Aristide and Miami Haitians  
Alex Stepick  

The day of the coup against Aristide hundreds gathered on 54th street in Miami’s Little Haiti. As evening fell someone started a bonfire. While most of the two to three hundred in the crowd sought shelter from the rain, 15 to 20 young men built the fire higher. While the police chief watched the seemingly peaceful crowd, one man ran up to him screaming for help. A crowd quickly surrounded the police chief and the screaming man. They tore the man from the police chief, shouting that they were going to burn him because he allegedly asserted that he was glad that Aristide was deposed. The man was saved and driven off in a police car, but the crowd turned its anger on his business, smashing windows and throwing the office’s contents onto the street. After demanding in Creole that the crowd disperse, the police fired tear gas. By 10 p.m. the street was clear.

Creole radio broadcasters the following day urged peaceful protest. They appealed to Haitian leaders to convince Miami’s Cuban American mayor, Xavier Suarez and its Black American police chief, Calvin Ross, that Haitians would rally peacefully. The city was finally convinced. They provided a stage, a line of police barricades, and security. More than 4,500 gathered that evening to listen to music and speeches of protest. The mayor himself showed and addressing the crowd in French announcing that U.S. Senators Bob Graham and Connie Mack were “petitioning the president of the United States to restore what the people of Miami want to happen in Haiti, which is democracy and President Aristide.

Every day for a week, Haitians publicly protested. While rallies in Washington and New York usually gathered larger crowds, each Miami march or rally had between 2 and 8 thousand supporters. Just before the coup, Aristide had visited Miami and over 13,000 gathered, the largest gathering ever of Haitians in Miami. All of these events were peaceful and all received considerable attention from the local press.

The Miami Herald’s editorials consistently and forcefully condemned the coup and called for the reinstatement of Aristide, as did their principal African American columnist. African Americans had joined Haitians in numerous protests throughout the 1980s, but for the first time Cuban exiles also raised their voices in support of Haitians. In front of the National Association of Hispanic Public Officials, Miami’s Cuban American mayor declared that Haitian refugees were not a problem. A broad cross-section of community groups organized a public forum to support the return of democracy to admission of
refugees created by the coup. Participating organizations included the NAACP, the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, American Jewish Community, the Rabbinical Association of Greater Miami, Church World Services, and United Protestant Appeal. A group of Miami politicians, attorneys and entrepreneurs collected 90,000 pound of clothing, food, and medicine for the refugees housed at the U.S. naval base Guantanamo. Even general public opinion, commonly anti-immigrant in the U.S., tented to support the cause of Haiti and Haitian refugees. In a scientific opinion poll, nearly 60 percent of Miami-Fort Lauderdale residents stated that "some" refugees should be allowed to stay and another 21 percent asserted that "all" should be allowed to stay.

The widespread support for Haitians reflected their increasing integration into south Florida society. More and more Americans were taking Haitian Creole classes and more and more businesses were hiring Haitian Creole speaking staff. The owner of a poultry factory that had 125 Haitian employees took Haitian Creole lessons as did the owner of a small construction company. With public funds, the Haitian Task Force remodeled and reopened Little Haiti’s Caribbean Marketplace receiving glowing reports from the Miami Herald.

But all was not easy for the Haitian community. Besides the relentless efforts of the U.S. government to repatriate Haitian refugees, a Miami neighborhood where asylum seekers temporarily resided protested their presence. The bayside neighborhood just a few blocks east of Little Haiti is bordered by Biscayne Boulevard, an area plagued by an illicit sex and drugs industry. The neighborhood organization protesting the arrival of Haitians claimed that they were trying to protect the Haitians from dangers there. More generally, many Haitians reported a continuing stigma created by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banning Haitian blood. Although the FDA lifted the ban in February 1990, a year latter the slur persisted in the mind of many.

Nor was the community entirely internally unified. Seven weeks after the coup, anti-Aristide demonstrators appeared for the first time. About 80 of them gathered in a park downtown. Students for a Free Haiti assailed the international embargo that had been imposed on Haiti. They praised the army as the country’s savior, blaming the Duvalier regime for creating the political crisis and Aristide for inciting violence. A week later about 30 of them demonstrated again, but this time in suburban Kendall far from Little Haiti.

In short, the coup against Aristide mobilized far more Miami Haitians than any earlier event, including Duvalier’s demise and the numerous protests against U.S. discrimination. Moreover, the Haitian community received far greater support than they had ever previously received. Not only did human rights and religious organizations champion their cause, but also local public officials and the exile Cuban community weighed in for the first time in significant numbers. Yet, the scars of prejudice and discrimination remain. Apart from the Struggle to return Aristide to power, the majority of Haitians still feel alienated from the larger society. Equally important, the Miami Haitian community remains riven by internal factionalism denying it the solidarity that Miami’s Cuban community enjoys and employs for its own advancement. Aristide supporters numerically prevail and have newfound defenders among the Cuban American and white American communities, but even these have been unable to reverse the policy of the U.S. government toward Haitian refugees or heal the scars of previous abuses.

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Augustin, a young man from a small town on Haiti's northern coast, sits across the table, his hands nervously clasped in front of him. He stares at the Immigration and Naturalization Service adjudicating officer ready to question him. Augustin understands that what he says in these 15 or 20 minutes could determine the direction of the rest of his life. After waiting here in Guantanamo for 2 months, he is anxious to be heard.

THE INTERVIEW

"May we see your card and bracelet?"

He quickly retrieves from his pocket the battered yellow card that bears his (misspelled) name and the 5-digit number that identifies him. His bracelet confirms the same information. After a short introduction, the "pre-screening interview" begins.

"What was your profession in Haiti?"

"I was a student. I just had two years left [to complete my secondary education]." Proudly pulling out a damp, torn copy of his report card from last year, he tells us about his studies and the plans he had for his future. "But all that's finished now. I'll never be able to finish. There's no school for us in Haiti anymore."

"Why did you leave Haiti?"

Slowly, shakily, he tells his story. "It is impossible to live here now. After Aristide left, everything fell apart. They're shooting, burning, killing people, arresting people, beating them... people are running and hiding... there's no life there anymore."

"With whom did you live in Haiti?"

He explains that he lived in his mother's home, along with several siblings and cousins. "My mother doesn't even know where I am now," he suddenly breaks into tears and covers his face with his hands. "I think she thinks I am dead; she doesn't even know I got on the boat!" he sobs, and backs away from the table, struggling to regain composure.

"Why did you get on the boat? Had you been involved in anything that would cause somebody to give you problems?"

He does not know why they gave him problems, he says. He was not involved in afè politik; he never made trouble for anybody.

"Who gave you problems? You didn't do anything to make them angry?"

"Well, I loved Aristide very much," he responds, explaining how he had helped to campaign for him in his neighborhood. He told us how hopeful he and his friends had been after the 1990 elections and how they had celebrated Aristide's victory and inauguration. He was in a "neighborhood..."
committee" that had decorated their area with flowers, "Titid" posters, and drawings for the inauguration day, and had continued to meet and clean up the area periodically after Aristide took office. "We were so hopeful," he smiles, "he was on the side of the young people of Haiti; we loved him; he promised to do many things for us..."

"That's why they hated us so much, that's why they want to kill all of us; they think we are to blame for Aristide becoming president. They want to crush us."

**How did they try to crush you?**

Shifting around in his chair and glancing back and forth to the other screening tables in the tents surrounding us, he starts to explain: In the weeks after the coup d'etat there was shooting every night in the town where he lived. At first everybody in his neighborhood hid in their houses and tried to wait for Aristide to be restored to power. But then the military started coming to the neighborhood. They burned one of the houses; they walked through the street shouting threats; they beat people brutally for being caught out after dusk. Augustin's older cousin was arrested one evening: for listening to the radio with two of his friends... and has not been seen since. Other young men began disappearing. Did they flee? Were they arrested? Are they dead? Their families do not know. Then one of Augustin's friends, a classmate who was a leader of their neighborhood committee, was shot in the head while sitting outside his home. "When I saw his body, that's when I decided to leave," he explains, "I knew if I didn't, they were going to kill me, too. So I ran and ran and ran. I never went back home. My mother doesn't even know I left, or anybody else in my family; not even my girlfriend. I don't know if they came and got her, too." Again fighting back the tears, he then tells us how he hid for several days on a mountain behind his town, and then met up with a group of people planning to go to Miami. "We were scared," he confesses, "of getting on the boat, but we had no choice; we were more scared of staying."

"**Would you be scared to return to Haiti?**"

"Oh! I'll never go back there. No, I can't. They'll kill me."

"Thank you. You can go sit under the tent at the end of the row now."

**REFUGEE PROCESSING AT GUANTANAMO**

"Kouri pou Lapli, Tonbe Nan Rivye" means "Run to Dodge the Rain; Fall into the River." This traditional Creole proverb epitomizes the experience of thousands of Haitians who fled the reign of terror following the coup d'etat that toppled President Aristide. Their desperate search for temporary refuge in the United States plunged the vast majority into even deeper peril.

Although many Haitians—possibly hundreds—drowned, most have been picked up after a few days at sea by the United States Coast Guard. After boarding the cutters, the now "refugees" are immediately searched by Coast Guard personnel who are dressed in uniforms that include latex gloves and surgical masks. The refugees wonder, is this a welcome into freedom or a sentencing into captivity? They are told that they will not be allowed to enter the U.S.; they will eventually have a chance to request "political refugee status"; they are now being taken to a place called "Guantanamo."

Once the cutter arrives at the naval base, the refugees—exhausted, hungry, disoriented, ill from exposure and nausea—are unloaded, searched again and given a brief medical examination, an ID bracelet and card, some soap, a blanket and other necessities, and possibly a change of clothes and shoes (sometimes their own clothes are "confiscated"). Carefully watched and directed by groups of
uniformed men—sometimes armed with weapons, sometimes with sticks, sometimes with dogs—they are led through each step of the registration process in single-file lines, and eventually find themselves assigned to a tent in one of the sections of the camp.

The McCalla Air Field is a hot, desolate, flat piece of land. Myriad army-green tents are arranged into long rows and blocks, each section separated by endless stretches of coiled barbed wire. It is here that Augustin and thousands of other Haitians have lived, some for 3 months now... waiting... not knowing where they will be sent next or when, not hearing anything from their people back home, not knowing if their families are hungry, hiding, or dead, or perhaps somewhere in Guantanamo—behind another section of coiled barbed wire.

They hear they are all going to be sent back to Haiti; they hear they are going to be shot; they hear the INS has lost hundreds of records, that their names are not even written down anywhere. New rumors circulate everyday. I served as interpreter for several conversations in which INS officials attempted to respond to refugees’ questions about their fate or the fate of others in the camps. Too often these responses are misinformation and lies. There are few formal channels for the refugees to voice their questions and concerns.

Information of the outside world is also hard to come by. All loudspeaker news broadcasts of censored reports from the Voice of America in Creole have been terminated. The reasoning is: the potential for riot will be less likely if they are kept ignorant about what is going on, either within the camp, outside the camp, or concerning their own fates. Sometimes the military comes and calls for one or two, or sometimes even several of them to tell them to go get their plastic garbage bag with all of their possessions. They are taken them away. The others watch. Have they gone to Miami? To another section of the camp? To Haiti? No one knows. So the ones who are left sit and wait and wake each morning to another day of uncertainty, trying to be patient, trying not to lose hope.

There are some sincere and conscientious individuals among the INS staff, military personnel, clergymen, medical staff, UN officials and Community Relief Services employees at "Operation GTMO." Some try in their small way to right a system which cannot seem to see these Haitian people as persons, but only as a mass of poor, black, unwanted and menacing refugees needing to be processed, managed and controlled until something can be done with them. I have seen one search through the crates of clothes for a shirt or a pair of shoes, another read the countless notes of requests scribbled in French and Creole on tiny strips of paper, still another stop to give a word of encouragement or an honest bit of news. Yet there is credible basis to the stories of intimidation, humiliation, and physical mistreatment of the refugees. One anguished United States Marine Corps officer privately admitted to me, "I have never been ashamed to wear the uniform before now. These folks are being treated worse than the Iraqi POW’s in Desert Storm."

If he was not so fearful of returning to Haiti, Augustin told me, he would have gotten away from this place as soon as he could. "I guess I cannot complain," he said, "because they give me three meals a day... But I have never eaten my food with less dignity, even when I only had one meal a day."

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THE "REFORMED" SCREENING PROCESS

There were many people in the camp who "spoke with Immigration" while they were still on the cutters and despite the numerous reports attesting that those interviews often consisted of little more than recording (often inaccurately) the refugee's name, place of birth, etc. and sometimes even ended with the interpreter or officer shouting at the person or accusing the him/her of lying—thousands of the refugees were "screened out" through that process.

In response to mounting protests and legal actions following the Coast Guard's cursory, forced repatriations, the INS consented to reform its pre-screening process. The participation of "Creole Language Specialists" beginning in December was one of these reforms. But even after many improvements had, in fact, been implemented in the interviewing process, it remained seriously flawed.

First was the setting for the interview. Separated from other interviewing tables only by make-shift walls of stacked army cots, the refugee being interviewed could hear other interviews going on around him/her and knew that his/her own comments could be heard by others. Further distraction came from the military personnel (whose uniforms resonate with negative meanings for most of these refugees) who joked and chatted with the INS staff in the interviewing area while they did their work.

Secondly, whether a person was screened out often seemed dependent upon the personality of the interviewer. Some interviewing officers were patient, concerned, and went out of their way to learn about the political situation in Haiti. Others, anxious to finish each interview as quickly as possible, were rude and cold. They demonstrated little interest in learning more about the context of the Haitians' accounts. Despite the availability of an expert on Haiti, who had actually been hired by the INS both to head the interviewing team and to educate the staff about the socio-cultural background of the migrants and about conditions in Haiti, his services were hardly exploited. Instead, he served as an interviewer, like me.

It was heart-breaking to see a refugee, who had waited sometimes a month or more for an interview, be cut off in the midst of telling a traumatic, emotionally-laden story because the interviewing officer was willing to get only enough information to complete the pre-screening form in front of him/her. Or to watch the expression of a frightened young woman as she had just made were received with a sigh of boredom, a hurt of impatience, or a question totally unrelated to her last comments. The last question of the interview was usually about whether the person would be willing to go back to Haiti or if he/she would be afraid of returning. Many people responded that they would rather be killed right then than be sent back to Haiti. One cynical officer, after having heard this many times, started to laugh when people responded this way. He "joked" with me that he would like to see their reactions if he told them he would take them up on their challenge.

The levels of disorganization and incompetence in this system—from Washington to the interviewing tents—were astounding. The INS lost so many (evidently several hundred) records, we began doing "record checks" in the camp in January. To find all the "lost people" and to clarify who was screened in and who was screened out, we set up tables in each of the camp sections and had every person pass through a line, where we checked his/her name, biographical data, and status. One day one of the Immigration officers noticed as we were doing record checks that the names of a couple of Haitians he had screened "in" were marked "out." Even getting screened "in" does not guarantee getting into the "in" pile.
That same day, while looking for the name of one man on the list, I found his name misspelled, noticed there was no birthdate, and saw that his recorded age was inaccurate. This man was literate and knew his date of birth well. He had been screened out. "How," I asked the officer with whom I worked, "can we be sure this is the same man? And even if he is, how could the people who recorded this information have possibly gotten enough other accurate information about him to be able to screen him out? "That has to be him," the officer insisted, "and he's marked "out." So "out" he was.

Even record checks provided an opportunity for nonsensical mistakes (with enormous repercussions for the Haitians concerned.) One man's name, for instance, might have been found on the list, whereas his brother's might not. Even though they came on the same boat and had fled the same circumstances in Haiti, only the brother "missing" from the list would get a second interview. The other, who had likely been screened "out" at an interview conducted before "the reforms" were effected, would be sent back to Haiti.

Despite the fact that screen-in rates from the interviews went up dramatically after the reforms began to be implemented (on many days during my time at Guantanamo, percentages ranged from 80-90%), the overall approval rate remains around 30%. In fact, during the end of my time there, we were being told by the local INS administrators that "Washington" was getting concerned about such high rates. The State Department, the INS, and the Bush Administration continue to insist that the majority of these people are "economic refugees," they do not deserve protection in the United States, and that they are in no real danger upon being forcibly sent back to Haiti. Everything I saw in Guantanamo Bay taught me otherwise. Now, back in the U.S., I see just how little either the humanity or the suffering of the refugees figured in the "out-in" screening process in Guantanamo Bay.

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The Haitian Studies Association (HSA) is an independent organization designed to promote scientific research on Haiti and Haitians, identify and catalogue contemporary publications on the subject, collect and disseminate scientific information, formalize Haitian Studies as an academic subject, and establish a network of experts competent to address Haitian issues from multi-disciplinary perspectives. HSA is not associated with any public or private institution in or outside of Haiti.

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- Cultural Influences in Haitian Religious Beliefs
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  Elizabeth McAllister, Yale University
  Laennec Hurbon, Université Quisqueya, Haiti
  Karen Richman, University of Virginia

Saturday, October 17, 1992

- Psychosocial and Transcultural Issues in the Haitian Diaspora
  Michele Cuvally Klopner, Haitian Mental
  Lorreta Saint-Louis, Haitian Mental Health Clinic
  Anthony Chapin, Workplace Productions

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