaning of “raché manyok bay té-a blanche” is “to uproot the manioc, leave the land empty.” Manioc is a root vegetable similar to yucca and a staple vegetable in Haiti and is used in several cuisines. Manioc is significant because it takes nearly a year to mature (longer than typical root vegetables), and once it is pulled out it takes all the other roots along with it. The Haitian proverb symbolizes a new start or a new beginning. This phrase was chanted throughout the streets during the end of the Duvalier dictatorship to express that Haitians did not want the same government that they were subjected to during the twenty-nine yearlong dictatorship (Cobb 1987).

The significance of this phrase reflects the need for Haiti to tell its own story, since the prevailing ideas of Haiti comes from the viewpoint of outsiders or non-Haitian natives. In essence the discourse surrounding Haiti’s environment –the subject of this study- suggests that Haitians are exhausting and overexploiting the land or “leaving the land empty.” Changing the way in which we speak of Haiti’s environment reveals an opportunity for Haitians to tell their own story, a chance for a new start. Haiti was known, for instance, as the “Pearl of the Antilles:” not from the Haitians but by the colonizers. A phrase that seems positive and commendable, it is in fact a concealment of the reality of slavery. The representation as the “Pearl of the Antilles” was at a heavy cost to enslaved Haitians who at the time were subjected to great atrocity. Following independence in 1804, Haiti has been represented as being politically unstable, while the U.S. occupation of the country in the early 20th century further perpetuated the perception of Haiti as being mired in social and political disorder. For many years Haiti has been represented as poverty-stricken, mismanaged, and exploited. In the representation of

Haiti poverty and deforestation are presented as being inextricably linked where exploitation of the physical environment is inevitable due to a lack of management from authorities and desperation of Haitians for any source of income.

These notions of Haiti have been reinforced to a degree which has caused Haiti to be known and identified only by these perceptions. Such fixed and oversimplified assertions of Haiti are stereotypes (Hall 1997). These assertions about Haiti have been fixed and accepted as the standard or conventional image of Haiti. The continued and repeated narrative of Haiti includes imbedded stereotypes which have resulted in Haiti's myth. As expressed by Roland Barthes, a myth is an acceptable story (Barthes 1972, 111). He states, "A myth is speech stolen and restored" (Barthes 1972, 124). Haiti's myth or recognized narrative, has been accepted by scholars across multiple disciplines, media personnel, and societies as they often include stereotypical ideas of Haiti in discourse. Haiti's speech has been stolen by those that have written its story and continually stolen by those that perpetuate stereotypes of Haiti. The myth of Haiti is an incomplete story that has been reestablished as one that is complete.

Haiti's story has been taken from Haitians for centuries and one idea of Haiti has been deeply-rooted into our minds. Poverty is engrained in Haiti's myth. Deforestation is recognized as a symptom of poverty where Haitians are rapidly cutting down trees with no regard for the future consequence and it has reached this extreme level because of incompetent governance. This study analyzes photographs of forest cover along segments of the border between Haiti and the neighboring Dominican Republic to demonstrate the power of this myth. The border images have been instrumental in providing a visual representation of stereotypes about Haiti which have constructed Haiti's myth. The goal

of this study is to reveal Haiti's complexity through analyzing visual and written descriptions of Haiti, so that Haitians can finally tell their own stories.

An Iconic Image

A ninety minute plane ride southeast from Miami, Florida, will take you to the island of Hispaniola, shared by the countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Haiti is on the western side of the island and the Dominican Republic is on the east side. Due to their geographical proximity, comparisons are often drawn between the two countries and much of that discussion is focused on environmental protection and deforestation. Photographs of the border between the countries have significantly been used to represent Haiti as possessing a degraded environment. The photograph below, the first of a number of such images to be produced, is of the northeastern corner of the Haitian and Dominican border. This photograph marks the conception of the "border image" as a key element in the representation of Haiti's faults and errors regarding its environmental quality.



Figure 1. To the left (west) of the border is Haiti and to the right (east) is the Dominican Republic (Source: Cobb 1987).

The image presents a startling contrast; the Haitian side (on the left) seems desert-like compared to the Dominican side which appears highly forested. This first printed image of the Haiti-Dominican border was taken by *National Geographic* photographer, James P. Blair, in 1987. The now iconic image was included in a twenty-seven page article, titled “Haiti Against All Odds,” in the November issue of the magazine (Cobb 1987). Haiti was going through a pivotal political time, and the article describes the political climate of Haiti when the first election was to take place after the end of the twenty-nine yearlong Duvalier dictatorship. Stressing the problems of Haiti, the article emphasizes that its political crisis is connected to environmental degradation. Three pages into the article the border image, prominently spread across two pages, includes a lengthy caption

that attempts to explain the reason for extreme deforestation in Haiti. The caption declares, “Hungry peasants have stripped the land of its soil-stabilizing tree cover to plant quick-growing food-stuff...in recent years peasants have felled the remaining trees for charcoal...” (Cobb 1987, 648). Highlighting and connecting political instability to widespread poverty and land degradation, the border image works to support and reinforce the longstanding stereotypical idea that “Haiti” is defined fully by its problems. The cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall states, “stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (Hall 1997, 257). Stereotypes exaggerate and simplify a group of people to a few characteristics and these border images of Haiti are embedded in a discourse that does exactly that.

Over the past twenty-six years numerous versions of the border image have emerged with the same impact as the original, all reinforcing a stereotypical idea of Haiti and its people. These aerial photographs have been used in different forums but have resulted in the same effects as the original image: shock and disturbance, representing Haiti as a place of despair and Haitians as desperate in the face of a government that is unable to protect its people from political, economic, and environmental hardship. Looking at the images superficially, one may use the following adjectives to describe Haiti’s environment: “unhealthy,” “poverty,” “exploitation,” “infertility,” “hopelessness,” and “incompetence”. These images have reduced Haiti and Haitians to a small number of general features that have informed our idea of who Haitians are and how Haiti “is.”

Theoretical Framework

The analysis in this study of the image of the Haitian and Dominican border draws extensively from the concepts expressed in the work of scholars including: Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins (1993), Stuart Hall (1997), Neil Everden (1992), and Roland Barthes (1972; 1977). In their book *Reading National Geographic*, Lutz and Collins provide insight into the authority of *National Geographic* magazine to represent Third World countries' cultures and societies. Such authority lies in the magazine's age and large readership which have granted them iconic cultural status. As Lutz and Collins state, "the National Geographic Society has been in existence for over a hundred years, in that time constituting itself as an important and reliable interpreter of third-world realities" (Lutz and Collins 1993, 15). *National Geographic's* authority is translated in the text as well as in the photographs. Lutz and Collins writes: "More than simple documents, both text and photographs call up and then reinforce or challenge shared understandings of cultural differences" (Lutz and Collins 1993, 2). Given this authority *National Geographic* has been successful in its establishment as a magazine that claims objectivity (Lutz and Collins 1993, 15). The 1987 issue that featured the article "Haiti Against All Odds," contained the image of the Haitian and Dominican border, and attracted an estimated ten million readers (Lutz and Collins 1993, 4). Due to the *National Geographic's* authority one can assume that those ten million readers viewed the article as objective and accurate.

Lutz and Collins' notion of *National Geographic's* authority coincides with the concept of "symbolic power or power of representation," which has been defined by Stuart Hall. In *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, Stuart

Hall defines symbolic power as “power to mark, assign, and classify...the power to represent someone or something in a certain way – within a certain ‘regime of representation’” (Hall 1997, 259). In other words symbolic power has been an established system of hegemonic forces having the authority to be the narrator of others’ histories. The concept of symbolic power can lead to essentialized and reductionist views of the subject, which is often built on limited observations and assumptions. “Stereotypes get a hold of a few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person [or place], reduce everything about the person [or place] to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity” (Hall 1997, 258). Relying on a limited idea of something or someone perpetuates stereotypes that become solidified by the authority of the entity expressing the notion. The message is as important as the messenger. Stereotypes only begin to become powerful and gain momentum after they have been reinforced by the entities possessing symbolic power.

In addition to stereotypes being solidified by symbolic power, stereotypes install the concepts of “binary oppositions” and “ethnocentrism.” Hall writes, binary oppositions “have the great value of capturing the diversity of the world within their either/or extremes, they are also a rather crude and reductionist way of establishing meaning...swallowing up all distinctions in their rather rigid two-part structure” (Hall 1997, 235). The binary oppositions create a hierarchy, leaving a positive connotation to one term and a negative connotation to the other. Binary oppositions are thus likely to not be neutral, and but rather promote power relations within their distinctions as the dominant pole appears more favorable than the subordinate.

This domination could also be seen in the imposition of one's societal norms onto the apparent subordinate society. Ethnocentrism is imposed by the difficulty in representing a culture or society other than your own. Hall calls "ethnocentrism – 'the application of the norms of one's own culture to that of others'" (Hall 1997, 258). Ethnocentrism classifies people according to a norm and constructs the individuals of the excluded as 'other' (Hall 1997, 259). The classification of the 'other' reinforces stereotypes and heightens dichotomies. This "otherness" is placed on display in magazines such as *National Geographic* where the depiction of the "other" is told by observers not by participants. Stereotyping occurs when gross power inequalities exist and ethnocentrism is the way in which hegemonic powers' world views, value systems, sensibilities and ideologies are able to be applied to whole societies (Hall 1997, 258).

These issues arise in the analysis of photographs, which contain and perpetuate myths. Roland Barthes discusses press photographs in *Image, Music, Text* and the key factors to take into consideration when analyzing such photographs. Although, the press photograph includes a written commentary, the image itself is analyzed independently and once the two (commentary and photograph) are fully studied then one is able to understand the connection of the two (Barthes 1977, 16). Denotation and connotation are essential terms in the study of a photograph. Semiotician Daniel Chandler states, "denotation tends to be described as the definitional, 'literal', 'obvious' or 'commonsense' meaning" (Chandler 2013). The term "connotation" is used to refer to the socio-cultural and 'personal' associations (ideological, emotional etc.) of the meaning" (Chandler 2013). By viewing a photograph analytically one can distinguish from connotation and denotation.

Related to connotation is what Roland Barthes refers to as myth. “We usually associate myths with classical fables about the exploits of gods and heroes, but for Barthes myths were the dominant ideologies of our time” (Chandler 2013). In *Mythologies*, Barthes explains the concept of a “myth” as an accepted story of the way the world is (Barthes 1972, 111). The danger of myth is that it is not taken as a human creation but taken as a factual system when it is actually a semiological system (Evernden 1992, 23). Barthes’ analysis of myth takes into account three key ideas from semiotics: “signifier,” “signified,” and “sign.” He used the example of the rose to take the role as the signifier and the rose as the signified which leads to a sign of a “passionified rose” (Barthes 1972, 111). Once a sign has been established it becomes independent and an undisputed meaning. In other words, a rose, the signifier, cannot be separated from passion, the signified. A rose *is* passion. Evernden explains, “Once something is perceived as lying in the realm of nature than it in the realm of society or history, it seems beyond criticism” (Evernden 1992, 24). A myth has the ability to define.

According to Barthes, a myth is “a type of speech defined by its intention much more than by its literal sense; and that in spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by this literal sense” (Barthes 1977, 123). A myth is the absolute, a signification with perpetual power. “Signification is the relationship between the signified and signifier” (Chandler 2013).

Barthes also explains that a component of a myth is its ambiguity, which has led to consequences of signification where it appears to be both a notification and a statement of fact (Barthes 1972, 123). This ambiguity leaves the receiver or viewer susceptible to the intentional notions of the myth. The border image of Haiti helps to establish one

narrative about Haiti: that it is an extremely poor country that was once very rich but because of bad governance has failed. One generalization of Haiti ignores the complex history of the country and perpetuates dangerous stereotypes. To reveal the complexities of Haiti one has to look into its history.

Background

Haiti is an island slightly smaller than the state of Maryland with a population of about 9.8 million.



Figure 2. Map of the Caribbean islands. Source: Geology.com (2007)

The climate of Haiti is tropical and semi-arid; the terrain is mostly rough and mountainous. Although, the land is only twenty percent arable, it is estimated that about fifty percent is under cultivation (McClintock 2003). Only seven to eleven percent of the land is suitable for permanent cultivation without major investment (Hoiser and Bernstein 1992). The climate of Haiti makes it suitable for agriculture but the dry semiarid climate makes it more difficult as well because of the periodic droughts. Furthermore, Haiti lies

in the middle of the hurricane belt, which makes it susceptible to severe storms from June to October (Laflin et al. 1949). Hurricanes destroy farms, which support the livelihoods of many Haitians, and seasonal storms wash away the topsoil that is essential for agriculture. Haiti's forests are particularly vulnerable to the damaging effects of hurricanes which have the potential to alter forest structure and ecosystem functions, including the amount of living matter and forest tree species arrangement (Chambers 2011). In regards to the climate, it is said to affect deforestation because Haiti is semiarid which leads to periodic droughts and low rainfall levels resulting in certain tree species not gaining adequate water.

In addition to Haiti's physical environment there are some social conditions that are said to exacerbate the devastation experienced after natural disasters. Poor health and nutritional status causes individuals to be stressed and vulnerable to diseases (Felima 2009). Another social issue is the government having an inadequate environmental and disaster management policy (Felima 2009). Class is also thought to influence the magnitude of natural disaster because residents who live in impoverished areas may have difficulty accessing basic amenities and infrastructure after a natural hazard (Felima 2009). Haiti's underdevelopment is another perceived condition that aids in the devastation because individuals occupy an unsafe land and live in insecure and overcrowded homes (Felima 2009). It is important to acknowledge that Felima's presentation of Haiti was not without criticism as her opening paragraphs describes Haiti as politically and socially unstable. This idea of Haiti suffering from instability has been established since shortly after its independence. Although, Haiti is not without the social issues described by Felima, it is the only narrative that is provided and emphasized.

Focusing on the problems that Haiti faces is not a novice practice as the acute awareness of Haiti is the poverty that inflicts the country. Haiti's current environmental conditions and visual aids (i.e. the border images) have been used as a tool in discourse to solidify a stereotypical idea of Haiti being mismanaged.

The earliest recorded history of Haiti begins in the late 15th century with the expeditions of Christopher Columbus to the New World. European explorers' initial attraction to Haiti is said to be because the land contained riches such as gold, pearls, and spices (Girard 2005). Seeing Haiti as a potential asset, Columbus introduced the island to Spaniards who killed off the entire native Tainos population and stripped them of their resources (Girard 2005). The Spaniards, two centuries later, in 1697 ceded the western tip of the island to French, who named the new colony Saint-Domingue. The French realized they could benefit from Haiti's tropical climate and areas of fertile soil. The native Tainos grew cotton, corn, sweet potatoes, and cacao (Laflin et al. 1949). Prior to the Spanish arriving to the island the amount of forested cover is indeterminate. However, it is speculated that Native Americans modified the land in some ways such as through deforestation (Denevan 1992).

During French colonization the island began cultivating cash crops that were unable to thrive in Europe such as cotton, indigo, coffee, and sugarcane (Girard 2005). Growing these cash crops made Haiti the most profitable Caribbean island of that time (Gates 2011), and the demand for these crops caused a push for increased labor on these plantations. The French imported thousands of enslaved Africans to work the plantations, and it is estimated that by the late 18th century, the number of enslaved Africans was nearly 800,000 (Pierre-Louis 2011). Common tasks of the enslaved Africans in Haiti

were to clear the land of its forests to make room for the construction of plantations. It was typical for a plantation in Saint-Domingue to have two hundred or more enslaved Africans working the fields. By the mid-18th century the number of plantations reached eight hundred (Diamond 2005). By then Saint-Domingue was one of the richest colonies in the world and became known as the “Pearl of the Antilles”.

As noted earlier, the use of that phrase is problematic. Continually referring to how profitable Haiti once was (implicitly contrasted with today’s relative poverty), ignores the harsh social conditions of Haitians during that time and reinforces the stereotypical idea of today’s mishandling of Haiti, as if colonial rule was more advantageous. The life of enslaved Africans in Haiti was horrendous. It is estimated that nearly half of the newly imported enslaved African died within a few years of arrival (Gates 2011), and slaves were forced to work 12-hour shifts in sugar, coffee, and tobacco fields. The torture of slaves was a common occurrence during which the enslaved Africans were whipped, burned, buried alive, restrained and allowed to be bitten by swarms of insects, mutilated, raped, and had limbs amputated (Abbot 2011). Enslaved Africans practiced multiple forms of resistance such as escaping, poisoning of landowners, their families, and their livestock, and also arson (Reinhardt 2008).

However, none of these resistance efforts would prove comparable to the plan for freedom in 1791. The intense labor of working on the cash crop plantations and the horrific abuse from plantation owners caused tension between the enslaved Africans and plantation owners, which by the late 18th century reached an all-time high. Haitians were not only fed up with the plantation owners but also the plantation system which in both aspects had enslaved them. The enslaved Africans took action under the leadership of

Toussaint L'Ouverture and later Jean-Jacques Dessalines to overthrow the French. In 1791 Haitian Revolution began, and thirteen years later, Haiti gained its independence in 1804 as the second independent country in the Americas. No longer enslaved by the French, Haitians renamed the island using the original name given by the Tainos, *Ayiti*.

Although, this was a joyous occasion the political, economic, and environmental state of Haiti was far from best. Haiti was isolated from the world with tens of thousands acres of forest cover destroyed, no allies, and a large debt owed to the French (Diamond 2005). During Haiti's fight for freedom Haitians burned cane fields and refineries in order to destroy the system that enslaved them, which led to the destruction of 184 cane fields and 1000 coffee farms (Gates 2011). The destruction of the many plantations changed a large agricultural country into a country that was primarily composed of small-scale subsistence farming. The profitability of the agricultural economy could not be continued without foreign trade which inflicted a system of poverty onto the island.

Agricultural practices in Haiti are not typically discussed as a main culprit of deforestation; rather, charcoal production is often foregrounded. It is estimated that rapid deforestation can be dated back to colonial times and especially intensified with the introduction of coffee in the 1700s (Bellegarde-Smith 2004). The monoculture plantation system and clean-cultivation between rows of coffee, indigo, tobacco, and sugarcane exhausted nutrients and led to rapid erosion, a lack of capital and land tenure continues to constrain sustainable resource management (McClintock 2003). Discourse regarding the deforested land in Haiti often does not mention the practices of the French in the name of economic development. Stereotyping Haiti as poverty-stricken and exploitive and reinforcing the notion through border images ignores the fact that deforestation was

occurring before Haitians were stewards of the land. Nonetheless, deforestation has led to a high loss of soil fertility, which has adverse consequences for agricultural production and therefore growth performance of the economy (Jaramillo and Sancak 2009).

After independence, countries such as the United States, Britain, and France boycotted Haiti, devastating the country's economy, which was primarily based on agricultural commodities export (Pierre-Louis 2011). A little under two decades after independence, Haiti occupied the Dominican Republic for twenty-two years. Haiti's heavy taxation on certain sectors is said to have contributed to the repayment to the French (Gates 2011). France demanded that Haiti pay an amount equal to about \$21 billion to recognize it as a country and for the loss of their former colony (Pierre-Louis 2011). Haiti had to borrow the money from foreign banks to pay the French government. All the revenues that the Haitian government collected from taxes and trade at the time went to repay the debt, which took eighty years to pay (Pierre-Louis 2011). For eighty years (from approximately 1825 to 1905) and through numerous changes of government, Haitians were able to organize to complete the substantial task of paying off an unjust debt. Despite this extraordinary accomplishment, Haiti has been regarded as being politically unstable and plagued with dictatorships from 1843 to 1915. Seventy-two years of Haitian history is simply presented as being unstable, which in all aspects ignores the complexities that existed. Contemporary authors such as Jared Diamond (2005), Terry Buss (2008), Philippe Girard (2005) and journalist Charles Cobb, Jr. (1987), have all subscribed to the idea of Haiti being politically unstable during that time, control by dictatorship is a prevalent theme. For instance, Cobb states *National Geographic*, "...from 1843 to 1915, 22 dictators shattered the political and social order" (Cobb 1987,

653) in some form or another these authors have included this sort of statement in their discourse about Haiti.

Poverty Contributors

These thoughts on Haiti's government mark an emergence of stereotypical ideas of Haiti and Haitians. The United States occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 supported the notion that Haiti was unstable and needed intervention (Gates 2011). However, it is often not mentioned that during the occupation, the United States took control over Haiti's customs activities and collected taxes (Schmidt 1972). This occupation removed an undisclosed amount of revenue from Haiti for nineteen years and forcing the economy into further hardship. Also, during the time of U.S. occupation, one of the most commonly referred to estimations of Haiti's forest cover was revealed. According to the United Nations in Haiti, eighty years ago (approximately 1930s) Haiti had sixty percent tree cover, but by 1950 the tree cover was at twenty-five percent, in 1987 ten percent, 1994 four percent, and it is currently estimated that Haiti has only one and a half percent of its forest cover remaining (UNDP 2011).

The political instability argument has been used as a tool to support the notion that Haiti's physical environment is linked to Haitians' mismanagement. It is important to note that the Duvalier dictatorship lasted from 1957 to 1986, during a time when Haiti's forest covered allegedly decreased from twenty-five to ten percent. Distinguishing correlation from causation is important as the political climate in Haiti has often been presented as a major factor in deforestation. Duvalier's regime did not necessarily cause Haitians to apparently deforest the land. In the Dominican Republic, the forest

preservations were primarily established during a dictatorial regime (Diamond 2005), which highlights that the environmental condition of a country is not necessary dependent on the politics. Nonetheless, stereotypes of Haitians' mismanagement continued.

Haiti's stereotype of political instability has further stereotyped Haitians as being incompetent in governing themselves. Author Jared Diamond states, "it [destruction of the plantation system] proved in the long run disastrous for Haiti's agricultural, exports, and economy when the farmers received little help from subsequent Haitian governments in their efforts to develop cash crops" (Diamond 2005, 335). The perceived connection of mismanagement and poverty are made apparent in Diamond's statement. Unjustly, the current social conditions in Haiti have been placed solely on the Haitians.

Foreign policies since the independence of Haiti have greatly affected Haiti's economy and conditions of the people (Collinson 1997). For instance, in 1981-1983 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) slaughtered the entire Haitian pig population after an outbreak of swine flu which could have threatened the pig population in the United States (Arthur and Dash 1999). For Haitian farmers, the Haitian pig was an essential economic asset, easy and cheap to keep, and an important source of cash in emergencies (Arthur and Dash 1999). In almost any case, removing a source of income from an individual would greatly affect their livelihood and invoke a search for other sources of income to supplement the loss. Connecting deforestation too casually to farmers' removes from view the accountability of other contributors. This complexity is evident, for instance, in the mass killing of the Haitian pig which eliminated a source of income for many Haitian farmers, driving many further into poverty.

A decade after the pig incident, Haitian's economy was affected once again by foreign agencies. Haiti's forest cover in 1994 was estimated to be at four percent. It is important to acknowledge that from 1991 to 1994 Haiti had an embargo placed on it by the United States (Jefferies 2001). An economic punishment on an already wounded economy intensifies poverty. By the 1990s, it was estimated that the average size of Haiti's hundred thousand plus farms was less than one hectare (Smucker 2011, 390). Agriculture's share of total exports fell from around 90 percent in the 1950s to less than 10 percent in the late 1990s (Smucker 2011, 318). Not having an opportunity for an adequate recovery from the embargo, the neo-liberal economic movement then hit the country.

The US military and delivery of \$2.1 billion in aid following the 1991 coup was contingent on the implementation of a structural adjustment program mandated by the World Trade Organization and international lending institutions, requiring regular debt service, maintenance of low wages, privatization of state enterprise, as well as the lifting of agricultural subsidies and price supports (McClintock, 2003). Agricultural imports and food aid have increased since 1994 with the lowering of import tariffs as required by structural adjustment; and the resulting influx of cheap food imports has pushed market prices below competitive levels (McClintock, 2003). The conditions of foreign aid, and the free-trade zone agreement, have undermined Haitian farmers and the local economy.

Prior to the international agreement Haiti imported 18,000 tons of rice every year, now Haiti imports close to 400,000 tons of rice annually (Bourne 2008). Coupled with embargoes and trade liberalization of the 1990s drastically impacted Haiti's economy which was primarily based on agriculture. This is a result that has been presumed to be

caused by the political instability of Haiti. Despite the multiple factors contributing to the decline in the agriculture economy, others have entered into Haiti with the desire to improve the agriculture system. Although, Haitians have been cultivating their land for hundreds of years, outside organizations have flooded Haiti since the 1960s with the hopes of helping Haitians better cultivate their land and increase crop output.

Agriculture and Deforestation

Haitians have been sustaining themselves since their independence. Most Haitians own their own land, which they use to feed themselves (Diamond 2005). The emergence of NGOs was a strategy for the international community for aid to bypass the Haitian government and thus combat corruption during the Duvalier dictatorship. However, the prevalence of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) became a standard of Haitian society. In 1984 the number of NGOs was at 300, in 1994 the number rose to 800, and currently it is estimated that Haiti has at least ten thousand NGOs with only five hundred officially registered with the government (Pierre-Louis 2011). However, donors' decisions to bypass the Haitian government and work with international NGOs has set a precedent in the country that no successive government has been able to reverse (Pierre-Louis 2011). There is great significance in the amount of NGOs currently in Haiti. Their presence represents the full embodiment of the stereotypes about Haiti being accepted as the narrative of Haiti where it appears that Haiti needs other's help.

USAID is an bilateral aid agency that is involved in every sector in the Haitian government and works with key ministries of the country. Moreover, USAID has encouraged international agencies to apply for their grants to implement initiatives

instead of giving the funds to the Haitian government. The mantra to the international community in regards to Haiti has been “less government is better” (Pierre-Louis 2011). Powerful countries (e.g. United States, Britain, etc.) have been involved in Haiti’s affairs for more than a century. This involvement has set the foundation for the way in which Haiti has been portrayed. Diamond provides an example of the portrayal: “Haiti is simply poor, and so deficient in natural resources and in trained or educated human resources...Haiti even lacks the capacity to utilize outside assistance effectively” (Diamond 2005, 354).

Haiti’s myth is that because of the mismanagement of Haiti’s government in maintaining the lucrative agricultural economy that once existed, the result has been vast poverty that has cause Haitians to deforest the land at alarming rates. This myth has been manifest in a way that has caused organizations from all over the world to enter Haiti with the hope of restoring it to an economy that was heavily dependent on agriculture. “The ex-planation of this paradox is that Haiti’s burst of agricultural wealth came at the expense of its environmental capital of forests and soil” (Diamond 2005, 339). Discussion of Haiti’s current environment condition rarely addresses how the environment arrived at its current condition. Stereotypical depictions of Haiti have embedded into a discourse about deforestation in Haiti.

An Incomplete Tale

Looking closely into Haiti’s history one can see how deforestation came to its current condition. The outcome is a complex result of multiple forces that come from both inside and outside of Haiti. The Haitian and Dominican border image, however, is

an incomplete depiction of this situation in Haiti. For one thing, the various images display only tiny segments of the borderline, but they contain a suggestion that the image represents the whole of Haiti in relation to its neighbor. Furthermore, with no available context other than a caption, the denotative meaning of the photographed landscape is displaced by stereotypical connotations that are identified with Haiti. The image's connoted message is that Haiti is a country with an unhealthy physical environment, stricken by poverty, hopelessness, exploited and mismanaged land.

The image suggests that poor Haitians and bad governance created a deforested country, but an alternative conception is that Haitians, at least in part, *adopted* a deforested country. In order to have the plantation economy that existed in Haiti, the French had to clear forested land. After gaining independence, foreign policies such as trade embargoes (1804-1862) on Haiti contributed to the loss of the agriculture economy that once made Haiti a profitable country. Had Haiti been able to continue the profitability of the agriculture economy, deforestation may have still been an issue but possibly more acceptable as countries such as the United States would be benefitting from Haitian agriculture outputs. Most importantly, these striking images of the border draws comparisons between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which inaccurately implies that Haiti and the Dominican Republic, had the same beginnings.

The photographs of the Haitian and Dominican border reinforces the idea that Haiti is heavily deforested. These photographs do not provide a comprehensive examination of the history of deforestation in Haiti. They have instead grabbed onto memorable traits and simplified it, which by definition is stereotyping. These stereotypes then become seen as fixed and unchanging. Myths generally prefer to work with poor and

incomplete images (Barthes 1972, 125). Focusing and taking an image of one particular area of the Haitian and Dominican border and bestowing it as true for all areas of Haiti is misleading. The stereotype now becomes the true story or the myth.

The Original

As expressed previously, the original border image came from a *National Geographic* article, “Haiti Against All Odds” in its November 1987 edition (Cobb 1987). During that time other American media outlets presented headlines that focused on the first “free” election that was to take place in November.



Figure 3. This image was featured next to the border image (Cobb 1987)

Unfortunately, the election was cancelled on account of a massacre on Election Day when more than 30 people were killed (the *National Geographic* article was published prior to the massacre). Nevertheless, the border image was chosen to be included in *National Geographic's* article on Haiti. Located in the left margin of the border image (figure 1) is map of Haiti (figure 3). The denotation of the map of Haiti is that ninety-five percent of it is deforested and the other five percent is forested (Cobb 1987, 648). The connotation of the map only occurs after one accepts the denotation and once that is happens the connotation is revealed. The connotation or associative meaning of the map of Haiti (which accompanies the border image) is that Haiti was once entirely forested but peasants have severely deforested the country. As Cobb put it, "...peasants have felled remaining tress for charcoal..." (Cobb 1987, 648). The map of Haiti suggest that Haiti's vegetation was once solely forests. Such a suggestion exaggerates the alleged deforestation and amplifies the stereotypical view of desperate poor Haitians. The inclusion of the map of Haiti sets a precursor to the connotations of the border image.

The location and size of the photograph is what Barthes describes as "photogenia." The concept of photogenia explains the significance of the connotation involved in the technique (e.g. exposure, lighting, etc.) used by the entity presenting the photograph (Barthes 1977, 23). First, its appearance in the beginning of the article (the third page) suggests that it was an important notion that needed to be addressed early on. The border image was influential in setting the tone for the article which primarily focused on the problems facing Haiti. The photograph covers two full pages, which emphasizes its importance. This photo spread across two pages captures the viewer's eye, which is drawn to the contrast in colors between the brownish-green representing Haiti

and the dark green of the Dominican Republic side of the border. The borderline itself appears to become visible, and binary oppositions are also now observable. The stark contrast of the two countries frames Haiti and the Dominican Republic into positive/negative structures. Such generalized categories fail to acknowledge the power inequalities that are integral to representation.

National Geographic's exhibits its authority in representation in what Barthes calls the "trick effect." The trick effect is a phenomenon where a credible source attempts to present a heavily connoted photograph as one that has a denoted or a literal meaning (Barthes 1977, 21). In viewing the border image superficially the denotation is that Haiti is massively deforested and the Dominican Republic is not. However, as expressed by Barthes, once the photograph is completely analyzed, then the commentary or caption is analyzed to connect the two (Barthes 1977, 16). The connotation indicates that the cause of the deforestation is poor Haitians which is further validated in the map of Haiti (figure 3).

The connoted process that establishes these ideas onto the photograph is known as "pose." Pose explains that a photograph signifies a certain meaning because of pre-existing stereotypical attitudes (Barthes 1977, 22). Stereotypical ideas of Haiti and Haitians may have already been pre-established in a discourse that has been constructed through generations, which informs the already made signification of the border photograph. It is important to note that one's pre-established stereotypical attitudes affect the presentation of the photograph. Subsequently, the commentary that accompanies these images are supporting previously established notions, embedded as they are in the discourse about Haiti. This original border image reinforces the myth: the "signifier" is

the presentation of the contrasting national landscapes in the image: the “signified” is the explanation for the contrast, which includes poverty and its associated causes.

Cobb presents a clear image of what “Haiti” is like, according to stereotypes: “Eighty percent of Haiti’s population is rural, trying to scratch out a living from the land and losing ground” (Cobb 1987, 654). Haitians are stereotyped as being desperate victims because although they know the consequences of deforestation they continue to cut down trees. According to Walter and Ugelow, “societies afflicted with widespread malnutrition and disease, high infant mortality, low life expectancy, high illiteracy levels and endemic employment are not likely to place the same value on degradation of the natural environment as societies in which these kinds of problems have been overcome” (Walter and Ugelow 1979, 102). This statement suggests that poverty eliminates one’s accountability or concern for the environment. The suggestion is that deforestation is linked to poverty and implies that their poor desperation causes them to cut down trees. Believing that an entire group of people’s sensibility is compromised leaves an opening for control. Scholar Stuart Hall writes: “the establishment of normalcy through social-and stereo-types is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups...to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology” (Hall 1997, 259). This exercise of control can be illustrated in Haiti as numerous foreign agencies have entered Haiti under the same agenda, which is to “help.”

Nonetheless, beyond the border image, other images of Haiti’s environment were included in the article.



Figure 4. Southern peninsula town of Pestel, Haiti (Source: Cobb 1987)



Figure 5. The Haitian Citadel sits on a mountain in Haiti (Source: Cobb 1987)

Some featured forested areas of Haiti, suggesting that the border images are used to maintain stereotypes of Haiti being massively deforested and impoverished. This is not

to say that Haiti is does not suffer from deforestation and poverty, but it is vital to acknowledge that Haiti has been only presented as having one narrative when alternatives are possible. Nevertheless, the original 1987 border image was not the last of its kind. Other images of the Haitian and Dominican border have emerged and the annotation that follows continued these stereotypes about Haiti and Haitians.

Copies

The following are more recent images of the Haiti and Dominican Republic border. These images depict the mountainous terrain of both countries. What makes these photos astonishing is that the distinguishing factor between the two countries is Haiti's apparent massive deforestation. Multiple images of the border have surfaced throughout the years. Commentary following these border images almost exclusively discuss Haiti's poverty, ineffective government, the desperation of Haitians, and need for intervention of international entities such as the United States Agency of International Development (USAID). A look into the use of the border images will illustrate their influence and how it has perpetuated a stereotypical idea of Haiti and Haitians.



Figure 6. Source: NASA, 2002



Figure 7. Source: United States Geological Survey via Google Maps, 2004

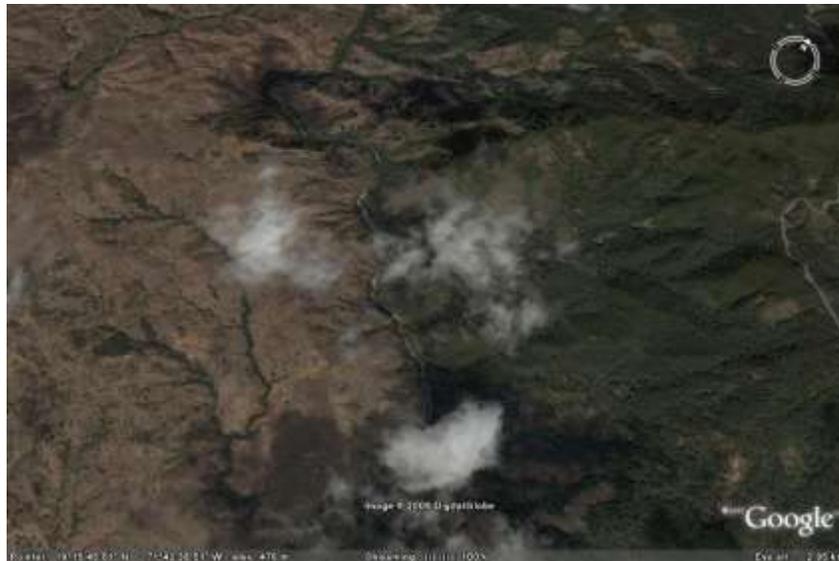


Figure 8. Source: Google Earth (2008)



Figure 9. Source: Unknown, 2009



Figure 10. Source: Unknown, 2010



Figure 11. Source: UNEP, 2011

In 2002, another border image surfaced. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) computed the land area in the image (figure 6) in 2002 to illustrate the difference of forested area in Haiti versus the Dominican Republic. As the source states, “The border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic (D.R.) is more than

just a political boundary. It also reflects the large amount of deforestation that has occurred on the Haitian side of the border” (NASA 2002).

Following the computation of the image more than ten media entities used the photograph in articles about Haiti. Of those ten about half were from notable entities such as *National Geographic* (Than 2010), *NASA’s* website (2002), *Huffington Post* (2010), Columbia University’s Earth Institute (2011), and the popular online encyclopedia, Wikipedia. The number of people to view the articles that included the image cannot be determined. However, the *National Geographic* online article was shared 127 times on Facebook and 4 times on Twitter. According to Facebook data, an average user has 190 friends on Facebook therefore, this article had the potential to reach close to 25,000 individuals.

Fifteen years after the original border image was published by *National Geographic*, the language used to discuss Haiti and Haitian deforestation issues remained the same. One reason behind the massive deforestation was that the poor Haitians needed charcoal. As Than states, “Many of Haiti’s people, the poorest in the Americas, routinely cut down trees for fuel—either to burn “raw” or turn into charcoal” (Than 2010). Haiti was described as suffering from extreme poverty in nine of the ten media outlets covering Haiti’s deforestation. Some examples include: “many of Haiti’s people, the poorest in the Americas” (Than 2010), and “Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere” (Choo 2011). That myth is no different from the 1987 border image, neither of which directly addresses the (presumably better) conditions in the Dominican Republic. This unspoken “better” situation is the basis for reinforcing the stereotypical view that Haiti is by contrast poor, and mismanaged.

In viewing the border images, the “trick effect” also applies. The border image (figure 6) was used by five credible sources and presented as objective observations of Haiti. Stereotypes associated with the image are reinforced by the symbolic power of the media sources such as *National Geographic* and the Huffington Post. The object being photographed also has an implicit meaning. As Barthes states, “The interest lies in the fact that the objects are accepted inducers of associations of ideas or, in a more obscure way, are veritable symbols” (Barthes 1977, 22). The border photograph of the Haiti and the Dominican Republic draws a sharp contrast between the two countries. Haiti signifies the opposite of normalcy and health. In 2008 and 2011 the trick-effect would be employed once again.

In 2008, an article from the *American Geophysical Union* included common representations of Haiti as heavily deforested and Haitians as desperately poor people who must cut down trees for charcoal. The article depicted the deforestation issue as being a result of the major poverty in country and presented no historical context. Dave Petley uses the image (figure 8) to support Haiti’s myth by contrasting it with the Dominican Republic: “Bearing in mind the fact that Haiti should be densely vegetated with tropical forest...” (Petley 2008). Petley, is assuming that Haiti and Dominican Republic began with same amount of forestland. Petley and the *American Geophysical Union* engage in the trick effect. Their credibility implies the idea that the information given is objective when it is more than likely heavily connoted. The text accompanied by these border photographs are parasitic and is designed to accelerate the image’s connotation. In other words “the image no longer illustrates the words, it is now the words” (Barthes 1977, 25). The border images no longer represent an idea of Haiti, it is

Haiti. The myth of Haiti has been imbedded in these photographs of Haiti because it has been continuously presented as representing Haiti in its entirety. Once a narrative has been told over and over again the stereotypes become indistinguishable from the facts.

Other connotation procedures are applied on the border images. It is important to note that the addition of the yellow line that indicates the division of the two countries is an example of photogenia. The yellow line (figure 7) brings even further awareness to the blunt contrast between Haiti and the Dominican Republic which highlights the differences between the countries. That difference focuses on binary oppositions and solidifies the ridged, reductionist, two-part categories. Photogenia is also utilized in the 2009 image of the border (figure 9) which appears to incorporate some artistic elements. A book's division is used as an artsy tool that mimics the borders of the two countries. The art element being employed is "contrast", which is defined as the arrangement of opposite elements (Dewitte et al. 2011). Artists use this technique to draw viewers to a specific point of interest, Haiti. On the other hand, Barthes declares, "There is never art but always meaning" (Barthes 1977, 24). Applying the Barthes principles of photogenia and aestheticism it is apparent that these artistic elements have an implied meaning that can only be inferred.

"Aestheticism" is related photogenia in that it takes into account the photographic techniques utilized, but unlike the other connotation procedures, all of the border images apply some form of aestheticism. As expressed by the Barthes, "Aestheticism" translates precisely in terms of an apparent objective spectacle... to impose a generally more subtle and complex signified than would be possible with other connotation procedures (Barthes 1977, 24). The images, but more specifically Haiti, becomes a spectacle because of its

impressive qualities which call attention to Haitians' unseemly behavior. In this case, Haitians' utilization of the land has been made a spectacle. These border images have foregrounded the issues facing Haiti and Haitians where the location of each photograph is not seen as a relevant fact.

Every single border image following the original 1987 image did not specify where the photograph was taken. Only the images of 2004 and 2008 provide any insight into the location because of inclusion of coordinates on the image. In 2004 the United States Geological Survey developed another image (figure 7) of the Haitian and the Dominican Republic border. Similar to the 2002 border image the photo was used by about ten different media sources but not from ones that are well-known. The location of the image is only known after entering the coordinates that were placed on the image. It appears to be at the northwest area on the Haitian and Dominican border (1987 border image was at the northeastern area). Without information about the 2002 border image one can infer that it is a different area from the 2004 image. In the 2002 image the border is divide a zigzag pattern whereas the 2004 image shows a curved pattern of separation of the two counties. Similar to 2004, image (figure 8) was used by about ten times by non-major media outlets. The location of this image was also only determined after entering the coordinates in Google Maps from which it appears to be at the northwestern corner of Haitian and Dominican border again. After 2008, without coordinates there is no way of knowing where 2009 (figure 9), 2010 (figure 10), and 2011 (figure 11) border images were taken.

Not stating the specific location of the photograph implies that all of Haiti is the same and reinforces the idea that all of Haiti is degraded and mismanaged. Not indicating

the location solidifies Haiti's myth. The location does not matter in these incidences because the view of Haiti still remains. Although it may seem contradictory, "a myth hides nothing, its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (Barthes 1972). Haiti's representation in the media perpetuates stereotypes, which results in generalizations of the country and people, leaving viewers with an incomplete assessment of Haiti.

The most recent image of the border of Haiti and Dominican Republic came in 2011 (figure 11). The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) constructed the image to discuss the poverty in Haiti compared to the Dominican Republic. The United Nations is a well-known entity, designed to be a neutral entity in the international community, and has been an authority on information regarding foreign countries. In the construction of this image UNEP has perpetuated a dichotomized view of Haiti. More than twenty years since the first border image, there has been one narrative about Haiti's deforestation issue. This one narrative has been consistently conveyed and has informed our idea of Haiti and Haitians. It can be inferred that the pose was a factor in the signification of this image. Haiti's myth has been ingrained in our minds. A "photographic 'copy' is taken as the pure and simple denotation of reality" (Barthes 1977). Essentially the six images following the original 1987 border image are copies. They have been recreated to preserve the myth of Haiti and to maintain stereotypes of Haiti.

Haiti's Myth Continues

The perpetuation of Haiti's myth does not require images because it has been entrenched in our minds. The border images are now supplementary. Written media has

perpetuated our ideas of Haiti and Haitians. During discussion of Haiti's deforestation Haiti is often compared with the Dominican Republic. The comparison is an attempt to comprehend the many differences of two countries that happen to share the island of Hispaniola. The geographical location of Haiti and Dominican Republic makes the two comparisons convenient. These generalized comparisons leave readers with an inadequate view of Haiti and reinforces binary oppositions.

In their paper, "Why Has the Grass Been Greener on One Side of Hispaniola?", Laura Jaramillo and Cemile Sancak (2009) attempts to date when the noticeable difference in Haiti and the Dominican Republic occurred. According to Jaramillo and Sancak, the differences came in the 1960s and were heightened by trade liberalization of the 1990s. Trade liberalization hurt Haiti whereas it helped the Dominican Republic because the country was more politically and economically stable (Jaramillo and Sancak 2009, 325). The policy made the Dominican Republic more favorable to the international community and perhaps reinforced the dichotomizing view of Haiti as exploited and the Dominican Republic as well-managed. The photographs of the border eliminate that complex history of not only Haiti but the Dominican Republic as well.

In addition to being compared to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, is almost always presented as being extremely impoverished. In an article by "Red, Green, and Blue," about Haiti's deforestation, the environmental conditions in Haiti are described in the following way: "...one of the poorest [countries] in the world has been directly attributed to the degradation of Haiti's natural environment..." (Blajchman 2009). The author's explanation for the poverty is a lack of structure in the government and the low amount of social capital being used. A year later, an article in *Scientific American* describes Haiti's

people: “Haiti’s poverty-stricken population” (Scientific American 2010). However, simply describing Haiti as “poor” or “extremely poor” dismisses deforestation as simply a symptom of poverty. That dismissal implies that because Haitians are poor they are unable to stop cutting down trees. Getting Haitians to stop cutting down trees is presented as “unalterable” or fixed character flaw of Haitians, a main component of the stereotypes.

Also, reforestation projects that many international organizations have started in Haiti are simply treating a symptom and not addressing the root of the issue. The expressions used by the media imply that poverty eliminates one’s accountability of environmental degradation or even one’s concern for the environment. Additionally, the effects of deforestation are often addressed to explain the ways it hurts Haiti’s economy. For instance soil erosion damages agriculture, floods wash away the topsoil which is necessary for agriculture, and the vulnerability of watershed disrupts hydroelectric power.

Haiti’s worth and potential lies in its ability to contribute to the world economy. The benefits of trees are rarely discussed. Arturo Escobar explains the reasoning behind the economic focus in Third World Countries such as Haiti: “The treatment of poverty allowed society to conquer new domains. More perhaps than on industrial and technological might, the nascent (i.e. emerging) order of capitalism and modernity relied on a politics of poverty the aim of which was not only to create consumers but to transform society to turning the poor into objects of knowledge and management” (Escobar 2011). Haitians are seen as individuals that need guidance and Haiti is seen by foreign powers in a paternalistic manner. The power relations and ethnocentrism are at play in Haiti.

Moreover, articles have continually referenced failed attempts of foreign aid projects. A National Public Radio (NPR) report for instance, declares, “Many reforestation efforts in Haiti have ultimately failed” (Flintoff 2009). However, what is not addressed is why reforestation efforts have failed. Nathan C. McClintock explains in “Agroforestry and Sustainable Resource Conservation in Haiti: A Case Study”: that the approach largely failed because farmers were not included in the planning process, the projects often infringed on land rights, provided little economic gain, and ignored traditional conservation technologies and knowledge (McClintock 2003). In reality, the agricultural sector and local market economics have their own systems and it not simply poor Haitians desperate for income. Haitians are their own bosses. So selling charcoal or coconuts on the street maybe perceived by Haitians themselves as their profession and not necessarily a “means to an end.” Intervention in the practices of Haitian farmers are the manifestation of stereotypes of Haitians exploiting or mismanaging their land. Haitians selling charcoal are not seen as entrepreneurs but poor victims, an idea based on one’s own idea of entrepreneurship and poverty. Connecting deforestation loosely to farmers’ removes from view the complexity of the issue.

Not only is Haiti’s poverty made a major issue when discussing deforestation but Haitians are repetitively perceived as victims. Haitians are represented in the media as desperate and helpless victims to their situation. A *New York Times* article titled, “On Environmental Brink, Haiti Scrambles for a Lifeline” states the following: “While mature trees provide the best material for charcoal production, the scarcity of wood has forced people to take smaller and smaller trees and scrubs. Today people are even pulling roots to make charcoal” (Gronewold 2009). An NPR article titled, “Haiti Seeks Remedies in

Environmental Ruins” states: “desperately poor people have stripped the mountainous land of its trees to use for cooking fuel” (Flintoff 2009). The *Scientific American* magazine describes Haitians as: “...throng of hungry and thirsty people” (*Scientific American* 2010). Haitians are described in a way that assumes they have no agency. Outsiders assume that Haitians will be blindly willful in their projects for improving Haiti. JoAnn Jaffe explains in her piece, “Underdevelopment by Design: How Agriculture Development Program Increase Poverty and Inequality in Poor Countries—The Case of Haiti,” that project planning implies the belief that society can be engineered and changed at will (Jaffe 1997). *Helpers* from the outside do not account for the dynamics that already exist in these areas of Haiti they are serving. They often see Haitian peasants as passive participants in the issues of the environment, and the peasants’ traditional practices are often undervalued. Many times the *helpers* try to apply one specific model of development.

Such outside voices present theories on what Haiti needs to do to improve their current conditions. For instance in a *Scientific American* article, the author suggests: “Providing access to propane to encourage a shift from charcoal-burning stoves in an immediate goal” (*Scientific American* 2010). A Huffington Post article states: “He [Former President George W. Bush] confidently said that mangoes will help the country “grow into prosperity” (Huffington Post 2010). Although, the ideas appear reasonable, they do not take account of Haiti’s complexities. The suggestions made in these articles oversimplify a more complex economic system that exist in Haiti which takes more than one grand idea to fix. The political structure in Haiti is different than United States’ structure. Haiti operates under French Law (Jaramillo and Sancak 2009, 325) which

consists of a president, prime minister, and various ministries. One can assume that the procedure to enact an ordinance or law is different. Therefore, it is important to understand the structure of the Haitian government and to not simply dismiss it as inept. The notion of “helping” Haitians illustrates the dangers of stereotyping because it is a method of social control. The rhetoric on ways to save Haiti are eerily similar to the plantation economic system of colonial times. Our society has placed limitations on best way to improve the economy in countries similar to Haiti which is either tourism or agriculture or other servitude positions.

Alternate Vision for Haiti

In an ideal world the representation of Haiti would be complete and include its complexities. The discourse about deforestation in Haiti would require historical context that addresses the physical environmental before Haiti became Haiti. Deforestation would not be taken as a rigid concept but rather as “ambiguous” (Allen and Barnes 1985). The idea of Haiti being heavily forested would be an assumption not a fact, as evident in this quote – “First, there never were extensive rain forests in Haiti according to maps of the Life Zone System, based on the work of L.R. Holdrige, one of the pioneers in defining tropical forest ecosystem” (Pellek 1988). In a technical sense the activity described of Haitians cutting down trees for charcoal is not necessarily deforestation. In an ideal world cutting down trees would not be solely seen as an act invoked by poverty but as the beginning stages of development. Before developed countries such as the United States gained such status as developed, it practiced some level of deforestation. “While it may be heresy to state that soil never really wears out, the fact of the matter is that every

nation on earth practices almost continuous exploitation of its soil resources whether or not the land is properly managed” (Pellek 1988).

Haiti has established very limited energy sources, and relies heavily on wood for energy and fuel. Economists such as Richard Hoiser and Mark Bernstein (1992) believe that wood fuel should be seen as a viable energy source even though wood has a relatively low efficiency; with better technology the efficiency of wood can be improved. They also argue that even though a tree is being grown for fuel, during the tree’s maturation it is providing environmental benefits (Hoiser and Bernstein 1992). The dependence on wood for fuel cannot be ignored. Nearly 74% of Haiti’s total energy supply is from wood fuel. Haiti’s reliance on wood fuel appears to be wholly unsustainable, wood is being harvested and consumed more rapidly than it can regenerate (Hoiser and Bernstein 1992). With proper tree harvesting and management, Hoiser and Bernstein (1992) argue that wood fuel can be made sustainable.

Haiti would receive the consideration to have its acts not be presented as straying from the norm. An ideal world media coverage about Haiti would produce diverse images of Haiti and Haitians. Stereotypes of Haiti and Haitians would be identified as such, not disguised. Commentary on the photographs of the Haitian and Dominican border would be a tool used to explain how binary oppositions and stereotypes gain power. Discourse surrounding the border images would include a discussion of the complexities of both countries. Most importantly, the myth of Haiti would represent how Haitians see Haiti. To accomplish a change in the representation of Haiti and Haitians, *trans-coding* is necessary. “Trans-coding” means taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings” (Hall 1997, 270). Haiti complexities need to be accepted. Haitians are

not monolithic. There is no prototype of the Haitian narrative. Media representation of Haiti and Haitians need to convey a wide-range of depictions. Reports about Haiti should be gathered by not only outside media sources but also through Haitian media outlets. Only then will Haitians would have the authority to tell their own stories, a privilege that it has never been afforded.

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