Se Mwen Manm Gwo Wòch o

Depi m soti lan Ginèn
Moun yo ape sonde mwen
Se mwen menm, Rasin o
Depi m soti lan Ginèn
Moun yo ape sonde mwen
Se mwen menm, Gwo Wòch o
Mwen soti anba dlo
Mwen prale lan dezè
Jou yo kwè yo pran mwen
M tounen lafimen o
Se vre, jou yo konnen sa m sèvi
Latè va tranble
Jou yo konnen non vanyan mwen
Kanno va tire
Se mwen menm, Gwo Wòch o

Since I left West Africa
People have been testing me
It is I, the Root
Since I left West Africa
People have been testing me
It is I, Great Rock
I emerged from water
To enter a desert
Once they thought they had me
I turned into smoke
It's true, the day they know of my faith
The earth will tremble
The day they know my valiant name
Cannons will fire
It is I, Great Rock
In 2009, Daniel “Brav” Brevil, musical director of Rara Tou Limen, first hosted a cultural exchange tour to Port-au-Prince in Haiti and surrounding provinces. And since then, he’s brought more than three dozen participants over a period of four two-week long cultural immersions in Haitian dance, music and song. Serving as tour leader, advisor, and cultural arts ambassador, Brav carries out donor and relief missions to his community in the Carrefour Feuilles area and raises cultural awareness about his country. The initiative also subsidizes instructor fees and provides lunch assistance for Haitian students at prominent Ecole Nationale des Arts (ENARTS), where tour participants learn Haitian dance and drum culture.

Activities and places visited have included:
Citadelle Laferrière [Cap-Haïtien]; celebrated Vodou Ceremony at Lakou Souvenance [Gonaives]; Moulin Su Mer beaches; daily Kreyol, folkoric dance, song and drum classes with Haitian instructors at ENARTs [Port-au-Prince]; Saut-d’Eau waterfalls; meeting reknown Vodou priest Max Beauvoir, National Museum of Haiti (Musée National d’Haïti), FOSAJ Art Center and Gallery [Jacmel]; performances, shopping at Iron Market, homecooked meals and more.

Collected on these pages are a mere handful of reflections and photography by cultural exchange participants.

For more information about how you can join the next Haiti Cultural Exchange Trip, please visit raratoulimen.com or contact brevilartlive@gmail.com.
REFLECTIONS OF HAITI

(Top) Dance class at ENARTs; (Bottom L to R) Citadelle Laferrière; Rara band in Jacmel; Waterfalls of Saut-d’Eau
Ayiti is a journey in staying present in the moment while letting go. Wonders of the most exciting kind are around every corner. If you are silent long enough you might hear a live rara moving steadily through the streets of Port-au-Prince in the darkest of night or through the greenest of trees in a Carnaval-like spirit in artsy Jacmel. You feel the collective breath of relief from dancers who have finished their fourth dance class of the day after battling heat and congestion; spy a jittery lizard scurry across the landscape of a compound; wash in the most cooling, healing and giving pools; smell the aroma of fresh banane peze avec pikliz; taste the sweet taste of the most colorful fruit; and understand the overwhelming spirit of Africa in each and every exchange, while noticing the various natural hairstyles worn by many and Haitian mannerisms. Then, you will know what it is to visit and be present in Ayiti. My senses were truly awakened.

HALIMA MARSHALL
I went on the Haiti Cultural Exchange trip with Daniel “Brav” Brevil, our host and leader, about a year after my previous trip to Haiti. Being guided back was so deeply meaningful. It reinforced my awareness of the universal presence of Spirit and the commonalities of ‘ritual’ (practices to honor the energies that guide our everyday lives) across the globe.

I am so grateful for the opportunity to attend such a sacred, ceremonial celebration in Souvenance. I had recently attended a very similar ceremony in Ethiopia. Witnessing this in Haiti represented the extraordinary. The palpable presence of ‘Spirit’—powerful and real—will stay with me for a long time. The body-shaking drums and joyful voices singing in the peristyle (temple) are still in my head. The cool, refreshing sprays of Saut-d’Eau waterfall felt like a beautiful and comforting embrace from Eruzuli. With the constant caring attention of our Brav and the company of a wonderful group of fellow travelers, it was an honor to explore this nation with a complex history, rich culture and so much heart.
This was my third time traveling to Haiti. So I only took a handful of photos. On our way back to Port-au-Prince from Souvenance, we stopped at this beach. It had been so crowded and packed the other times we visited before. But maybe because it was a Monday, it was refreshingly peaceful.

The boat, sand and water looked so tranquil. I knew it was the perfect memory shot for my Haiti 2016 visit. I waited, phone in hand, for right the moment to capture just the waves and the little boat.

That day we swam, floated in ocean, took selfies and group photos, gathered shells and cool looking rocks. It had been my first day in the water. Easily one of the most memorable days of this trip. ■

YOLANDE STERLING
My interest in Haitian culture was informed by the lives and work of anthropologists Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham (Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* and Dunham’s *Dances of Haiti and Island Possessed* respectively). It’s an extension of my master’s thesis research on the intellectual and spiritual life of anthropologist, dancer, and Mambo Katherine Dunham. So much of her life work and activism was connected to the people and culture of Haiti and Vodou.

I am grateful that during my visit I was able to witness some of these things with my own eyes. In such a short amount of time, I created many beautiful memories, formed new friendships, and learned so much.

I wouldn’t have imagined that on my first visit, I would have the opportunity to see so much of the country. Mountains upon mountains, lush landscapes, healing waters, the sounds, the people... Some of my most memorable experiences, outside of the dance, drum and Haitian Kreyol classes, included visiting the National Museum of Haiti, the Citadelle, Saut d’Eau, and Lakou Souvenance. The Mapou Tree Ceremony in Souvenance—from the singing, dancing, and honoring the ancestors’ journey to Haiti from Dahomey, and everyone wearing white—especially resonated with me.

There was also the Community Feast Day, when we served meals cooked and prepared by our host Daniel Brevil’s family and distributed donated clothing to over two hundred residents of the Caffoufey community. In a small way, we were able to give back and see it literally go into the hands of the people.

The dance classes were out of this world! A chorus of drummers, musicians and singers took the energy of the dance classes to another dimension. I enjoyed watching everyone unify through rhythm and movement, pushing past cultural and language barriers.

I am happy that I was able to see the collective efforts among Haitian people to rebuild their lives and community after the 2010 Earthquake. I am thankful that I was able to visit Dunham’s former Haiti residence, Habitation Leclerc, which has been transformed into a library and botanical medicinal herb garden in Martissant Park area.

Many thanks to Daniel and his family and friends who made our trip amazing and prepared our meals daily; and to those who made sure we arrived to our various destinations safely despite the winding and bumpy roads.

Donating clothes on Community Feast Day in Caffoufey.
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Danielle Hall
January 4, 2003. That was the day I first stepped on Haitian soil. So many emotions during the flight. SF to Miami: Elated, on cloud nine, joyful, proud of that fact I was traveling solo. YES! I was FINALLY going to Haiti! Miami to Haiti: Uncertainty. Anxiety. I’m almost there. “What am I doing?” My nerves were shot, my terrible nail-biting habit resurfaced AND the pains in my stomach were unbearable. Reality hit. There was no turning back. After a few breathing exercises, a sense of calmness and assurance invaded my body. I needed to make this journey. I had to connect with Haiti and her people. I set the intention, and it was up to me to fully embrace the mission. Touch down. I exited the plane, but I didn’t enter the airport terminal. Instead, we used aircraft stairs to walk down onto the tarmac. As I’m walking down, trying to keep my balance, the first thing I noticed were the enormous mountains, beyond mountains. What a beautiful sight! Salutations and a bow to the earth were in order.

My first adventure? The airport. Hustle, bustle and pure chaos! I was completely overwhelmed and flustered at the lack of order in the airport. I manage to get all three bags, and myself out of there in one piece. Once outside the madness of the airport, my skin was instantly hit with the warmth of the Caribbean sun. Hundreds of faces at the gate, eagerly awaiting new arrivals. I panick. “Where ARE my folks?” After what seemed liked an eternity (five minutes) I hear: Pousha, nou la! Beyond the sea of beautiful black faces, I see Mona Alexandre and Brav. I exhale. Within seconds I’m comforted in knowing I’m right where I need to be.

My specific interest and concentration of study took place in Gonaives, at Lakou Badjo, where Nago (Yoruba) traditions are preserved. The Nago nation is the Ogou family of Iwa, which are known as warriors and leaders. The temple at Badjo was founded in 1792 by a man named Azo Badi, who fought with Dessalines against the French during the Haitian war of independence. The temple is dedicated to Ogou Batagri. I visited Lakou Badjo in 2003, and returned in 2008. The photo above speaks. I was completely giddy and in awe of the dancing. Subtle. Graceful, yet, strong and powerful. THIS was the real deal, and I was finally IN it, worshiping with the devotees, and communing with the Spirits in Haiti. I was welcomed into the community with open arms. I felt safe. I felt protected. I am home.

Ogou has always been with me. Little did I know, we would forge a bond that would last a lifetime. He cleared the path, and guided me to my first Vodou ceremony in Haiti - in his honor. He has given me the tools to navigate in this world with passion, strength and courage. He has opened and softened my heart to allow positive, alternative strategies to come forth. Awoshe Nago, Papa mwen!
Rara Tou Limen (RTL) has performed at festivals as well as cultural and academic institutions throughout the Bay Area including: The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, The Black Choreographer’s Festival, The Malcolm X Jazz Arts Festival, The San Francisco Black Film Festival, the deYoung Museum, Ashkenaz, CubaCaribe Dance & Music Festival, San Francisco Carnival, Hamlin School, and University of California at Berkeley.

Accompanied by dancers, vocalists and celebrated musicians, along with musical director Daniel Brevil, the company brings to the stage a wide spectrum of diverse Haitian dance forms, from vibrant rituals of Vodou, the turbulent legacy of political struggle, to the celebratory and festive dances of Carnival. RTL is at the cutting edge of the evolution of Haitian dance and music in the Bay Area. The use of traditional rhythms, chants and movement integrates the grace, strength, fluidity and precision of Haitian folkloric dance.

Established in 2004 under the artistic direction of Portsha Jefferson, RTL has continually offered Bay Area residents, as well as people from all over the United States, the opportunity to experience Haitian music, dance and culture through classes, workshops, performances and educational events in both the United States and in Haiti. Their mission is to educate audiences about the richness of Haitian culture through artistic expression, while building and enhancing working relationships with other Haitian cultural groups in the U.S. and Haiti. The company is carrying on the long legacy of creating strength and solidarity within the Haitian community, while actively raising awareness (and funds) for Haitian organizations.

The objective is to help nurture and grow Haitian dance and musical traditions in the Bay Area. The company is committed to showcasing the best of folkloric dance and music, which carries in it the stories, struggles, and spirit of the first free Black Republic in the world. Rara Tou Limen continues to uplift a country whose culture has increasingly sustained the Bay Area’s artistic community and beyond.