

Women Writers with Issues

Fania Simon
Castina Charles

BCB & LTI
New York-Florida

Copyright © 2007 by Fania Simon
Copyright ©2007 by Castina Charles
Published by Bois-Caiman-Books/LTI

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means— mechanical, electronic, photocopy, recording or any other— except for brief quotations in printed review, without the prior permission of the author and publisher.

Requests for information should be addressed to Bois-Caiman-Books

Email: Boiscaimanbooks@yahoo.com

Author's website:

www.faniasimon.com

www.baadasspoet.com

Simple Writing 4 Simple People©2003
Wholesale Rates Available

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF
AMERICA

Table of Content

Introduction

- 1- Children's Rights in Haiti: Providing a Voice for the Voiceless 6**
- 2- Diaspora Lost in The West: A Place Of Disorder 29**
- 3- I Am Beautiful: What It Means To Be Colored And Woman 57**
- 4- Haitian Women & Sweatshops In Haiti 83**
- 5- Upcoming Discussions 98**

Introduction

Women Writers With Issues, a publication by two Haitian-American women writers, Fania Simon and Castina Charles. They aim to share their views about many striking issues within society and culture. This project is simply a unique approach to open a channel of communication between people with like minds. They are not trying to convert anyone into accepting their views. They speak as an effort to build a bridge towards change for all people.

Women Writers With Issues
Discussion #1

Children Rights in Haiti: Providing A Voice For The Voiceless.

A famous quote rolls easily from the tongues of many mothers and fathers in Haiti. The quote opens up many doors to much cruelty to children in Haiti. They say, "Borik fe pitit fe li repoze" [Loose translation: donkey gives birth so that baby donkey can carry the load.] and with such expression and belief, many parents (especially mothers) feel that once they have children (especially daughters), that gives them the ultimate right to "retire" from their everyday chores and begin to enslave the children.

The act of giving birth somehow gives them a sense of superiority or gives them massive authority over the child. They become "the oppressor" and the child is naturally reduced to a "slave," an "object" or a "donkey." Castina, do

you know of this expression? How do you feel about it?

In regards to the quote, I am quite familiar with it, and recognize parallels to it in many cultures. The idea that children are somehow their parents "savior" so to speak-with their sole purpose as laborers for their parents is a very old one, and one that was/ and still is prevalent in many countries. It really wasn't until the 20th century that attitudes started to change (in parts of the West at least) and in many impoverished nations that concept is still very much alive.

Now I think it is safe to say that Haiti is not a progressive country. Whether it is with technology, or human rights- we are still very much behind, and have a lot to catch up. If you want to understand the brutality and the corruption that is manifested within the government and the country as a whole, than you need to look no further than the condition of children. From an early age, the child is taught two very important things: those with power

control everything and have all the rights; those without power have nothing-and don't have the *right* to even claim their rights. This is the dynamic, for the most part between parent and child. It is a system in many cases of extreme abuse and cruelty, and one that I feel is at the root of so many problems in Haiti. How can we expect to have a strong nation ruled by strong visionary leaders, when from birth we teach our children nothing but brute force and perpetual servitude?

Children are people [ti-moun se moun] why are they being treated, referred to, or compared to as animals.

That is something I ask myself often. From a personal perspective, I cannot comprehend this type of cruelty, and I suspect that aside from the cultural, historical and political circumstances, there is this innate desire in many people to dominate others-and children since they are so utterly vulnerable become the natural target. I think the reference to

children as animals, donkeys specifically, illustrates perfectly their view of children as potential laborers-something to be used in cultivating the fields. Donkeys are, after all, domestic animals, used to carry the load of the people. So if you think about it, it's a perfect metaphor for how these children are viewed-load carriers.

This becomes even more evident in relation to mothers and daughters. As you mentioned earlier women often pass on the burden of the domestic labor onto their daughters, and are often instrumental in inflicting abuse on them. Now I think in order to comprehend this, you have to look at it from a cultural/psychological perspective. These women live in a society where they are considered subservient to men-valued only for their bodies, and their ability to produce children. The wives are servants to their husbands-they cook for them, clean the home, serve them and provide them with strong sons. So when a mother gives birth to a daughter I think two things

happen- one she resents her for not being a son, and thus making *her* undervalued (especially if she has not been able to give birth to a son) and second she sees her as “respite” from all her labors. She now has someone who is beneath her, someone she can use to alleviate her sufferings. She does this, not because she despises her, but because it is all *she* has ever known, and means to prepare her for her future duties as wife and mother. So in essence, women are instrumental in this process of turning their children into “donkeys.” It is a process that has its roots in West Africa, and if nothing is done to seriously address it, it will probably continue into the future.

**What can be done to make children feel comfortable in their own home?
Are they slaves to their parents?**

The only way that children can be happy and comfortable in their household is if their parents are willing to change. The

parent has to recognize their errors, and begin valuing the children as independent entities onto themselves, with the right to their own feelings and thoughts. Those thoughts need to be respected. As you say children are people, and just because they are small, doesn't mean that don't have something to contribute. Parents ought to legitimize their children, validate their opinions. That will give them the strength and confidence to be happier and successful adults.

What about the phrase- "I pay the cause to be the boss."

What does that mean? Isn't taking care of YOUR child your duty? Should their parental duty be seen as a favor to the child?

You know it's interesting that you mention that phrase. The first thing that comes to my mind is that James Brown song, called "Boss" that uses that phrase. It was part of the soundtrack for a film that came out in the mid 1970s called "Black

Caesar". The premise of that film was this: A young Black kid from the streets rises from a petty street thief to a big time gangster in Harlem. He does this by forming the right alliances, and by paying "his dues"-running favors for the Italian mob. Once he gets into a position of power, he begins to abuse it, as he is now in the position of "Boss." hence the saying, "I pay the cause to be the boss"

In Haiti the same type of philosophy is at work. The hierarchical system is separated into really four classes-class, color, gender and age. For our purposes, I'll focus simply on "age." Since older people are revered, they tend to have more status within the culture. Children being the youngest members of the group have the least status. So the situation with many parents or older people is that, for a good quarter of their lives they are constantly "paying their dues" by showing reverence to their parents, and older people, remaining silent, and obeying their every command. They spend such a

long time doing this, that by the time they become adults and have attained some degree of power, in a cultural sense, they start to exploit that. It's sort of like a master-slave complex. The slave in many instances usually wanted two things; to obtain freedom, and to be in the same position as their master. So in the case of these parents- they have paid the cause, and now they can now assume the role as master.

“Isn't taking care of YOUR child Your duty?” Absolutely. But unfortunately that is not the mentality of many of these people. It's more like “I gave birth to you- I fed you, provided you with a roof over your head-So you owe ME.” You see the child automatically starts with a debt to pay to society.

Let's say if a family is poor yet sitting around and giving birth to a village full of children and they can't take care of them, Isn't that also a form of child abuse because the parents are misusing their power and consciously

**creating an environment that is not
fare and productive to the children?**

I wouldn't say "consciously" because I don't think the parents necessarily view it that way, but I do think that in an unconscious way it is form of abuse that puts both the parents and the children in a difficult situation. Raising one child is not easy, never mind 10 or more, so it is a tremendously stressful situation. I think two things are at play here, a lack of education on the part of the parents (particularly when it comes with sexual matters, and practicing forms of birth control) and also a belief in some of these parents that having more children will make them more prosperous, b/c they will have more hands to help out with the labor-and people that would take care of them when they are old. This is especially the case in rural communities. There is no government system in place to help these people, and no nursing homes to take care of them when they are old; so many times, they rely on their children to take

care of them. However I still personally feel that it is a wrong to view your children as some sort of investment, in the business sense. They are so much more than that.

Should poor people be told by the government how many children they should have per household? Also, keep in mind we are talking about Haiti, a place without the welfare system. There is no food stamps, no WIC checks, no help from the government to help raise the children and no law against child abuse...who will help a poor mother and father raise their 10 children? Moreover, who will help the children once their needs are not met?

Should poor people be told not to have more children? Not directly. However I think the problem lies in the fact that many people are not properly educated when it comes to contraceptives-(and you have a whole host of men who refuse to use it because it "feels" better raw).

However I think if there was some type of government incentive perhaps in terms of financial rewards to parents who *don't* have more than 2-3 kids than that might help.

But we have to keep in mind that this is all talk. Haiti is completely unstable-and without a stable government, there can be no regulation of anything.

I think we can agree that it is expensive to raise children these days. Isn't it also a problem for society when people with no financial power continue to give birth and not have the money to properly educate their children?

Yes. But the problem is multifaceted. It is one thing for parents to keep on producing children when they do not have the financial means to take care of them. It is another thing to have a government so thoroughly corrupt and incompetent that it does not try to make a conscious

effort to educate its people. I cannot blame the illiteracy rate on the people. I lay that blame on the footsteps of the government.

My mother once told me, that during the Duvalier regime, people who invented things were killed, because they were seen as a threat to the government. The logic being that if this person was intelligent enough to invent things, than they were also intelligent enough to overthrow the regime. Now I ask, what in the hell type of logic is that? You see if you are in an environment where education for the poor is not only discouraged, but could possibly be dangerous, than it is only natural that it will fail to thrive.

Children are the future, what will happen to the future if our children do not know how to read and write? Who will lead the country in the future?

I think it's fairly obvious who will rule; the same people that have always ruled; the

bourgeois, the military, the politically corrupt, and everything else in between. For the most part the people who have been in positions of power, or have taken over the country, have had some type of education. However the type of ignorance that you and I both know exists in Haiti goes far beyond literacy. You see you may know how to read or write but that does not mean that you will have the depth or the consciousness needed to truly lead a people. That requires a visionary, who can go beyond the selfish ego in order to establish harmony amongst all the people.

Now you see we have had educated leaders, but we have not, since the founding of Haiti by our revolutionary forefathers, had *visionary* leaders-who possessed a greater vision for the people. A leader who could realize that educating our children should be top priority, because only when you have a nation filled with educated people will it become progressive. Children who have been

given nothing, and know nothing, can produce nothing.

I think the poor are already carrying a heavy load and it is not right to dictate how small or how large their family should be but at the same time, what about the children's right? Don't they have the right to grow up in a healthy home? Don't they have the right to basic human needs? (Food, water, shelter, education) who will provide for them if the mother and father can't do it?

I think you are absolutely right, and I think the problem goes back to what we were talking about in relation to some parents viewing their children as “donkeys” more or less. Children are perceived as assets to them.

However having said that, I think it is important to note that these parents do love their children, and would, if given the opportunity provide for them, unfortunately for many in Haiti, poverty is

a condition that is unavoidable. These same parents were products of that same poverty, so it is the only lifestyle they know. It is a harsh and cruel environment that affects both the parents and the children.

Why don't we have public schools in Haiti?

We don't have public schools in Haiti because we don't have a government that is organized and stable enough to make it a priority.

Some say God will provide for the children but isn't God all about "Balance and harmony?"

He also said: he will punish those who abuse children...right?

Right. People frequently defer to God what should be taken care of here. Justice must exist on this planet, as well as the afterlife, and since children are totally dependent on the adults to take

care of them, than it is *their* duty to provide for them.

Okay. Let us jump to the issue of RESTAVEK:

RESTAVEK is Child Slavery in Haiti. It is our terrible reality. Some parents from many different villages are offered a better life in the city for their children. And after they agree to let their children go, they then realize or they find out that they were actually conned into giving or selling their children into slavery. These children are often very young, as young as three, four and five years old. Some of them are verbally and physically abused and raped by their owners. They get no schooling (except in rare cases where some are sent to night school). What is to be done to free these children?

Restavek: Restavek's perfectly illustrates an idea that I strongly feel, that although we achieved our independence from the

French in 1804, we were quick to reinstate it with a form of slavery of our own. Haiti is a nation of slavery, in both the physical and psychological sense. The people are a slave to political oppression; the poor are a slave to the rich; the women are a slave to the men; and children are the slaves of everyone.

In the case of child slavery I think it is an illustration of the most perverse aspects of human nature. It seems to be an unfortunate part of humanity that so often people have this desperate need to dominate others; they don't feel good unless they have someone beneath them. In the case of restaveks it is even more interesting because it is poor people abusing these children. I think in a situation like that you have what I term "master-envy." These people, who are perceived as the lower end of society, enslave these children in order to feel better about themselves, and garner a sense of superiority by abusing these children.

As for what could be done about the situation, it is very difficult to say. I remember awhile back me and my father were having a discussion on this matter. He explained that the problem lies in the people, and their mentality. That very same night we went over to a friend of my mother's, and she was, in her nostalgic bliss, reminiscing about "those little children" that used to work in her household, and how that was one of the good things in Haiti. Me and my father exchanged knowing looks. But you see this is where the problem lies. Unfortunately, this woman's views are not unique, and as long as the vast majority of the people see this as normal, even a good part of the culture, then the situation will remain intact. I think the only real thing that can be done is to raise awareness on the matter. Everyone in Haiti knows about restaveks, however they need to be taught that it is an EVIL thing-not an aspect of the culture that should be celebrated. This however will not be an easy task, and there is part of

me, that doubts that this will ever take place.

I heard another quote: "ti moun se byen malere" [Children are poor people's wealth,] and I say NO. Parents need to love and elevate their children. They are not here to be used as objects to financially elevate their parents. What do you think? Should a child face the streets and make money for his/her poor parents as a "pay back" for being born?

Absolutely not. If a child is brought into the world with a debt on their head, how will they ever be able to make it on their own? Parents should stop passing on their misfortunes onto their children. If the culture is to thrive, than we need to make investments in our children, not use our children as investments.

I agree with you Castina. I feel in lawless environment children suffer the most. We all need to come together

and find a practical way to put an end to child slavery and child abuse in Haiti? We need to stand together and provide a voice for the voiceless. But we need to let the voice be loud like thunder so the whole world can hear our cry against child abuse.

Here is a piece Cartoonist, Author and Poet Fortune Lauture wrote about our voiceless children, what do you think about this poem?

Bigger Ears for Children

*Children are like ears
People want them to listen
People want them to obey
If they don't listen and obey
People punish them
And wash away their brain. ~ Fortune
Lauture*

Wow. That is an incredibly powerful piece, that I think perfectly illustrates the plight of the children in Haiti. They are the victims that have been stripped of a voice,

and are forced into submission- They are the ears that must witness all the violence and perversion of a culture. It is time now that we stand up and be their voice.

Finally, do you think we can realistically free our state of mind in order to free our children? Please, I am not only talking about physical freedom but spiritual freedom. Is it possible to free them if we (adults) are not free?

Anything is possible as long as we are willing to make the commitment to change. If our ancestors, slaves that had suffered all manners of torture and abuse, came to defeat and obtain their freedom from one of the most powerful nations in the world, then it is certainly not impossible for us to free ourselves. We must confront our demons in an open and honest manner, for it is only then that we can obtain the type of spiritual freedom that we seek.

I have not given up hope on my people. Despite everything, our culture has much to offer, and has so much beauty. However as a true patriot you must be willing to face the ugliness as well. You cannot claim to love something, but then choose to turn your back upon the host that is feeding upon its flesh. That is not true love, only false pride, and that will only cultivate delusions; something which eventually destroys the culture. If we truly love Haiti, than we must fight, with every fiber in our being, to preserve it and save it from destruction. Collectively as a people, we must nourish its soils, and invest heavily into its future-our children.

Yes Castina, I think collectively we can make an effort to strengthen the importance of children in our society through verbal communication. For example, certain quotes, which degrade children, should be silenced. We need to use uplifting words to build up their self-esteem and not break them down by comparing them

to animals. They are not animals they are children in search for guidance. They are not here to carry other people's loads; they are not here to be anybody's ticket to the supremacy ladder. They are here to be all they were sent here to be. They are here to learn and to teach in order to lead us to a better future

Thank you Castina for staying on point. God blessed.

Women Writers With Issues
Discussion #2

DISCUSSION OF DIASPORA LOST IN THE WEST: A PLACE OF DISORDER

First, I would like to start this discussion off by stating that it is such an honor and a privilege to work with such an immensely talented and prolific artist such as yourself. Your work is always moving, in both the intellectual and spiritual sense, and this book is a wonderful example of this.

As both a contributor and reader of this text, what I found to be most profound is your thorough analysis of racial issues within the community. As we both know this type of issue is rarely discussed, and it is for that reason I believe *Diaspora Lost In The West* is breaking new ground. Because of this I would like to thoroughly break this book down, from top to bottom, since I know that everything presented in this text is deliberate. So let me start with my first question, the title. What made you decide to call the book

***Diaspora Lost in The West: A Place of Disorder?* What type of message did you want to come across?**

Thank you Castina

Well, I named the book ***Diaspora Lost in The West: A Place of Disorder*** because I wanted a captivating title to convey the message that we are not “all right” in the west. The title is my road map into the message. In addition, it is like a warning to my readers that I would be going inside the Diaspora soul in order to bring out to the surface many issues, which I feel we need to deal with in order to grow as a people. But most significantly, if we are a bunch of Diaspora people that are Lost in the West: A Place of Disorder, then isn't it logical that we try to find ourselves? How do we do start? That is the message I tried to get across in this title.

Okay, now lets talk about the images you have-the front and back cover. Tell the readers the historic significance of the images, and how they relate to the poetry in the text.

The image in the front cover is the picture of a **Slave Port** in Widah, Benin West Africa. This slave port is called *La Porte De No Retoure*, which translates in English *THE DOOR OF NO RETURN*. It is the final exit from Africa to the entrance of hell for millions of African ancestors. Our ancestors were kidnapped, chained, and sold into the west and paradoxically, the door was called the Door of No Return since our oppressors knew once our fore parents walked through that door they would be conquered and lose their freedom, their land, family, language ect...However, today we are the Diaspora; the descendent of enslaved African people. Wouldn't it be nice for us Diaspora children to in truth pay homage by going back to roots and turn the door of no return to THE DOOR OF (Diaspora) returns? Do we have the urge to go back and rewrite history for our own advancement? Many of us have become something else. We forget that we started from somewhere outside of the west. Therefore, we disconnect ourselves from our history and now breathe only for the west.

The back cover is the ocean where oppressors would load their ships and take our ancestors away to the west. From cover to cover, I wanted to show or remind the readers of that cruel passage and encourage them to go back to Africa and unite with our roots. We need to see and feel what it was like for our fore parents as they walked through the doorway to hell.

In describing the book, one word comes to mind: revolutionary. I use that term deliberately. A revolution is that which revolts against the order or the perceived order of things. I feel that *Diaspora Lost In the West: A Place of Disorder* is revolting against the spiritual and mental segregations within the Black community. It is a revolt against the plantation mentality. Would you agree? What was your intention behind writing this book?

Yes, I agree with you. This book is really a mirror before us (Diaspora) and I ask my brothers and sisters in the west to

examine ourselves and see the way we are in dealing with each other. For example, if I had a dime for every time a brother or a sister (in the U.S) told me to go back to Haiti, I would be rich by now. Or if I had a dime for every time a brother or sister told me that I did not look Haitian, I would be more than rich. This is to show the intensity of our division. Mentally, we segregate against each other based on nationality, religion, skin color, hair texture, language, old money new money, class ect. And I can honestly say that we are still on the plantation however, the masters are not all white.

I believe in my people. I know we can do better if we want to. I wish we would kill the hypocrisy and admit that our family does not stick together. Why do we continue to chant, "Family sticks together" if we keep on discriminating against our brothers and sisters from other countries in the west? Aren't they family? We complain about racist whites then we turn around and shed black on black bigotry on our own people?

Now it's time to go *inside* the book. In this part of the discussion, I want to focus on the thematic structure of the book. This book has many themes, but I will mention the ones that immediately jumped out at me as I was reading the text; feel free to add to this list if you want. The four main themes I want to look at are hypocrisy; Africa; Haiti and blackness.

The first issue hypocrisy I feel is MAJOR, it is prevalent throughout the entire text, the sense of hypocrisy amongst blacks, and this pretense of "family unity" as you title it, when in reality what truly exists is this separatist mindset. Since I know your work to be intensely personal can you describe for us, how your own experiences have inspired you? What made you want to challenge the hypocrisy? I know this theme spills over into the other themes such as Africa and Haiti, so you may include that in your discussion as well.

Yes, we do have a separatist mindset. We are very tribal and it reflects in everything that we do. For example, we claim to love Africa but when a Diaspora millionaire gives millions to Africa (her motherland); many of us come up with many other reasons why the money should be spent in the west instead of Africa (our motherland). But my question is: when is this “romance” going to end in order for real African love to kick in? See, when we love something we should want it to prosper. Here’s another example, look at Haiti; we helped others gain their freedom but when we need their help, we are left alone to die in the sun. Where are our brothers and sisters? Don’t they see our pain? Look at the way our 200 years of “liberty” went down the drain in 2004? Just imagine if black people from all over stood up on that day and came to Haiti’s rescue -that would have been so powerful and together we would have sent a message to the world that “hey, don’t you mess with our Haiti. We’ll sticks together and write history.” But NO! That is not what happened. Haiti was left alone swimming in violence and in tears while

celebrating 200 Years of independence from slavery.

See, I want the Diaspora to remember that Haiti helped abolish physical slavery in the west and everyone benefited from Haiti's contribution. Haitians did not only free themselves but they went aboard and gave their lives to help free many other countries including the United States. It is because of us Louisiana was sold to the state. But look at us today; when we need help do we get it? NO! Anyway, this book is not about Haitian Diaspora vs. African American Diaspora or any other Diaspora in the west but it is about all of us dwelling in the west and our need to find a way to connect as children of Africa. We need to work towards finding a way to take back our victory from ignorance. But first, we must be willing to bring out the dirty laundry in order for real clean up to take place.

Now let's talk about Africa. Throughout your work, you express this intense love affair of Africa, as it is the subject matter of many of your

poems. You make a point however to distinguish between authentic love and fake love, and you express on many instances a sort of disgust for the latter. For example in your poem “Romancing Africa” I feel you attack this issue head on. Could you tell us, what do you feel is the problem here?

Here is the problem. Just like a man who wants to seduce a woman or a woman who wants to attract a man, she will cook for him, buy him gifts just to have a moment with him but does she really love him? I do not think Africa is looking for a one-night stand from any Diaspora child and I do not think Africa is looking for a romance that is in season. I think Africa is in need of people who are willing to pick up the pieces for the sake of our heritage. I think true love (not false pride) is to claim our heritage and contribute towards its development, but if a person cannot make an effort to contribute why does he or she continue to wear the African booboos, lock the hair, beat the drum, change the Massa’s name yet keep the plantation mentality? Why not

decentralize the mind and revolutionize the way of thinking. I think that's the key. I may not know much but I believe with all my heart that "being African" is much more than fashion.

Haiti is another significant theme here, and one in which I feel the issue of intra-discrimination comes into play. As a woman who immigrated to this country at a young age, I know that, for you many of the issues, such as discrimination, are personal. How have your experiences impacted your work? Do you feel that the discrimination against Haitians from various groups is at the crux of what you are trying to address here, as far as the separatist mentality?

Yes, the discrimination we face from various black groups does have an impact in what I am trying to say because I think it hurts more when one is being discriminated against by his or her own people. When I was in elementary school in New Jersey, I remember being told by my African American classmates and by

foster sister to “Go back to Africa.” And I remember yelling these words; “I’m taking you with me. Your family needs to see you too.” See, I was around 12 years old and even then, I knew we were family. But since the oppressors dropped my side of the family in Hispaniola/Haiti and that I was born on that colony, they did not consider me as family. I was considered as “the voodoo child, boatpeople, aids girl, and stinking Haitian or h2o (Haitian body odor)...” On some occasions, I was even told to “go back to Jamaica” as if geographically speaking Jamaica was in Haiti.

See, I want to help erase that kind of mentality and encourage simple logic. I want us to remember that our ancestors passed through that same DOOR OF NO RETURN. And we need to know that and help each other. I know once we free the mind, everything else will follow.

To take this issue further I want to ask you, do you feel that Haitians are dehumanized by other groups? In “Katrina is Choking Me” you mention

Hurricane Jeanne and how the world was virtually silent on this devastation. So many people were killed, but because the people in question were “Haitian” it was as if it didn’t matter. Tell us, what compelled you to write this poem? What made you decide to speak out?

Mos Def’s piece “Katrina Clap” inspired that poem. The moment I saw that video, words from within me started to attack me, so I began to write the anger I felt about the way Hurricane Jeanne wiped parts of Haiti out and many of our brothers and sisters did not say a word. Many did nothing to help. They did not lend a helping hand.

In my province alone, thousands of people included children drowned. I have family members who died from this hurricane but we had no one to help. We cried back into the emptiness of our souls.

I say many people in the Diaspora discriminate against us because we are

no longer the pearl of the islands. But I want to remind them that poverty is not a crime and we should not get the death sentence for being poor. My argument is this: If we really love who we are and if we really love our heritage, why do we look the other way when another Diaspora child is in need? Why not help keep the entire family on its feet? Why not do it for the sake of mother Africa? After all, Haitian people are not adopted children of Africa. We endured slavery, fought to free others and today we are paying the price while others continue to prosper. Today we are still in bondage because of our victory 1804. We were brave enough to free ourselves and influence the world but today history turned on us. We are desperately seeking that “family unity.”

Brief story

When I was a child in Haiti, I used to see white missionaries building schools, building churches, orphanages and

cafeterias ect, and I used to ask my dad this question:

“In these white people’s country, do they also have people who look like me living there?” and he would say yes, and I would say, “Well, how come they don’t come to visit us and to help us too?”

See even then I felt the problem but was not grown-up enough to understand it as a “separation” issue. Anyway, in this book, I am letting my brothers and sisters know that I crave family unity for all my brothers and sisters around the world and I know there are some people who feel the same way.

Black seems to be a major symbol used throughout the book. The phrase “black on black” appears often. I feel that you play around with that word, at moments referring to the actual color, and in others use it in reference to race. I would like you to unpack that term for me. What do you think is the significance of the word “black” and how as a poet do you play around with its varied meanings?

Black has many different meanings in this book, from the color of the unknown, the color of the skin and even ignorance. However, they all relate. In addition, I use “black” because black is original. We came from the unknown, the source and then the source called on the light. [Ref: Let there be light] Hence, I want to remind my brothers and sisters of that powerful fact because I feel that we are sleeping on our power and we need to be revived.

Black is like a prize to me and I wish it was seen as such in the eyes of my people here in the west. I know if we understand who we are, if we understand our connection to the source, we would do better—not to please the ego but to please the maker. We would contribute collectively to humanity. However, please keep in mind, I am not preaching supremacy. I am addressing the importance of embracing our history and understanding the making of our western identity.

But most of all, I am addressing family unity and the power we would have if we

unite. That is the ultimate message here. I am saying, let us kill the plantation lifestyle and push forward to uplift us. If we do that, we could show the world TRUE power of unity.

In my eyes, there is no valid reason why we should discriminate and abandon each other. See, I know I am not dreaming about something that cannot happen...I know it can happen because whenever we are in crises such as police brutality, we do come together. We march together all across the Brooklyn bridge seeking "justice" without caring about the nationality, religion, language of the brother or sister marching next to us, therefore, why must we wait for a racial tragedy to happen before we come together? We need to understand that THE MOVEMENT IS GLOBAL. NOT TRIBAL.

Okay I think its time to examine the stylistic aspect of your poetry. I have read a large amount of your poems, and have come to recognize your own unique style. However as I started

reading this book, I noticed that your work has taken on a new form. There appears to me, to be an incredible sense of freedom, and I feel that you have become much bolder in your speech as if “the shackles have been removed from your feet.” Is this just me, or is there some truth to this observation? Do you feel that this particular book is somewhat different, from all your other books?

Yes, you are correct. Spiritually, “the shackles have been removed” and for the first time in my life, I feel free. Right through the pressure, I was able to drop my load in order to embrace life. And if anyone reads about my life story in **Sofi’s Load**, he or she will see that I have been a fighter all my life—trying to keep my neck above the sea. But sis, since childhood my hunger was to be heard by my people. As an observer, I could see so many things going on around me, which also affected my life, but I was somehow unable to let it out because I feared criticism. I judged that it was not right for me to hold back and not give my 100% to

humanity because of the fear of being judged, but now I know that that was not the problem. It just was not the time. However, Castina you are right, this project is different. I feel bolder and more confident in delivering this message. And the credit goes to God because He is in charge. In addition, I have to say that you Castina have helped me because finally God sent me a talented sistah who understands the mission and the message. Your cheers are like a booster to my spirit.

All right it is a must that we move on to your poetry, because no amount of discussion would be significant without addressing the sheer beauty of your words. You have such an incredible way with language, an aspect that makes your work poetic in the truest sense. For this reason I've selected three passages from a few of my favorite poems that I feel stand out for their beauty but more so the message behind the words. I'd like you to go over these passages and break it

down for the readers. What are the issues you are addressing?

Let's start off with "Honor Yourself: A Quick Wordy Story" In this piece you brilliantly use repetition to make the audience feel the full affect of your words. After every anecdote you discuss, you punctuate it with

"Oh friends!/ Now do you see what I mean?/Subjectivity/Negativity Lost of identity/ In his eyes/Nationality/Rates higher/ Than family unity."

Now this phrase varies somewhat, within the context of the poem, however the overall content remains the same. Can you tell us, what is behind that phrase? What is the message you want to come across?

I am placing the imaginary mirror in front of us, as I remind our people to honor themselves because if we do, we will involuntarily respect ourselves. Back in many different provinces in Haiti, when someone visits and knocks on your door,

he or she must say, “honor?” and the person inside the house must respond, “Respect!” meaning I honor your territory. And because of that gesture the other person will gladly ask him or her to enter because he or she came in the name of respect. This form of salutation is also practiced in the Jamaican community among the Rastafarians. They greet each other by saying “RESPECT” and the other responds “Yes I.”

Actually, I think this is a simple logic passed down to us from our ancestors, and if we apply this “honor/respect” technique, we would begin to value and reconnect with each other. However, to answer the question, that particular passage is describing three or four specific occasions when ignorance crossed my path where a Jamaican woman, a Trinidadian woman, an African American woman reminded me of “my place.” But one interesting part was when a Haitian person began to throw his own discriminating views in my face about me writing too much about Africa. He voiced his disapproval because he saw that as a

sign of me “rejecting my Haitian identity” at the end of each story I use repetition to show the readers how these people value “nationality, religious convictions, and ignorance more than Africa or blackness or family unity.

**In the “Remembrance of the Forgotten Rain” you state “So what if I fall?/ The Sun will give me energy/ And I’ll rise again/
If I fall, I’ll rise/ Cause I have faith/
Please forget me not!/
I rain/ I slip/ I fall/ I rise.”**

When I read those words, I feel as if you are speaking of some personal tribulation, and your ability to overcome whatever is placed before you, because some higher spiritual authority guides you. Am I correct in this assertion?

Yes, almost everything I write about is from my own experiences and in that poem I wanted my readers to know that they should never be afraid of **falling**

because “falling” has no power to keep them down. It is up to them to get up or stay down.

See, life is my best teacher and through the years I have met people who pray for my fall but that is like a joke to me because I have experienced worse than a fall and came out more than a conqueror. Some say it is arrogance when I testify but I just don't know how not to tell it. I am a living testimony and everyday God is blessing me with more grace. I say this as humble as I can. I am not afraid to fall because if I fall I will get up. See, people who wish me evil probably don't know that I died, went to hell and God got me out. Hence, falling seems like cup cake because I have Him leading my path. I am sorry but I do not know how not to stand up with boldness and give Him the glory.

In that poem I wanted people to know that falling is nothing because the power within me will just keep pushing me forward. I have no doubt about this. Hence, I am like a child playing in the

rain. I know in life I will slip. I will fall and I will rise. I will wash the mud off my hands and knees and I will stand. This is all part of life. Girl, I don't want to get started because I will not be able to stop but trust me after being raped, after being shot, after rejection, after being cast away by family and friends, after being conned and discriminated again, I still stand and I thank God for it all.

This is the same faith I want to share. I want us to stand and claim our stolen throne. I want us to remember that we do have power and we can do great things. All we need to do is come together under a common ground. Let's have faith and come together under the umbrella of true family unity.

Finally in the poem "The Movie: Who Shall Save Us From Black on Black Crime?" you take an interesting new direction tackling the issue of drugs in the black community. You state

"Oh modern plantation! / I hear about civil union/ I hear about civil freedom/

**I hear civil this and civil that/But you
killed your civic sense of duty/
As you pack syringes/ And cook rocks
in the hood.”**

**Now although this particular poem
goes into a variety of issues, your
focus on drugs is highly significant.
What made you want to go into that?**

I went into it because I feel if I was talking about problems in our community and did not address our #1 killer, than my job would be incomplete. However, in relation to the title at hand, I am telling my brothers and sisters, just because the oppressors are selling drugs wholesale, that does not mean that it is okay for us to sell retail. I say this because I feel by selling drugs that we too play a huge part in killing the family.

I think black drug dealers are also taking part in our death because they know that drugs will never uplift us. Hence, how can we grow and prosper if drugs eating our body and soul? How can we have a revolution of the mind if we are on crack?

We need to decentralize our brain-not clog it up with things to self-destruct. I stand firm that if we all make this commitment to work positively towards our advancement—through education and action, we would be better off.

Finally, to the last issue, one, which I would like to close this discussion with you. I feel that no discussion on any work of yours would be complete without going into spiritual matters. You're in the deepest part of your being a spiritual person, as it pervades all aspects of your life, and it most certainly prevalent in your poetry. Could you tell us how would you define spirituality and how does it manifest itself in your poetry?

I grew up in a religious family but my parents are also spiritual people, especially my mom. She is connected to the unknown in such a way that religious people can not fully understand her gift. And even as a child, when people tried to feed me religion, I would rebel and question things; I questioned them so

much that I used to get hit for being what they called “stubborn” or “evil” But I always listened and analyzed things for myself and I knew deep inside my gut that there was something deeper than religion. I saw that something, that spiritual relationship in my mother and it helped me to identify my own spirituality within me. As a child, I watched my mom laid hands on the sick and make them well again. Although I know I was born with my gifts, I still like to say that my mom’s faith was the seed that bloomed on the inside of me. It is a fact that anyone can be religious but it takes faith to stay connected.

And in relation to my poetry, songs, memoir, movie scripts, children story ect I can humbly say: a spiritual person can’t take spirituality out of his or her message because faith is the foundation of the message.

Well Fania, thank you for allowing me this wonderful opportunity to discuss your amazing work *Diaspora Lost In The West: A Place of Disorder*.

Since this is an open forum, I would like to bring this discussion to the community and get your feedback.

If you have not read the book (something which I highly advise) than let us talk about some of the issue that were raised- issues such as black on black discrimination, hypocrisy, negative views against Haitians, and the lack of unity within the black community. You may talk about any of the issues present here.

Thank you my sistah. You are a clear example of harmony's beauty. Together, we will bridge the gap that divides our people. One love.

Diaspora Lost In The West: A Place of Disorder is available at both Amazon.com and Lulu.com.

Women Writers With Issues
Discussion # 3

I Am Beautiful: What It Means To Be Colored And Woman

If anyone asks me about “beauty” I would simply tell him or her that beauty is like a seed sowed in our spirit but it is up to us to cultivate it in order for it to bloom nicely from within to the surface. I think “being beautiful” is the full acceptance of who we are...

What do you think Castina, is this an exaggeration on my part? How do you define beauty?

No I don't think it's an exaggeration. I think beauty is something that radiates from within, an intangible quality that goes beyond physical aesthetics. People, whom I find to be beautiful, have this sort of glow about them, a magnetism that seems to radiate from their very soul,

However for many of us, our perceptions of beauty are not shaped that way, but more on what our culture dictates as beautiful. We place a certain emphasis on

particular physical features that we determine to be “sexy” or “attractive” and for many of us, especially women, it is a struggle to meet those standards.

As a black woman “Colored” living in this mainstream culture, do you consider yourself beautiful?

Yes I do, but it is certainly not easy. I think like many Black women in this country, I tend to find myself at odds with my own physicality, and what the media says I should look like in order to be considered beautiful. I am not thin, nor light, and do not possess blonde hair and light eyes. In the “classical” sense I do not fit the Western tradition of what it is to be beautiful.

Let me go over a statement I came across while doing some research on the subject some time back. It came from psychiatrists William Grier and M. Cobbs in their article “Achieving Womanhood”:

In this country, the standard is the blond blue-eyed white skinned girl

with regular features [...] The girl who is black has no option in the matter of how much she will change herself. Her blackness is the antithesis of a creamy white skin, her lips are thick, her hair is kinky and short. She is in fact the antithesis of American beauty. However beautiful she might be in another setting with different standards in this country, she is ugly. (qtd in Shaw254-255)

I think Griar and Cobbs hit upon something that is very real in terms of how Black women are perceived in America, and I would argue the world at large. By our very definition, our sheer “blackness” we are ugly. This sense of cultural ugliness plays a key role in our lack of self esteem as a people, and I think that is why it takes a large amount of will power to go past these labels, in order to embrace the beauty you have within.

What is beautiful about you? Is there a black standard for beauty?

I think what is beautiful about me is my wholeness, and the harmony between my interior and exterior. I think it is important to have a sense of yourself as a complete being, not some roadmap divided into zones of perfections and imperfections. I think that is where most women, and people in general (because there are loads of men who have the same issues) go wrong. Its like you say to yourself “Ok my breasts are nice, but my stomach is way too big, or my calves are great, but my thighs are a little too fat,” and I say NO! Every part of your body works in unison with each other, and is beautiful in their own way. I think what is off balance is not your exterior, but your interior; it’s a psychological thing, that was inculcated into you by society. Children have no such concerns, and I think that is something that we should keep in mind. We should learn to appreciate ourselves for who and what we are, and stop fussing about what we term as “imperfections” because if we were ever to be injured in such a way that we would become incapacitated, than we would

come to understand the true meaning of “beauty.”

Now in regards to your question on a “black standard for beauty” I would say that there isn’t a black standard, more like an appropriation of Western concepts of beauty. The vast majority of Black people seem to have an aversion to what is defined as “Negro” features in respect to dark skin, fuller lips, shorter kinky hair, and a flat nose. They tend to gravitate towards those who are the opposite, people who have light skin, and long straight or wavy hair, and light eyes. They’ve adjusted it slightly, in that in general, Black people tend to be more accepting of fuller curvaceous figures, but on the whole, it is still very Western based. In fact I can wager that if you went to the average Black person, and described to them two women; one being fair skinned with green eyes, and long hair, and the other, dark skinned with a flat nose, and kinky hair, 8 out of 10 would automatically say that the “lighter” one was prettier, while the “darker” one was ugly. This is the level we are at, and I

think for many people who do not fall into the former category, the emotional effects on their self esteem can be devastating

How do you stay grounded in order to find your own clarity on beauty?

Well like I said earlier, it is certainly not easy, and I am certainly guilty of the same pitfalls that I think every woman falls into. However whenever I find myself going in that direction, I try to clear the outside noise in my head, and bring the focus back within. I know who I am, and what I have to offer the world, so I will not let some mainstream corporate entity define who and what I should be. I think if you want to feel and be beautiful, than you start focusing on yourself, rather than on what others think you should be. Take care of yourself, do things that please you, and that elevate your self esteem, and treat your body and your spirit as if it's a sacred temple that needs to be cherished and well nourished. Feed your soul with positive uplifting things (and stay far away from negative people who feel they should dictate to you on how you

should look) and you will shine from the inside on out. When I am feeling pleased with myself, then it reflects on how others see me. Generate positive energy and others will react to that.

We live in a society where we are constantly being told that it's better to be light skinned than dark-skinned. It is a belief that has been ingrained in us for generations, and we can trace its roots back to era of Willy Lynch. What do you say to such belief?

Well let me start off with a saying that I came across during my research a couple of years ago.

“If you’re white, you’re alright, if you’re
brown

Stick around; if you’re yellow you’re
mellow, if you’re black get back! Light,
bright and almost

White. Blue-Black African”

- (qtd in Hunter 1)

This is the root of the problem. Many of us have been brainwashed into accepting

our own inferiority, and thus reject our own blackness. If you look at the statement in particular it is emblematic of a scale- with two extremes, white and black. At the white end you have beauty- at the black end you have ugly. Now depending on where you are on that scale, will determine how beautiful you are “if you’re brown stick around” and “if you’re yellow you’re mellow”. Brown not being “black” is good enough (although not perfect) to earn entrance into the beauty category, while “yellow” being lighter is much more appealing, and hence is closer to the conception of beauty.

Now what I think what Black people need to keep in mind is the historic origins of this concept. We did not automatically have this sense of black being ugly; it was something that was ingrained in us through slavery; the purpose being two fold. One was to create division amongst blacks-so that the light skinned slave (generally the offspring of their white masters) was pitted against the dark skinned slave. Skin color was used as a

sort of class system to designate who was in a higher position-to put it simply “the house nigger” who lived in the Big House and emulated his/her master in style, dress and manner, over the “field nigger” who worked the grounds, and was more African in style and manner. This was successful in creating a friction between the two groups in order to prevent them from unifying and overthrowing their common oppressors.

The second purpose was to devalue blackness as whole, so that Black people would not have a sense of who they were, and appreciate our own selves. This logic was enacted *to keep us down* so that we would value the master, and not ourselves-working to uplift them, and not us.

Now what I have to say to this, is that slavery (in the physical sense) is over; its time to get off the masters plantation, and embrace ourselves for who and what we are, accepting, the mocha, the caramels, café au lait, mahogany, and ebony-in all, the entire spectrum of black beauty. By accepting our own form of beauty, in its

wonder, richness and diversity, than we will begin to progress as a people.

Why do we see so many light-skinned black actors/actresses on television and not too many dark-skinned actors/actresses on television? How do you think these images affect Black Women/girls in general?

Well let's look at first who *owns* the Media. Racist white people have had a long invested interest in dehumanizing black people. This is a historic fact; so now in analyzing the *history* it makes perfect logical sense as to why you only have a certain type of Black person represented on television, as having a broad spectrum of Black people would only validate them as a people, thus going against four centuries of racial indoctrination.

Now if you look at the Black people depicted in the Media, especially those in more serious broadcasting, like the News or talk shows, you will notice that not only are they lighter, but there is this tendency

for them to *get even more lighter* as time progresses. Aside from Michael Jackson, who is an extreme case, let's look at someone like Oprah for example. One only needs to look at a series of photos of the woman, from when she first started in the entertainment industry, when she was just a news anchor in Chicago, to her now, and you will see the gradual evolution, from being darker, with kinky/nappy hair and heavier, to having slightly lighter skin, and straight, wavier hair, and a much slimmer figure. As her fame and celebrity grew, she began adapting her looks to fit a more acceptable mainstream image.

Even in instances where you do see a dark skinned person who is lauded, for the most part, they are used more for "shock value", like Alex Wek a few years back, who caused a sensation, simply because she was not the "norm" in the industry. I think the overall message this sends to Black women is that in order to be accepted and even successful in the business, you have to adapt your looks in order to appeal to a Western sensibility.

Full afros, thick dreadlocks, and cornrolls, are too “ethnic” and therefore unacceptable. This ultimately feeds into many Black women’s overall sense of inferiority.

Do you think the perception of "beauty" in Hollywood is part of the reasons why so many of our teenagers are drowning in low self-esteem?

Of course I do, how could it not? When you are a teenager you are at a very vulnerable stage in your life. Your body is changing and developing in new ways, and you are just starting to get a sense of yourself and your identity. Now you have this image being presented to you as “beautiful” and “ideal.” You have models who are airbrushed and look skinny, and you are told that these women are perfect. Well what does that do to a young girl’s self esteem who doesn’t fit that criteria. This can be a terrible blow. I once read that after viewing the cover of a magazine with a model/actress on it for only a couple of minutes, women reported that their self-esteem dropped, so I think

by force feeding this perception of beauty on us, Hollywood plays a major role in destroying many girls sense of self worth.

What do you think it means to call someone “ugly?” What is the cultural significance of that term, and how does it affect the individual?

Well I think to call someone ugly, is a way of dehumanizing them. If you think about it, when you say someone is ugly, in essence what you are saying is that they are less worthy, less valuable as a human being. Somehow something is not quite right about the person-they don't fit into your image of beauty. Now almost always this sense of ugliness is tied in with disgust, so that depending on how far this person strays away from your standard of beauty, there is almost a physical revulsion to them. It is like the way people look at homeless people, their poverty and filth makes them innately disgusting, and people can hardly stand to look let alone touch them. It's almost as if they are nauseated just by being in their presence/ if they even allow themselves

to acknowledge their existence at all, and this is where this process of dehumanization takes place, because this person, this living breathing being, has been reduced to a “creature” this *thing*.

Now if you put it in a cultural/ racial context you can see how this was manifested on Black people, for part of the process of stripping Blacks of their humanity was by depicting them as ugly. This serves two purposes; first it keeps Black people from developing a sense of esteem, hence keeping them subservient, but secondly it allowed white people to inflict all manners of horror on them without any sense of guilt. If I look at a person as beautiful, and equal to me, than it is much harder for me to harm them, however if I say that this person is a beast, an ugly monster, more akin to the devil, than it becomes much easier. These people are not like *me*, and are barely human-they are sub-human, so I no longer have to care about them. Beautiful people feel pain, not ugly people.

If a ten year old came to you and said that he or she feels “ugly,” and unnoticed, what advice would you have for that child?

Well first off, I will start off by telling that child that s/he is beautiful, because I think everyone should feel that way about themselves. Then I would let them know that true beauty radiates from within. We are God’s creation, unique and individual. We are special because we are who we are, and there is no one else like us. Radiate on the inside, and you will shine on the outside.

What would you tell him or her about blackness and pride and self-image?

I would tell her/him that we should love and embrace our blackness because it is who we are, and we are beautiful. When Jesse Jackson got up on that stage in the 1970s in front of a crowd of people, and raised his fist and shouted “I am Black, and Beautiful” He was not only making a cultural statement, but a *political* one. It was a statement of pride and validation

and recognition of our culture, rejecting the racist imperialist notion, that we were anything less than our beautiful selves. We need to accept that. I would tell that child to take pride in who he/she is, and never let anyone, black or white, make him/her feel subservient in any shape or form.

I think you have a point, but this fetishization of light skin is so ingrained in the culture. For example, we all know that skin bleaching is a major issue within the black community, something that is practiced in mild and extreme forms. If someone wanted to bleach his or her skin in order to become light and “beautiful” what would you say to him or her?

Do you think it is ever acceptable to bleach the skin?

First let me start off by saying that in no way shape or form is it acceptable to bleach your skin. The only purpose for such a thing is to make yourself into

something that you are not. Having a lighter skin tone does not make a person more beautiful, and rather what they are doing is succumbing to societal pressure to be something that they are not.

I can't tell a person what he or she can or cannot do with his or her own body; however I would hope that I could impart this piece of truth with them; whether you have light skin or dark skin, eventually this will go away, because in death *everything* will disintegrate. What will make the biggest impact on the world is how you are as a person-that, not your "light skin" will have the greatest effect on your life.

Some say they only use chemical products in order to beautify the skin but not to bleach it? How do you beautify the skin without using chemical products?

Well let's put it this way, how can you possible "beautify" the skin by putting chemicals on it. Simple logic tells you that chemicals harm the body. If they want to

have beautiful skin, take care of their body, and drink lots of water. A radiant, well hydrated skin looks beautiful, no matter what skin tone.

In high school, I remember some black girls who used to explain their "good hair" by saying "Oh, I have Indian in my family" what is your take on this declaration? Can a black person inherit good hair if he or she does not have "Indian" in his or her family? Is there really such a thing as "good hair" or "bad hair?" What is it?

Well this is again another example of that backwards logic. There is no such thing as "good hair" only a variation in hair textures. If your hair is healthy and well maintained, than it is fine. The only reason why "Indian" hair is perceived as good, as opposed to kinky hair, is because it is straight. When Black people say someone has good hair, it generally means that it is straight, wavy or curly. This is just an illustration of our internalization of our inferiority. Anything

that is distinctive from black features-is validated and seen as a good thing.

Why or do you think natural hair like dreads, breads and Afro are looked at by some people as a primitive representation?

Well I think it has more to do with these things being viewed as African and hence more savage. These types of hairstyles are not what are traditionally seen as acceptable, since of course our conceptions of what are appropriate stem from a Western sensibility. By wearing breads, dreads, or an Afro, what you are saying is that you are rejecting this western identity and embracing your African identity, however for many people still stuck in a plantation mentality, this is a sign of regression.

In what way can we make ourselves more “beautiful as a people?”

I think the way to make ourselves more beautiful is to stop debasing ourselves, and others, and embrace each other.

When we learn to kill the divisiveness that is causing so much devastation and destruction amongst us, and respect ourselves, respect our children and respect each other by coming together as a family, then, and only then will we live up to the phrase, "Black and beautiful."

Now, let's jump to Eating disorders in relation to Hollywood beauty

Some of us (especially young people) refuse to eat because we want to be thin and "pretty" like the people we see in the magazines, do you know any one who is bulimic?

No. Although growing up in a society that places so much emphasis on thinness, I can understand the pressure that many girls undergo to lose weight.

What would you say to someone who refuses to eat because he or she is trying to be thin as a means to beautify the body?

Well truly, a beautiful body is a healthy body. A person that is well nourished, strong, and healthy, and is able to do what they need to do is beautiful. If you are starving yourself, and have to be hospitalized and have to have a nurse inject a needle in you in order to feed you, can you then be beautiful? Hospitals are a place filled with all manners of sickness, pestilence, and death. Would you rather be in a hospital bed or a coffin so that others can admire that “beautiful figure?” I think that rather than “dying to be thin” we should be living to be healthy. Nothing is more beautiful than life in its full exuberance.

Is obesity beautiful? Why?

Well again this is another form of extremism. Overfeeding the body is just as dangerous as under-nourishing it. I think what we should strive for is a type of balance. If your weight is depriving you from doing simple basic things, than that is a problem. Again, what is beautiful is keeping the body healthy.

Why do we spend so much money trying to lose weight?

Well I think we spend so much money because we are constantly being bombarded with the idea that we have to lose weight. There is a reason why the diet/ weight lose industry is a billion dollar business. They spend lots of money, to get you to buy into this concept in order for you to spend even *more* money on their products.

One of the things that I observed by watching television, is the amount of commercials devoted to weight loss. Literally in nearly every commercial break there was at least one commercial (and many times there were more than one) advertising some weight loss product, indeed some sort of “miracle” drug that was going to give you the perfect figure. Not to mention the fitness commercials that feature muscular men and women, who obtained their figures by doing a minimal amount of work using some “new” and “easy” machine. This coupled with the images of thin, toned models,

musicians and actors we see displayed all around us, is what pushes many people to open up their wallets and spend what they have in order to achieve that desired look.

The irony of course is that although we are spending more money on losing weight, for the most part, Americans are actually *gaining* weight, and we have record levels of obesity amongst adults and children. What this means is that after trying and ultimately failing these diets (because they were not *actually* designed for people to really lose weight) people are going to the other end and rebelling by overeating. Since we can't achieve the desired look we overeat in order to compensate. Food is also used as means to get people to think that they are getting more bang for their buck. If you give people larger portions, than they feel it is justified in paying higher prices for the same, or in some cases, inferior service.

In either case, society at large is driving people towards an unhealthy lifestyle. We

need to drive out the noise from our heads, and listen to what our bodies tell us, rather than what people tell us. It is not an easy process, and I think, in many cases, we will slip and fall, but the goal is to continue appreciating, loving, and taking care of ourselves, and know that we are beautiful.

Indeed. Thank you my sistah for taking the time to break down this very important subject with me!

We live in a society where so much energy is spent on creating the perfect illusion about the exterior beauty. Truly, it is a pleasure for me to have a beautiful sister whom I can vibe with about such important issue and also teach others how to revolutionize their thinking in order to finally embrace themselves. Please, let me wrap up this week's topic by sharing a piece I wrote called "Hey Beautiful Brown Girl."

Hey Beautiful Brown Girl

*Love yourself -brown girl
Don't be afraid- brown girl
Grove your mind -brown girl
Not your behind -brown girl
You can do it -brown girl
Stand tall and bold -brown girl*

*Love your eyes -brown girl
Kiss your lips -brown girl
Cherish your skin -brown girl
Embrace yourself -brown girl
Move your hips- brown girl
Swing with pride -brown girl
Bloom like spring- brown girl
No one can take your crown- brown girl*

*God made you brown-brown girl
Just stop the lies -brown girl
Stand upright- brown girl
And go-go-go -brown girl*

*Love your brown mind-brown girl
Love yourself -brown girl*

Women Writers With Issues
Discussion #4

Haitian Women & Sweatshops In Haiti

In the Western world we have become quite accustomed to the luxury of convenience. We can drive off to the nearest Target or Wal-Mart, find any goods that we desire at a cheap price, and leave with the satisfaction of knowing that we purchased a spectacular product at an affordable price.

It is this philosophy, providing desirable commodities at a low price to the consumer that has driven the Western, and more particular American economy for generations. It has made many men millionaires and billionaires.

However how often after we've obtained our desired object, do we stop to think about the *real* cost of this product; the conditions under which this object was produced, and the affect that it has had on the individuals producing it. Sweatshops are a

horrible reality for many people around the world, a new form of economic slavery, and it is time that many of us in the industrialized nations ask ourselves this question: is the sweat, labor and cruel abuse of others a price we are willing to pay for our “cheap” goods?

For this discussion, we are going to focus on Haiti, and the conditions that women have to face in these sweatshops. To start off, I am going to ask you Fania, to give us a brief overview of this situation. What companies are involved, and what is the basic structure of these shops.

A few years back while I was in my Caribbean History class, I watched a video about **Sweatshops in Haiti** and I must tell you, it was a sad reality to look at. First let me try to describe the definition of “Sweatshop” to the best of my ability. The sweatshop system is like slavery. The working room is like a hazardous field. The enslaved workers

are overworked and poorly paid. They have no rights.

There were many Companies in the United States and in Canada, which hired Haitian workers in Haiti to work all day for less than a \$1.00. For example, there were companies such as Disney, K-mart, Levi Jeans etc who were paying Haitian workers .50 to .80 cents per day to make shirts that were going to be sold in the United States for about \$20.00 and up. Not to mention the condition under which the workers had to work. No vacation pay, No break because the pay is so low, the workers are encouraged to work extra and still cannot feed their families. In such plantations, the managers would be like the overseer, and would often abuse their power. Keep in mind, there is no labor law that is being violated, because labor laws do not exist in Haiti; the workers have no one to report the crimes to and are unable to get justice.

Now imagine what it must be like working in this new form of plantation. In order to legally “justify” this system these so called

imperialist masters “pay” their workers, however if you take away the 50 cents they are getting for a whole day of work, then you can call it slavery, because the conditions that are present there, match perfectly the conditions that exist on a plantation, or any other form of slavery. By paying the, .50 cents a day, they convince themselves, and the world, that they are not slave owners but legally binding executives who pay to profit millions from the sweat of poor workers.

Frankly, this is like the triangular trade. Instead of snatching the workers out of their lands (continent) to work aboard for free, the owners instead created another system and bring the labor to the people inside their own land (country). And as western gentlemen, they (masters) give the workers crumbs as payment

Now tell us Fania, the conditions of women in these shops? What are some of the challenges they have to face?

Well sweatshop workers are faced with challenges such as not having a useful, clean bathroom, not allowed paid break time, not being respected, not having sick days, not having medical insurance. Some women are forced to sleep with their boss (overseer) in order to keep their job, and some are even raped and cannot speak out.

How frequently does sexual violence occur in these shops?

I do not know how often sexual violence occur in sweatshop environments, because I do not know of any analysis done on such a topic, but I can honestly say that it happens too often. Just like slavery, the overseer is excellent at abusing his power. Whatever he wants, the female worker must give it, if she wants to keep her job or else. There is no law against sexual harassment in Haiti.

What would happen to them if they spoke out against their abusers?

There is no one to report them to. If you speak out against it, you will lose your job and your family will go hungry. That is it. The victim will continue to suffer.

Again, there is no law against it. The policy is, if you cannot stay, then leave. The sad reality is that the men and women working in sweatshops are trapped in these jobs, because if they quit, they may never find anything better. Some do believe that crumbs are better than nothing. There is a proverb our elders used to say and let me translate it from Creole to English, “Gin de foi fe ou femin ninw pou-w bwe dlo santi” [Sometimes you have to close the openings of your nose to drink the foul-smelling water.]

Now I want you to tell us a little bit about the background of these women, so that we can get a clear picture of what their lives are like. First start with the environment that these women live in, and what they have to do in order to survive?

The women and men who are working in sweatshops are poor. Many of them have children to feed and a shack to pay for. The question is how are they to survive in such a very expensive world by getting 50 cents or a dollar for a whole day of work?

How can they pay the rent, send their children to school and eat to survive?

What do you feel makes these women so vulnerable in these situations, and to abuse?

The women and children are vulnerable to abuse because they have **nothing**. You know that in our society there are people out to target those with **nothing**. Victims need to have **something** as a weapon to defend their human rights. I believe when a woman is in a position to do **nothing** for herself, she automatically becomes a target because those people in power are looking for **something** from her before they can help. In many cases, that **something** is to have her on her back.

Poverty is a condition that affects billions of people around the world, and is certainly the case in Haiti. I once heard that 10% of the country controls/holds 90% of its wealth. Now just think of the logistics of that, which means that 90% of the people in the country are dealing with only 10% of its wealth! Even for the highly educated, there are no jobs available, and those that are, are traditionally reserved for men. Women are left with the worst of the worst. Could you draw us a picture of what these women have to work with, and why the situation is so desperate?

Let me put it plain and simple. These POOR women have nothing to work with. Poverty is the reason why they go to work in sweatshops. Keep in mind that we are not talking about all women in Haiti; we are talking about those working in sweatshops. However, in one way or another, every woman is underprivileged in Haiti. It is a male dominated culture. Also, imagine a desperate woman waiting to be hired but first she must do some

favors in order to be hired, and once she is hired, she must continue with the favors in order to keep her job. In that case, she pays to stay under. She is trapped within her distant dream of survival. Here is another saying from our elders, “de pie nan grin soulye.” [It is like both feet inside one shoe.] Now try walking like that.

What about the conditions of mothers? If these women can barely feed themselves, how about their children? How do the children of these women survive, and what do you think are the psychological affects on a mother who is unable to feed her babies?

Well I am not a mother and I do not think I am fit to make psychological analysis about “a mother who is unable to feed her children.” However, as a human being with warm blood running through my veins, I can say that simple logic tells me that a good mother who is not able to feed her child bleeds in the heart every time she sets her eyes on her starving children or every time she thinks about

her children not going to school. I can just imagine the sadness.

See, sweatshop is a system that dehumanize its workers—especially women and children. Let me compare sweatshops to a graveyard. The workers are like zombies working the field of death.

The conditions that these women are working under are horrendous. From the poor working environment, extremely low wages, sexual abuse, and other forms of physical intimidation. Since the individuals in question are women, many might look at this as simply a feminist issue, but I beg to differ. These women are human beings, and it is their very *humanity* that is being attacked, because they are being violated in every shape and manner. Do you agree with me on this one Fania? Do you see this as a feminist issue or human rights, and if so, what do you think is the difference between the two?

It is definitely a human rights issue because I know that in many places (like China and some countries in South and Central America) there are also children and men working in sweatshops. However, in our society and around the world, women and children tend to be the most abused people. However, there are men being mistreated in sweatshops too, I mean, just imagine the sweatshop system as a way to maintain power over the poor and profit by using the capital power that holds poverty in its place.

I think it would have been “a feminist issue” if the men in power of such companies were only abusing women. That is not the case. They abuse men and children too. This is clearly a case of rich oppressing the poor and they get away with it, because as always, the rich benefit on the backs of poor people (especially black people).

The managers are like the overseer just like back in the days during slavery days. They used to abuse their power. They exploited the enslaved Africans just as

well as the masters. However, who is in position to judge them and make them pay?

Seeing this, and the affects that it is having on these women, and the country in general, do you think that there is a realistic solution to the problem. Keep in mind that this is not a popular issue, and not one where most people are concerned with. Is there a way that we, as a people, can stop this, and raise awareness on the matter?

I would love to shout **REVOLT** as my answer but many do not know how to revolt in order to get results without shedding blood. I think speaking about it, educating ourselves about the situation, demanding a law to be established to protect the workers are where to start.

The fact is, we need work. Haitian people do not mind working but they must be paid correctly for their sweats. In addition, as workers hired to work for American companies, I believe they are entitled to

some benefits as any other workers who work for American companies in the United States.

Of course, the lifestyle in Haiti is less expensive than the lifestyle in the United States. Hence, Haitian workers may not ask for the same minimum wage, however the American companies must keep in mind that Haitian sweatshop workers are not animals. They are human beings who have the same basic needs as any other workers.

You have a valid point Fania. Personally, I think that the biggest problem we have in this society is complacency. We are so comfortable in our environment and so immersed in our own problems, that we are not willing to go outside ourselves to look at the injustices the world around us. If it doesn't concern us, why bother with it. But I think it is important to keep in mind that the world does not consist solely on our own issues, and that if we are so unwilling to help others in their time in need, how can we expect

others to help us, when we are in need. So I will end this discussion with the words, of what I'm sure most would agree, one of the most influential and revolutionary men of our times, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and that is this: "Injustice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere."

Women Writers With Issues
Upcoming Discussion # 5

The Plight of Women: The Politics, The Culture, and The Battles that Rage Within

Our Upcoming Discussions:

The Struggle of Accepting Love After Rape

Mirror Mirror: The Art of Deception Practiced By Women.

Get Your Hands Off My Womb: Breaking Down The Maternity Clock

Aren't I Your Sister: The Pitfalls of Sisterhood.

Politics:

Let's Get Radical-Defining What It Means To Be A True Revolutionary

The Power to Choose: To Give Life or Abort It.

Parlez Vous Francais-A discussion on the politics of language.

Having An Empty Bowl Doesn't Make Me Less Human: The Dehumanization of

Poverty.

"The Poorest Nation In The Western Hemisphere:" Breaking Down The Phrase.

LOVE

He said She said: Unraveling the drama between Black women and Black Men

Would You Love Me If I Didn't Have A Weave: The Battle Over What's Sexy

S-E-X doesn't spell L-O-V-E: Knowing the Difference

What It Means To Love: A Positive View of Emotional Healing Between Black couples.

THE WRITING BUSINESS

The Deception You Weren't Told: The Emotional Costs of Being A Writer.

So You Want To Publish Your Stories & Poems? Here's What To Do

Give me the word, spoken or written:
Spoken Word vs. Poetry

Let The Word Be The Sword: What It Means To Be A Revolutionary Writer

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Fania Simon, founder of Bois-Caiman-Books (BCB), author of novels and poetry: "Sofi's Load," "Poetry in Haiti," "No Means No: The Aftermath," "Diaspora Lost in The West," "Yesayah Poetry: Applying The Secret," "Surviving Loving a Ghost," and many other poetry books, screenplays and songs. She is also co-author of "A Poetic Conversation Between Two Warrior Poets" and co-author of "Women Writers With Issues."

Castina Charles, Painter, founder of LTI and author of two books "Bad aass Poetry" and "In My Naked Flesh." In addition, she is co-author of "A Poetic Conversation Between Two warrior Poets" and co-author of "Women Writers With Issues."

