

# **Fieldwork Identities in the Caribbean**

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Chapter 8 "Anthropology That Warms Your Heart: On Being a Bride in the Field" by Anna Cristina Pertierra is adapted from the article of the same name originally published in *Anthropology Matters*, Vol. 9 (1) 2007. Permission to use is gratefully acknowledged.

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## “Mister Blan,” Or, the Incredible Whiteness of Being (an Anthropologist)

Mark Schuller

In a class at my graduate institution, a fellow student explained, “Being white in Hawai’i is like being black in the mainland.” This notion of somehow being a minority that transcends cultural and national boundaries is quite common. It is also false: This deliberate erasure of privilege is a common discourse, part of a general trafficking in global whiteness – transnational discourses of race embedded with continuing Victorian colonial hierarchies of self worth (Willoughby-Herard 2007). Not only false, this discourse can be dangerous, as my ethnographic experience explains.

Haiti is the first free black republic in the world, the only nation forged by a successful slave revolt. This decisive act still powerfully shapes consciousness about Haiti: It is called the most African nation of the Caribbean, often in the same breath as being the poorest nation in the hemisphere. In the foreign imagination (sometimes aided by sometimes well-meaning anthropologists), Haiti is often synonymous with Vodou (cf. Davis 1988; Dayan 1995). When I give lectures on the subject, students’ first impressions are invariably negative, either “voodoo”—something that they identify as negative—or violence, including riots that led up to and followed the departure of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004.<sup>2</sup> In my research and writing about Haiti I have struggled against racialized stereotypes. Despite this resistance to participating in racialization, the pull of the history of the U.S. and Haiti

proved overpowering. The lessons I have learned sometimes stubbornly or accidentally and still have to learn about race and identity, including my own, are compelling regardless of my attempts to set my own identities aside. The two years of fieldwork in Haiti spanned a difficult-to-understand yet front-and-center political and economic crisis. Advice from some professors was to remove these distractions or even detractors from this already complicated story. So I began the process of erasure that Behar (e.g., Behar 1992; 1993), Clifford and Marcus (Clifford 1986; 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986), Abu-Lughod (Abu-Lughod 1991) and others critiqued. This chapter is an attempt to bring these considerations and my own identity back into the conversation.

### Beginning the Research

It is appropriate to establish that Haiti is not the U.S. and I am not Haitian. These facts sound trite to people who have no experience in Haiti, I am sure. But every day in Haiti, I was hailed as a *blan*. [*Blan* is the Kreyòl word for white, also white person.] I couldn't forget my outsider status and pretend to go native, even if I wanted. Furthermore, I can't forget that my place vis-à-vis the vast majority of people in Haiti is one of privilege, mirroring the colonialist, imperialist, now globalist, relationship that anthropology has been saddled with since the days of Evans-Pritchard and Benedict. I think it's important to acknowledge that. No matter how objective or neutral I would want to be, I can't help but be a participant. My status, my position as a *blan*, as a white man, gives meaning to my experiences by shaping what people say

(and how they say it) in front of me and how they interact with me.

Another important issue concerns duty to reciprocity. As publicly engaged anthropologists have argued, we should be directing our efforts to tangible benefits for our research participants in addition to attention to the power of our pens (Lamphere 2004; Sanday 2003). On one level, it's a question that haunted me every day: Okay, so you got a Ph.D. out of these two years in Haiti, and what do the people you are studying, what do Haitian people, get out of it? Compared with people whom I admire, like Paul Farmer, or Catherine Maternowska, who have both made tangible here-and-now and long-term contributions to Haiti, I have to sadly admit that I hope this knowledge itself is something that can empower people to better their situation. Perhaps it is a space for reflection in order to clearly formulate critiques of the current aid regime and formulate alternatives. In other words, not much.

At another level, reciprocity involves interrogation and exchange. If I get to ask people questions, they get to ask me questions. What indeed am I doing in Haiti? How did this long-haired white hippie graduate student end up in Haiti in the first place?

This journey began in college. I was an undergraduate at an isolated, small-town liberal arts school where there really was space for student activism. A Halloween prank involving Klan impersonators galvanized a student movement against racism. I resolved to be an organizer, which I became, as well as a white anti-racist. I was a co-facilitator for my school's Amnesty International chapter during the 1991-1994 coup against Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a violent and unstable chapter in Haiti's history. We were petitioning junta leader Cédras and

the paramilitary Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti (FRAPH) to stop killing, torturing and raping. I found myself intensely curious about what was going on in Haiti. Sure, I had heard of Haiti. How could a good student get through college, especially one active against racism, without knowing a thing about the Haitian Revolution? I had heard about the French Revolution and the Cuban Revolution. But my textbooks in courses titled World History and taught by a leftist Latin Americanist skipped the part about Haiti. Thankfully for me, and for a lot of people, Paul Farmer's *The Uses of Haiti* had just been re-published (Farmer 2003 [1994]).

I was hooked. There's a discourse among white people who hang around Haiti, "I came for a visit and there's just something about it...I have been coming back ever since." There is something about Haiti: its proximity to the U.S., its sheer poverty, its exoticism, *kompa*, Vodou, the beauty of the mountains and the sadness at seeing them stripped away, the beauty, the elegance of Kreyòl, *youn-edè-lòt*, the wonder of a child who yells *blan* as if she is saying it to convince herself of what she is seeing, the pride of a people who have survived and resisted for 200 years under conditions that are brutal and inhumane yet who have time to shame their neighbors "*m pa we ou*" (I haven't seen you), or spontaneously compose a song about someone's pride, or laugh at a joke that only Haitian people could possibly get, or the stubborn *kenbe la* spirit, which allows people to walk tall and face whatever is coming their way, animated by their understanding of Haiti's role in history as the place where they ended slavery, on their terms, forever, and finally a sense of irony that Haitians have been paying for our racism ever since.

I could have been (and probably was) just romanticizing Haiti. It was important that I actually see it. I took out a loan in my first year as a grad student to attend an intensive three-week language and culture course at Florida International University, in Miami. In the mornings, we learned as much Kreyòl as could be taught in three weeks. In the afternoons, we heard from Haiti experts in Florida. Following this, a smaller group of us went Haiti for a two-week trip that was designed to show Haiti in a positive light. We saw magnificent hotels, awe-inspiring historic sites, beautiful beaches and even visited the National Palace. But I still lacked an understanding of how people actually lived in Port-au-Prince, the vast majority who don't have SUVs and can't stay at fancy hotels like the Oloffson or the Roi Christophe.

With a little bit of department money, and a new laptop, I returned to Haiti *pou kont mwen* [by myself] for nine weeks in the summer of 2002. The other part of the story about why I went to Haiti is that after four years as a campus activist organizer I became a community organizer for three different groups. Most challenging and rewarding was my 27 months at the St. Paul Tenants Union. The union empowered low-income tenants to address problems in their buildings, neighborhoods, and city with public, corporate, and foundation funding. The city and a corporation funded a hotline. Private foundations supported the organizing component. My job was to empower tenants to advocate on their own behalf, even if that meant upsetting people in powerful positions. There was a constant tug-of-war between my job and the constraints on the union by hotline sponsors. I was told to be careful with the city, although it could solve a local housing crisis. In addition, I was prevented from helping

tenants whose housing was demolished in an expansion by the corporation that funded the hotline. Eventually, this corporation moved out of St. Paul and cut support to the hotline. The director then left and the board of low-income tenants did what they could but the city also pulled its support. After four months, unsuccessful in raising funds, the board had to lay off all employees. Rather than repeat this cycle at another grassroots organization, I decided to study the effects of sources of funding on grassroots organizations, trying to approach a model of social-justice organizing that is sustainable and not dependent on the whims of funding institutions or governments.

I timed my dissertation research in Haiti to follow the Haitian Studies Association meetings at Florida International University. I arrived in Pòtoprens [Port-au-Prince] on Sunday. I paid for a taxi and went to a cheap place for the night. I was literally overwhelmed. I had difficulty sleeping, even though I was tired. Haiti's problems, to the extent that they were discussed at the conference, were portrayed as discrete: Haiti needs a change in the social contract, and it is coming. Being there, alone save for two large boxes full of kitchen supplies, research materials, and a couple of nice outfits, it felt anything but simple.

I remained overwhelmed for quite a while. Two months before I went to Haiti, a free trade zone was created along the Haiti/Dominican Republic (DR) border in Wanament. One month before, Amiot Metayer had been assassinated, triggering a violent response from his group of hitmen. A political crisis, talked about for four years, began in earnest. People began counting the dead. NGOs, especially those friendly to Aristide's opposition, began to close, with their staff and board members in *marronage*, in hiding. My

contact at a women's NGO stayed at a few of her friends' houses during this period. Needless to say, it was difficult to meet with NGOs to plan my research.

I did try, however. I met with the women's NGO and observed some activities, including "*manifestasyon*" [protests]. Responding to the deaths of the director of Fonds Haïtien d'Aide à la Femme (FHAF) and others, the national committee advocating for Haitian women held a sit-in at the Ministry of Justice. This was one of their activities, wasn't it? Wasn't I here in Haiti to conduct research on women's NGOs? So I went. About 30 men and women, including a couple of *blan*, wore white t-shirts and were holding placards. A small crowd gathered to watch, including approximately 10 Haitian and 3 foreign journalists, with my roommate of one week. I didn't have a press pass, but I sure looked like a journalist. The protesters read a list of names, people who had died as a result of the recent political violence. The protesters asked the government to take responsibility and protect people. After speaking they all sat down. An hour later I saw a truckload of men, very big by Haitian standards, drive from the direction of Casernes Dessalines, the national security headquarters. They shouted at the mostly female crowd. Then they got out. I saw the driver give a high-five to one of the police officers, and someone got in the police truck, chatting for a while. This group of tall men threw bottles of a yellow liquid and a coconut at the seated crowd. Standing inches from my nose, a six-foot-four Haitian man with a Brooklyn accent bellowed, "What are you doing here?" I fumbled, saying that I was just a tourist, and then I walked off. A group of protesters were taken to the U.S. Embassy, led by a white woman in the crowd.

### Getting in the Way

The research design was simple enough, stemming from my previous work as an organizer. I was interrogating the role of funding on what I call civic infrastructure, the interweaving spheres among stakeholder groups in an NGO or social movement (Schuller 2006). My research project, crafted after conversations during separate field visits with three women's NGOs in Haiti, involved a comparison of these NGOs, combining anthropology's dual strengths of open-ended interviews and participant observation with a method that can be justified as scientific. On my third research trip to Haiti, the last before my 20-month dissertation fieldwork, one of the NGOs closed (see Schuller 2007). So I scrambled to find a third NGO. When I began the fieldwork, I found that one of the other two was a leading part of Aristide's opposition. The office was closed because of threats to leaders and because they were in the streets, trying to bring Aristide down. I could not escape the conclusion that my presence as a foreigner triggered a host of questions and reactions. To the protesters, I was a microphone to broadcast their concerns to the outside world. To the government supporters and crowds of onlookers, I was a CIA agent, spy, journalist, or in some other way directly involved. To say that I stuck out like a middle finger would not begin to describe the situation.

While my status was not easily explainable, my presence involved me, like it or not. Like Geertz caught at a government raid of an outlawed cockfight, I found myself in danger (Geertz 1973:420). At the second (and last) protest I intentionally observed, the crowd was tear-gassed. Like everyone else, I ran as my eyes began to sting. Unlike Geertz, my doing as the natives do did not endear me to the NGO I

was accompanying. There was no way to be neutral because my mere presence as foreigner lent the protesters visibility, credibility, and legitimacy.

Even if I had not been concerned about the political ramifications of my identity, my foreigner status shaped my interpersonal relationships with this NGO. As all anthropologists should, I had asked each NGO what thank-you gesture I could offer for its time and expertise. My contact at this NGO had asked me for invitations to U.S.-based conferences. Despite being a graduate student with little access to such things, I set out to do this. Earlier I had mentioned a conference I was planning to attend, and the ante was upped. My contact wanted my help in securing a visa for her friend also, and she couldn't afford the plane ticket. I wrote the conference organizer and put them in touch. In an e-mail exchange she had asked me about a scholarship in the U.S. for a friend. I researched and e-mailed her a list. On the following visit I brought her a gift that was ostensibly for her office. When she saw the cassette player I had brought for another NGO director, she grabbed it for herself. When we drove out to the provinces, she asked if I wanted to stop at an air-conditioned store to get some snacks. Eschewing local treats made by local hands, street food, or anything bought from one of many street merchants along the road, she wanted to get plastic bags of imported Frito-Lay food. In my going-native arrogance I refused such Western comfort food. Whether she understood my objection, she insisted I go in. She loudly said that she would be buying for everyone. Then, after everyone made their selections and went to the car, she asked to borrow my credit card.

The requests for money increased as her situation became more dire. When her rent was due, she asked me to

pay it for her. I spent long nights processing this relationship in my field notes, in e-mail, and on the phone with friends; not only did I feel like a failure (Kent 1992), I was frankly feeling used (Geertz 1992; Hull 1992). A friend of mine, who writes about global whiteness<sup>3</sup> (Willoughby-Herard 2007), reminded me that my Haitian contact was robbed of a decent life; had she been born in the U.S. or France, where she got her degree, she almost certainly would have been more successful. Like several others whom I later interviewed, she had told me that she was making a sacrifice to return to Haiti, unlike the 85% of Haitian people with a college degree who live overseas (Docquier 2006).<sup>4</sup>

Like most white people, my racial identity is often hidden from my own view (Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1997; Gordon 1997). My being white/foreign was an identity that I was not fully conscious of, except in organizing. Even so, it was an identity I thought I could check at the door, along with my other baggage of privilege. In Haiti, because of my choice not live a cloistered existence in a big, private mansion high above Pòtoprens chauffeured in a large white SUV, I was marked as different. At least five times per day, I was hailed: *Blan!* As well as meaning white (person), *blan* also means foreigner, which solidifies and reinforces the racial ideology that all Haitians are black. This official racial equality stems from the Haitian Revolution and the national Constitution wrought by liberator Jean-Jacques Dessalines. The French Code Noir defined racial hierarchies in the colonies. Unlike the one-drop rule in the United States that defines everyone with African ancestry as black, there were 33 racial categories based on the percentage of African and European blood. This system tracked seven generations of ancestors, and the divisions became more fine-grained the

closer one was to white. Someone of 1/128th African descent was not white. Tannenbaum's famous thesis (1947) explains racial instability in the French legal system: Within the Anglo-Saxon model of slavery, a child resulting from the union of a white man and a slave woman was a slave, such as Thomas Jefferson's daughter. The Iberian model, on the contrary, held that mixed-race children of a white planter were free, as in the *mestizo* concept.<sup>5</sup> The French system was indeterminate. As Trouillot argues, these concepts have not gone away (1994). Color still shapes life chances in Haiti, and racism still excludes Haiti's darker majority from power. A child born a shade lighter than her family is often called *blan* as a nickname, categorized as a *moun wouj* [red person]. These red people are granted higher status than black people, but not as high as *milat* [lighter-skinned, from the French for mulatto]. Some of the most popular products sold in the market are skin lighteners and curl relaxers, testifying to internalized racial hierarchies.

*Blan* are excluded from this system as outsiders. As my friend Tiffany, a black woman raised by her Haitian stepfather, painfully discovered on a visit, the term has nothing to do with skin tone, facial features or hair color. Simply put, she was not Haitian, so she could not be other than a *blan*. The sad irony of this was not lost on her, as she struggles to come to terms with racialization of class and identity in Afrikaner groups in South Africa (Willoughby-Herard 2007). A second-generation Haitian American college student was also *blan* because of his cultural whiteness, his inability to speak the language, unfamiliarity with Haitian proverbs, food, and other customs. Being of wholly European descent, with a long, pointy nose, über-straight hair and green eyes preceded my slowly growing competence with



language and interactional culture: how and more importantly when to *chiye* [suck my teeth] to express annoyance, for example. No matter how many Kreyòl proverbs I could quote or whether I knew the recipe for a street-food snack, I could never be other than blan.

At first it felt overwhelming. Since I had neither a car nor chauffeur, which most blan living in Pòtoprens had, I was highly visible as I walked the streets or took public transportation. Had I woken up forgetting I was a blan, at least five people per day would remind me by calling my new name, Blan!, followed by a request for something, usually money but often assistance obtaining a U.S. passport and occasionally my straight-haired green-eyed genes.<sup>6</sup> When I walked around Channmas, the National Heroes Plaza surrounding the National Palace, these requests would be more frequent and usually more emotionally charged. Sometimes with younger men, particularly on the eve of Haiti's bicentennial, my presence triggered an angry response. I saw children point, and sometimes, especially in the provinces, cry. While I never deluded myself, as had imperialists such as Captain Cook, the Leahy brothers, or the "White King of La Gonave" before me (cf. Renda 2001:4), my racial identity was something that I could not take for granted, nor forget. I was being racialized, exoticized, and othered, in a way more like Goffman (1963) than Omi and Winant (1994).

After the initial shock wore off and I was establishing some sort of relationship with a community of people, I began to see these daily reminders as an important, if not vital, part of the experience of doing fieldwork. The requests for money became short exchanges as I offered instead a pen, with an explanation that grew with my language proficiency. I

am a believer in collective social change, not charity, for example, or I don't have sufficient funds to help out 8,000,000 people. These, and especially requests for visas, were necessary reminders of the power differences that divided us (Behar 1993; Behar 1996). At first I have to confess I was annoyed and indignant, and maybe a little self-righteous: Why do you need a U.S. visa? If you're trying to leave Haiti because it is troubled, leaving it isn't going to help it improve.

### Settling In

Honestly, I felt like a failure at first to not be able to transcend this outsider status (Keesing 1992). Even though I know at some level that foreign anthropologists can never fully blend in, I was still hoping for some sort of Geertzian entry story and to develop into full personhood. It remains true that I will never be a Haitian, and as a blan I am actually a representative of the oppressor: my daily presence a reminder of the sad irony of Haiti's bicentennial. I never will be fully a *nèg* (guy—yes, it's gendered and yes, it arises from racist French slang), but I could at least become a *blan ayisyen* [white Haitian]. I eventually started settling into a rhythm, inside a bubble where my foreign identity was less immediately noticeable. Gradually, over time, the bubble grew.

Struggling to understand the political situation, struggling to find an appropriate role, thwarted from doing any meaningful participant observation, I got to know my neighborhood and the people in it. I filled out my spartan apartment with Haitian furniture as much as possible, with recycled batteries and converter, and with a tiny gas stove. I

was becoming familiar with the habitus of middle-class Haitian life, reproducing inequalities through my quotidian realities (Bourdieu 1980). I was confronted with some important decisions. People offered to work for me in my house, to cook, to clean, to do my laundry. When I carried a five-gallon jug of water up the hill, I would get chastised for doing it myself. People offered to run errands for me, like fetching water, or buying items at the market, which is a very lively experience. I decided to only go to the market (in English) whenever I couldn't find anything in the local *mache* [market] for many reasons. I didn't want my blan money to go right back to other blan or the merchant elite in Haiti. A few lighter-skinned families have an oligopoly of Haitian grocery stores; some of these families have taken this wealth and invested in media. I preferred to have my money stay in the neighborhood. I didn't want my need for comfort food to add more weight in the already woefully lopsided Haitian economy. I have since noticed, of all the middle-class families in the neighborhood, I was the only one who did this, causing a ripple in the "when in Rome" dictum of cultural relativism. Second, I found that these interactions, of being seen eating food from a *timachann*, talking with neighbors who were also buying rice or onions, was a helpful introduction to the neighborhood. It helped facilitate my transition from blan to *mon blan* to *Mesye Mak* to *Mak*. Third, in Pòtoprens the market is a communal public space where people interact. It is a social experience. It is where information about the political situation is shared and debated. Certainly, it is a place where I could keep up on the pulse of the opinions of the popular classes instead of the exclusively middle-class people of the NGOs (Schuller 2009).

I lived as an albeit strange, stubborn and confusing middle-class Haitian. I became accustomed to many middle-class consumption patterns and status markers while living in Haiti. For example, I bought my first cell phone in Haiti, and bought treated water for the first time, not drinking out of the tap. Despite this, I also tried engaging with the pockets of poor people. Like everyone around me, I found myself commenting on the state of the electricity. It went from six to eight hours per day in October 2003 to a period of one to two hours, if that, and periods of three to four days with none at all from late December to late March. I found myself planning like my neighbors to make my outgoing calls on a landline that my neighbors had agreed to share with me under the table (they were not the contract holders, I later found out) while using my cell phone for incoming calls. Like many a neighbor, I concocted elaborate schemes to keep out the cockroaches, to keep a window open so I could get some air, and turned cardboard boxes into shelves. I started burning my own trash, too scared to ask anyone else to take care of it. I found myself talking about the price of rice, of beans, of corn – all of which had gone up substantially – and scolding a local merchant for gouging her cousins in the provinces by selling U.S. rice, having hour-long conversations with a neighbor that would cover the globe, which began with a simple question about how much power we had the previous night or how the water bill worked. I found myself saying to people *m pa we ou* [I haven't seen you] after not having seen them for a couple of days. A couple of people commented that I was a blan ayisyen because of my behavior and language and cultural fluency.<sup>7</sup> It took almost the entire time I was in Haiti, but my body became accustomed to daily living for a middle class and urban Haitian.

### However...

Although the bubble grew, it was always easy to tell when I left it: "Blan!" No amount of acculturation or rapport building could take away the mark of privilege I carry around with me. Here is where racial formation in North America differed from my experience (Brodkin 1998; Willoughby-Herard 2007). While I was the other to Haitians, for obvious reasons, when I saw another white person walking around I too would turn my head and wonder what she or he was doing, sometimes with suspicion; the institutional layers of racism and privilege that transcend national boundaries did not back up the stares or the "you're not from around here." This was hammered home during the end of my fieldwork.

Pòtoprens was mired in a growing wave of kidnapping. I told myself, as indeed my friends were telling me, that my being a blan ayisyen actually protected me in some way. Since I wasn't chauffeured around and lived simply, inviting my neighbors to take water from my tap while giving them the key to the outside barrier when I wasn't home so they could see for themselves that there was nothing worth stealing, I wasn't an obvious target. But, as I was told many times by many different people, these weren't ordinary times. Desperation spiraled with the prices for staple goods. I went to teach my last class at an upstart rural university for the weekend. Upon my return I found that someone was kidnapped from the very spot I bought my five-gallon jugs of treated water. I found out about this from various *radio bouch* [rumors] but not from the radio or other media. I wondered what other incidents of kidnapping were going unnoticed and unreported, because the victims were from Haiti's middle- and lower-middle class. Two days later, I was trying to get to

an interview, stuck in a taxi and unable to move during the worst *blokeis* [traffic jam] I remembered, taking an hour to go about a half mile. Just as the taxi reached the spot where I caught the *taptap* to one of the NGO offices, I heard gunshots close by. Immediately, the police who were standing about 20 yards away shot their automatic weapons in the air. There was an immediate panic, and the taxi zoomed up the hill leading to my apartment, finally getting stuck in an even worse traffic jam. I left Haiti the way I entered it: rushed, overwhelmed and feeling powerless.

I finally left when the violence reached my bubble. Because I had what I was daily asked for—assistance in obtaining a U.S. visa—I could leave. So I did. As I sat in the airplane, flying over the deforested mountains, I couldn't contain my emotions: now I fully understood what it meant to be a blan. The privilege to leave, to protect my own life and leave others behind to face the violence. I thought of the many people who had asked for my help, and my self-righteous responses. As I explained in my abbreviated reports to the two NGOs, I was going to come back (even if I hadn't promised to do so, to withhold my analysis from the informants of this research would have been wrong and imperialistic). People in the neighborhood asked if I could take them with me. I said, "I understand, but no, I can't." To my promise to return, many said *sidyeve* [God willing], which might have been a taste of "socialized ambivalence" (Bourguignon 2000; Trouillot 1992). Just as I inherited a colonialist, imperialist, militaristic relationship between my country and Haiti, I inherited a string of broken promises by tourists, missionaries, journalists, and maybe even anthropologists. *Nap gade pou n wè.* [We'll see....]

When I returned to Haiti after conducting the “study up” part of my research (Nader 1969) in the financial and political capitals of the so-called free world, I felt rushed. I saw myself during this *vizit doktè* [literally, doctor’s visit – quick and rushed] become a *blan blan* [can be translated as ugly American]. I was chided by several people for being impatient, and some deliberately gave me bad directions. I took taxis instead of taptaps or walking, as I was rushing from one meeting to the next. I was used to having all the time in the world in Haiti, or acting that way. Now I was acting like the mission group or NGO agency I wrote critical field notes or e-mails about. I learned about people’s tragedies. A friend had died of a very curable illness because he had no health insurance, and would likely not have fallen ill if he had the means to buy treated water. A couple of babies in the neighborhood had died, again of what Paul Farmer calls “structural violence” (Farmer 2004). While I was finally gaining some rapport, the life stories people shared further underscored the differences between us: Where I come from these diseases were eradicated generations ago. I left again with more sad wisdom.

### Dangers of Whiteness

One of the ways I have tried to give back to one of the NGOs is to tell life stories to people in my country who are already involved, volunteers for NGOs who were barely literate in Kreyòl before their visit to Haiti and are knowledgeable about the world in a way that my students at the University of California or Vassar are not.

Another disjuncture between being a *blan* and a person of color in the U.S. is that being a *blan* has a higher

cost than I had understood. The first thing I noticed when I returned to Haiti to film a documentary (finally, a concrete example of trying to give back, upon the request of one of the women’s groups in my dissertation) was that traveling with another *blan*, one with a videocamera, increased exponentially the shock waves of my presence. People couldn’t as easily explain the situation to their neighbors. Being seen with a *blan* during a protracted economic crisis (see Schuller 2008) triggered suspicion. While I tried to explain to people that my hesitancy to visit them at their houses in shantytowns, which middle-class Haitians and the U.S. government were telling each other to avoid, was more about their safety than mine, it wasn’t real until something happened. I told them about the experience I had with two individuals who were carting me around: People hailed them as pastors, and asked them for money. Why else would a Haitian drive a couple of *blan* in his car? When it first happened it was a little amusing. The second time it happened, it was sad.

Over the course of the research period, the U.N. occupied Haiti. The U.N. force was led by Haiti’s Latin American neighbors, to facilitate entry and goodwill. As the violence and kidnapping raged on without adequate U.N. response, this goodwill evaporated. The team was called “*Tourist-ab*,” a play on the official French acronym, because of their ineffectiveness and their cavorting. After an incident that reminded people what occupation means, people began calling the U.N. *vole kabrit* [goat thieves]. During the filming of the documentary I was occasionally greeted with a bleat. Instead of a *blan* I became a *blanco* to the Spanish-speaking U.N. forces.

As I was setting up an interview with Janine, a former factory worker who was forced to retire because of ill health, not well off by even Haitian standards, people called me blanco, and I attempted to diffuse the tension by bleating like a goat. People asked if I was Colombian. Like many U.S. Americans abroad, particularly given recent warmongering, I had made a game of concealing my nationality,<sup>8</sup> but this was a little specific, I thought. As I found out later, some drug cartels were operating in the area; whether they were Colombian or not I don't know, but as Shakira pointed out in her smash hit with Haitian superstar Wyclef Jean, the stereotypical association is powerful and international.

When I saw Janine again, she was shaking. She explained to me that some people in the neighborhood, possibly the young guys who had asked if I was Colombian, had given her a good scare. They asked her for the money I gave her. Janine explained the purpose of the visit to the best of her ability but they didn't believe her. They said, point blank, "You were with a blan. Where's the money he gave you?" They threatened to kidnap her to get a ransom if she didn't cough up. I have talked with her since, and she was all right. But I have never visited her again, and was forced to realize the dangers of being blan and associating with a blan.

### Parting Reflections

First I became a blan in Haiti, forced to acknowledge that I have a racial identity (Di Leonardo 1998; Thandeka 1999). More than being impossible, the goal of going native is naïve and even dangerous. Possibly less obvious is that I did have a glimmer of empathy, a glimpse of daily life in being a person of color in a racist society—the stares, being othered, the

constant questioning and never feeling fully human—the situation of being a blan and a person of color in the West are fundamentally different. The final proof is that by accident of birth I was spared the worst of the violence of Haiti's contemporary crisis. Despite all the good intentions, the history of disequilibrium, slavery and occupation does not go away. Wishing it away or avoiding it is more than blind, it is irresponsible. Our presence does indeed affect things, like it or not. And like it or not, we are already implicated in systems of inequality that have been centuries in the making. What we do with that is what counts. And while it might hurt to say or to hear as an anthropologist, maybe it's okay to stay at home sometimes, not impose our need to study on people who didn't ask for it. We would do well to turn our gaze to our own and value those among us who do so. Because we white folks too are a kind of native, we too are altered (Ulysse 2008). To answer my colleague, that may be the only true commonality with people of color in the U.S. Because our whiteness follows us and precedes us and affects others in our wake.

<sup>1</sup>The title is a riff on popular song, "Mister Blan" from Brothers Posse, from their album *Revolusyon* 2004.

<sup>2</sup>Only one student out of over 1200 identified a positive image of Haiti: Grammy-winning hip-hop artist Wyclef Jean.

<sup>3</sup>Global whiteness is a transnational ideology of white supremacy, inherited from Victorian colonialism as expressed by Tylor's "savage-barbarian-civilization" schema and the so-called "white man's burden." Drawing from DuBois, scholars such as Thandeka (1999) argue that this

is ultimately poisonous to the bearer of this prejudice, while others (e.g., Willoughby-Herard 2007) focus on its impacts on the intermediate groups excluded from "pure" whiteness.

<sup>4</sup>There are other, more socialist interpretations of this duty to remain on Haitian soil. Some NGO directors said simply that "*sa a se peyi m*" [this is my country] or "*lakay se lakay*" [loosely translated, "home is where the heart is."]

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Greene 2007, Whitten 2007 for a critique of this ideology.

<sup>6</sup>Deborah Thomas (2004) outlined cultural practices such as language and food as "very, very Jamaican" and thus an racialized identity of what she calls "modern blackness"; however this contrasts with Salvador Vidal-Ortiz's auto-ethnography in which cultural traits, especially Spanish language, distinguish people from Puerto Rico as "of color," even though he is "white" (Vidal-Ortiz 2004).

<sup>7</sup>Althusser called this process "interpellation" (Althusser 1971).

<sup>8</sup>Thomas (2004) makes similar arguments about Jamaicanness.

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## Return to Belize: Shared Experiences, Different Histories

Flemming Daugaard-Hansen

A core aspect of ethnographic fieldwork, regardless of where or under what circumstances it is carried out, is building rapport and establishing meaningful social relationships with the individuals who become part of one's study. Building rapport, or becoming acquainted and gaining acceptance, is often described anecdotally as a rite of passage that involves overcoming certain obstacles of miscommunication and moments of social embarrassment before one is included or accepted by the host community or study population (Dewalt et al 1998). Studies that focus on this process are most often concerned with describing the different stages of gaining acceptance and trust that anthropologists must go through before ensuring the confidence of potential informants that eventually leads to a successful ethnographic study (e.g. Spradley 1979: 78-83). However, rarely is rapport building analyzed: how it actually occurs, how one goes about developing social relationships and gaining the confidence of those one seeks to understand through ethnographic fieldwork, and how one goes about this as an individual in relation to the study population.

In this chapter I address these questions by viewing the process of building rapport as a central and ongoing research problem that can be successfully addressed by focusing on the anthropologist's personal life experiences, narratives and motivations for research, and how personal