

Spring 2014

# The Haitian immigrant experience in the Shenandoah Valley

Kelli Renee Williams  
*James Madison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019>

---

## Recommended Citation

Williams, Kelli Renee, "The Haitian immigrant experience in the Shenandoah Valley" (2014). *Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current*. 495.  
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019/495>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [dc\\_admin@jmu.edu](mailto:dc_admin@jmu.edu).

“The Haitian Immigrant Experience in the Shenandoah Valley”

---

A Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts and Letters  
James Madison University

---

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Science

---

by Kelli Renee Williams

May 2014

---

---

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Sociology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

HONORS PROGRAM APPROVAL:

---

Project Advisor: Stephen Poulson, Ph.D.,  
Associate Professor, Sociology

---

Barry Falk, Ph.D.,  
Director, Honors Program

---

Reader: H.B. Cavalcanti, Ph.D.,  
Professor, Sociology

---

Reader: Amy Paugh, Ph.D.,  
Associate Professor, Anthropology

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Dedications .....	4
Abstract.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Purpose and Objectives .....	8
Research Question .....	10
Literature Review.....	11
Large-Scale Constructs of Interaction.....	11
Small-Scale Constructs of Interaction.....	13
Constructs of Interaction Among Caribbean Migrants .....	15
Research Design.....	17
Analysis.....	20
Arguing for One’s Humanity .....	21
Countering Media Portrayals .....	24
Demonstrating Self-Sufficiency .....	25
Raising Good Citizens.....	27
Constructing a Transnational Community .....	29
Conclusion .....	34
Bibliography .....	36

## **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Dr. Stephen Poulson, Dr. Amy Paugh, and Dr. Keo Cavalcanti in their commitment to ensuring that this work was both reflective of the immigrant experience in the United States and contextual in the current discourse in modern sociology. Their insight into immigrant settlement, culture, and social movements were invaluable in this project. Thanks are also in order for Dr. Mary Tacy, Dr. Jennifer Byrne, Mr. Doug Cumbia, Mr. Jonny Novgrod and Ms. Kimberly Keckley for their contribution to this project as liaisons into the Haitian expatriate community.

## **Dedications**

This work is dedicated to the interviewees who volunteered their time to this project and to the fulfillment of their dreams both in the United States and in Haiti.

## **Abstract**

The following study provides a presentation on how immigrants of the Haitian Diaspora construct their social selves and what they believe constitutes a positive social self within the context of the American South. In asking how these immigrants present themselves and their connection to their country of origin, this study contributes to existing literature on the presentation of self, transnationalism, minority relations, and immigration in the American South. Their identities are also constructed in association with socio-historic-race relations and prejudices long established in the Southern United States. This prompts these individuals to produce accounts that are designed to confront these negative stereotypes and to also garner respect, inclusion, and recognition. Through their attempts to educate Americans about Haiti and by demonstrating control over their own futures, these immigrants assert themselves as self-sufficient contributors to their community and ultimately, as good citizens.

## Introduction

Currently in the United States, opposing perspectives of national identity have often caused governments and individuals to reconceptualize citizenship and reevaluate immigrants' belonging within the United States (see Benhabib 1999; Glenn 2000; Labelle and Midy 1999). While some argue for a tightening of borders, often utilizing nativist arguments associated with American nationalism, others have proposed more liberal policies associated with a global consciousness that argues for a nation's need to assist all human beings (Benhabib 1999:710). Still, this debate has caused the American government to limit asylum requests, control the movement of undocumented immigrants, and limit their access social services. Immigrants have often responded with a "parallel evolution" which is at times manifested in persistent and meaningful connections with their countries of origin (Labelle and Midy 1999:213).

These ties have defied the "commonly held view that populations of a state reside within its territorial boundaries" (Schiller and Fouron 1999). Rather, some immigrants have continued to have close associations with their country of origin where they exercise influence in political processes, participate in community organizations, and make financial contributions to institutions and individuals in their country of origin. In this way, they demonstrate that it is now possible to live within a transnational social field (Schiller and Fouron 1999). This transnational field includes both their country of origin and country of residency, and this reality is woven into the fabric of their day-to-day lives. In this way, say Labelle and Midy (1999:27), "border-crossing is experienced in their everyday lives."

This is true for many Caribbean immigrants, who have established large transnational communities across the globe (Glenn 2000:10). In particular, Haitian immigrants formed a

growing Diaspora of complex migratory networks (Labelle and Midy 1999:221). It is through these networks that individuals already settled in receiving countries such as the United States may encourage their friends and family members to join them (Woldemikael 1985:8). Some native-born Americans have also encouraged Haitians to join them in the “land of opportunity,” citing opportunities for secure employment, enhanced education, and political freedom. These individuals typically serve as their “mediators,” often utilizing their connections with the local churches and universities to assist in their transition of living in the United States (Woldemikael 1985:10).

Upon settling in the United States, some Haitians choose to live close to fellow Haitians, making frequent visits to each other’s homes throughout the week (Woldemikael 1985:11). Their connection to Haiti and to each other continues to remain strong as a Haitian national identity is fostered through financial contributions to their kin at abroad and through other connections with their native country. Immigrants may read Haitian newspapers, listen to Haitian radio stations and even attend a Creole mass in certain areas of the United States, enabling them to retain the feeling of being Haitian. Often, this identity is closely associated with their individual successes and achievements (Schiller and Fouron 1999). For example, when Schiller and Fouron (1999) speak of Yvette, a Haitian immigrant whose cousin’s daughter had just graduated from a prestigious law school, they write of her jubilant cry, “Haiti! Haiti!” as the young woman accepted her diploma. With her diploma in hand, the young woman’s victory was clearly defined by her emotional, pride-filled cousin as a victory for all Haitians. It is this strong identification with their nation of origin that is often an essential part of Haitians’ expatriate experience, foundational to their sense of self.



Conversely, many Americans tend to “classify” the Haitian-American experience under different terms. They view the Haitian experience through current geo-political interests and tend to categorize immigrants according to racial and ethnic categories long established in the United States (Labelle and Midy 1999:217-222). These racial ascriptions are based upon skin color and physical features. Haitians notice that individuals who have darker skin are thought of differently and even treated differently by the white majority. They notice, for example, that native black Americans are treated with less respect and accorded a lower status within American society. To be associated with this particular racial category would mean decreased chances of economic and social opportunities. It is for these reasons that some Haitians are quick to oppose this categorization and reject this minority status (Woldemikael 1985:10-11; Labelle and Midy 1999:220).

### *Purpose and Objectives*

This study contributes to a greater understanding of the means by which middle-class Haitian immigrants residing in the northern Shenandoah Valley of the United States utilize the tools of interaction for the purpose of constructing a social self. The details of this process, including these individuals’ efforts to satisfy their self-presentational demands, and their perception of what may constitute a desirable social self within the community are presented through the accounts of local individuals. In this study, the social self may be defined as an entity within any social interaction that holds meaning (Malone 1985:6).

Currently within the ongoing academic dialogue on immigration, several researchers have begun to investigate how Hispanic immigration has changed the culture of the traditional American South (Lippard and Gallagher 2011; Marrow 2011; Schleef and Cavalcanti 2009). Yet,

to date, the Haitian experience in the South has not been explored. This is notable since Haitians are a growing demographic in the region, increasingly becoming present as workers in factories, farms, and in construction companies. Their experiences can contribute to our understanding of the immigration experience in the American South. This study will utilize past studies of immigration in the South as well as readings of transnationalism, minority relations, and classic literature on the presentation of the self in an attempt to provide a more holistic view of Haitian immigration into the Southern United States.

## **Research Question**

This study asks how middle-class Haitian immigrants residing in the Shenandoah Valley of the state of Virginia maintain and present both themselves and their connection to their country of origin. It also demonstrates the ways in which they craft positive individual reputations—a positive sense of self—which is closely associated with their Haitian-American experience.

## Literature Review

### *Large-Scale Constructs of Interaction*

How, then, do Haitians assert and demonstrate their unique identity within longstanding American traditions of racial and ethnic ascription? Marko Valenta (2009:352-353) suggests that immigrants may deploy a series of strategies, dependent upon the current social reality, to influence frames of interaction when they negotiate their ethnic identity. Within large-scale social constructs, wherein national policies and distributions of power provide contending views of immigrants' place within society, immigrant groups have endeavored to collectively present an image of themselves that reflects and furthers their self-identities as well as their place within the society of their receiving countries.

Lynn Fujiwara (2005) demonstrates how members of the Asian Pacific American community of the Northern California Bay area were able to successfully reframe themselves as elderly, disabled veterans who for their past military service were entitled to the liberties granted to other naturalized citizens. Through their counter-rhetorical strategies, directors, staff and volunteers of the Asian Women's Resource Center, Asian Law Caucus (ALC), Asian Law Alliance, and others were able to counter claims that associated immigrants with idleness and assert their involvement and belonging within the community (2005:83).

Similarly, Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2011) illustrated in her American Sociological Association presidential address how proponents of the Californian Assembly Bill 540 and Jovenes Inmigrantes por un Futuro Mejor (JIFM) have attempted to combat nativist discourse in the Southwestern United States. The bill, which was signed into law in 2001, created an

exemption from the payment of non-resident tuition for non-resident students who have received a high school diploma or its equivalent in the state of California (New Partnership Foundation 2014). It is similar to the DREAM Act, which eliminates federal influence on states to withhold in-state tuition rates for undocumented immigrants and provides undocumented students with an opportunity to earn an Associate's and Bachelor's Degree (JIFM 2014). JIFM, represented by a group of students at Texas A&M University, supported and advocated for legislations that promoted immigrant students' "equal" access to higher education (JIFM 2014). Utilizing a rhetoric that argues for fundamental human rights, these advocates emphasized their humanity rather than their legal status, placing themselves on a similar level as other residents in the region.

Other immigrant groups in the Southwest have also rejected the "otherness" they have sensed in American media discourse. Muna Ali (2011:335), in her discussions with Muslim Americans, found Muslim American identity is both "forced by the American experience" and "forged" by those who experience it. Although often presented with an identity that was conceptualized without their input, Muslim Americans have often presented themselves as contributors to the American experience, present in its history since slaves first arrived on the nations' shores. When Muslim Americans, even those that have been settled in their communities for a long period of time, are asked where they are from, they are marked distinctively by their peers as outsiders. Several of Ali's participants also expressed this feeling of being out-casted as the media increasingly portrayed them as having "negative, bad, terrorist, violent, anti-America, uncivilized," and "extremist" qualities (2011:370). In reaction to these labels, Ali (2011) says many Muslims have denied them in their refusal to be categorized into

one simplistic identity (2011:374). Rather, they have forged their own identity in that they are Muslim and American.

### *Small-Scale Constructs of Interaction*

Valenta's (2009) article on immigrants' means of coping with stigma highlights the value of small-scale social interaction in the creation of the immigrant-American self, which may be actively constructed during routine interactions in everyday conversation. These "microstructures," comprised of both social roles and relations, limit and enable immigrants as they endeavor to display their ethnic identities, deploy ethnic markers, and cope with stigma (2009:353). Malone (1997:11) elaborates on this dynamic, explaining the ways in which conventions or social roles such as race, age, or gender are employed during these interactions. While they may serve as resources to conversation partners, enabling them in their understanding of one another (1997:11), the meaning associated with conventions may also influence the course of the encounter, alternately affecting the way in which recipients respond to the speaker.

Still, Malone (1997:6) argues that these interactions can satisfy self-presentational demands. It is through interaction that individuals may construct a social self or "face" that is of positive social value and then strive to maintain this self-conception and its meaning. When an individual senses that they are close enough in proximity to another to be "perceived" by them, (1997:4-5), he or she becomes acutely aware of the need to act in such a way that produces a desired meaning as it relates to previously shared expectancies (1997:3). The successful construction of their "face" is dependent upon the back-and-forth that follows in what becomes a collaborative construction of self through social interactions (1997:5-6).

Homeless immigrants of Middle Eastern, Asian, and African ancestry were intensely aware of the value and meaning of an opportunity to construct a positive face in their interviews with Margaretha Jarvinen (2003) in Copenhagen, Denmark. Often feeling as though they are strangers in the community, the immigrants described their experiences of being labeled as a threat and of their misidentification with “social welfare refugees.” In encounters during their everyday lives, the convention of “race” often served as a grounds for local Danes’ distrust. In their desire to convince Jarvinen—and Danes—that they belonged to Denmark, these immigrants deployed a series of strategies in their interactions to validate their alliance with native Danes and to foster strong identification with Danish values.

Emphasizing their clean criminal records and respectable qualities, they typically included their qualifications as educated individuals and the professional roles they held in their countries of origin. They also referenced their employment, saying they worked “because [they] want[ed] to,” using their income for honorable goals such as paying off loans and paying the rent “like any normal person” would. Their homelessness, they claimed, was due to causes native Danes had not experienced. It was not due to alcoholism or self-indulgent behavior. Rather, they were much more akin to middle-class Danes, whose longtime residency, language, and values of adaptability, openness, and nationalism they shared. By associating themselves with activities and perspectives whose meanings carried positive attributes, these immigrants worked within interactional mechanisms to construct for themselves a reputable social face.

In another study, Miller (2000) found that recently-arrived Chinese-speaking students in an Australian secondary school also were bound by the confines of racial convention, often limited in their interactions by their identification as “Asians” or “foreigners.” Their inability to learn English at a rapid pace caused them to disassociate themselves from native Australians as

they began to see themselves as outsiders in their social groups. Oftentimes, they were “neither heard nor spoken to.” These students’ encounters with Australian students served as opportunities which further confirmed their belonging to a Chinese-speaking, “black hair[ed]” group. In this case, the students began to self-identify as Chinese and cited their cultural practices and personal contacts as references to their belonging.

### *Constructs of Interaction among Caribbean Migrants*

Caribbean immigrants have also utilized personal interactions to create and maintain social identities. This is evidenced in Karen Fog Olwig (2012) and David Mittelberg’s (1992) interviews with island natives. In Olwig’s study, women who had made a successful return to their countries of origin were noted as good mothers, sisters, or aunts whose self-sacrifice and unwavering work ethic in domestic services abroad provided their children with an enriched quality of life. As a result, the expectancies associated with this role produced esteem among their peers and respect from their dependents. This respect was so strong that, when one mother in particular found herself locked in a feud with her daughter over the ownership of a home, the community argued for her rights to the property.

This was not the experience of Haitian immigrants in Mittelberg’s (1992) study who were often preoccupied with what they asserted was an “illegitimate” racial and ethnic classification that they had experienced within their receiving country. While a shared history, “superior” language usage, or successful experience in employment might have contributed to their identity formation in their country of origin, race became the primary construct by which they were defined in their daily interactions with Americans. The attempt to avoid the downward social



mobility associated with their ascribed race caused these immigrants' to be engaged in the difficult task of constantly accentuating their Haitian ethnic identity (Mittelberg 1992).

## Research Design

People of Haitian origin residing in the Shenandoah Valley aged 18 to 55 years of age were asked to participate in this study. They were contacted through philanthropists and professors at a local university. The initial participants were contacted first by these individuals and were then given the option to respond to the researcher. Upon responding, the researcher and the interviewees exchanged telephone numbers and established a time and place in which the interview could be conducted. The researcher allowed respondents to ask follow-up questions during the interview. Other participants were gathered through snowball sampling in which past interview participants put the researcher in contact with their Haitian friends. A total of nine Haitians residing in the Shenandoah Valley were interviewed.

During the interviews, the participant and the researcher met for a duration of thirty minutes to one hour in such places as libraries, universities, or homes in which the participant and researcher felt most comfortable. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were given the opportunity to express any questions or concerns they had or remove themselves from the study. None of the participants withdrew from the study.

**Table 1: Composite Summary of Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Means of Arrival</b>	<b>Initial State of Residency</b>	<b>Pull Factor</b>
David	Male	Student	Visa/Sponsor	Virginia	Education
Michael	Male	Office	N/A	Kansas	Education
Patrick	Male	Construction	Visa/Sponsor	Florida	Employment
Edward	Male	Agriculture	Visa/Sponsor	Florida	Family
Stephane	Male	Student	Visa/Sponsor	Massachusetts	Family
Natalie	Female	Factory	Visa/Sponsor	Florida	Family
Rozalie	Female	Student	Visa/Sponsor	Florida	Education
Elsie	Female	Student	Visa/Sponsor	Florida	Education
Staisy	Female	Student	Visa/Sponsor	Florida	Education

Rapport was built during the interview as the researcher made efforts to conduct the interview as a casual conversation. This appealed to the interviewees, who expressed their ease with this style of interviewing. In this way, humor and the relatable qualities of the researcher, including her understanding of the French language, built up a mutual sense of trust which allowed interviewees to fluidly express their thoughts. Participants were asked the following questions in a semi-structured format:

- Tell me about your experience in the United States. What differences do you notice between your life in Haiti and the United States? How have you adapted to life in the United States?
- Do you feel that you have become a part of your community? How so? Describe your relationship with your neighbors. What kinds of community activities or religious services do you participate in?
- Have you or your children (if applicable) used educational facilities (ESL programs, primary or secondary schools, higher learning) in the United States? What is your experience with these facilities? How do they compare with what you perceive to be the experience of other Americans?
- Are you employed? What do you do? What are your experiences at work? How do they compare with what you perceive to be the experiences of other Americans?
- What is citizenship? What does it mean to be a citizen? What are the benefits of being a citizen? What are the benefits of not being a citizen? Is citizenship necessary for living well in the United States?

- Are you or do you want to be a citizen of the United States? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that the United States government would provide a means for you to become a citizen? Do you think that it should? Why or why not?

## Analysis

These Haitians, while varying in age and occupation, tended to have several factors in common when considering their experience. First, almost all of the individuals arrived as a result of connections with Haitian and American contacts who had applied for Visas or Green Cards. Some of these contacts came from relations with a church, a local school, or a family member already residing in the United States. And while just over half of these individuals began their journey in the state of Florida, each of them ended up in Virginia to pursue their life goals. These goals specifically reflected their desire to obtain valuable opportunities, such as obtaining a higher education, employment, and/or family reunification. Participants often expressed the desire to achieve more than one of these goals. The most important of these individuals' goals are listed in Table 1 along with their pseudonyms, gender, occupation, means of arrival, and initial state of residency.

Several discussed their initial shock when arriving in the United States. A handful of them mentioned their available food choices, stating that Americanized meals were difficult to eat. Others mentioned their difficulty in learning the language and how that skill was necessary in participating in work-related activities and in daily interaction. As they began to process the language in their minds, they became conversational, contributing to much more comfortable interactions with their peers. One of these participants, Edward, has plans to make learning English one of his priorities. His interview was translated into English with the help of a fellow participant. By describing his current situation, Edward provided insight into the transitions new Haitian immigrants in the Shenandoah Valley often face.

A married man with two children, Edward was a school director and worked in a radio station while he was living in Haiti. He was prompted to come to the United States when his wife fell and injured herself at work, making it difficult to take care of their children. He applied for a Visa, but was denied because his wife was already living in the States—she needed to file his application for a green card. He waited, but when he got here, he began working in industries which required hard physical labor.

“When I was in Haiti,” he said, “my job was like education and work in the radio station. And pretty much when I come here, I doing this kind of hard labor of work here. It makes mess with my [inaudible] a little bit. Well, when I came here, I’ll do what I have to do.”

Like other Haitian immigrants, he says, his main objective is to have the best life—a life of economic security and safety. Yet this change in social status is not uncommon to Haitian immigrants who arrive in the United States. Woldemikael (1985), speaking of a group of Haitian immigrants in the Midwest, notes that Haitians will often accept any kind of employment, even opting to work several jobs, to earn income and then send those monies as remittances to their families in Haiti. He also noted that newly-arrived Haitians tended to lack the social skills necessary for dealing with the complexity of life in the U.S. (Woldemikael, 1985:4).

### *Arguing for One’s Humanity*

Social capital is especially important in the American South, where an economic boom in manufacturing and technology centers, along with an increase in high labor industries such as meat packing, carpet, and construction have drawn these and other immigrants. The boom is so large that it reflects a greater growth in jobs than any other region in the last 20 years (Lippard

and Gallagher, 2011:4-5). Up until this time, most immigration occurred in metro areas where there were well-established immigrant communities (Lippard and Gallagher, 2011:4-5). Their move towards the American South, then, presents a unique challenge to immigrants since it has historically lacked diversity and a cultural familiarity with foreigners (Marrow, 2011:30-31). This, says Marrow (2011:8-9), influences their quality of interaction with American citizens. Although Southern towns have experienced dramatic change as a result of Civil Rights Movements, say Lippard and Gallagher (2011:31), this change has been limited “by what Jim Crow left behind.”

Michael, Edward, and Natalie have all experienced instances of blatant racism and, along with David and Stephane, vehemently opposed discriminatory comments that had been directed towards themselves and others. Natalie’s experience was reflective of the prevalence of racism in families. In one particular instance, a little girl told Natalie her mom “sa[id] I cannot talk to you because you’re black.” Natalie tried to gently explain to the little girl why she felt that was wrong. Edward’s experience was reflective of discrimination in the workplace. While he feels that racism among Americans is not common, stating that it is a minority of persons who react to immigrants in this way, he explained that in one particular peanut packing plant he and a group of Haitians experienced blatant racism from one of the farm’s managers. After finishing their work early, the son of the farm’s owner called them into the packing house. After a while, he saw a “big guy” coming towards them.

“...This guy was... kind-of reacted badly. We were quite a few Haitian that was working in the packing house and he walked by us and went all the way by the end of the aisle. By that time he really started talking. And there was a Haitian guy that was there that understood what he was saying. The Haitian person said,

‘Hey, guys! The guy says we need to leave the packing house now!’ When I come closer, he was constantly... he was uh, saying bad words to the other Haitians that was there, the boss, the supervisor. And the guy said, we are negroes... He said, ‘everyone get the F—out of here!’ He said if all of ‘em don’t get out right now, he’s gonna get his gun. All of us had to get out and let me tell you, when I find that kind of situation I don’t like to stay folding my arm.”

Edward said that this event brought tears to his eyes and explained that his faith in the law of the United States prompted him to seek the help of a lawyer. The paperwork is still with a lawyer in Florida. Michael’s experience with racism and his reaction to made him critical of the presence of racism in Southern American churches. “A lot of Haitians and people from Africa will not say that people are racist,” but, he said, “I am open.” Seeing that several white Americans had been un-accepting of himself and other black individuals, Michael expressed his disappointment in Christians’ reluctance to stand up against racism. He attributed their inaction to a misunderstanding of God’s design of humanity. “God created everybody and never said that one was better than the other,” he said. “The devil puts ideas in peoples’ heads that they are better than others. I am not better than Haitians on the street. I just got an opportunity to get an education that I want to use positively.” Edward mirrored this, saying, “I am man of God. God gave me liberty. And he tells us there’s no difference between the white and the black.”

These responses to racism were exemplary of immigrants’ ability to deploy a narrative of shared humanity which argues for mutual respect. This characterization as a human being constructs a social self which is equal to others in their community and to their co-workers. As discussed above, several other immigrant groups have also utilized this frame, employing it to argue for the protection of immigrants and refugees everywhere (Labelle and Midy, 1999:215;



Glenn, 2000:14). Because notions of humanity transcend race and citizenship status (Benhabib, 1999:711), this frame tends to give way to new patterns of interaction in which participants may see each other as “moral beings.”

### *Countering Media Portrayals*

Crafting this narrative of mutual respect that is associated with one’s humanity also translates into a desire for their countrymen to be well-represented among their peers and countrymen in the media. American media companies and charities often depict Haitians in dire poverty with empty stomachs, living in squalor. These emotional pictures are often designed to compel wealthy and middle-class Americans to donate funds so they may be distributed to individuals devastated by famine and earthquakes. Yet Stephane says that when pictures of poor people are used to represent Haiti, “it’s not fair... I want new information about Haiti.” Rozalie and her older sister Elsie agree. “Yeah, that’s not Haiti,” says Rozalie, “That’s not it. I mean they will never show the good part of it. Cause we have good food. We have the good places, good places to go see.” She explained that her university took American students to Haiti for several years in a row, helping to rebuild her father’s school following the earthquake. However, when they got there, said Rozalie, the students, who were surprised by the country’s tropical flora and fauna, said, “I am in Miami?” “There’s still misery,” admits Rozalie, but, “it’s not like everything they are showing you on the TV. That’s not what we are about, you know?”

When respondents reflected on these kinds of media portrayals, they seemed to be more animated than when describing their reactions to racism. Rozalie, Elsie, and Stephane became so passionate about inaccurate media portrayals because they see their Haitian nationality as central to their self-ascribed identity. That meanings associated with their nationality is being reworked

in television commercials is not only embarrassing for these participants but raises concerns for the Haitian expatriate community in the United States.

Staisy, a young college student, said that she has already seen the affect that perceptions of her countrymen as undereducated, poor and dirty has had on other Haitians she has met in America. She said that you can tell someone is Haitian by looking at their face and by observing the way that they carry themselves. However, when she talks to some of them, “they will not talk in Creole and will pretend not to understand.” While many Haitians are proud of their country, these individuals have chosen not to associate themselves with their nation of origin because they are aware that the Creole language indexes their Haitian identity. They will do this even if it means forgoing a conversation with a fellow Haitian. Perceiving that the meanings associated with conventions about Haitians and other black foreigners will evoke an unfavorable response, these individuals ignore Staisy to maintain what they see as a positive social face valued by American citizens (Malone, 1997:6).

### *Demonstrating Self-Sufficiency*

This representation of all Haitians as poor and dirty persons furthermore contradicts Haitians’ perception of themselves as able-bodied agents in control of their future. Patrick knew when he arrived in the U.S. that he was here to progress. For Haitians, he said, you need to be aware of this need to move forward. He characterizes himself as one who is responsible for his own actions, who takes all available opportunities, and whose dream is the American Dream. “If the opportunity is here [and] you don’t take it, it’s up to you,” he said.

“But it’s there for you. You have, everything is there. And you choose not to, hey, it’s your fault. It’s not the government. It’s not your parents. It’s nobody... But

it's the opportunity and a vision and desire to move forward. When I work in construction, if you don't have no love for your work, your work [will] never be great. That's how we do, and when I used to work construction, I love all my work. So it's just like, I see my life, and at work, and I make it so beautiful. Try to do my best because it's my criteria.”

As we spoke of those first days he spent in the United States and how his journey took him to this place of reflection, I asked him about the friend who sponsored him in the beginning. He said, “Yeah, he helped me and supported me, and now I don't depend on nobody. I depend on my own self.” In this way, Patrick asserted his own independence and his ability to influence his own future. Unlike the depictions in the advertisements, he is presenting himself not a victim of forces beyond his own control, but as one whose abilities will alter the futures of his wife and children, too.

Stephane also reflected on his achievements in the United States and the way in which his hard work and self-sacrifice became the root of his accomplishments. “Since I've been here, I've been working so hard.” He said that in the past he has worked two jobs at once and couldn't sleep most of the time as he resolved to complete his coursework and provide for his family simultaneously. Nevertheless, he says, “I don't complain. I can work, I can go to work. But I have to do something... Every single moment counts.”

Elsie, who is also a student, said her teachers joked about putting a mattress in their office for her because of her dedication to success in her classes. Since she is almost always in their offices to ask questions about her homework, they joked that as soon as she woke up in the

morning she could ask them a question. Referencing her goal of obtaining a degree in higher education she said, “We fight until we achieve that goal.”

Elsie’s self-presentation as a well-educated, hard-working individual surfaced as a result of a conversation with her sister and the researcher about the struggle for international students to prove themselves in an environment where English is their second language and professors’ teaching styles differ from those at home. Every moment, including those with her professors, were opportunities to show them that she was not only capable of succeeding but was entirely serious about doing so. In these contexts, Patrick, Stephane, and Elsie’s motivation and level of work was related to and engendering respect from their peers.

### ***Raising Good Citizens***

Elsie’s education also serves as a reference for her identity when she compares and contrasts with others who are more or less educated. Each of the participants expressed their completion of or at least some connection with a higher education. Natalie, Patrick, and Stephane each completed their studies and are now watching their children as they progress through elementary, middle and high school. Natalie was proud to show me her children’s honor roll and perfect attendance certificates, some of which were framed and displayed in the family dining room. Stephane, a self-proclaimed lover of learning, was determined to get his degree regardless of the laughter he encountered from his peers as he pursued this degree. David, Elsie, and Rozalie are getting ready to graduate with their degrees, and are optimistic about the benefits of education. Staisy is also optimistic, saying that even as she navigates a new territory of social norms and values, an education from an American university “will bring [her] further. You can only work in Haiti with a Haitian degree.”

It is through education that several of these participants expressed that they had achieved a level of enlightenment, stating that those who are uneducated simply “do not know better.” Elsie felt that this was especially consequential in her community, where some individuals lack an understanding of basic medical information about colds and fevers, for example, which impact their children’s chances of living. “It’s just sad,” she said. “They don’t know better.” Natalie also utilized the statement, “they don’t know better” when referring to the way in which a lack of understanding contributes to racism in her place of employment in the U.S.. She described the favoritism that her Hispanic co-workers expressed towards other Hispanics who rebuffed her and other Haitians in the workplace. When asked about why they treat her differently in reference to her ethnicity, she says, “Most people don’t think that way or else they know better.”

It is for these reasons that this group’s perception of education goes far beyond primary, secondary, and higher education. Several held the stance that a child’s education continues at home as the parents fulfilled their duty of producing “bon citoyens” (good citizens). “That’s our job, to train them,” said Natalie. The children come home as soon as they are done with school and then learn through their interactions with parents to respect family elders and community members. “Kids don’t know right from wrong,” said Natalie, noting that if the parents are not present, the children will only learn these life lessons from their TV, video games they play, or the baby sitter. Edward, who has children of his own, reiterated this, saying that Haitian people truly care for the education of their children. Even more so, he said that for a child to become a good citizen, he or she

“...ha[s] to have a good family at home that keep you in education, that giving you idea at home and sending you to school; you will learn well. The education that

you receive from home and school... you will respect people. You will not commit crimes. You will not steal. You [will] love to work. All these thing[s] I say are the thing[s] that make you a good citizen. A good citizen is a guarantee for your country.”

In this way, education becomes the means by which they build their communities and also become leaders of their communities. This self-presentation concerning the importance of an education is directly expressed through their actions as they provide this education to their children, thus becoming contributors to their community. In this way, they are also “good citizens,” passing on culturally valued lessons of hard work, unity, and respect.

This is especially important because they saw the value that having more Haitians with a good education could have on their home country. Stephane, Rozalie, and Elsie dreamed of the way in which access to education in Haiti could lead to the creation of inventions that would become as influential as electricity or the internet, more informed voting, the establishment educational practices such as Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings seen in the U.S., and better leadership in the country. “It is the key to succeed. It’s freedom. It’s a way to transform,” said Stephane.

### ***Creating a Transnational Community***

So then, why should Haiti transform? What has prompted its expatriates to desire freedom for Haiti? Several of the participants have described issues which they assert may negatively impact the future of the country. For Stephane, it is government inaction during political unrest. He recalls instances in which barricades of fire and weapons took control of a part of his city and prevented individuals from reaching the hospital or going to school.

Rozalie is concerned about priorities within the Haitian government. Instead of finding permanent homes for individuals who are still under tents following the 2010 earthquake, she said the government promoted a three-month-long party this year. She and Stephane each attribute this to a lack of education. Rozalie concedes that most of her country's leaders were educated but that "the only thing that they knew was to get money for themselves."

Rozalie is also concerned with the scope of the work of charitable organizations during this crisis. She explained how the funds received by individuals in positions of leadership are often split up among the leaders before being distributed to individuals in need. She explains that by the point the funds reach individuals in need there is not much left over for them to rebuild their lives. "Food for a day!" she said. "And that's it. So you're just eating today and you're not eating tomorrow."

It is because of their view of themselves as active participants in their community as well as their connection with Haiti that these individuals are determined to produce efforts which may contribute to improvements within the country. Patrick compared Haitians' relationship with their home country to that of an individual and their umbilical cord and also that of a man and his first love, to help me understand this perspective. When a baby is born in Haiti, their umbilical cord is cut and then buried under a coconut or mango tree. That tree symbolically becomes that individual's tree, the foundation of their life. Many Haitians know where to locate their tree and visit it when they are able to.

"It's like Haiti is a tree and then they plant my umbilical cord with it, and I'm connected with it. Every time you see the tree, you spend time with that tree. You

stay there thinking, you know? It's like something about that tree is a part of you."

Furthermore, he says,

"You can find a man or a woman who gives you everything in the world. It doesn't matter who it is. But the connection with the first person never fades away. I remember my mom told me, 'You can have a woman or a husband that has much to give, but the love the person can give you... there is no price for it.' And you know, that's the connection. It doesn't matter if you give me two, three, four, five hundred million dollars. It is still nothing [compared] to the love... it is the love that counts."

In this way, a Haitian's connection with Haiti is represented by their connection with their tree or with their first love. As a part of a Haitian's own flesh remains in Haiti, so too does that individual. And just as the memory of a first love remains within a person, so too does the memory of their home country. This is not to say that Haitians do not experience a love or care for their receiving countries. Rather, Patrick says that the United States "is a lovely country... It's been quite an amazing experience my entire life since I've been here." It has also provided him with considerable financial stability and opportunities for advancement. However, while America has offered him much, he still remains tied to Haiti. David reiterated this, saying that if you have a green card or citizenship it is much easier for an immigrant to be stable and to find a good job in the United States. However, he admits that he has not really dreamed of how he may contribute to America because he hasn't thought of the country in that light. "Haiti's like, home... my heart's still in Haiti."



Yet for Stephane, citizenship is not an object in an individual's capacity to contribute to their country of origin. "You need to think globally," he says. He states that while his American citizenship means a lot to him, he does not believe that his citizenship in the United States undermines his commitment to Haiti. American citizenship has provided him with opportunities to explore the world, to learn, and to be able obtain employment and better his life, but he asserts that he is no less able to contribute to Haiti's future than when he held Haitian citizenship. The connections he has maintained in Haiti are so strong that he could find meaningful employment immediately upon returning there.

By taking this stance and through the maintenance of their social ties with Haiti, Stephane, Patrick, and David are challenging common perspectives of territorial boundaries and are living in a transnational social space, as did those in Schiller and Fouron's (1999) study. 86% of their participants believed that Haitians would remain Haitian regardless of their citizenship status, and acted on this belief by sending remittances to their families abroad. Yvette, who was previously mentioned in the literature review, sent money to her niece in Port-au-Prince so that she could rent a house with a stove and a cistern. These facilities, in turn, served as resources for members of the community, who used the cistern for bathing and drinking water. In this way, Yvette's presence in both the United States and Haiti fostered improvements in her niece's community.

The participants in this study also have the intention of contributing to the improvement of their communities in Haiti and to remedy the problems mentioned above. However, it is their intention that they utilize their specific skills, rather than just financial remittances, to accomplish this goal.

David realized that he is unable to become a “doctor without borders,” someone who visits nations worldwide to provide essential medical care, because of his unease around sick individuals. However, it became clear to him that his talents with computers could produce a steady income which may fund doctors who travel to Haiti. Staisy is one of those individuals who is at ease with ill or ailing persons and hopes to return to Haiti as a physical therapist. While she holds that she hasn’t given much thought to her future, speaking only in abstract terms, one thing she is confident in is that she will maintain her ties to Haiti, especially through her work.

Rozalie and Elsie also have intentions of utilizing their skills through work that will contribute to the country’s revitalization. The two and their siblings will each be employed at their father’s school, which educates children in one of the poorest parts of the country. Currently, the students are without a building—the original school building collapsed and has not been rebuilt since the earthquake. However, two of the siblings have studied accounting, one of them has studied computers, and the others have studied economics, business, and education, majors which may be impactful in their family’s situation.

“All of us, we can put ourselves together and help the community where the school is. That’s our plan right now. Cause my dad’s getting old. And I know the education I’m getting here will really help me. ‘Cause one thing I know that I’m getting’s like a global view. You know? With that global view and like my networking and stuff I can really get help for like, the small community that I will be in... I might not be able to help everybody, but I know that I can, you know, make a difference.”

## Conclusion

The original intent of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how Haitian immigrants residing in the Northern Shenandoah Valley of Virginia construct and maintain a social self which is reflective of their connection to their country of origin. Among its aims were to identify which social selves these individuals considered desirable within their communities, explain the means by which they created these selves and to explain the significance of these presentations.

Several constructions were formed including those which indicated inclusion among their peers, self-sufficiency, and active participation in their communities at home and abroad. This need to satisfy these self-presentational demands was realized in the dialogue of interpersonal conversations (Malone, 1985:6) as participants deployed narratives and behaviors whose meanings resonated with their conversation partner. Narratives of hard work, education, and humanity, for example, were emphasized more often than narratives of being black or an immigrant because of the positive, shared meanings they attributed to the speaker. In this way, the participants were able to associate their Haitian national identity with admirable qualities which altered negative stereotypes about themselves and their countrymen.

These accounts provide an example of Haitian immigrants in the rural American South and how they navigate a new social field. As such, they add to the complexity of the literature on immigration in this region, which continues to grow in diversity (Lippard and Gallagher, 2011:4). As more groups of migrants move into this region of the United States, growing in number and variation, it is possible that others may use similar strategies.

These accounts offered previously contribute to the literature on immigrants' presentation of self and receptiveness to the immigrant voice. Like those in Fujiwara (2005), Glenn (2011), Ali (2011), Jarvinen (2003), Miller (2000), Oliwig, and Mittelberg's (1992) studies, these particular immigrants deployed conversational strategies which redefined the context in which they experienced immigration in the South. These interactions and presentations of self further demonstrate that immigrants can and do empower themselves through everyday communication.

## Bibliography

- Ali, Muna. 2011. "Muslim American/American Muslim Identity: Authoring Self in Post 9/11 America." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 31 (3): 354-381.
- Benhabib, Seyla. 1999. "Citizens, Residents, and Aliens in a Changing World: Political Membership in the Global Era." *Social Research* 66 (3)
- Glenn, Evelyn. 2000. "Citizenship and Inequality: Historical and Global Perspectives." *Social Problems* 47 (1): 1-20.
- Gold, Steven J. 2002. "'New Americans' and 'Yordim': Perspectives on American Identity among Jewish Immigrants from Former Soviet Union and Israel." *Migration* 33: 119-154.
- Fujiwara, Lynn H. 2005. "Immigrant Rights are Human Rights: The Reframing of Immigrant Entitlement and Welfare." *Social Problems* 52 (1): 79-101.
- Holstein, James A. and Jaber F. Gubrium. 2000. *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Post-modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jarvinen, Margaretha. 2003. "Negotiating Strangerhood: Interviews with Homeless Immigrants in Copenhagen." *Acta Sociologica* 46 (3): 215-230.
- Jovenes Inmigrantes Por Un Futuro Mejor. 2014. "Dream Act: Basic Information." College Station: Jovenes Inmigrantes Por Un Futuro Mejor. Retrieved April 5, 2014. (<http://jifm.tamu.edu/dreamact.htm>).
- Jovenes Inmigrantes Por Un Futuro Mejor. 2014. "History of Jovenes Inmigrantes por un Futuro Mejor." College Station: Jovenes Inmigrantes Por Un Futuro Mejor. Retrieved April 5, 2014. (<http://jifm.tamu.edu/about.htm>).
- Labelle, Micheline and Franklin Midy. 1999. "Re-reading citizenship and the transnational practices of immigrants." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 25 (2): 213-232.
- Lippard, Cameron D. and Charles A. Gallagher. 2011. *Being Brown in Dixie: Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Immigration in the New South*. Boulder: FirstForumPress.
- Malone, Martin J. 1997. *Worlds of Talk: The Presentation of Self in Everyday Conversation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Marrow, Helen B. 2011. *New Destination Dreaming: Immigration, Race, and Legal Status in the Rural American South*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Miller, Jennifer M. 2000 "Language Use, Identity, and Social Interaction: Migrant Students in Australia." *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 33 (1): 69-100.
- Mittelberg, David. 1992. "The Process of Ethnogenesis among Haitian and Israeli Immigrants in the United States." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 15 (3): 412-435
- Olwig, Karen Fog. 2012. "The 'Successful' Return: Caribbean Narratives of Migration, Family, and Gender." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18: 828-845.
- Schiller, Nina Glick, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc. 1995. "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration." *Anthropological Quarterly* 68 (1): 48-63.
- Schiller, Nina Glick and Georges E. Fouron. 1999. "Terrains of Blood and Nation: Haitian Transnational Social Fields." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22 (2)
- Schleef, Debra J. and H.B. Cavalcanti. 2009. *Latinos in Dixie*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Spiegler, Jessica. 2012. James Madison University.
- The New Partnership Foundation. 2014. "What is AB540?" California: The New Partnership Foundation. Retrieved April 5, 2014 ([http://ab540.com/What\\_Is\\_AB540\\_.html](http://ab540.com/What_Is_AB540_.html)).
- Valenta, Marko. 2009. "Immigrants' Identity Negotiations and Coping with Stigma in Different Relational Frames." *Symbolic Interaction* 32 (4): 351-371.
- Woldemikael, Tekle M. 1985. "Opportunity Versus Constraint: Haitian Immigrants and Racial Ascription." *Migration Today* 13 (4): 7-12.