

3-2000

The Lucky Ones

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Recommended Citation

McAlister, Elizabeth, "The Lucky Ones" (2000). *Division II Faculty Publications*. Paper 19.
<http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/div2facpubs/19>

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March, 2000

"The Lucky Ones"

by Lovely Nicolas and Elizabeth McAlister Nicolas

The Poster

Our daughter Lovely's face stares at us forlornly from a Unicef poster hanging in the dining room. Her almond eyes betray a deep sadness as the Creole caption in big red letters has her thinking, "apa nou bliye'm. sa n ap fe ave m?" "Seems you've forgotten me. What are you doing with me?" Lovely was chosen for the poster by the Unicef photographer in Haiti because she is pretty and charismatic, and always photographs well. She is supposed to represent "every-malereuse," any girl living in poverty. "Yes, Ti-Loune was a Unicef Poster girl," we joke with friends who notice that the face in the picture is hers.

Ours was the kind of laughter you offer loudly to the grinning face of adversity, to show that you haven't given in. Even as we laughed, that poster haunted her father and me terribly as we lived our lives in Brooklyn without her. For three years after Oli came here, Ti-Loune was trapped in Haiti without us, in the violence of the coup e'tat against President Aristide. The girl in the poster was a Haitian malereuse asking for children's rights--but she was also our daughter accusing us of leaving her behind the wall of the US embargo and its mean, cruel immigration policies.

The US embassy in Port-au-Prince wouldn't process her visa fast enough and while Lovely's father retreated into a silent sadness, I became a bundle of step-motherly anxiety. Were the relatives treating her like one of their own daughters? Was she getting enough food? Her family were members of the outspoken "roots" band, Boukman Eksperyans, who were brash enough to criticize the coup leaders and its army. Would the lakou be attacked by zenglendo, come to terrorize and kill?

Worry and fear found a home in my body, and became a furnace pumping panic into my brain. Every month I concocted a new plan. Could the consulate give her a visa for Jamaica? There the members of her family in Boukman Eksperyans were hiding with the Rastas up in the Blue Mountains to avoid being interned in a refugee camp. How about Bermuda, where I have family, and could fly to meet her to wait out the embargo? I faxed Haiti every day, knowing perfectly well that most of the faxes won't make it through the fragile phone lines into the embassy. A ferocious new maternal drive cut through any sense of fair play. I used any and all privilege that I had in this unjust world: my Americanness, my academic degrees, my whiteness, my social contacts. I spoke to lawyers, to government officials, to magwiye, con men. On the phone Lovely's lilting little voice was a tonic of relief.

"Mwen byen, wi," "I'm fine," she lilted in the sing-song Creole of Haitian children. She did not speak unless she was asked a question; she had been raised a proper Haitian child. "What were you up to, cherie?" we inquired. "I was playing in the lakou." Her father and I both felt waves of relief, but neither of us mentioned it, since that would mean mentioning also, the darts of fear. Schools were closed so we couldn't ask about her lessons. "Ou manje deja?" we asked, "Have you eaten today?" "And how about singing us a song?" When the telephone lines were down we went through our days trying to send our love in the spirit.

The Passport

It was an excitement when Papi told me I was going to the United States. I thought, "Thank God. Finally!" I was hoping some day my dad would come back for me. Almost every year he would come to Haiti from the United States to visit me then he would leave without me.

My face always looked red and pitiful when Papi was going to leave Haiti. I wouldn't talk to anybody, and I wouldn't even eat my breakfast. The day always felt dreary and foggy even though it was sunny and hot outside. My friends would always want to play games with me I would only shake my head with sadness. My dad would always try his best to make me feel happy, but it never worked.

Papi always had a job for me. He always wanted me to pack his valise for him before he left. He thought that would make me feel better. I was never up to doing that, and instead I would only pack one pair of socks and one pair of underwear and I didn't bother of packing the rest. I thought if I didn't pack everything, he would come back for his things, but that never happened. When he left I would cry so hard, because I wanted to visit the United States. I wanted to be with my dad. He is the most loving person on earth.

Papi and I were very close together ever since I was little. He is very good with children. People say he looks like me, but I don't see it. Dark brown eyes that look Chinese, nice black hair, round nose. I don't have his lips. I have my mom's lips. Every time people see me with my dad they say "Ou samble papa'w tet koupe!" "You look exactly like your father!"

Papi left Haiti when I was about seven years old. He called me almost every week. I would cry over the phone asked him to come and get me. I didn't want to go because I didn't like somebody or hated it, I wanted to go because of the war.

Haiti had a big coup d'état in 1991. It all started when the president wanted all people to pay taxes, but the bourgeoisie people didn't want to. After the president announced the bill for taxes, the bourgeoisie paid the army to kill him. Some people in the army liked him and decided that instead of killing him they thought they should make him leave the country. Now, the people who voted for him didn't want him to leave the country and tried to go against army. That's when the killing began. The

army killed about 7,000 people. The army would kill you if you talked in a good way about Aristide. They even killed one guy who looked like him.

I couldn't stand looking at my brothers and sisters killing each other. I felt like someone was pulling a rope in my stomach. Fire was everywhere around me. School was out for almost two years. We ran out of food and water and electricity. Water only ran from the faucet every 3 days, so we had to fill everything in the house until the water came again. My step mom and my dad would call from America every day to check on me.

My step mom and my dad knew I was fine because I was with my aunt. My aunt is my dad's sister. She has beautiful brown eyes and nice black hair that sparkles from a mile away. My aunt is the most wonderful person on earth, and she took care of me when my dad was away. She was my favorite person in the house. She is pretty, loving, kind and bright. She has three children, a girl and two boys. She had been taking care of me since I was 3 years old, and I always thought I was one of her children from how she took care of me and loved me just like one of her children. I respected her children like they were my brothers and sister. They also respected me. She never spanked me like the other parents did in Haiti.

She would give us our bath under a big tree. She would wash my hair and comb it any way I wanted. I was always asking for some lipstick to put on. She would laugh at me and say "You will look like a ti-gran moun," a little grown-up.

In 1996 Papi came to Haiti, and I was the happiest person on earth. I thought I was dreaming, but I wasn't, Papi was there. To see your father after so many months--do you know how happy you would be? Well I was. I hugged him and tears came running down my cheeks, it felt like a flood. Papi was also happy. After a few days he took me someplace to get my picture taken. I smiled at the world and I could see the world smiling back at me, so I knew I was going to have a wonderful day with my own dad.

After I was done taking my picture Papi had something to tell me. That's when it happened. "I am getting you your passport" my dad smiled. I was shocked for a second. Then I went up to him and hugged him. Now I was waiting for my passport to arrive. I was counting days, and the more days I

counted the more days I waited. When the day I had been waiting for finally greeted me, I wanted to hug the day.

The plane ticket said May 3, 1996. The day I was going to the United States with Papi, no one else, just my wonderful dad. We were going to start a new life there just with Papi and my step mom. When I was about to leave my family in this miserable country I felt bad. I going to eat good food and drink good water, and they wouldn't have none. I had more than six knots inside my stomach ready to be pulled. I looked back when I was in the airplane and a drop of tears fell down. That tear was for good luck. I think that tear was trying to say "don't worry be happy."

Dancing

"How did you meet Oli?" ask my academic colleagues when the conversation turns to telling life's stories. They are wondering whether I met him while doing my anthropological field research on Afro-Haitian religion. "Well actually I met Lovely first," I say, to their surprise. "She introduced me to Oli." The truth is that I fell in love with her first and unlike other American step-mothering tales, she is a big part of the glue of love that holds her father and me together.

The day Ti-Loune and I met we barely even spoke. But we did start dancing together, and in a way we've been dancing ever since. We were high up in the mountains above Petionville, at a music video shoot for Boukman Eksperyans' 1993 carnival song. The band decided to film the video at lakou Malik, a family farm where their cousins worked the land for corn, millet, squash and the sweetest avocados you'd ever want to taste. The filming took place on a large dusty clearing the family used as a soccer field.

Gazing through the mango trees to the side of the field, your eye fell on small houses made of wood and clay, with thatched roofs. Turning your neck to the other side you were treated to a wide view of other mountains, with pathways, houses and other families' vegetable crops growing in the distance. By the time I arrived mid-morning, the heat of the sun was making all the houses and gardens shimmer and wave. I was glad I had my big straw hat on, with the two ribbons trailing down the back.

Since there wasn't any electricity way up in the mountains, the band played their song on a boom box and turned up the volume really loud. The band dressed in their colorful "new age" peasant costumes and played and sang along, and everybody started singing and dancing for the camera. Mimerose, a lead singer for the band, pulled me into the group and urged "Vin danse, non, Laiyza!" "Come dance, Liza!" As my feet began dancing the quick movements of the Petwo rhythm, I could hear that the words to the song were for a warrior spirit named Simbi Ganga, from the Kongo line of Haitian history:

"Simbi Oh, Simbi Ganga, I'm calling Simbi Ganga Hey!
They can bring knives, they can bring swords, but I'm not afraid of them
I'm not afraid of them Simbi Ganga!
They might bring magic, they may bring traps, but I'm not afraid of them
They can bring Uzis, they can bring canons, but I'm not afraid of them Simbi Ganga"

"Simbi O Simbi Ganga E, m 'a rele Simbi Ganga E
Yo mèt pote kouto, yo mèt pote ponya m'pap pè yo
Simbi Ganga e m'pap pè yo, Simbi Ganga
Yo mèt pote maji, yo mèt pote pèlen m'pap pè yo
Yo mèt pote wouzi, yo mèt pote kanno m'pap pè yo
Simbi Ganga e m'pap pè yo, Simbi Ganga"

The song was probably a traditional song from Afro-Haitian religion, because it addressed the spirit Simbi Ganga. As I sang along, my stomach tightened. The song was also "voye pwen," "sending a point" or message, to the coup leaders that had ousted President Aristide. It was saying that no matter how the army tried to suppress the people--even if they attacked them with knives, swords or Uzis, that the people were not afraid and would fight back. I was slightly sick at the idea that the band was singing so defiantly in the face of such real danger. The fact was that the military did routinely attack people and just club them or shoot them to death right on the spot, for something as little as walking down the street after sunset. In a way, the band members were fighting back just by talking about the situation--and by laughing and dancing at it.

One thing about music in Haiti and anywhere that African people settled is that the music has specific rhythms that charge it up. And each rhythm has a dance to go with it. Once the music gets

going, everybody is supposed to dance, nobody is supposed to watch. But if you dance the wrong dance to the rhythm, everybody will laugh at you. I was used to dancing with the Rara bands and Vodou societies for my research, and I knew the steps and loved to dance. After a while, I was really having fun.

A group of little children were dancing near me in the hot sun who were very cute to watch. Already they were fantastic dancers. They were doing every step correctly except that because they were so little it looked comical. They were bumping into each other on purpose and laughing. There was one part of the dance where everybody hunched over, bent down and lifted their hands under their arms and flapped their elbows like chicken wings. I guessed the step came out of the Bizango, a kind of popular juridical society that brings people to trial in the countryside where there are no courts and judges. The words said:

"Dress the demon up in red, Oh, and send it away"

"Abiye djab la tout an wouj O, voye'l ale"

Again this was a "pwen," or point. Dress the devil up in red--beat the enemy up till he's bloody--and send him away. The children were having a good time kicking up dust with their bare feet and flapping their wings and dancing into one another like you're supposed to in Carnival. The moment was once more a mixture of defiance and celebration. It made me uneasy and excited at the same time.

All of a sudden, the palm trees swayed with a gust of wind that picked up my straw hat with the two ribbons, blew it up into the air, and dropped it into the dust. One of the little girls among the children picked it up, and turned to fix her eyes on me. Without missing a step, she danced toward me with the hat in her hand, and I danced toward her so she could hand it to me. She was smiling and her almond-shaped brown eyes were sparkling. Her hair was tied up in a red scarf and I noticed that somebody had put red lipstick on her, even though she only looked about six years old. As we started dancing together I plopped the hat down on her head. What a cute little girl, all smiles and eyes under that big straw hat! We danced like that for a long time, mirroring each others' steps back and forth, smiling and laughing.

I wondered who this beautiful, friendly little person was. Was she a farmer girl who lived up here in the mountains? Or was she with the band? She didn't seem to be shy at all, even though she had never met me before, and I was a foreigner. "What's your name," I asked her in Creole, hot and out of breath from dancing. "Ti-Loune," she answered. "Whose pitit (child) are you?" I wondered. "Pitit Oli," she said, "Oli's child." "Oli Boukman." "Oli from Boukman, the band." Ti-Loune ran under the mango tree to get more lipstick, and I stood in the shade, waiting for the music to start up again.

Boukman

I grew up in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in a quartier called Delmas 65. Ours was a very active house. Our family in Boukman Experyans always had a concert to get ready for, so they were rehearsing almost every day. If you came to stay for a night your feet wouldn't stay in place. Boukman Experyans is a religious band. Religious in Haiti means you believe in Vodou. Which means you believe in the spirits. Boukman would go and sing about the spirits.

There was one concert I will never forget. It was during the coup period. People weren't acting like their normal selves. Not a lot of people were in the street and a lot of police guards were out ready to make a move. The police were very strict about what they were doing. They would kill you if you sang or talked about the President.

Boukman didn't like being bullied by the guards, so they kept on singing their songs, and some songs had to do with the coup. I was feeling scared and worried the guards would come and kill us all. Every time there was a concert the ropes in my stomach were pulling tighter and tighter. When Boukman had the concert up in Petionville, in a school, people started to fe dezod, make trouble. The army had paid some people to go and throw rocks inside the school yard when Boukman was singing. Rocks were falling everywhere. I was feeling more scared, but I couldn't go to my dad because he was doing the sound check. I stayed near the stage, but still I was feeling scared.

My aunt Mimerose was trying to calm people down, but it was no use. "Poukisa?, Poukisa? " Why? Why?" My aunt said to the audience. While I was listening to my aunt's speech, a rock hit me. Hit me behind my leg. While that pain ran through me I thought that was it. We were all killed.

"Poukisa?" I guess my dad was watching because he came running. I was crying not only because it hurt, but because of my country, ruined, fini.

Prayers

Lovely's family has a lot of spirits walking with them. Her mom is a spirit-worker and so is her aunt, Mimerose, who raised her. I'm a spirit-worker too, I guess, although not as graceful as the women in Lovely's family. I did swim an ba dlo, "under the waters" to Africa and now I only sleep in white sheets, eat on white plates. Since I'm new to these ways I follow my godfather Gwo Woch, "Big Rock." Lovely's family doesn't follow anyone, they do things "naturally." They sing, they receive the spirit into their heads and bodies. Their whole lives are governed by the spirits, really.

Sometimes her family spends the whole day doing spiritual work--cleaning people, blessing people, and praying to God and the spirits. I remember being surprised when I went to the first lapriye, prayer, because they didn't follow the usual regleman, or order, of Vodou ceremonies.

Mimerose would cook all day, often making Chaka, a stew of chick peas, meats and squashes. Towards evening, friends would arrive to the lakou and would light candles and get ready to pray. Ti-Loune would get all dressed up in one of those dresses I called a "gato mariaj," a "wedding cake dress" with layers upon layers of satin pleats.

Everybody would find the most comfortable possible place--we would lie around on the beds, the floors, sit in the chairs and put our feet on one another's laps and our heads on one another's shoulders. We would light candles, then pour water on the earth in the lakou as a libation for the spirits.

Tonton Lolo would usually start a song, calling it out in his beautiful voice, soft but deep. Then we would all talk to God and the spirits. Lovely's aunt Mimerose would usually talk the most, in a preaching kind of way. "We are all beautiful, we children of God," she would say in her rich Creole. "One might be light-skinned and another one dark, but we all have our own beauty. We must stop being divided. We are a Creole people, we are all African, European and Indian. We can never forget who we are."

Mimerose is a kind of preacher. Well, it's not the right word to use for her; it sounds too much like a Protestant at church. But she would lie comfortably on her bed during the prayers and just preach to us, about spirit, about love, and beauty. "Everything is made of spirit, and each spirit is a mystery," she would say. "We must learn to live in the spirit, not in the body. When we can transcend our bodies and follow our spirits, then we are truly free."

"Freedom," she would always say, "is there for the taking."

Airport

The cold air hit my face when I stepped into a big room where everyone was standing and waving and looking confused. My dad took my hand and walked down with me, then in a little moment he started waving. I was trying to figure out who he was waving to. Then I saw Liza and Toutouba standing and smiling and waving like crazy. Then I started waving too. When I got near them, we were hugging each other and kissing. I was happy to see Toutou and Liza. Liza took my hand and handed me a big pink coat and said, meté sa sou ou (put this on.) As everyone looked at me, I put the coat on slowly and shyly.

When we all stepped outside it was freezing and there were piles of snow outside. Long memories came in my head as I remembered all my friends and family; how they would really enjoy seeing the snow. I remembered one of my friends told me to bring back some snow for him. I laughed quietly as the thought zoom by my head. I wanted to cry but I couldn't. I tried to remember all the fun days I had in Haiti and my lack of tears went away.

We all started walking together until we headed to a big stairway that was going up and up, non-stop. Liza took my hand and said ou pral monté sa (you going to ride this). My face was all scrunched up because the moving stairs were new to me. Dad, Liza, and Toutouba was looking at me and laughing they thought it was pretty cute. Then Toutouba looked at and called me a "Kongo" (a country person). I started laughing too.

Toutouba was already teaching me how to speak English, the moment I got into the car. She started with the alphabet. Ré peté a pre'm "Repeat after me . "A" she said in her thick loud voice. "A"

I said. She went on with her alphabet. As I repeated my alphabet I was also looking at the big buildings that stood before me. All the buildings had lights, something we didn't have in Haiti very often. I felt happy to see all the lights, but weird too, because in Haiti the lakou would have been dark by now. "Z," Toutouba finished. I woke up from my daydream, and saw a sign of a man with his hands out, holding a big check with millions of dollars written on it. Now I know it was the ad for the New York Lotto. Even though I didn't understand what it was then, I thought the sign was pretty cool.

Staying

The other night, years after the coup period, years into our new lives in a Connecticut university town, the conversation turned to the poster. "I agreed to be in the picture when they told me what it would say," said Lovely. "I was trying to talk to Papi. I was afraid Papi would forget me back in Haiti." My heart stopped for a moment when I realized that she knew as well as we did how much that poster spoke to us. It seems almost surreal. "How could I forget you; I called you every week," her father bristled. "I know," said Lovely, "but I didn't think you were going to come get me. You kept coming to Haiti and then leaving without me."

The coup d'etat generated untold pain and suffering for countless people--so many were killed, beaten, raped, disappeared, went into hiding, forced to migrate. We were among the lucky ones, really; after waiting and worrying, longing and hoping, we were reunited over here, on this side of the waters. Still, even though others back home envy her precious visa and passport, Lovely has paid a heavy price to have them. Leaving the family she grew up with, breaking from her home and her culture, separation from her mother, these have been the costs she has borne. Sometimes school is a struggle, picked up suddenly in English after years of school closings during the coup. Still, we are the lucky ones. We are lucky and yet we paid a price for our luck.

We are all nostalgic for Haiti, for living there again. Even though we write about the violence, there were sweet times too. Oh, I can't let you go without telling you there were sweet times. The beach--we used to go to the beach and enjoy each other and the ocean and sand. That's where Ti-

Loune and Toutouba learned to swim. And after lunch the whole beach would watch the girls dance cheek to cheek to the Troubadour's ballads:

"Laiyza te gen'on ti fi
Li tel rele Benita
Yo te we li telman si bel
Yo bay li non Fleur du Paris

Liza had a little girl
She was named Benita
She was so beautiful
They called her Flower of Paris"

My mind telescopes back to the first dance we shared, Ti-Loune and I, back at the lakou Malik, and my question to her, "whose little girl are you?" The answer, I know now, is that she is my little girl. And that we have paid the price. And that we are the lucky ones.

Lovely Nicolas is a thirteen year old Haitian young lady who moved from Haiti when she was ten, and now lives with her step-mom, dad and baby brother Julien in Connecticut.

Liza McAlister Nicolas is proud to be one of Lovely's mothers. She teaches at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.