Silencing the Monstrous: The Tale of Subversive Women’s Action in Haiti

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This research examines the gendered nature of Haiti’s historical accounts of female agency and focuses on the Fiyet Lalo, François Duvalier’s female paramilitary force. The Fiyet Lalo played a crucial role in Duvalier’s ascent to and maintenance of power. However, the context that gave rise to the Fiyet Lalo and that prefaces the subversive brand of agency they exercised during the Duvalier reign is not critically addressed in historical canons. This research contends that the rise of the Fiyet Lalo can be traced to three things: the perennial division in Haitian history between the nation and the state, the subsequent marginalization and mythologization of the woman’s voice in the historical narrative and finally, the formation of Haitian feminist organizations that seemed to work to the exclusion of women in the classes.

Both the state, as the body politic organized for civil rule and the Haitian citizens, as bearers of nationalism, propagate distinct brands of history with different intents. This research examines two categories of narratives: the dominant narratives—based in seminal historical texts that corroborate the Haitian state’s definition of history, and the counter narrative—texts that garner legitimacy because their incorporation and reliance upon the nation’s folk history in order to assess the representation of female agency. This research, thus, negotiates a theoretical model which explicates the historiographic practices which mediate gender and national identity through selective silencing.

Introduction

History is contentious terrain, a battleground which necessarily implies a struggle to dictate the tone of future historical narratives and thus claim a commanding position in the social imaginary—the system of meanings that govern a given social structure and help define the interactions of subjects in society. The power to produce historical narratives is oftentimes disproportionately distributed among groups with uneven accesses to the formalized means necessary for such a production. Thus, in order to understand the different social constructs that exist within a culture, such as class or gender, we must examine the varying manners in which history is narrated and how agency—the ability to impact, create or sustain change—is parcelled.

In Haitian history, accounts of female agency are often silenced by more dominant andocentric narratives. These “master narratives” reify nationhood and draw upon a societal bias that privileges masculinist notions of history and historicity, which posit femaleness as an appendage of maleness and maintain that a woman’s stake in nationhood rightly remain under the auspices of the nation or the equally patriarchal state. This research questions how gender is positioned within the Haitian state and nation and how this positioning leaves the voices of female agents susceptible to silencing. Embedded in this inquiry are questions of how and why silences are introduced into the process of historical production, the lines against which histories are divided and how the power dynamics of this divide interact with key issues such as race, gender, class and national identity.

Since historical narratives largely sustain the legitimacy of the nation and the state, and the ability to add to or detract from them, and thus tamper with their acquired validity, is highly guarded. According to Arjun Appadurai, contribution to pre-existing conceptions of history and thus the delineation between history and fiction is limited by a set of criteria: the historical authority of the narrator, the extent to which the narrative is contiguous with dominant notions of history, the depth of the narrative and the interdependence of new and master narratives. (Appadurai 1981, 203) Given the assumed authenticity of the masculinist voice as both a historical actor and narrator, the actions and the historical perspectives of women are denied entrance into normative avenues of expression because women’s voices are assumed to lack epistemic validity. Reflecting on the nature of Haiti’s historiography, Michel-Rolph Trouillot asserts that moments and voices in history are vulnerable to being silenced at during creation (initial sources), fact assembly (archival sources), fact retrieval (historical narrative), retrospective signification or a combination of the four. (Trouillot 1995, 26) This research assesses the Haitian woman’s voice at the third site of silencing, the historical narrative, by examining the Fiyet Lalo, a female paramilitary named after a popular nursery rhyme character, who operated under the reign of François
Duvalier. As a political unit, the Fiyet Lalo played a crucial role in Duvalier’s assent and maintenance of power. There have been tomes written about Duvalier, which often emphasize the rootedness and perpetuity of the tactics by which he came to power, often succinctly titled Duvalierism. However, the context that gave rise to the Fiyet Lalo and that prefaces the subversive brand of agency they exercised during the Duvalier reign is not critically addressed in historical canons.

This research posits that the impetus and context for the rise of the Fiyet Lalo is threefold. These women appeared outside of a historically constituted binary between the state’s and nation’s histories. Both the Haitian state, as the body politic organized for civil rule and the Haitian nation, the citizens and the sustainers of social norms, propagate distinct brands of history which serve different means. The state’s histories, the dominant narratives, are seminal historical texts such as Thomas Madiou’s Histoire d’Haiti which corroborate the Haitian state’s definition of history, power and propriety and have serve as the basis for many of the histories that are written about Haiti, accepted by the Western canon and subsequently used as historical scripts that sustain the social imaginary abroad. These histories, because of their acceptance into the Western canons, serve as historical scripts for the diaspora. Contrarily, the nation’s histories, such as Jean Fouchard’s Les Marrons de la Liberté, serve as counter narratives which garner legitimacy because of their incorporation and reliance upon the nation’s folk history. Both brands of history manipulate and selectively include mentions of female agency so they reflect their own prerogatives. Thus, Haitian women’s history, given its largely non-canonical status, remains effectively silenced—but not completed excised.

The agency of Haitian women is shrouded between these two towering paradigms which often mythologize female agency to the extent that it is included at all into history. This mythologization, which is implemented on the level of naming, functions to maintain masculinist histories because the female historical subject was the consequence of ideological or symbolic manipulation rather than an active agent in shaping and creating Haitian history. Finally, the creation of the Fiyet Lalo was further aided by the class divisions which prevented impoverished women, the base of the Fiyet Lalo, from participating and fully benefiting from the mobilization of Haitian feminists, who largely addressed the concerns and interests of women of the Haitian bourgeoisie.

The Historical Narrative: Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales

While “history requires a linear and cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a distinct entity”, a historical narrative, as this study defines it, considers how larger social structures impact and are impacted by the reproduction of the narrative into daily life (Trouillot 1995, 7). In order to question and interpret the silences Haitian history inculcates with regards to female agency, this research operates within a theoretical structure that, questions how daily interactions—everyday histories—interact with the more monolithic “History”. The power dynamics that rule this interaction can help explain the lack of narratives that valorize explore or explicate subversive Haitian female agency.

The performative features of history such as the vivid concrete details, the particularity of characters and the coherence of plot generate emotional identification and help transform history from a purely pedantic endeavor into a lived experience, which reproduces in daily life and functions in mediating action, constituting identities and building societal institutions (Ewick and Sibley 1995, 214). Thus by both reflecting the mores of the culture in which they are produced and by serving as a social script in the culture in which it is invoked, narratives bridge the gap between daily social interaction and large scale social structures (Ewick and Sibley 1995, 198). By allowing the silenced to speak and by refusing the flattening and distorting effects of strictly positivist interpretation of historical truth, narrative scholarship has the subversive potential to undermine hegemonic structures which it typically bolsters. Thus, underscoring narrative scholarship is the understanding that there are multiple truths and knowledge is socially and politically constructed. These realizations together, argue that the stories that have been buried silenced or obscured “have the capacity to undermine the illusion of an objective, naturalized world which so often sustains inequality and powerlessness” (Ewick and Sibley 1995, 199).

Dominant, or hegemonic narratives, contribute to and rely upon “the order of signs, practices, relations that come to be taken for granted as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it” (Commaraf and Commaraf 1991, 93). These hegemonic narratives contribute to social and political hegemony of a group or a set of interests, to the extent that they “conceal the social organization of their production and plausibility” (Ewick and Sibley 1995, 214).

Contrarily, subversive tales actively contest meanings, values and beliefs (Ewick and Sibley 1995, 212). They are involved in an effort to renegotiate the cultural terms in which the world is ordered and within which power is legitimized (Comaraff and Commaraf 1991, 24) Thus, “subversive stories do not oppose the general and collective as much as they seek to appropriate them; they do not merely articulate the immediate and particular as much as they aim to transcend them” (Ewick and Sibley 1995, 220). These subversive narratives may be motivated by the social marginality of the narrator, whose life and experiences are “less likely to find expression in the available plots, characters and master narratives” (Comaroff and
Commaraf 1991, 26). This research thus presents the narrative of the Fiyet Lalo which has heretofore been obscured, and presents an analysis of the context and significance of their existence.

**Duvalier, the Fiyet Lalo and the Tonton Macoutes**

Michel-Rolph Trouillot has theorized the division of Haitian life into the nation and the state as synonymous to the distinction between civil and political society respectively. Francois Duvalier’s reign was significant because his collapse of the nation and state into one omnipotent entity affords scholars the opportunity to further characterize these paradigms that have ruled the process of historical production and to examine how they have shaped issues of gender and race.

Francois Duvalier came to power in the midst of several crises of national identity: the American occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1943 had severely undermined Haiti’s sense of autonomy and the Dominican Vespers, a massacre in which twenty to thirty thousand Haitians were murdered by the neighboring Dominican government for occupying their land and “weakening the national blood”, had further threatened nationalistic sentiment (Abbot 1998, 49). As a writer for Les Griots, a revolutionary Pan-Africanist journal which embraced Haiti’s African roots, an ethnologist deeply entrenched in folk tradition, and a leaf doctor, a cross between an herbalist and a shaman who had travels the Haitian countryside, Duvalier was a welcome face in the Haitian political sphere. Duvalier’s willingness to acknowledge poor, black Haiti—the majority—allowed him to manipulate national angst and propel himself into a powerful patriarchal position hinted by his colloquial name—“Papa Doc.” During his time in office, Duvalier “reshaped the relations between state and civil society and strengthened [himself] in the process” (Trouillot 1990, 17). At the center of this system stood a “powerful and personalized executive that dominated all other branches of government. This modified state apparatus was notable in its attempts to (re)define formal institutions of a civil society weakened by class, caste and gender lines” (Trouillot 1990, 17).

Duvalier instituted a civilian militia formally titled Volunteers of National Security, but known to the public as the Tonton Macoutes. The recruits into this militia came from impoverished backgrounds and were tantalized by the power and immunity that came from directly serving the head of state. They joined by the thousands, with their families pitching in to purchase the envied VSN identification card that “permitted the men to hack their way up through the filth and hunger of Haitian life” (Abbott 1988, 86). Under Duvalier, the members of the Tonton Macoutes “were elevated above even the richest, lightest skinned merchant, whom they could and did terrorize and extort” (Abbott 1998, 87).

Duvalier also exploited another important source for recruits: the oppressed and overburdened half of the female population, who served as the counterpart to the Tonton Macoutes. Duvalier called these women the Fiyet Lalo, after a sorceress in a common Haitian nursery rhyme/chant. Marlene Racine-Toussaint, in her dissertation on Haitian women and power, notes that “far fewer girls and women joined than men, but those who did were usually tougher and more dedicated to Duvalier’s service” (Toussaint 1994, 87). Duvalier even appointed women as Macoute commanders, notably Rosalie Bousquet also called Madame Max Adolphe and Sanette Balmir a lesbian and a convicted thief from Jeremine. In both cases, Duvalier had rightly identified “bitter, brutal and vengeful [women], who until [their deaths] would remain fanatically loyal to his leadership” (Abbott 1998, 88). These women were thus selectively incorporated into the state superstructure during Duvalier, but they would not make it into his histories or historical analyses. The majority of the information about the Fiyet Lalo had to be compiled from journalistic accounts or from the work of later Haitian who were interested in critically assessing legacy of gender in Haiti. These exclusions in Haitian history were very much present before Duvalier took power, a fact of which he took advantage in his formation of the female militia.

**The State, the Nation and the Myth of Marie-Jeanne**

Duvalier was able to inspire women to join his ranks by his selective invocation of past, buried legacies of female agency. Marie-Jeanne, a female soldier of the Haitian revolution who is seldom mentioned in state’s histories with the preface “the myth of” and often invoked in the nation’s histories in relation to her domestic significance, was a prominent figure in Haitian social imaginary. By invoking the name, “the Duvalierist state would restructure and redefine gender roles and representation with two constructed categories of women: a reappropriated historical gender symbol represented by a rebellious slave woman, Marie Jeanne, who …was transformed into "une fille de la revolution" (a daughter of the revolution) and became an integral part of the state paramilitary forces; and, parallel to the new "Marie Jeanne," another woman—the enemy of the state and the nation" (Charles 1997, 7). Thus, women who were not loyal to the Duvalierist cause were defined as unpatriotic and unnatural, while those who were loyal benefited from a perverse new form of gender equality whereby women who had risen in the ranks of the Fiyet Lalo became key perpetrators of state violence.

Duvalier’s new form of “state feminism” allowed for the appointment of Madame Max Adolphe, Rosalie Bousquet, as commander-in-chief of the Tonton Macoutes. Torturing
women became a staple of Duvalierist state control and Madame Max Adolphe was known for burning “the pubic hair of women arrested for opposition to the regime” and “torturing the genitals of naked prisoners, watching with sadistic delight as they writhe under her henchman’s blows” (Abbott 135, Charles 8). The other notable leader, Sanette Balmir, operated in the southwest Haiti and was crucial in orchestrating the Massacre des Vêpres Jérémienennes, the Jérémie Massacres, in August of 1964. Balmir led the army and volunteers to kill 27 men, women, and children, almost all of whom belonged to educated multatto families. The assignations were a direct order from François Duvalier as an attempt to repress an embryonic anti-Duvalier guerrilla group that called themselves Jeune Haiti.

Duvalier greatly contributed to the future mythologization of these women by the process by which he renamed them. Myriam Chancy notes in Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women, an account of the woman’s role in directing fictive narratives “history is repeated because the models that have been invoked to define Haitians women’s identity revolve around mythical norms and mythical deviants” (Chancy 1997, 77). Likewise, the Fiyet Lalo were given the opportunity to come to power because the myth of female agency was so amorphous that it could be appropriated by anyone with the right power.

One of Duvalier’s astute political moves was to endorse women voters and to establish the Faisceau Féminin—Feminine Torch—a women’s group devoted to propelling him to power in the 1957 election. After his rise to power, many of the women participants, including a young woman from Mirebalais who was one of the most ardent workers—Rosalie Bosquet—remained involved in the organization (Abbott 1998, 6). Duvalier renamed the group the Fiyet Lalo—a sorceress that had already existed in Haitian mythology. In doing so, Duvalier ensured that the future scholars who would research the Fiyet Lalo would have difficulty distinguishing, and could thus easily conflate the Fiyet Lalo their mythical namesake. These women would thus occupy a liminal position—symbolic of their peripheral position in the canons of Haitian history as women.

The final catalyst for the rise of the Fiyet Lalo was the Haitian feminist movement and its highly stratified notions of womanhood and thus female agency. The Feminine League for Social Action, Haiti’s first and arguably most influential feminist organization was created during the U.S occupation of Haiti. This organization was primarily composed of women in the middle class, who struggled for and achieved the right to vote in 1950 (Charles 67). Because of the highly class stratified nature of Haiti, the mobilization of Haitian feminists seemed inimical towards the agency of the women in the masses.

Charles notes that “with the increased militarization and policing of the political space under the dictatorship of the Duvalier family the [Haitian feminist] movement receded, but reemerged in the [diaspora] (Charles 1996, 67).” Because of their dismissal, Duvalier had the opportunity to enact his own versions of female agency—and recruited heavily from the impoverished female masses, who came in abundance in part because of their exclusion from the Haitian feminist movement which seemed to empower only the wealthiest among them. After the expulsion of Jean-Claude Duvalier, Francois Duvalier’s son and successor, “a striking feature of the political landscape of Haiti [was] the intensive participation of women in political processes”. From 1980-85 women from both sides of the economic spectrum organized food riots and school stoppages, mobilized grass roots movements and formed their own organizations. (Charles 1996, 66) The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) or the Women’s Development Unit participated in large scale agricultural research projects, the central goals of which were to find out about the needs of women from the agricultural class and empower them. (Charles 1996, 63)

Thus, many from the diaspora returned in the 1980s and reengaged in the new political sphere with a distinctly feminist affront. The Centre Haïtien de Recherches et d’Actions pour la Promotion Féminine (CHEREPFO), a feminist research and advocacy agency, was created in 1975 and provided family planning and provisions to poor women. Also, the Fonds Haitien D’Aide a la Femme (FHA), an organization which has provided small loans for market women since 1983, catered its activism towards the vast majority of Haitian women. Moreover, in this period the Centre National et International de Documentation et d’Information des Femmes en Haiti (ENFOFANM), an organization which documented the trials of Haitian women under political repression, became prominent in the Haitian political landscape. It seemed that Haitian feminists had learned both the importance and the need to engage the masses of Haitian women who were well capable of contributing to Haitian society. Unfortunately this new outlook has yet to be extended to the production of Haitian histories and the reevaluation of Haitian historiographic methodology.

Conclusions

Doubtlessly, the initial reluctance of Haitian historians to discuss the reign of the Fiyet Lalo correlates with the general silence about the Duvalier era, which left indelible marks on Haiti’s collective psyche. However, with time, the growth of diasporic scholarship about Duvalier has been abundant. Similarly, the male counterpart to the Fiyet Lalo, the Tonton Macoutes have received international infamy and an undeniable amount of intellectual interest and space in the discourse on nationalism and identity.

The silencing of the Fiyet Lalo in Haitian historical narratives has three root causes. First, the perennial division in
Haitian history between the nation and the state, the subsequent marginalization and mythologization of the woman’s voice in the historical narrative and finally, the formation of Haitian feminist organizations that seemed to work to the exclusion of women in the classes. While the women of the Fiyet Lalo women did subvert gender norms, the particular way that Duvalier had structured his government—with every henchman and every prison warden serving as an extension of him and his regime—it can be argued that these women remained effectively powerless. They were mere extensions of Duvalier’s phallocentric arm, with a seeming fixation on punishing the parts of other women’s bodies that had so damned them before Duvalier came to power. Thus, these women weren’t freed from gender constraints by their participation in the Fiyet Lalo, they were still very much agents of a patriarchal state and submissive to an equally patriarchal nation. This is evident in the manner in which they are remembered—if and when they are remembered. Rosalie Bousquet is almost exclusively credited as Madame Max Adolphe—the name of her husband Dr. Max Adolphe which she adopted per Haitian tradition and the mention of Fiyet Lalo will instinctively evoke the image of the character in a nursery rather than one of the most poignant examples of subversive women’s action. Thus, the tale of these “monstrous women”, a phrase often used to describe similarly organized women’s groups in Latin America during the late 20th century, was replaced by a similarly monstrous silence which impacted gender ideologies and conceptions of agency in the vast Haitian diaspora.

In a country such as Haiti, where the citizens proudly claim their status as the first Black Republic, issues of agency and its historical representation thereof mediate the individual’s relationship to the nation. Moreover, when the sheer volume of transmigrants merits the creation of a symbolic 10th district, as was suggested during Jean Bertrand Aristides term in office, these transmigrants actively practice “long distance nationalism” and reconstitute their identities translocally, using historical texts as scripts. It is thus crucial to understand the components of these historical scripts. Thus, this work in historical anthropology, which questioned how Haitian culture is constituted around fissures gaps and silences in historical records, will hopefully pave the way for research which concretely measures how these gaps work to perpetuate misinformed gender dynamics. Moreover, future scholarship in this field should actively reconstruct counter-canonical historical narratives which do not limit the Haitian woman’s voice to its current whisper which is barely heard above the stentorian boom of Haitian male agency.

References


