

Haitian immigrants and the Greater Caribbean community of New York City: challenges and opportunities¹

Inmigrantes haitianos y la comunidad del Gran Caribe de la ciudad de Nueva York: retos y oportunidades

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Abstract

Haitians are one of the largest post 1965 immigrant groups in New York City. In 2009, there were some 118,769 Haitian immigrants in the city, and this figure does not include the undocumented and the many thousands of children born in the United States to foreign-born Haitian parents. Unlike the English speaking Caribbean immigrants that are recognized as a model minority in America, Haitian immigrants had a different treatment. They were not viewed as a model minority despite the fact that they also came from the Caribbean and shared similar narrative. This paper addresses the two most important periods of Haitian migration to New York City and the mechanisms and structures that they developed in the past several decades to gain acceptance in the US and forge political alliances with the English-speaking Caribbean immigrants to empower their community.

Key words: Haitian immigrants, Haiti, Duvalier, Caribbean immigrants, New York City.

Resumen

La comunidad de haitianos es una de los más numerosos grupos de los 1965 grupos de inmigrantes en la ciudad de Nueva York. En 2009, había unos 118769 inmigrantes haitianos en la ciudad, y esta cifra no incluye a los indocumentados y los muchos miles de niños nacidos en Estados Unidos de padres haitianos nacidos en el extranjero. A diferencia de los inmigrantes caribeños anglofonos reconocidos como una minoría en Estados Unidos. Los inmigrantes haitianos tenían un tratamiento diferente. No eran vistos como un modelo minoritario a pesar del hecho de que también vinieron del Caribe y compartieron narrativa similar. Este documento aborda los dos períodos más importantes de la migración haitiana a la ciudad de Nueva York y de los mecanismos y estructuras que se desarrollaron en las últimas décadas para lograr la aceptación en los EE.UU. y forjar alianzas políticas con los inmigrantes del Caribe de habla inglesa para empoderar a la comunidad.

Palabras clave: Inmigrantes haitianos, Haiti, Duvalier, Inmigrantes caribeños, Nueva York.

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English speaking Caribbean immigrants in the United States are generally viewed as the model minority because of their success stories, their stock of social and cultural capital and the fact that they came from societies in which they were self-ruled. Although this narrative which was originally promoted by Thomas Sowell (1978)³ has been contested over the years by scholars such as Model (1991)⁴, James (2002)⁵ and others, it nonetheless remains predominant in the literature on English Caribbean immigrants in the United States because it is in the self interest of Caribbean leaders to project a positive outlook on their community as they compete with other immigrant groups in cities such as New York, Miami and others. This narrative also serves well scholars who want to emphasize the socio-economic and political differences between Caribbean and other immigrant groups in the city by highlighting data that support these differences. For example, New York's housing policy creates residential patterns that encourage racial and ethnic groups to locate in specific areas of the city. Neighborhoods such as Flatbush-east Flatbush of Brooklyn and Riverdale in the Bronx have a disproportionate concentration of Caribbean immigrants whose income tends to rival those of middle class whites due to their field of employment, such as the health sector where wages are better than those who work in other sectors.

Unlike the English speaking Caribbean immigrants that are recognized as a model minority in America, Haitian immigrants had a different treatment. They were not viewed as a model minority despite the fact that they also came from the Caribbean and shared similar narrative. This paper will address the mechanisms and structures that Haitian immigrants have developed in the past several decades to gain acceptance in the US and forge political alliances with the English speaking Caribbean immigrants to empower their community.

History of Haitian Migration

Today, Haitians are one of the largest post 1965 immigrant groups in New York City. In 2009, there were some 118,769 Haitian immigrants in the city, and this figure does not include the undocumented and the many thousands of children born in the United States to

3 -Thomas Sowell (Ed.) *Essays and Data on American Ethnic Groups*, (Washington DC: The Urban Institute, 1978).

4 -Suzanne Model "Caribbean Immigrants: A Black Success Story" *International Migration Review*, Vol.25, No.2 (summer, 1991), pp. 246-276.

5 -Winston James, "Explaining Afro-Caribbean Social Mobility in the United States: Beyond the Sowell Thesis" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Apr 2002), pp. 218-262.

foreign-born Haitian parents. There are two critical periods in the history of Haitian migration to the United States and the organizations they created to adjust in the City in the post-World War II years. The first period began in the 1960s and lasted until the early 1990s. This was a time when Haitian immigrants in New York City attracted considerable attention in the media because they held frequent protests against the human rights abuses of the Duvalier regime in Haiti, the discriminatory policies of various US administrations toward Haitian refugees, the common labeling of Haitians as HIV carriers and police abuse of community residents, most notably in the case of Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant who was assaulted, brutalized, and forcibly sodomized by New York police officers after being arrested outside a Brooklyn nightclub in 1997.

The second period began in the early 1990s, a few years after the overthrow of the Duvalier regime in 1986, which allowed many exile leaders to return home and opened up leadership space for Haitians who were mostly interested in assimilation and empowerment in New York. This period is linked to the creation of new organizations with younger leadership and the forging of alliances with other immigrant organizations in the city to encourage participation in local politics. It was in this period also that Haitians in the City experienced the appointment of several Haitian-Americans to prominent positions in local and national governments. The election of Mathieu Eugene, a protégé of Una Clarke, to the City Council in 2007 demonstrated the level of cooperation that existed between the English speaking Caribbean immigrant groups and Haitians in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn.

The Protest Period 1960-1990s

I have referred the first period of Haitian migration to the US as the protest period since it marked the beginning of concerted efforts by Haitian immigrants in the US to affirm their presence and organize their community. Haitian migration to the US began in earnest in the 1960s as a result of several political and economic events that took place in Haiti. These events included the election of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier to the presidency of Haiti in 1957. After a military coup that overthrew the constitutionally elected government in 1956, a bitter electoral contest was held in which Duvalier who represented the “Black” intellectuals competed against a wealthy “mulatto” of the ruling elite for the Presidency of the country. That election was marred with fraud and irregularities. However since François

Duvalier enjoyed the support of the army and the United States, the electoral council proclaimed him President of the country.⁶ As soon as he assumed office, Duvalier began to terrorize his opponents by throwing them in jail, imposing curfews, confiscated their properties and requiring citizens to register with the local police precinct when they enter new localities as a way to intimidate them. Bernard Diederich noted that those who contested these measures were often tortured, disappeared, killed, or forced into exile; or their homes were fired upon and burned by his agents.⁷

Duvalier's repression of its opponents greatly affected the country's economy. Haiti fell further into a depression when an international recession hit it in the 1970s. This depression caused the death of seventy-five people in two days in the northwest of Haiti as a result of starvation and diseases. While in other parts of the country such as Cap Haitien, a number of students fell ill with tuberculosis.⁸ The economic depression, which led to famine in the northwest, contributed to the mass departure of thousands of Haitians to the United States and other islands of the Caribbean.

In 1971 Francois Duvalier died in office and he was replaced by his son Jean Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc). Despite Jean Claude Duvalier's rhetoric to usher a democratic era, he continued his father's repressive policies. Baby Doc Duvalier, as he was known, also promoted neo-liberal policies, which attempted to change Haiti's agricultural system from subsistence farming to industrialized agriculture. International donors such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund encouraged this shift in policy to promote the modernization of the country's economy. Peasants were forced to abandon their land through eviction and higher taxes, and through a food for work program that was established by the United States Agency for International Aid (USAID). They were also encouraged to move to the capital to work in the assembly industries.⁹ Portes in a study of Haitian refugees in Miami

6-Bernard Diederich and Al Burt, *Papa Doc and the Tonton Macoutes: The Truth about Haiti Today*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1969).

7-Bernard Diederich and Al Burt, *Papa Doc: Haiti and its Dictator*, (Maplewood, NJ: Waterfront Press, 1991), page 112.

8 -*Le Patriote Haitien* No.109, 6eme Annee, 14 avril-6 Mai 1977.

9-Josh Dewind and David H. Kinley: *Aiding Migration: The impact of international development assistance on Haiti*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988).

found that more than 46% came from the Northwest of Haiti.¹⁰ The area where USAID started the food for work program and that was severely hit by drought. The neo-liberal policy that the US and Baby Doc Duvalier promoted failed badly. Haitians who fled the countryside for the assembly industries in the capital were unable to find work. Between 1970 and 1986, Lundahl estimated that the assembly sector in Haiti employed only 60,000 Haitians. This number dropped after the overthrow of President Jean Claude Duvalier in 1986 and by 1990 only 46,000 people worked in the sector.¹¹

The failed neo-liberal policy of Jean Claude Duvalier and his supporters further contributed to Haitians leaving the country to seek better economic opportunities abroad, primarily in the US. Most of them came in by boat and were called “boatpeople” by the US media instead of refugees even though they were seeking political asylum. The US however declared them economic migrants, thereby denying them the right to political asylum. It took a long legal and political mobilization for the various American administrations to grant some legal status to the thousands of these immigrants. The New York Times estimated that there were at least 40,000 Haitians that had arrived in South Florida by boat between 1975 and 1980.¹² Portes estimated the number as high as 70,000.

The protest period was linked with the mobilization in the community to force the US government to grant political asylum to the Haitian refugees who were being treated differently from the Cuban refugees who came at the same time. While the Cuban refugees were offered asylum and economic support as soon as they landed on US shores in the 1980s, Haitians were incarcerated and forced to return back to Haiti where they were persecuted by Duvalier’s secret police force called the Tonton Macoutes. Several community organizations that provided humanitarian assistance to Haitian immigrants in New York and Miami took on the asylum issue and protested against this policy. The refugee crisis created a wealth of sympathy for Haitians among left wing, liberal and religious organizations in the US as well as from several ethnic immigrant organizations.

10 - Alex Stepick and Alejandro Portes (1986). “Flight into despair: a profile of recent Haitian refugees in South Florida,” *International Migration Review*, 20, pp. 329-350.

11 - Mats Lundahl, “The Haitian Dilemma Reexamined: Lessons from the Past in the Light of Some New Economic Theory,” *Haiti Renewed: Political and Economic Prospects*, (Washington D.C: Peace Foundation and Brookings Institution Press, 1997).

12 - *The New York Times*, September 10, 1980, “6 more Haitian refugees drown off Florida coast,” page A16.

These groups played a crucial role in helping Haitians obtained temporary protected status in the US.

The refugee story had a profound impact on the political, economic and social integration of Haitians in New York and Florida. By seeking political asylum, the refugees immediately brought world's attention to the Duvalier regime, which the US was supporting. It exposed a side of Haiti that the Haitian middle class did not want to address including the fact that the country has a poor, dark skinned and uneducated population that was looking for the same opportunities that they were after. The AIDS crisis came also in the height of the refugee crisis and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) had linked Haitians as potential carriers of the HIV virus. This further isolated the refugees and embarrassed the Haitian middle class who had been in the US for a while since they were discriminated against for being Haitians. I mentioned the Haitian middle class as a distinct category from the peasant and poor urban Haitians who were coming to the states during this period because they were treated differently in the US when they came in the early 1960s. Members of the middle class were for the most part light skinned and spoke French. Therefore, they were able to pass for other nationalities. Some of them were afraid to acknowledge their origins by opting to speak English or French when they were addressed.

Haitians did not protest only in support of the Haitian refugees. Political and community leaders linked the plight of the refugees to the brutal regime of Baby Doc in Haiti. These leaders used previous contacts and networks they had in the United States to isolate the regime. Activities such as demonstrations in front of the United Nations, lobbying trips to Washington to prevent the regime from obtaining any aid to pay government employees, radio programs to expose the excesses of the government were common. Although the number of Haitians in New York in this period was small, they nonetheless had an impact in the City. The 1960 US census mentioned only 4,816 were admitted during that decade in the states and most of them were in New York City. As the political conditions deteriorated in Haiti, the numbers increased significantly. The US census registered 92,395 Haitians had arrived in the US between 1970 and 1980 and in 1990, it registered more than 225,393 Haitians in the country. In 2008, there were 534, 969 Haitians living in the US; 118,769 of them were in New York City.

A quick socio-economic background of the Haitian immigrants living in the city today showed that more than half of them are over 25 years old. Less than 1/3 owns their home and more than half are in the labor force. Interestingly enough over half of them had a household income of \$38, 000 which is almost equal to the rest of the city's population. More than 45% of them had a high school diploma or higher degree. With the loss of manufacturing jobs, most Haitians are found today in managerial, health care and service sectors of the city's economy. More than 18% of them are in the government sector. While there is a great participation of Haitian women in the labor force (56%), the socio-economic data has shown that overall New York's Haitian immigrants are in the same economic status as the rest of the English speaking Caribbean population and better off than most South Asian and Latino workers from South America.¹³

The Haitian Community in New York. 1960s to 1990s

As I mentioned previously, the City's housing policy tends to encourage immigrants from the same country or region to group themselves in specific geographic area of the City. The first wave of Haitian immigrants who came to New York City in the 1960s had settled in the beginning in the upper Westside of Manhattan, but they soon began to move to Brooklyn, primarily in Flatbush and east Flatbush where better housing was available as a result of white flight, the diversity of the neighborhood and the proximity of manufacturing jobs in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Red Hook and 3rd avenue. The Flatbush part of the Borough became a social and economic enclave for Haitian immigrants since most of the cultural centers, medium size businesses, and services that Haitian owned were located in that area. On Nostrand Church, and Flatbush Avenues in Brooklyn, there were numerous Haitian grocery stores, restaurants, dry cleaners, taxi stations that competed for immigrant businesses. There were three major Haitian weekly newspapers that published in Creole and French and one in English, aimed primarily at the children of the first-generation immigrants. In addition to newspapers that were written in French and Creole, the immigrants also opened several community centers to provide literacy and English courses. These centers also provided job referrals to newly arrived immigrants. These community centers were also places that people came to exchange news about the homeland, maintain

13 -Joe Salvo, *The Newest New Yorkers*, (New York City Department of City Planning, 2000).

contacts with friends and engage in political mobilization against the Duvalier regime. In 1980 following a major crackdown by Baby Doc Duvalier on the political movement that was emerging during the Carter administration, more exiles came to join the ranks of the immigrants in Brooklyn.

As the community took shape in Brooklyn, several leaders created neighborhood organizations to address the humanitarian, social and economic conditions of the population. They created organizations that serve dual purposes by being community centers to address humanitarian needs and business concerns to assist in filling immigration forms, filing income taxes for a fee, providing translation services, etcetera. Leaders of these centers tended to focus primarily on homeland politics. Wilson Desir, a former military official who tried to overthrow Duvalier in 1970, for example, founded the Alliance des Immigres Haitiens (Alliance of Haitian immigrants). This organization offered paid translation and immigration services to the population while on weekend, it served as a political hub that mobilized the population against the Duvalier regime. Other leaders who were involved in humanitarian services included Jean Dupuy of the Haitian Neighborhood Center of Manhattan, Leonvil Leblanc, and Bishop Guy Sansaricq, former pastor of Sacred Heart Roman Catholic church in Cambria Heights whose family was massacred by Francois Duvalier. Bishop Guy Sansaricq founded the Haitian-American United for Progress in Cambria Heights. The organization provided social services to new immigrants while actively advocating against Duvalier.

In the 1980s when the refugees began to arrive in the second wave of migration from Haiti, the federal government provided funding to these centers to address their needs. More community centers were founded in Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan to meet the needs of the growing immigrant community. In 1982, several organizations came together to create the Haitian Centers Council (HCC) to act as a clearinghouse on behalf of the other centers. HCC was successful in raising money from private and public agencies to support the services that the other centers provided in the community. HCC offered a variety of services including immigration/refugee assistance, health education, AIDS education and prevention, domestic violence prevention, youth and family services. In addition to direct services, HCC also moved into advocacy issues. In 1990, it was one of the principal

organizers of the largest demonstration ever held by Haitians in New York to protest the Center for Disease Control's policy of banning Haitians from donating blood.¹⁴ HCC also played a prominent role in mobilizing Haitians to protest the beating and sodomizing of Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, by the New York City Police Department in August 1997.¹⁵ In 1996, HCC brought a lawsuit against the Board of Education of the city on behalf of Haitian students whose bilingual programs had not been adequately funded. The organization was very active in lobbying Congress to provide asylum to the 49,000 Haitian refugees who came to the United States after the overthrow of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991.¹⁶

As more immigrants arrived in the city, those who could afford to leave Brooklyn moved to other boroughs in the City as well as in the suburbs. By the mid-1980s Cambria Heights, St. Albans, Jamaica had become a hub for Haitian middle class families. Moving to these areas was also a sign of success since most of them bought homes and was able to open their own business. Bakery stores, barbershops, libraries and restaurants began to line up on Linden, Springfield and Hillside Avenues in Queens. Jamaica, Hillcrest, Martin Van Buren high schools admitted Haitian students and many of them moved on to attend the CUNY colleges. By the mid 1990's children of the middle class and Haitian professionals moved out of the city to the suburbs of Long Island and Westchester counties. Today, there is a Haitian-American community in Nassau and Suffolk counties. Catholic masses for the Haitian community are celebrated in parishes and towns such as Elmont, Valley Stream, Westbury, Amityville and Brentwood. The Haitian American Families of Long Island (HAFALI) celebrates all the Haitian national holidays such as independence and flag days to help the community preserve its history and identity.

New York City	Nassau County	Suffolk County	Westchester County
118,769	16,434	6,803	3,711

Haitians Immigrants in New York (Source: US Census Community Survey 2009)

14 -Donatella Lorch, (April 21, 1990) "FDA Policy to limit blood is protested," *The New York Times*, page A25.

15 -Gary Pierre-Pierre, (August 18, 1997) "New York Haitians Sensing Betrayal in a land of Refuge" *The New York Times*.

16 -Francois Pierre-Louis. *Haitians in New York City: Transnationalism and Citizen Participation*, (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 2006).

Even though Haitians have more places to settle today than in the 1960s and 70s, Brooklyn still remains their primary destination and it is not uncommon for those who live outside of Brooklyn to travel all the way to Flatbush Ave on weekends to shop for their favorite ethnic foods. May 18, which is Haitian Flag Day and one of the country's most patriotic celebration is still celebrated on Nostrand Avenue (this is the only Haitian event that the Police Department allows community leaders to shut part of the avenue). Brooklyn also is the Borough that has the most civic, political and cultural activities. Neighborhoods such as Crown Heights, Flatbush and Canarsie have remained the center of activities for the Haitian community. There are Haitian churches of all denominations, small businesses that specialize in air travel, taxes, bakery, hair salons, and employment center that line up the streets of Flatbush- and east Flatbush. On weekends, many community Centers doubled up as social clubs, information center to exchange news about Haiti and help residents fill their immigration papers.

The Hometown Organizations

While the veteran leaders who were exiled by the Duvalier regime spent most of their time organizing against it, by the 1980s a new set of leaders began to emerge in the community. Instead of creating more service organizations, they were more interested in developing hometown associations that focused primarily on their own villages and cities in Haiti. These new leaders realized that one of the ways for Haitians to preserve their identity and culture in the US was to create hometown organizations that would engage directly with Haiti. These hometown organizations took a neutral position toward the Duvalier regime; a position that led the traditional exile leaders to distrust and view them as collaborators and spies of the regime since the government had a history of infiltrating the opposition in the diaspora through bogus organizations. However, many of them were not spies or Duvalier's collaborators. They were for the most part young, idealistic people who came from a different political and social experience than the first group that arrived to the U.S. in the 1960s. Most of them were children of immigrants who migrated voluntary to the US. They were American citizens and had lived longer in New York than the majority of the immigrant population. In the immigration literature, the hometown organizations are called "transnational" because of the dual role that they play in the sending and receiving

countries.¹⁷ In 2006 there were more than forty of these associations in New York and they created a network known as Federation des Associations Regionales Haitiennes a L'Etranger (FARHE).¹⁸ They have raised money to support local initiatives in Haiti and encouraged immigrants to participate in political as well as neighborhood activities. Jean Bertrand Aristide was the first Haitian President to recognize the potential of the diaspora and its transnational organizations by creating a cabinet position in his government in 1991 called the “Tenth Department”¹⁹ to address the needs of Haitians and their organizations such as the hometown associations.

When the earthquake hit the country on January 10th 2010, the hometown associations played an important role in collecting supplies and funds to send to Haiti. Their members who are doctors, nurses, traveled to Haiti to help in the recovery effort. Fundraisers were held in New York to collect money to rebuild schools, hospitals and community centers. One of these organizations that have been active in this effort is the Association des Ouanaminthais (ADO). This hometown association was created in 1997 to help improve the town of Ouanaminthe, which is located in Northeast Haiti, across the border from the town of Dajabon in the Dominican Republic. ADO holds two fundraising activities in New York a year; one in December and the other in August. The organization often invites local leaders from the town to address the members at the gala in New York. The money that the organization raised has gone to fence the cemetery, to put up street signs, to buy a garbage truck and to support a feeding center for street children. After the earthquake in January 2010, the organization raised over \$20,000 to bring most of the students who were refugees in Port-au-Prince back to Ouanaminthe. In addition to providing transportation and food for the students, ADO also helped paid their school tuition for the remaining academic year.

The Haitian Community Today

In 1986 after 29 years in power, the Duvalier regime was overthrown by the population. Many Haitians in the New York Community decided to return home to help rebuild the

17 - Michel Laguerre, *Diasporic Citizenship: Haitian Americans in Transnational America*, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Christina Blanc-Szanton: *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration*, (New York, NY: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992).

18 -Federation of Haitian Regional Associations Abroad.

19- Haiti had 9 administrative departments when the Diaspora Ministry was created. It has now 10, but the Diaspora Ministry is still known as the Tenth Department.

country and to run for office or create political parties. Others took jobs in the new government. As the experienced leaders left their organizations in New York, new ones began to emerge. Unlike the older leaders who were mostly interested in homeland politics, the new leaders' primary focus was on the empowerment of Haitian-Americans in the US. As a result, they began to engage in new forms of civic organizing that advocated citizenship, voter registration and lobbying. Several organizations that focused on these issues came to play a prominent role in the community. For example, organizations such as the Haitian Enforcement Against Racism (HEAR), the Haitian American Alliance began to collaborate with other immigrant organizations in their community to increase their bargaining power. In 1990, HEAR was a major organizer of the march to protest against the Federal government's Center for Disease Control (CDC) labeling Haitians as AIDS carrier. More than 50,000 people marched over the Brooklyn Bridge to Wall Street to demand that the CDC stop stigmatized Haitians as AIDS carrier.²⁰ This demonstration played a major role in having the CDC repealed its decision to label Haitians as AIDS carriers. Many of these Haitian leaders, who were for the most part college students, went to work for Haitian community organizations, local unions and politicians afterward. The Haitian-American Alliance was another post 1986 organization. The leadership of that organization was made up primarily of second generation Haitian-Americans who were educated in the US and who were eager to assume a role in the community. HAA encouraged voter registration, addressed problems within the City's education system, provided afterschool programs to children of Haitian origin and promoted citizenship and voters' registration in the community. One member of HAA ran for a seat on the school board of district 17 and won. It was the first time a Haitian-American had won a local school board seat even though several people attempted to do so in the 1980s, but never got anywhere. Other young Haitian-Americans began to be more assertive by running for local legislative and council seats. Union activist such as Jean Vernet openly challenged the incumbent for the council seat of the 40th district that covered Flatbush and East Flatbush. Others also ran for the assembly seat that Rhoda Jacobs has held for over 30 years. More women began to assume the leadership role in the service and community organizations. For example, the leadership

19- Donatella Lorch, (1990, April 21) "FDA policy to limit blood is protested," *The New York Times*, page A25.

of the Haitian-American United for Progress (HAUP), which was founded by Roman Catholic Bishop Guy Sansaricq in the 1970s to provide assistance to residents of the community in Cambria Heights, was taken over by a woman. Other social organizations such as The Flatbush Haitian Center, Dwa Fann, and the Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees were also led by women. For a community that is heavily male centered, this was a major shift to have the leading social service organizations being led by women. These new leaders were also engaged in electoral politics by creating their Political Action Committees (PACs). In September 2000, community leaders and Haitian professionals raised \$40,000 for Hillary Clinton's senate campaign ²¹ more than 1,500 Haitian-Americans crowded the auditorium of Brooklyn College on November 5, 2000 to close her senatorial campaign in Brooklyn. ²²

The Haitian-American Law Enforcement Organization (HALEFO) is one of the recent non-service organizations that Haitian-Americans founded in 1998. HALEFO recruits primarily Haitian-Americans who work with law enforcement agencies in the state such as the New York City Police Department (NYPD), the state highway patrol and the Port Authority Police. One of the founding members who created HALEFO came to New York City when he was 18. In 1989 when he joined the force, there were not too many Haitian-Americans within the Police Department. However by 1998, HALEFO had identified at least 500 first and second generation Haitians within the NYPD that wanted to come together to create their own group. Jean Sigue, a founding member of HALEFO mentioned that the abuse of Abner Louima by officers in the force prompted them to create HALEFO to educate the community about law enforcement and to empower them to report any form of abuses that they might suffer from the hands of law enforcement. The fact that most Haitians came from a repressive society where the abuse of authority was rampant, they are often reluctant to report any violation of their rights for fear of reprisal. Besides raising funds to provide scholarships to Haitian students and support police officers in Haiti, HALEFO also teaches Haitian immigrants in New York on how to report incidents that they feel police officers do wrongly. They also provide cultural training to officers that are assigned to work in the

21- Gary Pierre-Pierre, (2000, August 30) "A toast to Hillary: Haitians strive to muster political clout", *The Haitian Times*, page 3.

22- Dean E. Murphy, (2000, November 6,) "First Lady re-emerges in Clinton Campaign," *The New York Times*, page B4.

community.

The Election of Councilman Mathieu Eugene

Although Haitian-Americans were organizing to elect a representative to the City Council or to the State Assembly in Albany since the 1990s, they did not know it would come so soon in 2007. Major Owens who represented the 11th congressional district in Brooklyn decided to retire and endorse his son to replace him. He underestimated the desire of the Caribbean community to send one of their own to Congress. Even though the Brooklyn Democratic machine endorsed Chris Owens for the seat, the greater Caribbean community was able to mobilize enough votes to elect Yvette Clarke, a City Council woman at that time representing Flatbush and daughter of Una Clarke who had previously challenged Congressman Owens for the same seat. Once Yvette Clarke who had replaced her mother in the City Council as a result of term limit went to Washington, the Council seat was open again. Mathieu Eugene who was a protégé of Una Clarke was handpicked by her to replace Yvette. The election of Mathieu Eugene as the first elected Haitian American to the city council symbolized the full incorporation of Haitian immigrants into the political process and the power of the greater Caribbean community in the city. This was a milestone in the history of Caribbean immigration in the City. The English speaking Caribbean community could finally join forces with Haitian immigrants on issues that were not related to the West Indian Carnival, which is celebrated on Labor Day in Brooklyn.

The election of Mathieu Eugene made it possible for Haitians to no longer rely on protest alone to have their voices heard in the City. Now like other immigrant groups, they can lobby their elected officials; one of their own can speak on their behalf and they have someone to go to when they need government intervention. Following the election of Mathieu Eugene, other leaders created more PACs to support Haitian-American candidates to other state and local offices. More Haitian-Americans have been appointed to high-level positions in local and national offices. Rosemonde Pierre-Louis is currently working for Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, while Patrick Gaspard, who worked in the Obama's campaign, was appointed by the President as his political director for domestic affairs.

Moving Forward...

It is quite astounding in the chronicles of US immigration how one group can transition from new to old immigrants in a few decades. After more than 50 years of migrating to the United States, Haitian immigrants are no longer part of the new or newest immigrants. Neighborhoods that they once populated are now being occupied by South Asian, Central and South American immigrants. The first generation and their offspring are moving to cities that are not known as immigrant enclaves and where economic opportunities are better. For example, the Haitian population has grown so much in Atlanta, which a few years ago had very little, that the Haitian government had to open a consular office there last year. Similar events are occurring in many cities in Florida including Orlando and Gainesville. While the first generation continues to maintain strong ties with Haiti through remittances and holiday travel, their children are becoming more occupied with US politics. According to Migration Information Source “Haitian immigrants were more likely than other immigrant groups to be naturalized US citizens”. The report mentioned that 48.4 percent of Haitians were naturalized as compared to 43% for all immigrant groups.²³

Moreover young Haitian-Americans such as singer Wycleff Jean, professional athletes Pierre Thomas of the Indianapolis Colts Football team and Patrick Dalembert of the Philadelphia 76ers, writer like Edwidge Danticat and others are presenting a different perspective of Haitian culture to the American public. By showing a different aspect of the community to the American public, there will be more reasons for Haitian immigrants to be seen differently than when they first came in the 1960s and early 1980s when they were labeled as boat people and HIV carriers. Today through their sons and daughters, they are seen as artistic, capable of contributing to the common good. This has in turn created a desire for Haitian teenagers growing up in the US to learn about their history and not to be ashamed to speak Creole, to identify with the Haitian flag and to celebrate May 18th. Young Haitian-American students in Flatbush and Canarsie as well as Westbury and Brentwood whose parents felt uncomfortable to speak to them about Haiti, the dictatorship of the Duvalier regime and their plight as refugees and boatpeople in America are now eager to

23 -“Caribbean immigrants as a whole were significantly more likely than some other immigrant groups to become naturalized citizens.” Taken from: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/usfocus/display.cfm?ID=834>

embrace their history.

The January 10, 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti's capital had a tremendous impact on the Haitian diaspora. Many families in New York lost their loved ones and they had to make additional sacrifice to support the survivors who lost everything. The response to the earthquake in New York was remarkable. New Yorkers from all walks of life came together and rapidly raised thousands of dollars and collected supplies to send to Haiti. Immigrants from the Caribbean became one whole group in their place of worship, union halls and professional associations to support the community. The city of New York through Councilman Mathieu Eugene put one of its armories at the community's disposal to collect supplies to send to Haiti. Doctors, nurses, health technicians mobilized and went to Haiti with their own funding. The earthquake demonstrated the level of support that the Haitian community enjoys in the City. If anyone wanted to gauge how far Haitian immigrants have come in their journey to be accepted in the City, there could not be any better test than the collective response to the earthquake.

Like all other immigrants before them, Haitians are rapidly assimilating into mainstream American society. The first generation will always have an emotional as well as familial connection to Haiti since their journey to America started there and it is the historical place of their ancestors. Over the past 50 years they have learned that the best way to really help Haiti move from its dire state of poverty and isolation is by having political power in the US at all levels of government. They are perfecting that craft by registering to vote, improving their lobbying skills and showing off their culture. As Caribbean, Haitians may not become a model minority in the US like their English-speaking counterparts, but they will not be at the bottom of the ladder either.

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