



Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 2008
Photo: Katherine Smith

Dancing in Salon Pep LA

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By now, the images of the demolished National Palace in Port-au-Prince are familiar to most people. Once a beacon of stateliness that too often acted as a proxy for the state itself, the palace now looks like a collapsed wedding cake. Prior to January 12th, the palace stood as an enduring symbol of oppression for many Haitians, while for others its regality represented hope that the country might someday have a state worthy of its people. For me, the palace was a more prosaic thing: a landmark to orient myself in a vast and complex city. I chose this photo, taken two years before the earthquake, not only because it shows the palace intact, but because it shows the vivid street life that went on around it. In the foreground, the band Rara Fanm (Women's Rara)¹ is dancing in front of—and seemingly oblivious to—the National Palace in the Champ de Mars, a massive public plaza. Historically, Champ de Mars has been the main stage for state spectacles, from the airport-bound motorcades of fleeing presidents to the parading of military bands and regiments.

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Rara Famn

Photo: Katherine Smith

However, Champ de Mars has always been more than a stage for state spectacle. In Creole there is a common expression: *Lari a se salon pep la*, or “The street is the people’s living room.” Social and domestic life abounds out of doors, spilling over from the family *lakou* (courtyard) of rural Haiti to the urban streets of Port-au-Prince. Champ de Mars is the largest civic space in the city, where Carnival bands masquerade and dance. There are still all the markers of a national plaza: the busts and statues of national heroes, two museums, fountains, and the stately palace. But ultimately these are just the furniture of *salon pep la*.

Champ de Mars is a place where history is memorialized, but those official monuments stand as silent backdrops to the living memory that vivifies the city. During Carnival, the linear progression of daily life briefly detours through the funhouse mirrors of collective memory. As Pierre Nora has described, the social life of memory “takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things” (1989: 8). During Carnival, Champ de Mars becomes a site for the performance of an idealized vision of nation.²

Carnival 2008 was the first time I had been in Port-au-Prince for Mardi Gras in eight years. Strolling with friends around the square and around the Grand Rue—the great boulevard that is the commercial heart of the city—was nice. Such banal words are not generally applied to downtown Port-au-Prince, but this is how it appeared to me then. Somehow Carnival had turned Champ de Mars into a Norman Rockwell painting. The streets were clean and full of couples walking hand-in-hand amidst the blooming bougainvillea and the tidy lawns. Ice cream vendors jingled their little bells for impeccably dressed children. No traffic, no clouds of exhaust, just a pleasant breeze from the ocean. The fountains had been repaired and new streetlights were in place. Any dilapidated buildings were obscured from view by brightly painted stands sponsored by private corporations. When the masquerade groups began their orderly procession down the

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promenades, the crowds all cheered politely. A group of the government's new street sweeping crews carried banners, and a few led the vanguard dancing with their brooms. They were particularly popular with the crowd.

Later in the evening the floats came out. The police kept to the side. Ordinarily at least a few people die during Carnival, usually from accidents. This happens in all major cities where Carnival is celebrated; it is not particular to Port-au-Prince by any means. But 2008 was the first year in recent memory when not a single life was lost. If Carnival was a harbinger of things to come, the future looked bright.



Tchako Stand
Photo: Katherine Smith

Weeks later I returned to these images to organize them. My memories had long since been ordered into the narrative described above, ossified neatly in my fieldnotes. But as I was archiving my photographs, another narrative was at the forefront of my thoughts. By April 2008, the “food riots” breaking out in Haiti (and other countries) had captured the news headlines. Demonstrators occupied the streets to protest the cost of food. What I saw in my images then, months later, were the international food sponsors of all the stands: Nestles (milk and infant formula), Tchaka (rice), and Bongo (milk). It seems in fact that Carnival’s rebelliousness and political threat had not been tamed; it had only been deferred.³

Carnival was not as pleasant as it appeared. The unofficial sponsor of festivities had been “Klorox.” Haitians had appropriated the proprietary name of the popular bleach to describe a heightened state of deprivation. As if to question the universal sentience of hunger, Haitians joked they had invented “Klorox,” a new “brand” of hunger that could burn right through your gut. Behind the corporate stands, the walls of Champ de Mars were marked by taggers with the slogan “*Aba Klorox*” (Down with Clorox). It was not long before a new expression “*batri asid*” (battery acid) hunger, said to be even more powerful, became popular. “Klorox” presented a politically pointed and painful inversion to Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings on

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“feasts of tripe” in medieval Carnival. Bakhtin identified the digestive tract as the semantic nexus for death and regeneration: “Tripe, stomach, intestines are the bowels, the belly, the very life of man. But at the same time they represent the swallowing, devouring belly [...] (T)he belly does not only eat and swallow, it is also eaten as tripe” (1984: 162–3). Similarly, Klorox demonstrates that what you consume can consume you.⁴



Watson Whiskey
Photo: Katherine Smith

The corrosive witticism of Klorox was prescient because it exposed the extent to which the processes of natural disaster are socially constructed. Hunger was a brand of misery owned by the poor, not a somatic state. And when the earthquake struck, it was clear that the magnitude of the damage was largely an effect of social and historical processes.

Champ de Mars is now a refugee camp: it is literally *salon pep la*. In 2010, Carnival was canceled for the first time in the nation’s history. No one could think about a festival of renewal amidst so much death. Rebuilding Port-au-Prince will require reevaluating the blueprint offered by the past. But which memories do we recall when reconstructing “the past”? What did civic space look like in Port-au-Prince before the earthquake? For Carnival 2008, Champ de Mars was picturesque, but the moment would prove as elusive as it was idyllic. The popular discourse of “Klorox” would soon corrode this image revealing the unrest behind the private stands and pleasant landscaping. And yet there is another element to this image: the bodies in the band Rara Fanm that foreground the National Palace. In this instance they own the street, and they are marching forward. What clarion call might their horns sound?

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Notes

¹ Rara is a processional festival traditionally based in Vodou temples that takes to the streets immediately following Carnival and continue through Lent. See McAlister 2002.

² For more on the historical structure of state/nation antagonism in Haiti, see Trouillot, 1990.

³ In point of fact, the demonstrations yielded few results. The Prime Minister was forced to step down, and some went so far as to speculate that professional agitators were behind the ruckus. That may, or may not, have been true, but the rage expressed in the demonstrations was undeniable.

⁴ Haiti's food sovereignty has rapidly declined through the past two decades of neoliberal reform and environmental crisis. The individual body and its experience of hunger is linked to the national consumption of imported rice which is consuming the nation. The nutritionally inferior foreign rice and chicken that make up the bulk of calories consumed in Haiti is consuming national production and actually exacerbating the hunger of *pep la*.

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