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Yon Ti Bout Mazi (A little bit of ruins)

Let me add my thanks to Kris Lane for organizing this and for the honor of being invited. My intent is to honor Rich and Sally and their work as among the most important of my teachers. I am going to focus my comments on Rich's work and how I have used it in Haiti in a particular way. But that is not to minimize the contribution of Sally!

When I first arrived in Haiti in 2008, scoping for a field project related to historical ethnography, I was not prepared for what I found. In Limonade and across the northern department of Haiti, ruins of Limonade's past built landscape and remnants of its political and economic past were everywhere. Conventional writing and scholarship on the Haitian Revolution tells us that the insurgent slaves destroyed Saint-Domingue's plantation economy, that they razed it to the ground. It's an idea that agrees with our contemporary sense of justice, but it's not true. Some plantations were destroyed, while many more were put back into productive service to support Saint-Domingue's wartime economy. After Haitian Independence in 1804, industrial plantation agriculture steadily dropped off in favor of peasant smallholding, but the plantation infrastructure and ruins remained, sometimes repurposed for different schemes and more often as *mazi*.

Ruins represent a resource for Haitians in multiple ways. A little bit of ruins (*yon ti bout mazi*), which might surface as the remains of building foundations, aqueducts, or abandoned wells, containing bricks and rocks of adequate size, can be spalled and sold for the equivalent of about US$39-159 as domestic construction material. Older residents see the combination of building materials and style as markers of the provenance of *mazi*; rocks with fossil imprints known as *wòch ravèt* (literally, cockroach rocks) are signs of *blan franse* (the colonial French). But since newer constructions might recycle *wòch ravèt,* it is when they appear in combination with characteristic bright white limestone (*lacho*) that *mazi* are deemed French colonial. Older Limonade residents told me that *lacho* was produced locally in a handful of kilns, but using limestone mortar has been displaced as modern materials and methods became more readily available. They say contemporary Haitian tradesmen are ignorant of this style, which is a shame, since limestone is harder and more durable than concrete and iron. The loss of knowledge and skill reflected in present practices leads to another loss, which is derided as an infirmness of purpose. They themselves say, "Haitians cannot build things to withstand 10 years; they only build short-term."

Ira Lowenthal, one of Rich's first students, described another way in which ruins are a resource for Haitians. He showed how *mazi* also connote religious and ritual obligations to a family lineage of ancestral spirits (*lwa*). In instances where land with *mazi* are sold, sellers are expected to host elaborate ceremonies aimed at convincing the spirits to relocate to new lands, such that "mazi become, over time, the physical expression of geographic segmentation of one branch of an eritaj." *Mazi* are increasingly becoming synonymous with *patrimwan*, or national heritage. Elements and themes reinforcing the centrality of the Haitian Revolution, which filter down from the ideological world of the Haitian élite and its informal guild of historians, have increasingly come to dominate popular media. Younger generations are daily exposed to radio broadcast interviews and programming that uphold an international discourse concerning Haiti's place in world history. More than two decades of strategic planning and policy-making have sought to incorporate historical sites into the development of Haiti's tourist industry. ISPAN, the institute for the safeguarding of national patrimony, is a state agency under the ministry of

tourism. In Limonade, these efforts led the mayor to organize the commune's first historical society in 2006. In 2025, the goal of the group remains what it was in 2006: to highlight Limonade's history and promote its historical sites. The group consists of about 15 members from professional occupations who meet once or twice a month for intellectual discussion and debate regarding recent court rulings and national politics. The group has collaborated on a handful of promotional brochures since 2006, but the fact that these materials all recycle the same accounts, coupled with the substance of group meetings, gives the impression that Limonade's history begins and ends with its connections to the Haitian Revolution. A little bit of ruins, but not enough.

The idea that there is an absence of ruins in the Caribbean suggests that Caribbean people have suffered from a profound lack of historical consciousness. Time was a factor in the Caribbean's relative lack of ruins, namely that Caribbean societies did not have the *longue durée* occupation necessary to produce ruins as spectacle. That's an odd sort of phrase, producing ruins—it's odd because the ruins we esteem are the ones we inherited from rational investments in economy and society. Those investments may have been short-lived and ended in ruin, but what legitimates them as objects of cultural (or better yet, world) heritage is the social structure and cultural framework that enabled their appearance in the first place. So, the Caribbean's lack of suitable ruins signals not only a profound lack of historical consciousness, but also a profound political, cultural, and moral failing.

In his 1985 *Caribbean Review* article, "An Absence of Ruins? Seeking Caribbean historical consciousness," Rich laid out what I take to be his key research agenda and program. His immediate goal was to have us think about the "inner meaning of Caribbean history," and how it does not present in Western form or substance. Instead, the inner meaning of Caribbean history is found in various "archives hidden away" and "distinct forms of record-keeping." Unraveling the Caribbean past, Rich says, comes from focusing on the ways that ideas about the past are transmitted, the vessels in which the meaning of the past is stored, and the forms in which the past is packaged. Rich tells us that inner meaning is uncovered ethnographically from the repositories of practices and traditions, from the high rituals that extrude social structure to informal values that inform proper conduct in everyday life.

His language in that article is subtle, but for me, telling. It is a prolegomenon, a critical discussion introducing and interpreting extended work. He lays out in accessible language some Saamaka historical repositories. But then he previews what he's on to next. Rich clearly lays out a comparative program, I would argue, first with Saamaka, then in Martinique, and then references work from his students Ken Bilby and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, as if to say: This is the way.

"Consciousness" and "tradition" are cultural constructs, Rich says, adding that any people's view of their collective past is heavily conditioned by their notions of who they are, their collective identity. Rich's envisioned comparative project about the inner meaning of the past gives us a useful heuristic for understanding later anthropological work in the Caribbean.

The rituals invoking the 1763 Berbice slave rebellion in Guyana that Brackette Williams looked at present historical images, and the historical images presented in rituals address broader social, economic, and political issues in Guyanese society. Learning that ritual keeps the past in the present was a watershed moment for me because it opened up history as a terrain in the politics of cultural struggle, which I define and understand to mean a collective search for

sources of value and meaning that are not predicated on slavery or the racist violence inherent in Western colonialism.

Opening history up as a terrain of cultural struggle builds on Trouillot's analysis about the production of history to connect these lessons to a struggle over the direction and character of cultural change, which we can think of as practices that relate to morally appropriate and inappropriate ways of relating to a shared or common past. Still, like many historical injuries, it's unclear whether these colonial harms can truly be addressed. Any effort to do so risks becoming what Trouillot called an "abortive ritual"—gestures that fall short of meaningful repair precisely because of the impossibility involved with connecting contemporary people to an imagined historical subjectivity, not to mention the lack of investments in structural change.

In contemporary Haiti, expanding wage labor opportunities bring different experiences of time and history. As I mentioned, *mazi* are traditionally regarded as markers of family land and inheritance, and often appear as ruins of various kinds. As younger generations increasingly move away from the agricultural pursuits of their ancestors, the traditional knowledge maintained by everyday peasant labor practices is transformed into imagined histories privileging the Haitian Revolution. What was once family heritage is now national patrimony, detached from the historical specificity of particular family lineages and knowledge.

In addition, both older and younger generations claim privileged knowledge of what is authentically Haitian: older generations ground knowledge of the authentic in the day-to-day experience of how *mazi* are incorporated into the logic of their agricultural work, while younger generations may make appeals to authority outside of local experience, particularly Haiti's place in world history. *Mazi* conjure in the minds of older and younger generations different sets of conceptual and organizational units, such as family and nation. Viewed in this light, the discordant interpretations of *mazi* represent an intergenerational cultural struggle over morally appropriate and inappropriate ways of relating to Limonade's shared past and future.

The inner meaning of the past, at least in Haiti, is an open terrain of struggle to overcome the racist violence of Western colonialism. This struggle is there for all to read in most anthropology of the Caribbean... well, at least the good stuff! Rich, if it weren't for Sally and you, I would have never met your students Drexel G. Woodson and Brackette F. Williams, my teachers in grad school, and I would not be where I am now. Thank you.