



"From Complete Despair": Gender and Crisis in the International Photographic Archive of Haiti

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Abstract

This essay offers an abridged history of international photography in Haiti to trouble dominant visual representations of crisis. First, it destabilizes definitions of “crisis” that situate it as a spectacular, episodic moment of rupture with discrete temporal boundaries. I argue that such a formulation obscures a greater understanding of the ordinary devastation of life in Haiti for gendered subjects. Then, following art historians and scholars who argue that Haiti’s visual archive has been overdetermined by an optic obsession with its unbecoming, this essay describes three controlling features in Haiti’s photographic record: the ethnographic gaze, imperial documentation, and disaster sensationalism. Finally, taking seriously Christina Sharpe’s contention that beauty is a method, “From Complete Despair” offers a close reading of Haitian American artist Widline Cadet’s work to consider photography from the diaspora as redress. I show that Cadet’s work intervenes on Haiti’s international photographic archive, suffusing life and the Black interior into a visual genealogy built on Haitian non-survival.

Keywords: Haiti, gender, photography, crisis, Widline Cadet

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"They spent their lives dodging the consequences
of the images projected onto them.

– Jean Casimir, *The Haitians: A Decolonial History*

"I learned to see in my mother's house."

– Christina Sharpe, "Beauty is a Method"



169. A HAITIAN PEASANT WOMAN AND HER CHILDREN

Figure 1. **Plate 169. A Haitian Peasant Woman and Her Children.**
Excerpt - *The Negro in the New World* by Harry H. Johnston (1910).

In a December 8, 1910, issue of *Nature*, writer G. Elliot Smith lauded British explorer Sir Harry H. Johnston's newest book, *The Negro in the New World*. Smith extolled the author's expertise, insisting that Johnston's knowledge of the "failings and moral weaknesses of the negro... of his future, and especially of the hybrid's prospects" had helped him write a book of "exceptional interest" (Smith 1910, 172). Research for the buzzy new book began years prior at the behest of Theodore Roosevelt, former president of the United States. Tasked with producing a text that would compare "the Negro as [he had] found him in the French, Spanish, and English speaking islands of the West Indies as well as in the southern United States," Johnston included information about the population, commercial resources, and social conditions in various territories. *The Negro in the New World* offers a heavily illustrated historical and ethnographic narrative of Caribbean and Latin American societies that spans several centuries.

In a chapter about Haiti, Johnston praised Haitian women for their extraordinary industry and potential to aid in the nation's advancement. "The women are the best part of the nation," he remarked. "They are splendid, unremitting toilers... with unslackening energy." Johnston continued,

...[women's industry] should make Haiti one of the richest countries in the world for its size and population; but so long as it is cursed by its present military despotism *the utmost that the women of Haiti can do is to keep their country just above the waters of bankruptcy and their households from complete despair* (Johnston 1910, 196-197; emphasis mine).

Johnston contended that since Haitian women were doomed to suffer the consequences of a dysfunctional government, the best they could do as talented labourers was to tend to their homes and children. His assertion reveals that ideas about Haiti's unravelling political situation and potential for recovery

relied on discourse about gender and labour. Earlier in the chapter, a photograph captioned “Haitian Peasant Woman and her children” fills a full page (Figure 1). The woman stands outside a wooden building smoking a cigarette. Two naked children with dust-covered feet stand at her sides. The woman dons a long dress, a headscarf, and hoop earrings. From behind a plume of smoke, she stares directly at the camera. The image raises questions about the terms of her participation and her ideas about the photographer’s intention. Photographs such as this one provide keen insight into the coeval development of visual discourse about gender, crisis and survival in Haiti.

Both visual materials and historical narratives shaped Johnston’s assertion that Haitian women could keep a debt-ridden and despairing Haiti afloat through their domestic labour. His use of hundreds of images throughout the text underscores the importance of the visual as evidence of Haiti’s disorderliness and its potential. Vision-centred interpretations of the country—photographs, engravings, and motion pictures—offered broad audiences a sense that they had access to truths about Haiti and her people. To see was to know. The broader history of photography in Haiti amply demonstrates that in moments of diplomatic uncertainty, political instability, and civil unrest, imagistic battles over Haiti’s external image were waged on a gendered terrain.

The question of Haiti as a photographic subject is tethered to its material reality as a state living in the shadow of capitalist expansion, diplomatic disregard, political intervention, collapsing humanitarian mobility infrastructure, and man-made ecological devastation (Schmidt 1971; Trouillot 1990; Sheller 2020). Its geopolitical context has gripped the international imagination for hundreds of years, earning the country a host of monikers that obscure its vibrancy, syncretism, and aliveness. Haiti’s photographic legacy is rife with images of death—anticipated and realized—that overdetermine its epistemological position in the Atlantic world. Photographs form a critical part of the evidentiary basis for communicating crisis and predicting death.

In this essay, I theorize crisis in Haiti as a "non-event" to clarify how the proliferation of photographs during moments of rupture obscures a greater understanding of the ordinary devastation of Haitian life for gendered subjects. I contend that vernacular photography that places Haitians perpetually outside the home and perpetually suffering from state neglect is a failure of visual narrative. Such images betray an ocular disinvestment in the Haitian quotidian and de-incentivize a mode of looking that critically attends to women's lives. Next, I offer an abridged history of international photography in Haiti to introduce three imagistic quandaries that shaped twentieth-century visualizations of the country: the ethnographic gaze, imperial documentation, and disaster sensationalism. I show that the dominant photographic archive coheres around crises as spectacular events with discrete temporal boundaries. Further, it portrays Haitians as politically, culturally, and economically bereft and therefore deserving objects of international disdain and disregard. Finally, I introduce the work of contemporary Haitian artist Widline Cadet (b. Pétion-Ville, Haiti, 1992) as a departure from the dominant international photographic archive of Haiti. Through close readings of Cadet's ongoing series "Seremoni Disparisyon," I describe depictions of the Black interior as critical imagistic interventions in the twenty-first century. I contend that if, as Black studies scholar Kimberly Juanita Brown has argued, "sentiment ends" in Haiti, then Cadet's work is a reparative ocular project, suffusing Haitian interior life into an international photographic genealogy built on Haitian non-survival (Brown 2024, 75). In all, I enrich our understanding of international perceptions of Haiti's crisis by historicizing dominant visual discourse and guiding our gaze inward to find women and girls living among the imagistic ruin.

Crisis as a Non-event

Crisis, in Haiti and other U.S. imperial outposts, is quotidian, not sensational nor episodic. Decentering international policy definitions that describe crisis as a "decisive encounter between two or more states involving a plausibly elevated danger of imminent war," I figure Haiti's crisis as a non-event (Trouillot 1995; Hartman 1997; quoted text from Welch 2021, 8). This has required a perceptual

shift in my reading of crisis, even as empirical preconditions such as “plausibly elevated danger” are met. Most scholars of Haiti would agree that crisis is normal. Some have even contemplated Haiti’s crisis as not simply regular and recurring, but potentially *normative* and inescapable. Following Saidiya Hartman’s formulation of emancipation as a “nonevent” and Christina Sharpe’s assertion that “antiblackness is pervasive as climate,” I contemplate crisis in Haiti as the everyday logic and action that aids suffering, displacement, and premature death (Hartman 1997, 42; Sharpe 2016, 106). It is not solely marked by imminent temporal and geopolitical rupture, but also by the humdrum maintenance of a racial capitalist and patriarchal order.

This formulation is partially informed by a sustained study of various forms of ongoing international diplomatic intervention, fiscal conservatorship, man-made ecological catastrophe, and carceral humanitarian mobility systems. It gestures to a large degree of continuity in violent forms of Western domination that have undermined Haiti’s stability for the past two centuries. Additionally, positioning Haiti’s crisis as a non-event reflects my research focus on women’s lives. The seduction of narrating Haitian history as a masculinist procession of spectacular political episodes has overdetermined the country’s historiography and constrained our understanding of Western modernity and its discontents. By turning our attention to mundane, gendered experiences, we can confront quotidian manifestations of domination that shape Haitian life. This underscores anthropologist Greg Beckett’s contention that crisis might be best understood as a “category of [human] experience” (Beckett 2020, 89). Destabilizing the primacy of the event and redirecting our gaze to the Black quotidian changes both what we know about Black life *and* how we know it. This approach is a contemplation of colonialism’s wake, “the wakes before, and the wakes to come” (Scott et al 2017, 1).

Even still, a call to dispense with the notion of Haiti’s crisis as an event is not intended to minimize the severity of its continued struggle for self-determination or the present danger the country faces. I also do not intend to naturalize Haiti’s encounters with domination nor dismiss its current state of emergency. Instead, I

am rejecting the "subtext of exceptionalism" that marks Haiti and its geopolitics as an unintelligible aberration (Trouillot 1990, 2-3).

By extending Greg Beckett's generative line of questioning ("But what do we mean by crisis, and what do we mean by crisis in Haiti?") to ask, "*How have foreigners determined when Haiti is in crisis?*" this essay reveals the power of the international imaging project. Haiti's crisis is manufactured and felt daily. It forms the backdrop for broadly circulated images of Haitian life and, more prominently, Haitian death. Kimberly Juanita Brown argues that Haiti "bore(d) a hole into the hegemonic currency of the West" and has therefore been rendered a site of imagistic ruin. Her term "morte vivum" poignantly captures the ocular disregard that dominates Haiti's international photographic tradition. Morte vivum refers to the "hyperavailability of images in the media that traffic in tropes of impending black death. These tropes cohere around an ocular logic steeped in racial violence (and the nostalgia engendered therein), and they make any tragedy, any crisis, an opportunity for viewers to find pleasure in black peoples' pain" (Brown 2024, xix). In her analysis of this discursive strategy in Haiti, Brown describes a libidinal investment in the imagistic deterioration of Black subjects following the Haitian Revolution, as modernity cohered around racial capitalist aims. "And so, it might be said," Brown writes, "that Haiti registers photographically to replace slave success (and revolutionary overthrow of the empire) with modernity's revenge: a visual culture determined to illustrate, with devastating immediacy, how little that has meant to the world" (101). Art historian Jerry Philogene's concept of the "dead citizen" supports this characterization of Haiti's visual economy. She argues that Haiti has been constructed through a visual discourse that renders it socially, politically, and economically dead (Philogene 2015). Photographs of the Haitian dead illustrate the historiographic refrain narrating Haiti's sovereign failure and foretelling its people's un-survival. But what of Haitian living? Of all that crisis obscures?

Toward A History of International Photography in Haiti

With the advent of photographic technology in the mid-nineteenth century, images became critical tools used to represent Haiti beyond its borders. International photographers and authors eager to shape ideas about the Black republic used photographs to communicate with public audiences (Ober 1893, St. John 1889, Froude 1888). By the dawn of the twentieth century, an international photographic renaissance was well underway. A convergence of trends accounts for the explosion of photography in early twentieth-century Haiti. Photographic technology improved with the use of paper and glass negatives, decreased exposure times, and the development of the Kodak Brownie Camera. Mass journalism boomed, leading to a flowering of media for working-class audiences in the United States and Europe. With major print publications like *Harper's Bazaar*, *Century*, and *The Atlantic* increasing their circulation after 1893 and the emergence of the *National Geographic Magazine* after 1888, more eyes focused on depictions of other parts of the world than ever before. Meanwhile, in universities, academic disciplines began to more clearly define their boundaries, and social science research exploded. Geography, sociology, archaeology, and anthropology ruled the day, increasing the demand for images to accompany written analysis. The lines between natural science, social science, and entertainment blurred (Lutz & Collins, 1993). When scores of foreigners with cameras traipsed through Haiti in the first decades of the twentieth century, they raced to depict the tumult they encountered (Forsdick 2014, 233-46; Dash 1988; Johnston 1910; Simpson 1905; Niles 1926).

Three features come to define international photography in Haiti beginning in the twentieth century: the ethnographic gaze, imperial documentation, and disaster sensationalism. Taken together, these features demonstrate crisis' constructedness and its usefulness to justify racial capitalist abuse. Images offered visual proof of civic and cultural crisis, and photographers rushed to create them in a historical moment marked by instability. Anthropologist Greg Beckett reminds us that crisis sparks debates about appropriate responses

(2019). By manufacturing a sense of episodic, spectacular catastrophe or unbecoming in the early 1900s, these image makers produced visual discourse that shaped a global response to Haiti.

The Ethnographic Gaze

A combination of economic anxiety, foreign entanglement and aggression, and political strife in late nineteenth-century Haiti gave rise to growing concerns about Haitian sovereignty (Eller 2021). As the twentieth century neared, frequent revolutions forced high rates of political turnover by coup d'état. Relatively short military campaigns led by rebel members of the Haitian army periodically ousted sitting presidents. From 1806 to 1915, seventeen of Haiti's twenty-four presidents were overthrown by revolution, and of the seven men who held presidential office between 1911 and 1915, four were murdered. Many Haitians had grown accustomed to installment by insurrection, and many more were indifferent. The foreign press decried the political pattern as an indication of governmental failure. Foreign photographers saw the tumult as an imaging opportunity.

The ethnographic gaze in documentary and travel photography dominates Haiti's visual record. It involves the deployment of a visual referent for social scientific observational distancing. Images produced by the ethnographic gaze often engender a sense of nostalgia for the imagined past using an anonymized subject (Beckett 2013). Ethnographic narrativization accompanies these images to bolster a representational order that mirrors the uneven power dynamics between an international photographer and their subject (Kakavoulia 2008) (Figure 2). Such photographs are part of a broader history and tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given Haiti a reality in and presence for the West (Scott 1991, 2017). They have been mobilized as evidence of Haiti's "unique, bizarre, unnatural, odd, queer, freakish, or grotesque" identity (Trouillot 1990, 3).



Photograph by Harriet Chalmers Adams

DANCING TO THE MUSIC OF THE TOM-TOM IN HAITI

The tom-tom is one of the weirdest of musical instruments. It sounds far away when close at hand, and close at hand when far away. The voodoo worshippers make great use of it in their frenzied orgies. The drummer sits beneath the tree.

Figure 2 **Dancing To the Music of the Tom-Tom in Haiti** Photograph by Harriet Chalmers Adams
Excerpt - "A Little Known Marvel of the Western Hemisphere" *National Geographic*, December 1920.

In their attempts to capture footage of the politically volatile republic and its people, photographers such as Harry H. Johnston and Harriet Chalmers Adams adopted an imaging perspective that obscured more than it revealed (Figure 3). Their work contributed to a growing body of cultural material that underwrote Haiti's alleged backwardness, celebrated the state's perceived failure, and photographically prefigured the death of its citizens. Christina Sharpe describes spectacle as the right to capture what is deemed abjection, and the right to publish it (Sharpe 2023, 247-8). It is a power relation that grants the international image maker the ability to decide which ordinary scenes have visual impact and can be used to diagnose crisis (Figure 4).



180. A RAMSHACKLE HAITIAN DWELLING DEFENDED BY CACTI

Figure 3 **A Ramshackle Haitian Dwelling Defended by Cacti**
Excerpt - *The Negro in the New World* by Harry H. Johnston (1910).

By 1915, mounting calls for U.S. intervention would create the conditions for another imaging frenzy with even more explicit aims. Photographers from beyond Haiti's borders offered their work as discursive instruments to support imperialist claims over Haitian territory. In the dawn of the twentieth century, United States expansionism led to imperial incursions in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Panama, Honduras, Mexico, and Hawaii. U.S. officials had long been eyeing Haiti, eager to invade and establish a naval base at Môle Saint Nicolas along the northwestern coast. When hordes of disgruntled and grieving Haitians entered Port-au-Prince to overthrow President Vibrun Guillaume Sam in the summer of 1915, the United States found its long-awaited excuse to intervene. Plagued by the French indemnity and frequent coup d'états, Haiti faltered 110 years into its experiment with sovereignty. Exactly one year after the start of

World War I, the July 28, 1915, landing of U.S. Marines on Haiti's western coast marked the United States' twentieth attempt at intervention in Haiti since 1857. This time, however, the Marines would stay a while.

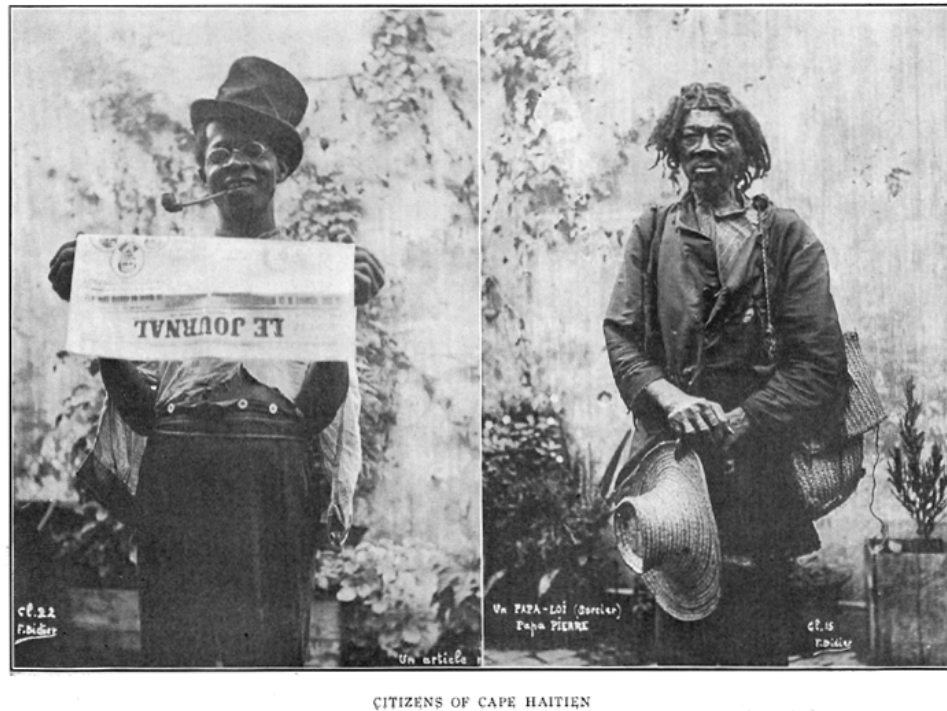


Figure 4 **Citizens of Cape Haitien**

Excerpt - Haiti: A Degenerating Island, *National Geographic*, March 1908.

Imperial Documentation

Foreign photographers and members of the military sprang into action, creating a visual log of Haitian society that underwrote and legitimized the U.S. invasion. The United States' occupation of Haiti lasted nineteen years and would become one of the most protracted U.S. military interventions in twentieth-century Latin America. Upon arrival, the Marines declared martial law, dissolved the Haitian legislature at gunpoint, installed a puppet president, created a militarized constabulary, and assumed control of customs receiverships throughout the

country. Additionally, the implementation of a brutal forced labour system, warfare in the countryside, and rigid press censorship created a toxic atmosphere for Haitians of all stripes (Schmidt 1971; Renda 2001; Alexis 2021; Sinclair 2023).

Over the course of the invasion, the occupying force of U.S. Marines would undertake a broad range of imaging projects under the guise of imperial documentation to justify their presence in the Black Republic (Renda 2001; Thompson 2007; Twa 2014). One of the major projects was an elaborate aerial mapping survey that was published in the 1932 *Monograph of the Republic of Haiti*. The 900-page text was designed to facilitate war planning, surveillance, and U.S. corporate development. Photographs and accompanying text provided intelligence information thought to be so thoroughly descriptive that "the Commander of an Expedition approaching [Haiti's] coast will have at his disposal all the information obtainable to commence active operations in case of a hostile invasion or a peaceful occupation" (U.S. Marine Corps 1932, 4). This photographic experiment and cataloguing effort reduced Haiti's terrain to its capacity for extraction. The project marked the first use of aerial mapping by the United States Geological Survey undertaken outside of the United States. With copies in Marine Corps headquarters throughout Haiti, these occupation-era snapshots epitomize a plantation visuality based on oversight, surveillance, and geographic control that characterized U.S. rule (Browne 2015; Bradley 2023) (Figure 5). The visual legacy of the occupation and its "record of atrocities, of brutality, and cruelty which defies description" is connected to these unpeopled photographs.

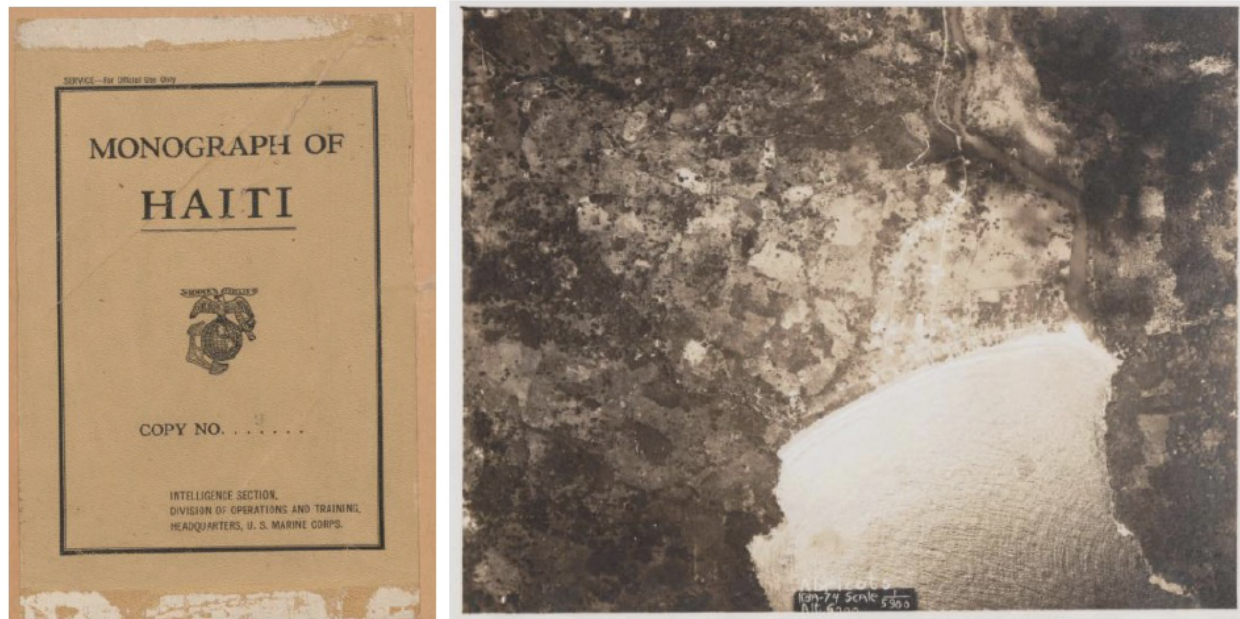


Figure 5 **Aerial photograph of Abricots, Haiti**
Excerpt - *The Monograph of the Republic of Haiti*, (1932).

The proliferation of vernacular photography from the occupation era was another imaging project that contributed to the visual economy of U.S. empire. Photographs made by U.S. Marines, travel tourists, ethnographers, and journalists all contributed. Their photographs circulated in printed texts such as American travel writer Harry Franck's *Roaming Through the West Indies* (1920); French author Paul Reboux's *Blancs et noirs, Carnet de Voyage: Haïti, Cuba, Jamaïque, États-Unis* (1919); and American politician John Dryden Kuser's *Haiti: Its Dawn of Progress After Years in a Night of Revolution* (1921). They also appeared in newspapers and magazines covering the occupation, such as *The New York Times*, *Chicago Defender*, *TIME*, *National Geographic*, and the NAACP's *Crisis Magazine*. Locations associated with the peasantry, such as Haitian marketplaces, worksites for prison labourers, countryside agricultural plots, and bustling ports, figured prominently in the depictions of Haitians at work under the watchful eye of U.S. administrators and constabulary forces (Figure 6).



Figure 6 **Recalcitrant Natives Forced To Follow Peaceful Pursuits**

Excerpt - "Haiti and its Regeneration by the United States" *National Geographic* (December 1920).

The images argued that only with careful oversight would Haitians do the work necessary to capitalize on their land's extraordinary abundance. They also suggested that the work of "taming" recalcitrant Haitians was a task best suited for white, male disciplinarians or proxy Haitian patriarchs (Twa 2014).

A preoccupation with gender lay at the heart of the imaging projects that had cultural cachet during the occupation era. In addition to the racialized meaning ascribed to Haiti, situating it as the site of a failed experiment with Black self-rule, its characterization as a site of sexual excess, gender disorder, immodesty, and indolence took firm hold. Early occupation era images convey Haiti's lack of rigid masculine order. Art historian Lindsay Twa argues that a popular series of *National Geographic* articles about the United States' imperial venture "rehearsed judgment of Haiti as a savage and degenerate space" (Twa 2014, 12). One August 1916 article entitled "Wards of the United



SORTING COFFEE BY HAND: HAITI

When the French were driven from the Island of Haiti it was one of the richest coffee-growing regions in the world. Little has been done in the development of this industry during the century that has followed, and while Haiti still produces enormous quantities of the aromatic berry, it is due to the natural exuberance of the soil and not to the care taken of the trees. Indeed, it is said that most of the coffee trees now at a producing age in Haiti are of volunteer growth.

Figure 7 **Sorting Coffee By Hand: Haiti.**

Excerpt - *Wards of the United States*, National Geographic, August 1916.

States" demonstrates this imagistic strategy. The article offers notes on what the United States was "doing for" Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), Nicaragua, and Haiti, and contains a photograph captioned *Sorting Coffee by Hand: Haiti* (Figure 7). In the black and white image, two dozen women sit on the ground beneath a cloth-roofed outdoor enclosure, surrounded by coffee berries and woven sorting trays. Donning modest cotton dresses and headscarves, they stare directly at the camera. Some rest their face in the palms of their hands. Others place their hands on their legs and hold the photographer's gaze. In the middle of the group, a man in a suit and bowtie stands with one hand on his hip. His towering position and style of dress imply that his duty is to oversee the women's coffee sorting operation. An additional photograph of a group of Haitian women and children congregating outside of a home encodes their alleged lack of productivity in the absence of male labour enforcement. These images are discursive objects that imprison Haitian women in the "regulatory gaze of the global world that confirmed a discourse of deviance" (Philogene 2015, 102).



Figure 8 **Haiti: Calabash Seller.**
Postcard found in the Netherlands, n.d.

In other instances, photographs by journalists, travel writers, and Marines naturalized the racialized and gendered idea that Haitian women were beasts of burden. In contrast to published photographs that suggested women's unwillingness to work, this body of images— appearing in Marine memoirs, magazines, personal scrapbooks, postcards, and military archives— suggests that women were drudges who were perpetually engaged in dull, menial labour. Some photographs depicted women standing alongside donkeys, foisting identical, massive loads of wares to sell at the market, inviting visual comparison between the women and their load-bearing animals (Figure 8). Others were photographed squatting in streams and rivers, washing clothes while partially nude, bolstering Euroamerican myths about Black women's sexual availability and Haiti's primitivity. They formed an important part of a visual lexicon that designated the Haitian woman as a creature invented for the sake of (re)productive labour above all else. These images reinforced otherness through documentation of *how* women worked. Taken together, photographs

of working women in occupation-era Haiti stressed their centrality to the domestic economy, a result of allegedly perverted gender roles (Twa 2014).

Despite the abundance of photographs from the period, the matter of Haitian living remains opaque. Images like the ones scattered in print publications, Marine scrapbooks, and state archives hardly offer a sense of how Haitians weathered the intensified repression. How can one make sense of Haitian life and living when dominant narrative and photographic accounts fixate on abjection, non-survival, and exoticized spectacle? Art historian Lindsay Twa calls this conundrum the “representational paradox of visualizing Haiti in the United States” (2014, 2). She argues that the more Haiti was represented in images and discussed in writing, the less clear an accurate image of the country became. She contends that more language and more images about the country often served to reinforce stereotypes or outright slander rather than provide a more nuanced and timely accounting of Haiti’s history, culture, or people. This phenomenon persists.

Disaster Sensationalism

In the century since the veritable renaissance in international photography in Haiti at the outset of the twentieth century, successive waves of political and environmental disaster in the country have provided visual fodder for international photographers. The ethnographic gaze in disaster photography extends the legacy of ocular abjection from the occupation period. Two additional occupations have taken place since 1915: Operation Uphold Democracy in 1994 under U.S. President Bill Clinton and a 2004 United Nations-backed coup d'état overthrowing Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the first democratically elected president of Haiti. Each of those forced interventions left in their wake enfeebled Haitian institutions, fractured civil society, and severely diminished Haitian productive capacities.

More recently, the July 2021 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse created a power vacuum in the Haitian government. Moïse's assassination took place just two days after he selected Ariel Henry to serve as prime minister, but a transfer of power was not carried out before Moïse's death. Instead, immediately after the assassination, Claude Joseph, the incumbent prime minister, took control of the government with military backing. Joseph was forced to resign after a meeting of diplomats from the MINUSTAH-established "Core Group" (comprising the United States, Brazil, the European Union, Spain, Canada, France, and Germany) endorsed Ariel Henry's rise to power. Henry assumed the role of prime minister of Haiti not at the behest of the Haitian people nor based upon standard succession procedure. He was appointed head of state by a coalition of external ambassadors and Haitian representatives in the United Nations and the Organization of American States. In 2023, Haiti had zero democratically elected government officials.

In the years since Prime Minister Ariel Henry took office, a massive August 2021 earthquake and the growing strength of paramilitary forces throughout the country have contributed to the deterioration of Haiti's cities, prompting massive loss of life and suffering. The violence has made headlines around the world. A 2023 directive for the institution of an UN-backed occupation carried out by the Kenyan police in Haiti stalled, and mounting calls for Prime Minister Henry to resign were begrudgingly met in early March 2024. More than a century after the United States' first intervention, Haiti finds itself embroiled in political and social struggle yet again.

As with the 1915 assassination of President Vibrun Guillame Sam, the 2021 assassination of Jovenel Moïse occasioned calls for intervention, prompting the resurgence of an international imaging project to justify invasion and domination. Paramilitary violence forced entire communities to mobilize, fleeing their homes to seek safety outside of Port-au-Prince. All the while, Haitian women and girls suffer disproportionately from the violence of political chaos (Hossein 2015; Obert 2022; Sanon 2025). As Haiti descended into civil unrest with



Figure 9 People displaced by gang violence take refuge at a Mormon church converted into a shelter in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Friday, March 14, 2025.

Photograph by Joseph Odelyn for Associated Press.

protestors taking to the streets, photographers captured the despair. Widely circulated Associated Press images taken in the years since gang violence engulfed the capital showcase Haitian despair. In many of these photographs, we see women and children in the streets, making elaborate treks to safety. The images depict forced mobility and place women beyond neighbourhoods or domestic spaces as an indicator of disorder (Figure 9). Another type of image shows women in shelters (Figure 10). They hold babies and tend to injuries and lie among industrial detritus and buckets of commercial food. The shelters are both structurally precarious and ill-equipped to handle the influx of migrants. Women are particularly vulnerable in these displacement camps and have frequently been targets for torture, sexual violence, and kidnapping.



Figure 10 **A displaced woman rests in a shelter for people fleeing their homes to escape gang violence**, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Friday, Feb. 28, 2025.
Photograph by Joseph Odelyn for Associated Press.

The photographs, many taken by freelance photojournalist Joseph Odelyn, capture Haitians' anxious frenzy to leave places they once called home. Displacement, forced mobility, and the precarity of the ballooning unhoused population take center stage.

Rereading and Reinterpreting

Confronting the imagistic quandaries of international photography in Haiti requires conceptual tools that reveal power in the visual production of crisis. It entails image creation, narrativization, and historical reinterpretation. Christina Sharpe's meditation entitled "How a Girl Becomes a Ship" models this reinterpretation method through an instructive reading of 1992 and 2010 photographs depicting Haitian girls. In the 1992 image, a young girl stands in front of two women sitting at a desk, backs turned to the camera. A toy replica of a ship and a ledger sit atop the desk. The child, who appears to be unaccompanied, clutches the ship in her hands. One of the adults makes a notation in the ledger. The caption reads, "Haitian boat people," an eponym popularized in the 1990s following a September 1991 military coup to overthrow President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The term refers to people departing Haiti on boats as refugees headed to the United States and the Bahamas. Sharpe asks, "*What is the look in her eyes? What do I do with it?*" The related 2010 image depicts a girl in a white gown, lying atop a palette. Her head rests on what appears to be an ice pack or a medical aid kit. A piece of tape with the word "Ship" is affixed to her forehead. The caption reads, "Haiti struggles for aid and survival after earthquake." (Figure 11) Sharpe asks,

Is *Ship* a proper name? A destination? An imperative?... Is *Ship* a reminder and/or remainder of the Middle Passage, of the difference between life and death? Of those other Haitians in crisis sometimes called boat people? Or is *Ship* a reminder and/or remainder of the ongoing migrant and refugee crises unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian and Atlantic Oceans? (Sharpe, 2016, 46).



Figure 11 **A patient — identified as one heading to the U.S. Navy hospital ship, the USNS Comfort —** waits for a helicopter evacuation in a staging area in front of the National Palace in Port-au-Prince. Photograph: David Gilkey for NPR. (2010).

Sharpe's provocations prompt the adoption of a looking practice nuanced enough to see the young Haitian girl. She demands that our conception of the 2010 earthquake be capacious enough to recognize the girl labelled "Ship." She asks us to question dominant visibility, which renders the girl an object/symbol of an imminent refugee crisis. This is a call to witness. To answer her call, I embrace elements of art historian Emilie Boone's Black visual reinterpretation method. Boone suggests that scholars can see more in Haiti's photographs by attending to Black interpretations of them. She prompts us to consider Black *perceptions* of the visual rather than merely prioritizing Black image makers. I do both. In what follows, I allow Cadet, a Haitian American photographer, to "become the lead interpreter" who reframes "the visibility of the everyday in the face of grinding oppression" (Boone 2022, 119-120). Cadet's photography is a masterful ocular intervention, revealing the stakes of imaging projects that do not prioritize visualizing the demise of Haitian subjects.

Living through Crisis: The Interior as Intervention

Although Haiti's photographic history has been overdetermined by the international community's obsession with Haitian suffering and abjection, photographers in the Haitian diaspora are visualizing their homeland and its diasporas on their own terms. Their imagistic interventions guide our gaze away from "endless reenactments of histories of death, discontinuity, and displacement" to the familiarity and the comfort of Black interior life (Cunningham 2017, 3). Among these photographers is Widline Cadet, a Haitian-born, Los Angeles-based visual artist and educator. Cadet's work provides a corrective to Haiti's photographic archive, prompting viewers to look inward—literally into Black domestic and social space—for insights into Haitian life and mundane self-making practices. Though her work is an "appeal to the future possibility of Black freedom," it is conversant with historical memory, archives, and ancestry (Cunningham 2017, 114).

Cadet's work reminds viewers that archive is both invention and feminist intervention (Trouillot 1995; Sanders Johnson 2022; Sanders Johnson 2023). She began her photography practice to self-consciously document her family for posterity, focusing on visualizing women-centred relationships and grappling with the politics of memory, place, and belonging. "One of the big reasons why I make the work that I do is because I want to be known by future generations," she shared with me in a 2024 phone call. "I came to the conclusion that I want to be known." Cadet is concerned with creating a public archive of her family's existence so that future generations have "images of the time, feeling, and experience" of their lives. She describes her work as a visual space "where impossible meetings can happen." Through her imagistic play with temporality, late grandmothers can comfort the grandchildren they did not live to see born. Daughters can attend their parents' wedding from decades past. Children can play together outside after dark. She creates spaces of possibility. In what follows, I think with and through Widline Cadet's ongoing photo series "Seremoni Disparisyon (Ritual [Dis]Appearances)" and allow the images to dictate a set of meditations on photographic archives, gender, and interiority.

Cadet's photographs argue for the ocular intimacy of home as both a physical space and a broad range of social relationships, inviting a new understanding of Haiti's capacity for existence beyond abjection. In "Sa yo se Premye Rido ou Achte mwen Renmen, Pa Gen Anyen ki ka Wè Soti nan Deyò (These Are the First Curtains you've Bought That I've Liked, Nothing Can Be Seen From Outside)" (2020), Cadet invites viewers to come in and stay a while (Figure 12). The photograph places us directly inside a "Black interior" via the presentational space of the living room (Alexander 2004, 8-9). Speckled linoleum block flooring meets crown moulding and a pale, yellow wall. A large faux floral arrangement with pink lilies, red carnations, white gardenias, yellow forsythia, woodland sage, red anthuriums, pink hibiscus, and bird of paradise leaves sits on the ground. The plastic flowers in all their vibrant glory convey splendour and fortune. To the right, a plush red armchair provides a comfortable place to rest. To the left, a plastic-covered wooden entryway table displays family affects.



Figure 12 Widline Cadet
Sa yo se Premye Rido ou Achte mwen Renmen, Pa Gen Anyen ki ka Wè Soti nan Deyò
(These Are the First Curtains you've Bought That I've Liked, Nothing Can Be Seen From Outside)" 2020
Photograph, 40 x 50 in.

Framed family photos, plaques, and a candy dish encourage communion and nostalgic reflection. A framed image of the photographer's younger sister donning a white graduation cap and gown invites us to reminisce. With a red tassel dangling beside her face, she smiles delicately, lips closed. Behind the flowers, a set of red velvet curtains hangs on either side of a window. A colour-blocked red and gold garment with metallic floral details hangs behind the curtains, offering another layer of protection, of opacity. No light nor view of the outside is visible through the ornate fabric. So, too, nothing that appears in the photo is visible from the outside. This is a space to be precious (Sharpe 2019; Brown 2024, xxxi).

The question of what, or who, lies beyond the cloaked windowpane is of little import. Part of the wonder and warmth of the scene is its familiarity to viewers throughout the African diaspora. Though the photograph was taken in Cadet's mother's New York home, it could just as easily be a scene in Quebec, Pétion-Ville, or Miami. It has many of the trappings of an elder's front room: framed photographs, upholstered seating, plastic surface protectors, ornate draperies, and a faux floral spray.

"Sa yo se Premye Rido ou Achte mwen Renmen," poignantly captures the ordinary details of a living room, a visual memorialization of everyday Haitian (diasporic) survival under brutal regimes (Sharpe 2023, 342). The room closely resembles the living room Cadet remembers from her early childhood spent in southern Haiti. She compliments her mother's ability to build a "warm, internal space," remarking that, "the aesthetic decisions that [my mother] makes... tie the two geographical locations [New York and Petion-Ville] together." The alchemy of arrangement, repetition, and self-reference enliven the room and make it the architectural centrepiece for a livable internal life.

Cadet's insistence on mundane specifics places her in the company of photographers such as Deana Lawson (b. 1979, Rochester, New York), whose ability to depict the Black familiar has sparked vibrant conversations about interiority, race, and personal history. Lawson's photos are often set in living

rooms or domestic spaces. Her strong directorial influence reveals that arrangement and presentation can signal cultural identity. Similarly, Vincentian multidisciplinary artist Michael McMillan has spent over twenty years studying the representational politics of the living room as a key component of a diaspora migrant aesthetics (McMillan 2023). In a series of installations that began at London's Geffrye Museum in 2005 and was shown most recently at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2023, McMillan reconstructed a postcolonial West Indian front room. His study of front rooms helped him make sense of his own Caribbean-British identity. He commented that "the front room was the place where the family showed off who they wanted to be to the world, as a public space in a private home" (McMillan, Morris, and Wales Bonner 2022).

Living rooms have their own ocular pedagogy. They show that acts of curation and self-reflection can strengthen connection. Across Cadet's body of work, returning to the unpeopled domestic vignettes reminds us that we are in community. They prompt the question: *what belongs inside?* In "Less Than Nothing" (2020), a plastic boat replica sits on top of a small bookshelf in the living room (Figure 13). The shelf below holds three smaller boats. The schooners, each with multiple masts, are carefully contained: the largest one is wrapped in thin plastic, the mid-sized one in thick plastic, and the smallest two in glass bottles. In this black and white photograph, the ships recall the 1992 and 2010 disaster photography images. Are the tiny ships and boats mnemonics for all that's to be cherished on the shore? Perhaps they are reminders that the painful histories associated with the vessels are not Haiti's shame to carry. Those lessons must be held close. This is how we learn to see.



Figure 13 Widline Cadet **Less Than Nothing**, 2020
Photograph, 16 x 20 in.

Reading Cadet's "Seremoni Disparisyon"

Cadet's photographic archive departs from Haiti's broader international photographic genealogy; she is concerned with the aesthetics of living. Her living room photographs are but one part of "Seremoni Disparisyon (Ritual [Dis]Appearances)" (2019—), a series inspired by her experience leaving Haiti and spending her childhood in the United States. With little memory of her early years in Haiti, the series is her attempt to reconcile her connection to the country of her birth. Cadet's impulse to create in response to scant memories reflects Toni Morrison's insistence that "Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research." Morrison continues, "The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared that way" (Morrison 2019, 326-33). Cadet credits the series with helping her process ideas about generational differences in her family. Using extant family photographic archives (mostly taken on instant film), she creates self-referential photos, imaging and imagining the haptics of kinship. Her process of photographing the Black interior, much like her mother's process for creating an intimate and inviting living room, is self-reflexive. Several photos in the series contain objects or signifiers to bring pieces of her family's past into the present.

In the titular piece of the series, "Seremoni Disparisyon #1 (Ritual [Dis]Appearance #1)" (2019), Widline Cadet stands knee-deep in the Long Island Sound off the coast of Fisher's Island, New York (Figure 14). Cadet's pale pink swimsuit cover-up is drenched, her hair is cropped short, and she wears ornate pink earrings. With her back turned to the camera, she gazes out at images of her younger self taped to a Haitian sunset backdrop. The backdrop is clipped to a black, metal background stand lodged in the water, secured by silver clamps. Of the three images Cadet surveys, one is peeling off, the other two show her younger self in a frilly dress, pouting, with red and white barrettes clipped into her hair. Her crossed arms lay delicately on her lap. She is the image of reluctant cooperation. The water from the Haitian backdrop image flows seamlessly into the New York water Cadet stands in. This melding of the physical environment with that of the image-within-the-image is one way that she

captures the experience of visualizing Haiti from U.S. soil. In the distance, three sailboats float in the water.

Cadet and the photos of her younger self are neither in the distant boats nor on the shore. Their liminality suggests the slipperiness of memories. Tides of connection and disconnection to Haiti wax and wane, but the pursuit of memory is a constant. In 2024, the photograph was featured on the cover of Haitian author Edwidge Danticat's collection of essays, *We're Alone*, a powerful set of essays on love, migration, loss, and grief. Cadet remarked that though she does not have access to Haiti, she uses her photos to depict the "things that just *stay with you* despite geographical distance, despite time difference."

Additionally, Cadet extends "an invitation to imagine an inner life of the broadest terrain" through her photographs of women communing (Quashie 2012, 8). In "Nan Letènite (In Eternity)" (2021), two women in blue and white gingham dresses lie recumbent on a bed of red rose petals in a field of grass (Figure 15). Their bodies are angled toward one another as they lie on their sides with bent knees. They use their arms to block the bright light of the sun from their eyes. The sun-blocking pose could be interpreted as a space-making gesture: a protective posture necessary to create a private world that the women could access together, a quiet retreat behind their eyelids. Their closed eyes convey intimacy, a sort of quiet togetherness and meditative state we might associate with slumber, however fleeting. Their moment of rest grants them access to their mind's eye, where they can "imagine a political state of being that deviates significantly from the prevailing state of affairs" (Azoulay 2012, 3). As the two companions lay in the sun, shielding their eyes, we bear witness to communal Black interiority, a form of connection that serves as a "stay against the dominance of the social world" (Quashie 2012, 6). The women find respite in each other's company.



Figure 14 Widline Cadet, **Seremoni Disparisyon #1 (Ritual [Dis]Appearance #1)** 2019.
Photograph 16 x 20 in.



Figure 15 Widline Cadet, **Nan Letènite (In Eternity)** 2021
Photograph 32 x 40 in.

They are acting out “the productive sociality to be found in Black sleep, delivering new possibilities for the intimate act of ‘sleeping together’” (Roland Hodson 2021, 9). Art historian Josie Roland Hodson describes these Black sleep aesthetics as “a visual poetics of somnolence that acts as a refusal of and reparation for the enduring myths of Black sleeplessness or nonsomnia, indolence, and extraordinary industry” (9). Their quiet gesture presents communal rest and repair as part of Cadet’s intimate archiving praxis. In so doing, “Nan Letènite (In Eternity)” offers a photographic alternative to Haitian women’s distillation to their role as workers. Bathed in sun atop a bed of flowers and reclining in rest, the women refuse the visual scripts written for them.



Figure 16 Widline Cadet, **Jiskaske Enfinite Vini Nan Yon Fen (Until Infinity Comes To An End)** 2021
Photograph 32 x 40 in.

Cadet collapses time and space with her photographs by using body doubles as visual referents for multiple generations of her family. In *The Haitians: A Decolonial History*, historian Jean Casimir asserts that extended families have long been an emotional bulwark against a hostile external world. He suggests that tending to "spaces of intimacy" is both spiritually necessary and constructive (Casimir 2020, 196-202). Cadet stages communion with her ancestors in her photographs, relying on their figural presence to tend to her own inner world. In "Jiskaske Enfinite Vini Nan Yon Fen (Until Infinity Comes To An End)" (2021), three women stand in a living room (Figure 16). They are lined up in profile in front of red and gold curtains. From left to right, the women have blonde box braids, jet black locs, and ombre box braids. Cadet herself is on the right. They wear the same soft blue brocade, cap-sleeve dress. Light shines on their faces, casting shadows behind them.



Figure 17 Widline Cadet, **Ki Jan Nou Wè Tèt Nou Nan Tan Kap Vini An #1**
(How We See Ourselves In[to] The Future #1) 2020
Photograph 32 x 40 in.

Cadet's staged photograph collapses time and space. Her speculative play with body doubling and staging invites the viewer to rehearse questioning archives. Could the three women in "Jiskaske Enfinite Vini Nan Yon Fen" represent multiple generations? Perhaps one is the grandmother Cadet was not born in time to meet? Edwidge Danticat's refrain from the epilogue of *Krik? Krak!* comes to mind. In "Women Like Us," Danticat writes, "You remember thinking while braiding your hair that you look a lot like your mother. Your mother, who looked like your grandmother and her grandmother before her" (Danticat 1995, 191). Her photographic fabulation makes beauty of archival indeterminacy. This is how you keep a household from complete despair.

Conclusion: Living in Front of the Camera

"Ki Jan Nou Wè Tèt Nou Nan Tan Kap Vini An #1 (How We See Ourselves In[to] The Future #1)" (2020) is a striking self-portrait of the photographer (Figure 17). The black and white image shows Cadet on a couch in a rouched, silk dress. One arm rests on the couch, and the other holds a remote control. We find ourselves in the living room where Cadet learned some of her first lessons about beauty, curation, and fashioning interiority. With shadows stretching across the wall behind her, she stares intently into the camera's lens. Her thumb on the camera's remote reminds us that she is in control of her archival presence.

The photograph's direct-address title renders its argument self-evident: Crisis, for Haitians, has never been a totalizing reality. Haitians see themselves (and Haiti) into the future—beyond abjection, beyond the heartbreak of banalized, constant devastation—by leaving traces of the interior. What we all gain from communing with ourselves, our families, and our memories, Cadet argues, is nothing less than a world of our own, prepared for our living. Her photographs demonstrate that giving greater purchase to Haitian women's lives and subjectivities—in photography and in the country's national epic—enriches our understanding of crisis and how to weather it.

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