

Charles Phelps Taft Research Center
at the University of Cincinnati
Graduate Summer Fellowship Award

Each section (I-III) should be placed at the start of a new page. All required materials must be included in a single document, uploaded to the electronic submissions system, no later than 5PM on the published day of the deadline. Departmental review is required for this program, as well as a letter of support. Applicants should submit their application with enough time to receive review prior to the close of the deadline. Taft does not accept an obligation to review applications that have not received intradepartmental review by the close of the deadline.

I. General Information

- a. Name: Sophonie Bazile
- b. M#: xxxxxxxxxx
- c. Department: Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies (WGSS)
- d. Project title: Dykeasporia: Queer Haitian Women Creating their Own Spaces
- e. Project Location: New York, New York
- f. Probable Results of a Grant (such as publications, working papers, and presentations): Research that this fellowship will support will culminate in a M.A. thesis in WGSS and an individual paper presentation at the 36th Annual National Women's Studies Association.
- g. Have you already or will you in the future apply for other grants for this travel, including departmental support? Yes, I will apply for the Research Fellowship from the Graduate Student Governance Association this Fall.

II. Taft Grant History

I have never received funding from the Charles Phelps Taft Research Center.

III. Project Narrative

Statement of Purpose:

I am applying for a Taft Graduate Summer Fellowship to support research for my Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies M.A. thesis. This project, which focuses on queer women in the Haitian diaspora in the United States, investigates how they create and define their own spaces within predominantly white LGBTQ discourses that inadequately represent their lives.

In *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, Gillian Rose describes place as "...a feeling; a feeling of belonging, of being inside" (1993, p. 47). For Rose, the notion of "home" is therefore tied to a sense of acceptance within a community. When it comes to transnational identities that are literally "in between," feelings of belonging may be out of reach. Questions of sexuality further complicate matters. Same-gender loving Haitian women living in the U.S. diaspora face not only racism and sexism but also homophobia from the dominant society as well as their own communities, in part for religious reasons. While often remaining attached to their home culture, which is vehemently homophobic and affords little space for non-heterosexual identities, they face exclusion from contemporary queer/LGBTQ discourses that tend to privilege white same-sex relationships. Moving between such complex subject positions, these women create a hybrid sexual identity that combines both local and global conceptions of queer agency.

Feminist and gender studies on the Caribbean ignore the integral role that sexuality plays in identity formation. For example, the anthologies *Gender in the 21st Century: Caribbean Perspectives, Visions and Possibilities* (2004) and *Gendered Realities: Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought* (2002) discuss at length social and gender inequalities, gendered histories, as well as representations of femininity and masculinity in post-colonial Caribbean cultures, but largely ignore the reality and

varied experiences of same-sex relationships in the region. *In Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance* (2001), a collection of thirty-eight oral histories, stories of same-gender loving women are not included either. The exclusion of queer women's experiences, from contemporary works no less, illustrates the stigma associated with homosexuality, especially in Caribbean cultures. Women whose desires are directed towards other women are often perceived as "animalistic, diseased and licentious" (Marshall, 2011). They are also commonly viewed as threats to the heterosexual family, enemies of the State, and traitors to the fight against racial/ethnic inequality.

The invisibility of same-sex relationships, particularly eroticism between women of color, is not only the result of a culture of homophobia but also fostered by the fear of re-hypersexualizing black, female bodies. The hypersexualization of black women is particularly illustrated by the sexual denigration of female slaves, which culminated in the voyeuristic exploitation of figures such as Saartje Baartman whose naked body was put on display in France and England in the early nineteenth century (Calixte, 2005). In reaction to this history of sexual objectification, the topic of sexuality has become largely buried in Caribbean gender studies. While being viewed as a threat to dominant masculinity, same-sex relationships between women are considered "unreal", abstract or illegitimate because of their deviation from normative sexual practices.

Just as detrimental to the displacement of same-gender loving Haitian women is the Western construct of queer itself, which largely fails to acknowledge how non-Western queer women are marginalized within the U.S. For instance, the label "lesbian" fails to be inclusive of queer Caribbean women who may have sexual relations with men for economic support while still maintaining erotic relationships with other women. Same-gender loving women in the diaspora thus "find themselves caught between western 'global' ideas of gay identity and local Caribbean theories of

the same" (Calixte, 2005, p. 129). Within this space, Haitian women develop a hybrid diasporic "queer" identity that allows them to move beyond cultural dichotomies and to negotiate multiple and fluid self-representations.

To examine the ways in which queer Haitian women create spaces for themselves, I will employ a feminist ethnographic approach to capture their experiences through participation, observation, and questioning. Erin Durban-Albrecht, who completed her doctoral dissertation on queer communities in Haiti at the University of Arizona, has agreed to put me in touch with her contacts. I will also work with UC professors specializing in Haitian studies, such as Dr. Jana Braziel and Dr. Myriam Chancy, to expand this network of contacts. I will work with six to eight same-gender loving identified participants who are second-generation Haitian-Americans in the New York area. In addition, I plan to interview three activists promoting the rights of Haitian LGBT from non-profit organizations, Sistahs of Caribbean Ancestry and African Ancestral Lesbians United for Social Change, that provides services to queer communities of Caribbean descent. I will begin the ethnographic study and activists/organization interviews in May 2015. I will then hire a transcriptionist to transcribe the interviews, which will be in English. After the interviews have been transcribed, I will create coding categories and review the transcripts to determine commonalities in the ways that queer Haitian women define their identities and create their own spaces. I am in the process of obtaining IRB approval to conduct this research.

I posit that same-gender loving Haitian women challenge existing hegemonic concepts of "gay" through the hybrid performance of their queer identities. Rather than succumbing to the push and pull of multiple identities that does not acknowledge their sexuality, they create their own space of resistance in queer/LGBTQ discourses. I will take care to avoid portraying these women as hapless victims.

This project will culminate in my M.A. thesis. I will also present my preliminary findings at the National Women's Studies Association conference in November 2015 before defending the finalized thesis in April 2016.

This research project aligns with my career goals. After graduation I aim to work as a Haitian LGBTQ advocate with a non-profit or non-governmental organization that provides social services to queer Haitian communities or queer communities of Caribbean origin and descent. Through this research, I will learn how to do independent research, remain mindful of covert messages as much as overt messages when observing others, as well as challenge my own Western-influenced notions of identity.