

6. Embodied Worship in a Haitian Protestant Church in the Bahamas: Religious Habitus among Bahamians of Haitian Descent

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In 2021 Haitians constitute the largest immigrant group in the Bahamas, where they are highly stigmatized owing to their large representation in Bahamian society and their unique cultural and historical heritage.¹ Many Haitians turn to religious practice as a way to counter normative exploitation, humiliation, and marginalization. Traditionally, Haitians have practiced Catholicism and Vodou. But now Protestant forms of Christianity are flourishing in the Haitian diaspora in the Bahamas (Louis 2014).

The observations and analyses presented in this chapter emerge from ethnographic research conducted in New Providence (Nassau), Bahamas, in 2005 and a research trip to New Providence for two and half weeks in the summer of 2012 (late June and early July), where I collected ethnographic data (through participant observation and interviews) for a project on de facto stateless Haitians.² To conduct studies on Haitians in the Bahamas, researchers usually go through Haitian churches to find participants (see College of the Bahamas 2005; Louis 2014; Perry 2017). Haitian Protestantism is on the rise among migrants in the Bahamas, and most Haitians attend Baptist, charismatic, Nazarene, Pentecostal, and other Protestant churches. In a 2005 survey concerning the religion they practiced, 27.7 percent of Haitians interviewed in the Bahamas replied Catholic, whereas 29.1 percent claimed to be Anglican, Baptist, or Pentecostal (College of the Bahamas 2005, 100). These figures suggest a new religious plurality among Haitians in the Bahamas, whereas in 1979 geographer Dawn Marshall (1979, xiii) remarked that the typical Haitian migrant was “al-

most certainly a Roman Catholic.” Haitians attend church to maintain their premigratory religiosity. They also attend church owing to the strong Christian religious culture of the Bahamas and the centrality of church life to Bahamian social life. This, in turn, makes Haitian Protestant and Catholic churches the premier institutions that serve various Haitian needs (spiritual, emotional, financial, and political).

In this chapter I focus on the embodied worship of Bahamians of Haitian descent—people of Haitian parentage born in the Bahamas who are stateless and become Bahamian citizens after the age of eighteen—through the concept of religious habitus: dispositions that are internalized by adherents and reflect particular forms of religiosity. I argue that the development of the religious habitus of Bahamians of Haitian descent through varying forms of embodied worship combines Haitian and Bahamian elements and serves as a key component of an eventual Bahamian identity that partly requires them to be Christians, as the majority of Bahamians identify as Christian. I focus on these sociocultural processes at Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene, a church founded to minister to the population of Haitian Bahamians. Haitian Protestant hymnody, liturgical dance, and prayer reflect social processes of individual and collective self-remaking through linguistic and embodied practices, which allow Bahamians of Haitian descent to negotiate their different contested identities. In particular, Bahamians of Haitian descent develop a unique, hybrid Christian habitus, both embodied and linguistic, that is developed through bodily and spiritual practices. This, in turn, is part of a dynamic ongoing process that helps them negotiate cultural belonging in the Bahamas (Chong 2015, 109). The religious practices of my interlocutors also demonstrate that religious habitus in practice is more malleable than the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) theoretical conceptualization of habitus as solely unconscious, unalterable behavioral internalization would suggest. As my ethnographic research demonstrates, religious habitus can be altered and can reflect self-conscious changes that differ from traditional expectations of how one is supposed to act, behave, and worship within particular religious spaces (Mahmood 2001).

First, I discuss religious habitus. Then, I cover Haitian migration to the Bahamas, Bahamian identity, and Haitian identity formation in the Bahamas. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Protestant Christianity as a religious choice for Haitians and of the religious habitus at Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene, a church focused on saving the souls of children of Haitian descent while providing them with a Christian-based sense of dignity to comprehend, combat, and withstand the normative degradation of their Haitian-based identities.

Religious Habitus

This chapter looks at the development of religious habitus through embodied worship at Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene, where Bahamians of Haitian descent worship within the larger context of the Black, Christian, and xenophobic Bahamas. I use Bourdieu's (1977) work on habitus, which allows us to better understand the processes and effects associated with the internalization of religious experience, with attention to perception and phenomenological experience. In their work on Haitian religion in Miami, Florida, anthropologist Terry Rey and sociologist Alex Stepick (2013, 8–9) add that habitus is also, according to Bourdieu, the “matrix of perception” through which one makes sense of the world and the seat or generator of one's dispositions, inclinations, and tastes. Habitus is also fundamentally about “perception and inclination.”

Rey and Stepick also understand religious habitus in relation to a Haitian religious *collusio* (the field within which people interact). Rey and Stepick (2013) argue that this religious *collusio* is a shared substratum of features that runs beneath the three major religions practiced in Haiti and its diaspora: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Vodou. This religious *collusio* unites Haitians across denominational and religious differences despite the antagonisms that invariably occur through the interaction of the different religions, their historical interplay, and the subsequent habitus produced from regularized inculcation in each varying religious tradition. Specifically, the Haitian religious *collusio* “consists in large part of a ‘practical sense’ that life in this world is inhabited by invisible, supernatural forces that are to be served and which can be called upon and operationalized toward healing ills, mitigating plight, enhancing luck, and achieving goals” (9–10).

How does Rey and Stepick's religious *collusio* relate to religious habitus? It is first important to understand the importance of religion to the Haitian diaspora of the Bahamas. Haitians are a population that is, for the most part, economically disadvantaged and lives on the margins of “paradise.” Religion “functions to provide a sense of *dignity* [my emphasis] that may be otherwise absent—a sense that they are *worthy* [original emphasis] in spite of it all” (Rey and Stepick 2013, 10). Thus, religious habitus “*inclines* people to embrace symbolic systems that pronounce for them their worthiness, systems that are predicated upon the existence of supernatural forces, and thus orient their lives in accordance with them” (10).

Other scholars use Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus in religious studies because of the concept's potential to foreground the role of the body in religious experience. Sociologists of religion Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling view religious habitus as a set of “embodied predispositions which promote particu-

lar forms of orientation to the world . . . [which include] a number of features of embodiment specific to religious life” (2015, 217).³ As the late anthropologist Saba Mahmood writes in reference to her research about the Muslim act of prayer (*ṣalāt*) among a women’s piety movement in Cairo, Egypt, Bourdieu used habitus as a “means to integrate conceptually phenomenological and structuralist approaches so as to elucidate how the supraindividual structure of society comes to be lived in human experience” (2001, 837). Mahmood also criticizes Bourdieu’s conceptualization of habitus as too rigid. In her fieldwork with mosque participants, Mahmood found that although the body served as a “site of moral training and cultivation” (838) there were variations in how Muslims constructed their ethical and religious identities that were influenced by conscious change. In other words, habitus is not solely unconscious but can also be malleable and reflect religious self-fashioning; an individual’s part of a larger religious institution and/or collective can use different cultural elements (combining different ways to be Christian, for instance) to become particular kinds of religious entities—not mechanistic cookie-cutter versions of the same type of Christian.

How do subjects, like Bahamians of Haitian descent, use religion to fashion lives of inclusion and dignity within a social context that has at its core a relentless devaluation of Haitianness? How does a person live a life of dignity in a society where there is an incessant assault on their being? How does a person of Haitian descent attempt to be a respected member of a largely Christian society that is fundamentally anti-Haitian?

In relation to my research consultants and the overall situation of Haitians in the anti-Haitian Bahamas, religious habitus is more than the mechanistic inculcation and embodiment of religious doctrine and culture that Bourdieu posits and Mahmood critiques. Religious habitus becomes a tool that Bahamians of Haitian descent use to build a stable sense of self while internalizing secular and religious aspects of Bahamian and Haitian socioreligious life while living between Bahamian and Haitian culture. Religious habitus is more pliable and accommodating when we look at Bahamians of Haitian descent, who use elements from Haitian Protestant culture, Bahamian religious culture, and secular culture to produce unique Christian (Nazarene) religious identities that reflect a hybrid Haitian and Bahamian religious identity as well as producing Christian and, in some cases, eventual Bahamian citizens of Haitian descent. They use hybrid ideas about how Bahamians and Haitians practice Protestant forms of Christianity to fashion a life of self-worth and dignity in a society that violates their basic human rights and racializes Haitians as lower in social status than Bahamians.

In addition to my own conceptualization of religious habitus vis-à-vis Bahamians of Haitian descent, I also draw on Rey and Stepick's discussion of religious habitus to explain why a specific form of Haitian Protestantism (Nazarene Christianity) is so attractive and important to Haitians in the Bahamas, in addition to other reasons that I have outlined elsewhere (Louis 2014). I also draw from sociologist Kelly Chong's (2015) work on religious habitus among South Korean evangelical women to analyze and describe the minutiae of religious practice among Bahamian Christians of Haitian descent that reflects religious habitus. Chong's work focuses on the religious practices of a population that help them negotiate patriarchy and redomestication into a family/gender regime, which helps to maintain South Korean gender arrangements. Chong's work on religious habitus is also useful for providing insights about how Bahamians of Haitian descent access and experience the divine in relation to lives that are shaped by heritage, racism, de facto statelessness, shame, and anger.

Haitian Protestantism, Migration to the Bahamas, and Bahamian Identity

As some religious studies scholars of Latin America and the Caribbean observe, parts of Latin America that were formerly Catholic are becoming Protestant. The growth and success of Protestantism in areas like Colombia (see Brusco 1995) and Jamaica (see Austin-Broos 1997) also extend to Haiti. Since the Wesleyan Missionary Society was established in Haiti in 1817, Protestantism has grown steadily, whereas Haitians traditionally practiced Catholicism and Vodou, all within a historical context of Black revolutionary triumph, poverty, consistent and continued foreign interference (by the United States, France, Germany, foreign nongovernmental organizations, and the United Nations, for example), state repression of the Haitian people, environmental degradation, and the earthquake of January 12, 2010. To illustrate, in 1930 approximately 1.5 percent of Haiti's population practiced Protestant forms of Christianity like the Baptist faith, Pentecostalism, and Methodism. Between 1930 and 1950, the population of Protestants tripled and then doubled again. According to the Haitian sociologist Charles-Poisset Romain (1986, 81), 20 percent of Haiti had converted to some form of Protestant Christianity by 1986. A conservative estimate is that one-third of Haiti's contemporary population is Protestant (Butler 2002, 85).⁴

Haitians tend to leave their home country during periods of intense political and economic turmoil and environmental degradation, migrating to countries throughout the Western Hemisphere and within the surrounding region, such

as to the Bahamas. Most Haitians in the Bahamas migrated to the island of New Providence, where Nassau (the capital) and two-thirds of the Bahamian population are located. In 2019 Haitians constituted the largest immigrant group in the Bahamas (approximately thirty thousand to sixty thousand Haitians in a country with a population of just over four hundred thousand). Many, if not most, Haitians are undocumented workers employed as restaurant staff, construction workers, housekeepers, and landscapers. This population has become highly stigmatized owing to continued Haitian migration to the Bahamas, negative media reports concerning Haitians, a lack of research on the Haitian population of the Bahamas, Bahamian xenophobia, and Bahamian governmental policies enacted to limit a Haitian population that is perceived as becoming too large. Haitians are viewed as threatening the sovereignty and social stability of the Bahamas because they are currently regarded as being unassimilable. The people of the Bahamas are very hostile toward Haitians specifically and foreigners in general.

The Bahamas gained political independence from its British colonial master through a relatively peaceful transition of power on July 9, 1973. Tourism became the major economic strategy of modernization after Bahamian independence (Alexander 1997, 67). Tourism accounts for 60 percent of the nation's gross domestic product and employs half of the Bahamian labor force, which makes the per capita income of the Bahamas one of the highest in the Caribbean and Latin America. Although the Bahamas is comparatively more affluent than many of its Caribbean neighbors, the Bahamian economy is subject to moments of uncertainty similar to those other countries experience as part of the global economy. The global financial crisis of 2008 adversely affected the Bahamas. While the economy shows some signs of improvement, the current economic and social realities still make life for the average Bahamian difficult. As of late December 2015, the unemployment rate was 14.8 percent, with unemployment at 30 percent among youth (those between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four). With stagnant wages and the introduction of value-added tax on goods, the cost of living continues to rise. The homicide rate has increased steadily over the years and reached an all-time high of 146 murders in 2015. So the Bahamas is not a paradise, at least not to the average Bahamian and definitely not for its Haitian population. The nation faces the challenges of being part of a larger capitalist economic system in an increasingly globalizing world.

The Bahamas is also a predominantly Black nation, with approximately 85 percent of the population African descended. Bahamian identity is diverse and contains African, American, British, Gullah, and Haitian elements. This hybrid background stems from a history of slavery, migration throughout the Caribbean, and in-migration from other Caribbean areas. Bahamian culture also

shares features with other cultures within the region that situate it in a larger African diaspora. The Junkanoo celebration and Bahamian storytelling are examples of a culture that has African origins (Johnson 1991, 17). Another core element of Bahamian identity is the collective practice and observance of Christianity.

The Bahamas prides itself on being a Christian nation where the majority of the inhabitants (96 percent) practice Catholic and Protestant forms of Christianity. Church is arguably more important to the Bahamian social fabric than school, government, or often even the family. As sociologist Dean Collinwood reflects, the most important features of Bahamian life—conscience development, mate selection and marriage, and vital social activities—take place within the confines of the church (Collinwood 1989, 16).

While Christianity plays an important role in contemporary Bahamian identity, another aspect is Bahamians' tendency to be xenophobic. As historian Howard Johnson (1991, 17) observes, resentment of foreigners is a long-standing tradition within Bahamian culture and provides an element of cohesion within a society long divided according to class, color, and race. A historical moment when a distrust of foreigners occurred was the 1920s, when skilled West Indian laborers arrived to work in the growing tourist industry. Bahamian xenophobia during that period culminated in 1926, when flows of West Indian laborers were curtailed owing to a decrease in labor opportunities. This type of resentment has carried over to the contemporary period. As Haitians continue to migrate to the Bahamas, the perceived large size of the Haitian community feeds into xenophobic fears shared by many Bahamians, which are reflected in recent changes to Bahamian immigration policy. In 2014 the Progressive Liberal Party, the ruling party of the Bahamas at the time, made a series of policy changes to establish restrictions targeting Haitian communities in the Bahamas and their progeny (Martinez 2015). Some of these restrictions include the requirement that all people living in the Bahamas have a passport from their country of nationality, which means a passport from their parents' country. Within this context, the identities of Haitians born in the Bahamas develop.

Haitian Identity Formation in the Bahamas

As historians Michael Craton and Gail Saunders (1998) observe, the Bahamian state tends to lump all Haitians together in “an undifferentiated mass” (457) regardless of a person's legal status, birth in the Bahamas, or familial ties. This obscures the internal differentiation within a population that includes Haitian migrants, Haitians born in the Bahamas, people of Haitian descent with Ba-

hamian citizenship (Bahamians of Haitian descent), and Haitians who were born in the Bahamas but have spent part or most of their lives in Haiti and currently reside in the Bahamas. An individual has an automatic right to Bahamian citizenship in the following cases: they are born in the Bahamas, and either of their parents is Bahamian; they are born overseas to a married Bahamian man; or they are born overseas to an unwed Bahamian mother. The progeny of Haitians are thus not granted automatic citizenship, are ineligible for the rights that go with Bahamian citizenship (i.e., voting in local and national elections, being eligible for national and foreign college scholarships, attending college without paying the high fees that foreign-born students pay), and are ascribed the nationality of their parents (Martinez 2015).⁵ Regarding the product of a Haitian union, the Haitian Constitution does not recognize children of Haitian parentage as Haitian citizens; they must be born on Haitian soil to obtain Haitian citizenship. Therefore, with the Bahamas following the *jus sanguinis* law of nationality and Haiti following the *jus soli* law of nationality, these children are legally neither Bahamian nor Haitian. In other words, they are *de facto* stateless, which renders their Haitian nationality ineffective. Haitian nationality in the Bahamas provides neither Haitian nor Bahamian citizenship until the age of eighteen, when the children can apply for Bahamian citizenship; some receive it, and some do not (Belton 2010).

In addition to being stateless, the progeny of Haitians are regularly humiliated and marginalized owing to their racialization as Haitian, at the bottom of the Bahamian racial hierarchy. Haitian identities are constructed from their familial heritage as well as from how Haitians are treated by the Bahamian state through the law and in Bahamian public schools. Many of my research consultants from 2005 and 2012 remarked that they were ridiculed and denigrated by Bahamian students and teachers at school, which is the leading site of their interaction and socialization as future Bahamians. In fact, their experiences at school prevented many from publicly identifying as Haitian. Teasing for being Haitian was at times so severe for children of Haitian parentage that they got into physical altercations with bullies, and some did not go to school at all. One young woman I interviewed in 2005 noted that she stayed away from school for most of a year because of the incessant teasing from her Bahamian classmates.

As a result of laws that marginalize them, Haitians utilize various strategies to survive the hostile Bahamian social climate, which include but are not limited to accommodation, ethnocide (passing as Bahamian by changing their names, sometimes legally, to a Bahamian surname, for example), and individual acts of resistance (physically fighting one's tormentors, for instance). Religion and the

church, the preeminent institution that addresses Haitian concerns, also play an important role for Haitians. As Rey and Stepick observe, religious congregations “can be a source of social support, solace, and identity formation” (2013, 11). These forms of congregational support “can be conceived of [as] different kinds of ‘symbolic capital,’” for example, as resources that can be transformed or “transubstantiated” into material capital and “provide immigrants with an arena for the maintenance of their homeland cultural identity, wherein they also accrue these and other forms of symbolic capital” (11). Haitian church participation also is a collective space that allows Haitian Bahamians, as they are popularly referred to, to learn Haitian Creole and other Haitian customs while developing a hybrid religious habitus (partly Haitian and partly the Christian religious culture found in the Bahamas). Participation in Haitian Protestant denominations also allows Haitians to affirm an identity that at its foundation is evangelical Christian, challenges Bahamian societal stereotypes, and prepares Haitian progeny to become Bahamians of Haitian descent.

Victory Chapel and Religious Habitus: Fet Mwason and Liturgical Dance

Founded in September 25, 1988, as a church to minister to the children of Haitian descent born in the Bahamas, Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene is a one-level church with a sanctuary that can accommodate at least 250 people. The church moved to its Minnie Street location in 1995. Rev. Dr. Antoine Saint Louis, a charismatic Bahamian of Haitian descent, heads Victory Chapel. He observed in an interview in 2012 that the Haitian children born in the Bahamas were unable to appreciate their two cultures until a church was created where young people could come and be proud of their parents and their place of birth (the Bahamas). Victory Chapel serves as this space, in response to rejection by Bahamian society and culture and, at times, by Haitians and Haitian culture. During my first visit in 2005, the congregation was 50 percent Haitian and 50 percent children and adults of Haitian descent. During my visit in 2012, Victory Chapel’s congregation was 60 percent Haitian and 40 percent adults and children of Haitian descent. The congregations at other churches I had studied previously, like New Haitian Mission Baptist Church and International Tabernacle of Praise Ministries (Louis 2014), overwhelmingly consisted of Haitian migrants rather than Bahamians of Haitian descent. A look at a typical church service at Victory Chapel partly illuminates how religious habitus develops.

While a diversity of denominations (Adventist, Baptist, Methodist, Charismatic, and Pentecostal) comprise Haitian Protestantism, shared aspects of Hai-

tian Protestant culture provide the burgeoning transnational religious movement with some cohesion. Some of these traits include a rejection of Vodou and the use of a Protestant vocabulary. Other traits include ritualized practices common in Haitian Protestant liturgy, such as the singing of songs and hymns that circulate throughout Haiti and the Haitian diaspora transnationally and are used in church (Louis 2014). Regardless of where Haitian Protestant services are held—Boston Missionary Baptist Church in Massachusetts; the First French-Speaking Baptist Church of Saint Louis, Missouri; Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene in New Providence, Bahamas; or the Pentecostal Unis of Port-au-Prince, Haiti—many share a similar worship format. Most church services begin with a *culte d'adoration* or *adoration et louange* (worship and praise) portion in which adherents worship and praise God through hymns and prayers led by members of the church hierarchy. Haitian Protestant hymnody is usually drawn from *Chants D'Espérance* (Songs of hope), a Baptist hymnal used by Haitian Protestant churches within a larger transnational social field.

In my study of Haitian Protestantism, a song I have heard at churches in Brooklyn, New York; at family gatherings in Boston and Washington, D.C.; and at Victory Chapel on several occasions is “Dieu Tout Puissant” (Almighty God), selection 27 from the “Melodies Joyeuses” (Joyous melodies) section of *Chants D'Espérance*. You would not find this hymn, sung in French or Haitian Creole, at a Bahamian church because Bahamian church services are in English. Thus, Victory Chapel creates a sacralized space where the denigration of Haitians’ linguistic hybridity (the ability to speak and understand Haitian Creole and English) is absent, unlike in the anti-Haitian Bahamian society. Singing this song also embodies some of the traditions of Haitian Protestant culture for adherents at Victory Chapel, which in turn enculturates their progeny. Embodied aspects of transnational Haitian Protestant church culture are on full display—such as swaying one’s hands in the air, stretching out one’s hands reaching to God, and shouting in Haitian Creole “Amen,” “Beniswa Letènèl” (Praise the Lord), “Glwa a Dyè” (Glory to God), and “Mèsi Seyè” (Thank you, Lord). Haitian migrants and Bahamians of Haitian descent embody Haitian Protestant culture by kneeling at the altar in fervent, silent prayer while others are standing and singing from memory or their hymnals, like at other Haitian Protestant churches I observed transnationally (in Saint Louis, Missouri; Boston, Massachusetts; and Port-au-Prince, Haiti). When “Dieu Tout Puissant” was sung at Victory Chapel during my fieldwork in 2005, it was done first in French and then in Creole, translating to “Ala w Gran” (“How Great Thou Art”).⁶

Sunday morning services at Victory Chapel also reflect how the church ministers to the spiritual and social needs of Haitians born in the Bahamas. Sunday

morning services were usually bilingual, conducted in Haitian Creole and English (the official language of the Bahamas), where the pastor would preach in Haitian Creole offering spiritual advice as to how to lean on God and one's Christian character during difficult moments in a person's life. A Bahamian of Haitian descent usually would translate *lapawol de Dye* (the word of God) into English for those Haitian-descended adherents and visitors who did not understand and/or fluently speak or understand Haitian Creole.

When I visited the church in 2012, it was my first time back in the Bahamas since my initial fieldwork in 2005. I was there to conduct follow-up interviews with key informants and new participants about the lived realities of de facto stateless people (Haitian-descended people). During my return, I served as a consultant to David Baluarte, a noted human rights lawyer who is an expert on de jure statelessness. He established a nationality rights clinic called the Nationality Support Unit (NSU) in the Bahamas under the purview of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. On June 24, 2012, David, other members of the NSU, and I went to Victory Chapel. That Sunday was the last day of Fet Mwason (the Haitian harvest [La Moisson in French]). Fet Mwason is celebrated in Haitian churches of various denominations (Baptist, Nazarene, and Pentecostal, for example) in Haiti and in Haiti's diaspora in the Bahamas and the United States. In Haiti it is customary for members of the congregation to bring items from their gardens to the church and place them in front of the altar in a devotional manner. The fruits and vegetables represent the blessings God bestowed upon them through the year. Toward the end of the service, a prayer is said for these blessings, and the items are sold after the service at another location in the church to raise funds for church projects like buying new furniture and replacing other vital items in the church. The biblical source of the meaning of La Moisson comes from a section in the Old Testament: 2 Chronicles 31, which describes the bringing of offerings (food gifts) to the gates of a temple. That day, the church also had a visiting *predikatè* (preacher or evangelist) from a Haitian evangelical church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, continuing the transnational practice of Haitian Protestant churches in the Bahamas inviting male Haitian evangelists and pastors from Haiti and its diaspora to preach during church services.

That morning, David, the other representatives from the NSU, and I participated in an animated and emotionally charged church service that included a speech from David that declared that the Haitian-descended people born in the Bahamas had a "right to nationality," which caused many of the Haitian teenagers and Bahamians of Haitian descent in attendance to cheer and scream. David also discussed the services of the NSU that could help them through an

intake process that could lead to Bahamian citizenship for many of those who were eligible. I delivered a speech that encouraged the Haitian children and teenagers and Bahamians of Haitian descent to draw on their Haitian heritage and to participate in creating a new, fairer Bahamas. I also observed a newer feature in Victory Chapel worship and praise that had been absent during my visits in 2005: liturgical dance. Liturgical dance, an African American church tradition adopted by Bahamian churches, informs the religious habitus of the younger members of Victory Chapel born in the Bahamas. According to one of my research consultants, her use of liturgical dance increased after October 2006 owing to her love of dance (also reflected by other young Haitian women). She recognized that they had adopted the cultural form from Bahamian and international churches. According to her, there was initial resistance to liturgical dance at Victory Chapel partly because, at the time, it was not part of the religious culture of Victory Chapel nor the larger Haitian Protestant community, which tends to be culturally conservative. But according to my research consultant, after some time, people in the church (Haitian migrants mostly) grew to accept and appreciate it (see figure 6.1).

That morning, some of the young women of Victory Chapel danced to a popular African American gospel song by Grammy Award-winning songwriter Pastor Charles Jenkins and Fellowship Chicago, called “Awesome (My God Is).” While standing in place, the dancers pushed their hands down to the lyrics “keep me in the valley” and covered their faces with their hands. They simulated rain falling down through their raised hands coming down, while wiggling their fingers, when the words “hide me from the rain” were sung. Embodied ritual-like liturgical dance demonstrates how Dr. Saint Louis encourages the church’s youth to express themselves religiously through popular culture and other cultural forms not readily a part of the Protestant religious traditions of Haiti because he wants them to grow as Christians. Haitian Protestant religious traditions can sometimes be experienced as restrictive by the youth of the church who were born in the Bahamas. But as the dance description describes and figure 6.1 displays, the movements reflect a form of religious worship expressed through their bodies, which helps to reinforce a Christian identity and also resonates with Bahamian cultural identity.

During that service the young women danced with intensity, with the choreographer (dancing with her face covered, to the left in figure 6.1) crying while she danced. The passionate religiosity of so-called Haitian Bahamians is informed by the religious spiritual context but also stems from an effort to cope not only with the individual challenges they face in the Bahamas but with the realities of living in a society that is structured against them. This means not having



FIGURE 6.1. Liturgical dance at Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene, New Providence, Bahamas, June 24, 2012. Photograph by author.

the same rights as a Bahamian citizen, which include not being able to open a bank account, not being able to vote, and not being able to access the same educational privileges that Bahamian students can. Through these dances and movements that are coordinated with the lyrics of this gospel song, which is popular in the United States and was played over the Bahamian airwaves during my visit, we can see how alternative Christian subjectivities are constituted through ritual dance. We also see how the dancers construct a hybrid Christian identity that draws from an international context (the United States) that is influenced and appropriated by the local societal context (the Bahamas). Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene, created for Haitian-descended people, informs a hybrid Christian identity that draws from the Protestant religious culture of Haiti and its diaspora in the Bahamas. This example of “praise dancing,” as the main choreographer of the routine refers to the ritual genre found in many churches in the African diaspora, also demonstrates how religious culture changes upon finding adequate cultural practices that correspond to the needs of religious practitioners and to the challenges they face in building a stable sense of self, living between Bahamian and Haitian culture.

Religious Habitus: Prayer at Victory Chapel

In 2005 Haitian pastors estimated that there were at least twenty Haitian Protestant churches in the Bahamas. As of 2012 there were at least forty-two churches. So why do Haitian-descended children flock to Victory Chapel? One reason is that the church was created to minister to them. Another reason is the nature of the Nazarene denomination. For Victory Chapel adherents, the intentional choice to attend a Nazarene church is important because this church's doctrine focuses on regeneration, continued growth as a Christian, and the normative repentance for sins. Adherents at Victory Chapel access the divine in part through impassioned prayer, which is part of their religious habitus. A particularly morbid example from my fieldwork that reflects religious habitus as well as the insecurity of people of Haitian descent in the Western Hemisphere illustrates this point.

After the fet mwason service on June 24, 2012, I attended a mass funeral on Saturday, June 30, for eleven Haitians who died when the boat they took to get to the United States capsized and all the people drowned (figures 6.2 and 6.3). Included in the death toll were children.

This tragedy cast a dark cloud over Nassau's Haitian community. That somber feeling was evident at the night service at Victory Chapel I attended the following Sunday, July 1. Toward the end of that service, Dr. Saint Louis held a special prayer for the youth of the church and asked them to assemble in front of the altar. He prayed for protection for the church's youth within Bahamian society. That night, the youth of Victory Chapel prayed fervently for twenty-five to thirty minutes straight, longer than any other time I had observed in all of my transnational studies of Haitian Protestant culture, confessing and surrendering to God as is taught in the Nazarene tradition. Fervent prayer is a ritual that is "linguistic and embodied" and "a way to experience the divine, especially the Holy Spirit," as Chong (2015, 116) describes in her work on South Korean evangelical women. Most of the people assembled knelt in front of the altar and prayed quietly with their eyes closed (see figures 6.4 and 6.5). As a leader of the church, Dr. Saint Louis helps the youth of Victory Chapel interpret the world around them through a Nazarene worldview and also aids them in learning the proper embodied "techniques and methods with which to carry out such prayers, that is, teach[es] them *how to pray*" (Chong 2015, 116).

The young adherents in the church learn how to pray and be Nazarene Christians to counter, among other things, the dehumanizing effects of societal marginalization in the Bahamas because of their Haitian heritage and to resist the evil vices of the secular world (such as premarital sex, drugs, and alcohol).



FIGURE 6.2. Caskets containing adults at a mass funeral for Haitians, New Providence, Bahamas, June 24, 2012. Photograph by author.



FIGURE 6.3. Caskets containing children at a mass funeral for Haitians, New Providence, Bahamas, June 24, 2012. Photograph by author.



FIGURE 6.4. Prayer at Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene, New Providence, Bahamas, July 1, 2012. Photograph by author.



FIGURE 6.5. Prayer at Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene, New Providence, Bahamas, July 1, 2012. Photograph by author.

Specifically, Haitian children raised in Bahamian society learn to hate the nationality of their parents because of how it relegates them to the bottom of Bahamian society. Bahamian society rejects Haitian Bahamians so that, among other reasons, the labor of their parents can best serve the Bahamian economy. Bahamians of Haitian descent who attend Victory Chapel enjoy participating in the church partly because it is the church of the eventual Bahamian. That is, many of the progeny of the documented and undocumented migrants who attend the church will eventually become Bahamian citizens.⁷ Victory Chapel reflects the liminal, stateless experience of people who were born Haitian, live as Haitians in the Bahamas until the age of eighteen, and then become Bahamian after they are granted Bahamian citizenship. They enjoy attending and participating in activities at Victory Chapel because it is one of the few spaces in Bahamian society where their cultural hybridity is celebrated and normative. Victory Chapel is also active in agitating for citizenship reform through the United Haitian Association in the Bahamas (UHAB). The UHAB president, Dr. Saint Louis of Victory Chapel, has repeatedly recommended to Bahamian government officials that they grant birthright citizenship to people of Haitian descent born in the Bahamas.⁸

Conclusion

In an interview with Victory Chapel member Brother Glodys, a Bahamian of Haitian descent, I asked him about the term *Haitian Bahamian* and whether he considered it to be an indignity, as did some Haitians born in the Bahamas, as a way to describe his identity and, by extension, the identities of other eventual Bahamians.⁹ He responded:

It's not a legal term, so when they say Haitian Bahamian, I'm always asking the question, "Am I a potcake?" because I'm mixed.

A potcake is a dog that has two pedigrees. A pitbull and a German shepherd together that mate, and they just call it a potcake because it's mixed so, and usually you see them type of dogs on the streets without no home and without no owner. So I usually say, "No, I'm not—I am not Haitian Bahamian, I am a Bahamian of Haitian descent." (Nassau, Bahamas, June 26, 2012)

Brother Glodys's mixedness is not a racial mixing but a cultural and national mixing that lies at the heart of many Bahamians' fears for the future—that Bahamians of Haitian descent will threaten the sovereignty of the Bahamas by

supplanting “real” Bahamians (primarily Black Bahamians who are Christians and have no recent, observable Haitian ancestry in their background). The only way to distinguish between a Bahamian and a Bahamian of Haitian descent is by learning the surname of the person. Other than that, Bahamians of Haitian descent are similar to other Bahamians, like the people we find at Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene. Owing to the normative stigmatization and marginalization of Haitian-descended people in the Bahamas, many want to leave the country of their birth as soon as they get their Bahamian passport, which allows them to travel with documents, because of the belief that they can live more dignified lives with more opportunities somewhere else.

As shown by the popularity of Victory Chapel Church of the Nazarene among Bahamians of Haitian descent, the church provides a haven from social marginalization and a dynamic opportunity to become conscious of their humanity. At Victory Chapel, the relationship of religious habitus to the church generates religious practice. Haitians (adults and children) engage in different practices at the church, which help to inculcate certain dispositions and reflect social processes of individual and collective self-remaking through embodied and linguistic practices, which allow Bahamians of Haitian descent to negotiate their different contested identities. As a result, they create a unique, embodied hybrid religious habitus that mixes Haitian and non-Haitian religious and cultural factors and prepares them to become Bahamian citizens because being Christian is a necessary element of contemporary Bahamian identity. By doing so, Victory Chapel creates the adherents it needs not only for the reproduction of the church but also, by extension, for the reproduction of Bahamian society. This is achieved through inculcated dispositions that reside in the hexis: the organization of the human body and the way it operates in the world (Bourdieu 1991). In other words, the hexis resides in embodied practices.

In closing, as long as the Bahamas is structured for those who can be defined solely as Bahamian, gross discrimination against Haitians will persist in the Bahamas, people will leave the country instead of contributing to its development, and the core elements of what it means to be Bahamian will continue to be Blackness, Christianity, and anti-Haitianism. And for those Bahamians of Haitian descent who choose to remain in the Bahamas, many will use their bodies, through liturgical dance and fervent prayer, for example, to shape new ways of being while turning toward a Protestant God. They will do this, partly, by utilizing Protestant Christian religious practices that help to make and remake them into the type of citizens that we find in the Bahamas. Or they can choose to challenge this hierarchy in order to lead dignified lives in “paradise.”¹⁰

NOTES

1. The term *Haitian* in the Bahamas includes the following groups who have similar, intersecting, and competing interests: Haitian migrants, Haitians born in the Bahamas, people of Haitian descent with Bahamian citizenship (Bahamians of Haitian descent), and Haitians who were born in the Bahamas but have spent part or most of their lives in Haiti and currently reside in the Bahamas. Also, I use “Haitian Bahamian” and “Bahamian(s) of Haitian descent” interchangeably.

2. De facto statelessness refers to when an individual has a nationality that is rendered ineffective owing to the nation they live in. Someone who is de facto stateless can reside outside of the state of their nationality and might have a legal claim to nationality/citizenship in the country of their birth. The situation of people born to Haitian parents in the Bahamas is an example of de facto statelessness. De facto statelessness is in contrast to de jure statelessness, which refers to an individual who is not considered as a national or citizen by any state (Article 1 of the 1954 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons). https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/wp-content/uploads/1954-Convention-relating-to-the-Status-of-Stateless-Persons_ENG.pdf

3. According to Mellor and Schilling the features of embodiment “have included the existential reassurances and anxieties reflective of human frailty, the stimulation and regulation of emotions relative to the sacred, and the development of rituals, techniques and pedagogics with the aim of stimulating particular forms of consciousness and experience, including those related to transcendence and immanence” (2010, 217).

4. The figure is most likely higher. In the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology’s *Baseline Study of Livelihood Security in the Departments of the Artibonite, Center, North, Northeast, and West*, Drexel Woodson and Mamadou Baro (1997, 98) observed that Haitian conversion to Protestant forms of Christianity was one of the most significant religious changes in the Adventist Development and Relief Agency’s zone of intervention in the past thirty years. In four departments, 20 to 25 percent of the household heads were Protestant, but the figure rose to 38.7 percent in the west (98). A 1996 BARA study on the Southern Peninsula of Haiti yielded similar results (55–56). In fact, there were some areas in Southern Haiti where the percentages of Protestant households were 42.9 percent (Bois La Rue), 55.6 percent (Aréguay), 51.4 percent (Potier), and 100 percent (Boleau). Finally, a study on culture in Port-au-Prince observed that in 1996 approximately 39 percent of Port-au-Prince was Protestant (Houtart and Rémy 1997, 38–39).

5. Bahamian citizenship is legally informed by the Constitution of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas (the 1973 Constitution), the 1973 Bahamas Citizenship Act, and other administrative regulations.

6. For an example in Haitian Creole, go to “Dieu Tout Puissant quand mon coeur considère,” НРС Home of Hope, January 21, 2014, YouTube video, 8:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fL_d2f6U8ts.

7. How do some Haitians born in the Bahamas become citizens of the Bahamas? A loophole that allows some Haitians born in the Bahamas to become Bahamian citizens is found in Article 7 (1) of the Bahamian Constitution:

A person born in the Bahamas after 9th July 1973 neither of whose parents is a citizen of The Bahamas shall be entitled, upon making application on his attaining the

age of eighteen years or within twelve months thereafter in such manner as may be prescribed, to be registered as a citizen of The Bahamas:

Provided that if he is a citizen of some country other than the Bahamas he shall not be entitled to be registered as a citizen of The Bahamas under this Article unless he renounces his citizenship of that other country, takes the oath of allegiance and makes and registers such declaration of his intentions concerning residence as may be prescribed. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bahamas_1973.pdf?lang=en.

8. Although this is important work, UHAB, which consists mainly of Bahamians of Haitian descent, also supports the Bahamian government's current stance on immigration, which adversely affects Haitian migrants.

9. I have changed the name of this research consultant to protect his identity.

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