



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

Women, Sabotaj, and Underground Food Economies in Haiti

Author(s): myron m. beasley

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer 2012), pp. 33-44

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/GFC.2012.12.2.33>

Accessed: 12/06/2012 17:32

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Women, *Sabotaj*, and Underground Food Economies in Haiti

*Ninety percent of our survival is on the informal system;
that's how many of us are able to eat.*

—Joel, a Jacmelian

*Mwen vle travay...Mwen vle mange
(I want to work, I want to eat).*

—a patron standing in line for food at Mayrose's

*Nou se revolisyonè, nou spran swen youn lot
(We are revolutionaries; we take care of each other).*

—Nancy, a street-food vendor in Jacmel

OUTSIDE THE GATES of the Cimetière Intérieur, the oldest cemetery in Port-au-Prince, just steps away from the Gothic steel columns, Aimee stands with her prepared foods to be sold for the day, prominently and nicely displayed in a box. Aimee has come to this corner for almost ten years. I look down at the items on her table: fried banana, yuca, crispy fried chicken, and golden crispy, brittle fried bits that look tasty to me. When I ask what they might be, she replies, “They are pig ears. This is what the U.S. sends to us because you don’t eat them there...You know how we feel about your pig!” she says with disgust in her eyes. The line at Aimee’s table gets longer as the evening comes on and people leaving work stop to buy some dinner.

Street food has always fascinated me: I’ve wondered how vendors can perform such culinary feats on roadsides and street corners, at beaches and public events; I’ve wanted to know their stories. Many of us know some vendors by name or by product; others just recede into the fabric of everyday urban life—we know that they are there, but do not really notice them. Sadly, and strangely, most writing on the topic of street food dwells on its nutritional value more than on religious, economic, and cultural factors, and it overlooks its potential as a site of resistance.

Four months after Aimee and I discussed American pigs and their ears, on April 3, 2008, I returned to Port-

au-Prince, planning to travel on to the city of Jacmel. My trip to Jacmel was halted because of what is now known as “the food riots.” I stood on the second floor balcony of my barricaded hotel, transfixed as I watched the crowd march before me, shouting “*vant mwen Pa Ka si pò te ankò*” (“my stomach is tight, I cannot suffer anymore”). A few minutes after the first large crowd (composed mostly of women and student activist groups) dispersed, a second, more raucous crowd descended, shaking their fists and shouting “Down

By making sense of the harsh realities of hunger and lack of food in their communities—by making meals available to the masses in spite of a formal system that simply does not get the job done—they subvert the power of the magistrate, of the entire system, in effect.

with the Prime Minister!” I witnessed several protestors charging the United Nations barricade—they had no guns or other weapons, only their bodies. The UN soldiers responded quickly and sharply, shooting pellets and hurling tear gas bombs at the protestors, who were risking their bodies for a basic human right and need—food.

Haiti’s hunger is exacerbated by the ongoing international crisis of higher food prices. The country’s vulnerability in this regard is heightened by its complicated history with international aid programs (chiefly sponsored by the United States and the European Union), which

have undermined Haiti's farming and other food industries, making the country mostly reliant on imported goods.¹ Just thirty years ago, Haitians produced most of the food they consumed. However, beginning in the late 1980s, the United States began flooding the market with what Haitians refer to as "Miami rice"; now the majority of the population earns an average of \$2.00 a day, half of which goes to food.² The cheap imported rice has replaced the Haitian crop to a great degree, diminishing the once prosperous rice farms of the Artibonite region of the country.

Haiti's food sovereignty has also suffered because of structural adjustment programs enforced by USAID and other international interruptive bodies, its people victims of what Paul Farmer calls a structure of violence—the asphyxiating policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) toward developing countries.³ The food riots I witnessed that day in 2008 were a direct result of such IMF and WB policies, and the recent international economic downturn has made Haiti even more vulnerable—not to mention the catastrophic earthquake of January 2010, from which Haiti has not recovered. Current higher food prices and higher fuel prices are, according to Hossain and Chossudovsky, profoundly linked to dwindling global economies.⁴ In such tenuous conditions, children and women are most at risk; women like Aimee have to find or make ways to survive. This paper is an ethnographic examination of women who cook and sell food on the streets as a means of survival—and solidarity and resistance—against the backdrop of rising food prices, economic devastations, and national disasters—women I came to know in Jacmel, in Haiti.

A Vital Informal Economy

The topics of gender, labor, political economies, and foodways are familiar ones in the context of Caribbean scholarship. Building on the work of Mintz, scholars such as Harrison, Bolles, Massiah, and Barrow highlight feminist perspectives.⁵ One of Ulysse's goals in her ethnographic work on the subject of informal commercial importers is to provide a space for female vendors to speak for themselves and to tell their stories against the backdrop of stringently structured political economies; and Cross's work with the street food vendors of Mexico aims to outline the political systems that allow informal labor to exist.

The squalor and disrepair of some makeshift, illegal operations may be overlooked by customers seduced by smells that stir memory and craving. But public-health policy and politically determined zoning of public spaces

tend to punish these vendors, who out of necessity operate outside of the formal economies that such laws valorize.

"*Fanm Se Poto Mitan*," translated, means that the (Haitian) woman is the pillar of society and, according to Charles (and Bell, Ulysse, and N'Zengou-Tayo), feminist political activism in Haiti has a strong history dating back to its revolution.⁶ (In recent times, several regimes have used pseudo-feminist discourse as a tool to support a continued patriarchal culture.) It was no surprise to see that several women's activist groups actively and visibly supported the protests I witnessed—there is a strong history of organizing and mobilizing such performances of protest, particularly surrounding food economies. Women like Aimee, women who cook on the streets, embrace what Haitians refer to as the "informal" system—a system that one of the women described as "when one has no identity...when one is not taxed and their activities are not registered by the magistrate." I situate this "informal system" within the panoply of what is defined as underground economies: despite the overabundance of street vendors selling food on the streets of Haiti, the stands are illegal; the vendors who cook and sell are unlawful, untaxed, and uncounted.⁷

An underground economy is often referred to as "the black market," and is a space that many assume is dominated by drug dealers, prostitutes, and con artists exchanging illegal goods and services. However, scholars such as Wiegand and Venkatesh demonstrate that even politicians, clergy, and police officers participate in enterprises outside the formal economic system, and that such activities do not exclusively comprise "illegal activity." Rather, for most, an informal or underground economy is a dialectic of "perpetual negotiations, of collusion and compromise, of the constant struggle to survive—to find a purpose for life, to fulfill your desires, to feed your family."⁸

De Soto opines that informal economies are fluid and that such systems exist because of a lack of regulations, and faults the state for creating an exploited class of workers.⁹ Others, such as Fernandez-Kelly and Cross, extend the argument by suggesting "that economic informality was created in complex relationships among government regulation, semiregulation, and economic actors."¹⁰ In short, the divide between informal and formal systems is never clear-cut; it is ever shifting. As T-Maude, one of the Haitian vendors, explained to me, "We can cook this way because some folks look the other way...remember last night you saw the Mayor of the city here...some folks look the other way." Despite the fragility of Haiti's economic and government systems, there are laws in place regarding street food



vending; however, few know when and by whom these laws will be enforced.

As a researcher, I am drawn to the conceptual frame of informal economies: it grounds my theoretical understanding of the economic and social role of the women who cook on the streets of Jacmel. It is a lens through which to examine how people survive day to day, a lens that's not available in the stream of statistics used to report on the economic status of Haiti and Haitians. Moreover, this concept allows one to take into account the international and local political structures that have placed Haiti's food economy in a most peculiar situation.

Unlicensed vendors, who occupy a precarious and provisional but crucial economic space, should not be

Above: A street-food vendor prepares her beans early in the morning.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MYRON M. BEASLEY © 2010

overlooked in any examination of Haiti's food systems—in this piece, they are at center stage. As Cross so wonderfully reminds us, such actors in informal economic systems are “not only surviving individually—they [are] providing essential services for the country as a whole.”¹¹ In Haiti, not only are unlicensed street food vendors allowed, tacitly, to work, in many areas of the country, they provide the primary means by which many people have access to a daily meal.

In addition to outlining the shape of the underground food economy, I will suggest that the grassroots honor system (*sabotaj*) these women engage in enhances community

kinship, trust, and civility. Fundamentally, this system also provides a means of agency for women within a traditional patriarchal society. This ethnography provides a glimpse into the working lives of female street-food vendors and touches on the question of what happens when the “informal system” is the default, when the underground food economy is the primary means of survival in a country where traditional economic structures are not able to provide the necessary support for the people.

Critical Stance and Methodology

“The only way to possibly understand Haiti is to bundle all of what you consider logical or what you’ve learned in the U.S., place it in a bottle, shake it up, then throw it out the door,” says Paula, who coordinates a women’s coffee co-op in Cap Rouge, a small town in the mountains above Jacmel. Paula’s words remind me that there are many different ways of knowing, of making sense of and articulating lived experiences. I think of Barbara Browning, who advocates that we embrace a visceral ethnography, and who found in her fieldwork in Haiti and Brazil that “Much of what I learned...I learned with my body, and it was only long after that I began to be able to articulate in writing...”¹² I too embrace a sensuous scholarship, “one that flows between the analytical and the sensible, in which embodied form as well as disembodied logic constitute scholarly arguments,” one in which my body and my senses are also written into the text, disrupting the Cartesian divide.¹³ Most important, this work partakes of a critical impulse espoused by Harrison, Madison, and Conquergood, who advocate that we endeavor to remain mindful of the power relations in all aspects of the research domain, and who also contend that ethnography is a collaboration with the “other,” not just a mere observation.¹⁴ One challenge of writing critical ethnographic work of this kind is to strike a balance between the scholar’s voice and the voices of the communities in which she or he works.

The data drawn for this essay are from my fieldwork in Haiti, including interviews, and my continued research on the economic food systems of Haiti. My work with the women vendors of Jacmel began in 2005, when I was researching rituals of death and loss within the African Diaspora.¹⁵ Particularly concerned with repasts, or food rituals about death and the sacred, I had come to Haiti to study the vodou figure Gede. I was based in Jacmel and found myself cultivating friendships with several of the women who cooked on street corners. Against the backdrop of several catastrophic natural disasters and the food riots, my focus shifted to the issue of food security in Jacmel, and I found myself engaged

in an ethnographic exploration of a local community affected by global politics and natural disasters. I have made more than fifteen trips to Haiti since that initial visit, lasting from seven days to four months. I have spent the bulk of my time with three women, sharing their days from the 5:00 A.M. walk to the *marché* (open air market) to the cleaning and clearing of the food space at 3:00 or 4:00 P.M. I cooked with them, sold some of their fare, and ate too.

Jakmèl Vil la (The City of Jacmel)

The port city of Jacmel is known for its importance in the coffee export trade. Its beauty persists in the remains of the majestic colonial buildings and in its small town conviviality. Today the community hosts the extremes commonly found in Haiti: wealth, from an influx of international artists and rich people from Petionville who find the port city a respite; and prevailing poverty, as most residents struggle daily to stay alive.

There are three sorts of street food vendors in Jacmel. One is *Akoupi m chajew*, which literally means “one who leans against the wall.” These are vendors who carry their wares atop their heads shouting out what they have for sale as they promenade down the streets. Such vendors walk about all day, often going door to door attempting to sell. Another kind of vendor is *Bou wèt*, those who sell items from a wheelbarrow. They either serve one particular dish, which they take throughout the city, or they serve a special dish on one particular day of the week. For example, during my stays in the area, I would look forward to Sunday mornings, when Nena walked about with her cart selling the most beloved squash soup, *joumou*, a customary dish for Sunday and considered Haiti’s national dish. Lastly, and the category of which I write, are those who literally cook on the street, *machann manje kwit*. Whether in makeshift rooms arranged from collections of debris, or in vacant structures, or simply on the side of the street with a pile of coals and pots, these women carve out domestic utility spaces in public. These spaces are given names—perhaps the name of the street or of the woman who cooks there.

Street food in Haiti takes on a substantially different meaning from those I have found in other cultures in the African Diaspora. On my first visit to Haiti in 2005, I was fascinated by what I called “bakeries on the street,” structures encased in glass, with baked goods beautifully displayed. These structures sat in the hot sun in the middle of busy intersections. When I articulated my amazement to locals, I was told that “[the bakeries] exist there because most of us do not have kitchens—so eating off the street

is the way we get food. It's our fast food but our fast food is the only food." In Haiti, food politics pits the national government, international aid organizations, and the small number of commercial mega grocery stores (which only exist in larger cities) against the women who cook on the streets, and it is the latter who most effectively provide food to the masses of Haitians. Food from international aid programs and the government is more often than not tied to political and sometimes even religious bureaucracies that complicate the distribution of the food. Sometimes, this food never gets to those most in need. With the failure of these official structures, the role of women who cook on the streets in Haitian culture is unusually important. Before I share more regarding the women who cook on the streets and the politics of the daily meal in Haiti, I must attend to the story of the Creole pig, which provides brief but sharp insight into the history of food politics on the island.

A Pig's Tale

...*You know how we feel about your pig!*...

Some say the Creole pig (which many refer to as the black swine of Haiti) was indigenous to the island, while others suggest that the Spaniards introduced them to the island prior to the 1500s. A unique species to be sure, the pig according to most accounts was *the* staple in the diet of the Haitian poor and a sacred animal used in the ritual practices of vodou. As Diederich puts it, the pigs were like bank accounts for a vast number of the Haitian people.¹⁶ In 1978, Asian swine fever was detected in a minuscule population of the pigs on a small portion of the island. USAID, with the help of the Duvalier government, orchestrated the killing of the country's entire population of the Creole swine and their replacement with pathogen-free hogs—pink pigs—from the United States. "But Haitians," according to Gaertner, "have more than a distrust of things new in their dislike of the light colored pigs: the gods demand a black pig as sacrifice. This is a non-rational reason; not an irrational one. Color is significant in all religions where ritual plays a role, including Catholicism."¹⁷ The replacement program was to provide each person who brought in a black pig with a new pink pig at no cost. But in the end, not only did the United States charge the Haitian citizens for the new pigs, they charged them at a price that was unpayable by the majority of Haitians. Therefore, for several reasons the pink pigs became anathema, a symbol of U.S. hegemonic participation in the destruction of the food and religious culture of Haiti. After several unsuccessful

attempts by USAID and Canada Aid, the French government introduced a Chinese breed to Haiti, which was similar in appearance to the Creole pig: black, short, and rustic.

Despite efforts to resist the pink pig, here again on the streets of Port-au-Prince, as I peered at Aimee's wares, I saw the pink ears, representing U.S. efforts to once again force the pink pig on Haiti's population. The majority of food sold and distributed in Haiti, particularly rice and meat, comes from the United States. Such misbegotten, internationally imposed programs, enacted with the support of a series of Haitian political leaders, have all but destroyed most of the country's traditional agricultural infrastructure, farms, and other food-producing industries on the island. The pink pig is a potent symbol of unchecked capitalistic domination, the destruction of a cultural and religious sacrament, and the stripping of a life-giving source of food and self-determination from exactly the people who can least stand to lose it. Into this space come the food vendors, who are both a response to and a product of fundamental errors in the formal political and economic systems. It is this very same pernicious political economy that makes such a livelihood dangerous.

Everyday (Food) Life in Jacmel: Working Women

As noted previously, for this research endeavor I worked with three women, T-Maude, Mayrose, and Nancy, all different in what they serve and how they prepare their fare. But they all belong to an "underground" network of women who pool their resources to survive, as I'll discuss in the next section. Cooking on the streets, though prevalent, is "dangerous work" according to T-Maude. "I have heard terrible stories, but here in Jacmel it's safer"—safer perhaps than the rumored violence of a big city like Port-au-Prince. But Mayrose said, "I have been attacked and robbed... Jacmel is a safe town, but I fear the police officers or the MINUSTAH"—the acronym for *Mission des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en Haïti*, which is the branch of the United Nations armed forces that has occupied the island since the politicized departure of Aristide. Danger is always looming, as the practice of cooking on the street is not regulated, licensed, or taxed. The women are quite vulnerable—from people on either side of the law, thieves and the magistrate.

T-Maude: Gender and Space

I always feel that I have officially arrived in Haiti after having a meal prepared by T-Maude at her restaurant, which



I affectionately refer to as “the shack on the beach.” It’s a small space set atop a stack of plywood and debris strewn with twigs and other refuse from trees. T-Maude takes great care with the used items dumped on the island by internationals—old mildew-stained chairs, makeshift tables with uneven cut plastic. The appearance of the place belies the culinary wonders brought forth from the kitchen. Though an old chalkboard from “Charlie’s Barbeque” is prominently displayed, with the menu inscribed in Kreol (this has not changed since the beginning of my fieldwork), you still have to ask for the menu, which changes daily. From a small closet of a room (the kitchen), T-Maude brings forth the most precious meals—tender fresh fish, fried banana soaking in the fish juices, along with slices of avocado, tomatoes, and potent onions. “T-Maude, what are you preparing?” I ask from across the room as I watch her chopping heads of cabbage. She retorts, “That man always want to know what I’m doing! He must love my food. Look at him, can’t you tell.” The room erupts in laughter. “I’m making *pikliz*, your favorite,” she says as she chops. *Pikliz* is a famous combination of spicy fermented cabbage, carrot, and pepper, a kimchi-like condiment that is served with most dishes.

Soon after I began my research in Haiti, I made a deal with T-Maude: I would help her out by working in her establishment (hence learning how to cook Haitian cuisine) and she would teach me Kreol. My work with T-Maude, coupled with my ongoing work with a community art center and my affiliation with a local vodou house, has helped me become, according to my friend Eugene, “a Haitian, one of us.”

T-Maude is a no-nonsense person who gives of her time to train young women to cook. Outside, behind the shack, you see young women prepping. Inside, some women wait on the three tables, while others assist T-Maude in the kitchen, cooking food. T-Maude came to Jacmel twenty years ago from the small town of Marigot to sell her food on the beach during one of the holiday festivities. She was an instant success, so she decided to stay in the area. She was able to garner a microloan through an international program, enabling her to establish her business. The microloan movement is largely successful in many developing countries, and it tends in particular to empower women. In Haiti, however, because of the lack of infrastructure and dismal literacy rate, many women are unable to meet even



Above: A traditional dinner at T-Maude's consisting of goat, pikliz, avocado, and onions with fried banana. **Left:** T-Maude's place on the beach.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MYRON M. BEASLEY © 2009, 2010

the basic qualifications for such loans. To qualify, one must be able to “have papers” (such as a birth certificate), own or have access to a place to establish a business, and have official “credit.” In a country where the adult literacy rate remains below 50 percent and the average income is only four U.S. dollars a month, and where laying hold of one’s “papers” is an arduous project, most women are unable to accrue the requirements for such programs.¹⁸ T-Maude’s success in getting a microloan is thus not commonplace.

Every evening T-Maude prepares a soup called *konsonmen*. It’s a potpourri of sorts, a thick broth with bones and meat from a variety of animals—from goat or beef intestines to chicken feet—with vegetables like leeks, green peppers, potatoes, garlic, onions, yams, chayote squash, and seasoned with Maggi cubes, salt, and spices like cloves. The hefty, oblong dumplings called *dombwèy* are a special treat in the white soup. According to T-Maude, in the mountain community from which she comes, women fight over who has the best *dombwèy* in their *konsonmen*.

One evening, as I sat on the sand at dusk, hot and humid and anticipating my *konsonmen*, I noticed how the restaurant’s space was uniquely masculine. Nadine, a young

woman who is also learning how to cook with T-Maude, had told me several weeks earlier, “Only women cook on the street, men who do are *pikliz*”—slang for homosexual. (Yet on any given day as you drive through the center of Jacmel and witness the chorus of barbecue stands with piles of chicken, you’ll see that most of them are run by men.) But I noticed on this particular evening while consuming my *konsonmen* that all of the customers were men. Periodically, one would see a woman accompanied by a man, and once at lunchtime I observed a woman coming to dine with her two children (which is even more rare). So dining-out spaces are male spaces with women in the kitchen. Even in the makeshift spaces of Mayrose and Nancy, during the high afternoon and early evening, the stream of people wanting a meal are almost exclusively men. Women may come to pick up a plate, but men linger. When I asked T-Maud about this, I was told that most women eat in the home, out of the public space.

Mayrose: The Open Market

It is 4:30 on a June morning and the humidity is already unbearable as I trek up the hill with Mayrose, a twenty-three-year-old who could easily pass for twelve. I have visited the *marché* (open air market) on several occasions as a tourist and was fascinated by the seemingly chaotic labyrinth filled with the orderly gesturing of bartering. This time with Mayrose, I come to the *marché* as a site of survival, a place where negotiation is not a choice, but rather a way of life. Here, one can't acquire the needed food without speed, astuteness, a sharp eye, persistence, and the ability to assert one's claims. The iron *marché* is a very tight space right in the center of the city, on a thoroughfare that slopes down a steep hill. Bodies cluster closely together blurring the lines between seller and buyer. It is a scrum of olfactory mayhem and color, where fruits and vegetables are organic by necessity.

Mayrose once said to me that her goal in life was to be a cosmetic salesperson. With her gleaming, beautiful smile and youthful appearance, one would think she could do well in such a profession. However, she finds herself here on the street corner preparing and selling meals, as this was the business she inherited from her mother, who sat at this very space for almost thirty years before her sudden death. With no children of her own, Mayrose is in this business to provide for her family—her five brothers and two sisters. The youngest, her six-year-old brother, joins her every morning to assist her. At the iron *marché* Mayrose's seemingly passive young face takes on a boisterous and audacious cast as she barter for the best prices for the ingredients she needs. It is common for many women to visit one particular purveyor every day, but Mayrose attends more to cost and availability. The cornmeal and beans are usually parceled out from international aid programs (but at times are challenging to find except through the informal system discussed in the next section), while vegetables, fish, and some meat must be bought at market from local farmers. Mayrose does have a particular person from whom she gets her beef: the meat man provides her a good discount if she prepares meals for his family. Her daily ritual is to rise early and make it to the market by 5:00 or 6:00 A.M. to get what she needs to cook for the day. "A good Haitian begins work at 4:00 A.M.," says Mayrose, and it is amazing to see the number of people out and about walking from the mountains to the city—to the market—to begin their day. By 6:00 A.M., the first rush has already occurred at the market.

I met Mayrose during my first visit to Jacmel as I was walking about the town early one morning. She was setting up shop, her stand consisting of old sheets strewn over sticks

to create three walls, and a ceiling made of old boxes. Three small benches inside provide sitting room for four or five people, and tree stumps are scattered outside of the tent-like structure to provide more seating. Her shop sits on the corner of a road that runs along a polluted stream filled with debris, mostly plastics. Wandering pigs scavenge about the landscape. At Mayrose's place three huge cauldrons are set atop burning coals as she prepares *Mais Moulin ak sos pwa* (yellow grits, beans, and meat sauce).¹⁹ It's a common dish found on the streets of Jacmel, where the yellow cornmeal is smothered with black beans and a heavy beef stew that's made by reducing mounds of carrots, cabbage, garlic, and onions with hunks of beef. It's a beautifully tasty dish, popular even in the more than ninety-degree summer weather; people wait in line for Mayrose's special preparation.

Nancy: *Trè Trè*

"I've cooked all around this town since I was ten years old," says the fifty-year-old Nancy. "In Haiti we must do what we need to do...we [Haitians] are revolutionaries...we take care of each other." I sit with Nancy and record our interview while she stirs her cauldron of *trè trè*. Only found in the cities of Jacmel and Jérémie, this dish is a preparation of tiny fish caught seasonally in June, December, and January. I first encountered Nancy selling her *trè trè* on the beach. I thought it was rice in a red sauce smothered with onions and was surprised to learn that the "rice" was minuscule dried fish, slowly simmered with tomatoes, *saf-rán*, green onions, cloves, and garlic and served on almond leaves. The dish's tomato flavor is sparked by a robust tinge of salt from the fish, which is in turn cut by the sweetness of the onion.

Nancy's fare is seasonal: she spends part of the year, when *trè trè* is available, on the beach, and other times she sells an assortment of meat, from barbecued chicken to pig ears. "I try very hard to feed people because so many of us are hungry," she said to me. "I try to keep my prices very low, but since April the price of even chicken is so expensive that I may not be able to sell it any longer." Nancy was referring to the price increases of food from wheat to corn to imported chicken—the price inflation that spurred the food riots of 2008. "I work with one fisherman, who provides me the [fish for] *trè trè* during season," she said, but her other ingredients come from a system of friends who have access to food "from the international aid trucks." She does not provide me with details of this private network.

"I do work to make a living, but I work also to provide for my people," claims Nancy. She asserts that she makes

very little if any in profits, that her goal is simply “to have enough money to have a roof over my head...living in Haiti is hard work...living in Haiti is all I know.” Nancy has three grown children, all of whom live with her in the same house, all trying to make ends meet. She never attended school and cannot read or write; her survival is contingent on her ability to keep cooking on the streets.

Sabotaj: Food Vendors and Collective Resistance

In 2008 the international press was full of news of the string of major natural disasters that hit the island (four major hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes), which corresponded with the food riots that mobilized the country for several weeks and toppled the prime minister. The press also reported on the amount and origins of international food aid promised to the island. But what the press rarely reports are the problems that follow, of actually getting food to the masses.²⁰ The systems of distribution are broken on many levels. For example, food aid can sit in storage for months before being distributed to hungry people—or it is never distributed at all. In light of the breakdown in disaster aid, Haitians fell back on a grassroots system of mutual reliance that allowed women like T-Maude, Mayrose, and Nancy to feed their communities and to take care of themselves and their families. Nancy says, “I take care of my people.” “My people” suggests a wider community, and concern for more than personal survival or making a profit. Nancy was evasive about disclosing where she was able to get some of her meat, though it became obvious that it was provided through her network, and was taken from (perhaps stolen from) international aid programs. In many instances that I witnessed, “aid” food remains stored for months and is never dispersed to the masses. The women’s resistance takes the form of usurping and navigating the corridors of national taxes and licensing, and even the structures of international aid programs, in order to survive. Further, this resistance is a performance in which they “play” within the strict confines of limited spaces allowed Haitian women—a survival tactic that includes taking care of the community as well as oneself.²¹

While working with the women, I was provided insight into one engine of this informal economy, a collective system of credit called *tontine*. Groups of women, including those who cook on the streets, contribute a small percentage of what they earn to a collective. The groups may emerge from membership in a vodou house, or be based on a shared location (for example, there is a collective of women

who cook on the beach), or arise out of some other shared circumstance or set of interests. The collective appoints one person (called the mother of the *sol*—short for *solidarity*) who is not a member of the collective, and who in many cases does not live in the immediate vicinity, to keep records of the contributed funds. The participants can draw upon these funds in extreme circumstances and even, in some cases, just to provide something special. “Sometimes I just want to have some butter,” says Paula, the coffee co-op coordinator. “Even getting butter here is challenging, as such products as cheese and butter are imported from France and mostly available in the big city.” She uses her network of other women’s collectives to get butter—“which is not too often,” she adds. Instead, the bulk of the resources gathered from her *tontine* might be used, for example, to repair the roof of one of its members’ houses. While I was spending time with Paula, the collective was discussing ways to pay someone to pick up a box of used boots from Port-au-Prince, as the women need shoes to work in the fields. According to the women I spoke with, such collectives provide a sense of community, foster social trust, and allow for a more functional and efficient sharing of resources, including food.

Haitians refer to this web of collectives, tongue-in-cheek, as *sabotaj*, from the French word *sabotage*, connoting deliberate, sustained resistance and subversion.²² According to T-Maude, “It’s a way for us to draw on our own system and also to take care of the other women in the community.” By making sense of the harsh realities of hunger and lack of food in their communities—by making meals available to the masses in spite of a formal system that simply does not get the job done—they subvert the power of the magistrate, of the entire system, in effect. They don’t randomly give meals away—they are in business, and they need to survive themselves—but through their systems of credit, barter, and negotiation, the vendors feed people who might not otherwise be fed.

A unique characteristic of this system is the validity of the “word”—what T-Maude describes as “what one speaks”—and its relationship to the exchange of material currency. One’s word means something. Credit and barter arrangements are made by giving one’s word that one will, for example, “pay your food bill at the end of the month,” explains T-Maude. The exchange of hard currency is common, but promising and giving one’s “word” that one will tender the amount due at the end of the month is even more common. When Mayrose goes to the *marché* in the morning to fetch her vegetables and meats, she pays cash for the vegetables, but she barter with the meat man. A couple of times while I was with her, she did not have the



small amount needed to pay for the vegetables, and without any hassle it was arranged that she would pay at the end of the month or when she had the cash. Negotiation is a necessity in these women's lives: the system of *tontine* and *sabotaj* gives it a form and a sort of fluid stability, and imbues it with trust. A beautiful element of trust is also seen in a *tontine* collective simply in the way it is structured: the mother of the *sol* is located outside the community. In this case, the mother of the *sol* was three hours away in Port-au-Prince, and was a person recommended to them by word of mouth. The women in the collective entrust her with their profits and confide in her ability to keep honest records and distribute the collective's resources fairly. The system is predicated on the "word."

Though we know that *sabotaj* and *tontine* exist, people do not publicly acknowledge that they belong to a collective, nor with whom they may form that collective. It's a very sensitive matter; as T-Maude said, "We Haitians are a jealous people." I heard the term "jealousy" bandied about a great deal, and I asked the women to help me make sense of how the term is understood. "We do wish each other well, but it is frowned upon to flaunt one's suc-

cess," Mayrose said. "This is what we consider jealousy." So a public performance of success is not acceptable in this community: it might draw attention to oneself, which in turn could garner unwanted attention to the co-op. The magistrate doesn't need to know some things. Attention imperils *sabotaj*.

Mayrose makes it very clear that, in her words, "privacy is not discrimination." In other words, the secrecy of the groups should not be confused with exclusionary practices. Rather, secrecy protects, but the collectives are always open, their members encouraging young women to participate in this system. I observe, through my intimate working relationships with these women, that such secrecy strengthens the bonds among the women in the patriarchal society of Haiti.

This system of credit is a fluid and flexible one that, at its core, is meant to feed the community, and, in the case of the vendors, it does so in several ways—not just with food. *Sabotaj* draws on the concept of the "word," an implicit trust that individuals will do what they say. Also, people who frequent the same vendor daily also come for social interaction with friends or family from other parts of the town, or the mountains. The vendors' stands become meet-



ing places and spaces of advice-seeking for men. Men come to eat for sure, but also to talk about their problems, be they with work or family: men are nourished in other ways as well. The cook—Nancy, T-Maude, and even Mayrose despite her youth—is elevated to the role of a counselor merely by her job. I witnessed several such sessions one afternoon while working with Mayrose. Joel, a patron, exclaimed, “I’m having a problem with my wife, Mayrose; I come to you because you’re always right.” She replied, “What is it this week?” Cook and customer; members of a *tontine*; a male customer and his neighbor—whether swapping lore and disclosure, providing or partaking in a meal, or negotiating material support, people come together at the vendors’. There they find nourishment for their roles as individuals claiming and constructing their own identities and as members of a community intent on survival, agency, and resistance.

Conclusion

Michel de Certeau reminds us that even a walk can be a form of resistance.²³ Women who cook on the streets of

Above: Trè trè is usually served on banana leaves. **Left:** A street-food vendor preparing trè trè.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MYRON M. BEASLEY © 2010

Jacmel, Haiti, engage in a performance of resistance as they enact a system of *sabotaj* that usurps the magistrate and supports the ties of the community. But most importantly, they provide food to the people more efficiently than governmental and international aid organizations. I returned to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake to continue my work and further document the lives and work of the women I know. The situation in Haiti is very dire. Even while the government and aid and development organizations struggle to help to the neediest, the women continue to engage in their more effective way of feeding the masses, and their importance is not lost on some. Haitian-born musician Wyclef Jean, in response to the food crisis in Haiti, has launched Yéle Cuisine, an alternative program (bypassing international aid programs and the Haitian government) that hires women who cook in the streets to provide meals for some of the poorest communities in Haiti.²⁴ Wyclef’s foundation and other independent Haitian groups understand the effectiveness of how the women who cook on the

streets can mobilize and make change in some communities. Their model is a successful one. Another new model involves sending seeds directly to local groups in farming communities to support small-scale farming and help build Haiti's food infrastructure. In Haiti, the food underground economy is *one* way to provide food to the masses. Others can be and are being found.

Postscript

From November 20, 2009, to January 4, 2010, I co-curated Haiti's first international art Biennale (GhettoBiennale.com) in Port-Au-Prince. The two years I spent in preparation for the Biennale were simultaneous with some of my work with the street food vendors of Jacmel. In addition to my administrative role during the Biennale, I participated in a performance of "Feeding the Grand Rue," in the neighborhood where most of the art was displayed, cooking alongside street-food vendors in the downtown neighborhood and distributing free meals each day. The devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010, left the already-dire food situation in Haiti even more critical. T-Maude and Mayrose continue to work and cook on the streets. Nancy did not survive; may she rest in peace. ☹

NOTES

Funding for this project was supported by grants from the McCinty Fund for Faculty Development, Bates College, and La Fondation Connaissance et Liberté/Fondasyon Konesans Ak Libète (FOKAL)/the Soros Foundation Haiti.

1. In July 2004 \$1.085 billion was pledged through 2006 at the World Bank Donors' Conference. Donors included the United States, Canada, the European Union, France, Sweden, Spain, Germany, Japan, Switzerland, Greece, Norway, Mexico, and Ireland. In November 2006, Haiti was approved for an International Monetary Fund (IMF) Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) and reached decision point under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. A legal minimum wage of seventy gourdes a day (about U.S. \$1.70) applies to most workers in the formal sector.

2. Mark Schuller, "Haitian Food Riots Unnerving but Not Surprising," *Worldpress*, 29 April 2008, at <http://www.worldpress.org/Americas/3131.cfm>.

3. Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2006).

4. Please see Michel Chossudovsky and Andrew Gavin Marshall, eds., *The Global Economic Crisis: The Great Depression of the XXI Century* (Montreal: Global Research Publishers, 2010); Naomi Hossain, "Reading Political Responses to Food, Fuel and Financial Crises: The Return of the Moral Economy?" *Development* 52, no. 3 (2009): 329–333.

5. Faye Venetia Harrison, *Resisting Racism and Xenophobia: Global Perspectives on Race, Gender, and Human Rights* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005); Sidney W. Mintz, *Papers in Caribbean Anthropology*, Yale University Publications in Anthropology (New Haven, CT: Published for the Dept. of Anthropology, Yale University, 1960); Augusta Lynn Bolles, *Sister Jamaica: A Study of Women, Work, and Households in Kingston* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996); Joycelin Massialh, *Women in Developing Economies: Making Visible the Invisible*, Berg/Unesco Comparative Studies (Providence, RI: Unesco, 1993); Christine Barrow, *Family in the Caribbean: Themes and Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Wiener, 1999).

6. Carole Charles, "Gender and Politics in Contemporary Haiti: The New Davalierist State, Transnationalism, and the Emergence of a New Feminism (1980–1990)," *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 1 (1995): 135–165; Beverly Bell, *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Gina Ulysse, "Papa, Patriarchy, and Power: Snapshots of a Good Haitian Girl, Feminism, and Diasporic Dreams," *The Journal of Haitian Studies* 12, no. 1 (2006), 24–47; M.J. N'Zengou-Tayo, "Fanm Se Poto Mitan: Haitian Woman, the Pillar of Society," *Feminist Review* 59 (1998): 118–142.

7. Bruce Wiegand, *Off the Books: A Theory and Critique of the Underground Economy* (Dix Hills, NY: General Hall, 1992); Phillip Mattera, *Off the Books: The Rise of the Underground Economy* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1985); Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

8. Alladi Venkatesh, *Off the Books*, xix.

9. Hernando de Soto, *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

10. John C. Cross, *Informal Politics: Street Vendors and the State in Mexico City* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3; María Fernández-Kelly, *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983).

11. Cross, *Informal Politics*, 2.

12. Barbara Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Barbara Browning, *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

13. Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), xvii–xviii.

14. D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005); Dwight Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," *Communication Monograph* 58 (1991): 179–194.

15. Myron M. Beasley, "Pipoca/Popcorn: Resistance and Ritual Performance," *Performance Research* 12, no. 4 (2008): 167–172.

16. Bernard Diederich, "Swine Fever Ironies: The Slaughter of the Haitian Black Pig," *Caribbean Review* 14, no. 1 (1985): 16–17, 41. Also view the film *Haiti's Piggy Bank*, which can be found online at <http://vimeo.com/25096965>, and the film *A Pig's Tale*, which can be found online at <http://paulinproductionsclub.weebly.com/a-pigs-tale.html>.

17. Philip Gaertner, "Whether Pigs Have Wings," accessed 3 July 2011 at www.webster.edu/~corbete/haiti/miscopic/pigs/gaertner.htm.

18. The most recent statistics on the condition of Haiti are found at the United States Department of State's Web site at <http://www.state.gov/t/pe/ai/bgn/1982.htm>.

19. This process of coal burning is of great concern because it is one of the causes of the depletion of trees and soil erosion.

20. "Gov. Paterson Apologizes for Delayed Relief to Haiti," *Daily News*, 4 December 2008, available at www.nydailynews.com/latino/2008/12/04/2008-12-04_gov_paterson_apologizes_for_delayed_reli-2.html.

21. For the women, the care for self means a sense of *empowerment*. The term empowerment is a contested concept with a variety of definitions, particularly in the "third world" and "development economics" literature. For many the term is defined as a process pertaining to outcomes and development, as a way to gain financial independence, and even something that can be measured. I define empowerment as life-changing activities that encourage individuals, through self-examination, to construct their own sense of self and equip themselves with the power to claim their own identity, which in turn helps individuals to achieve goals. Though they do gain some type of financial "independence," this underground network provides a sense of greater freedom to make more choices about their lives.

22. Officially, the system is known as *tontine*. *Sabotaj* is the word used on the street.

23. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

24. See www.yele.org/.