

Space, female economies, and autonomy in the shotgun neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Vincent Joos

Thompson Writing Program, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA

Corresponding author: Vincent Joos; e-mail: vnj2@duke.edu

This article argues that commercial practices, social relations, and moral obligations in downtown Port-au-Prince shape and are shaped by the vernacular buildings in which they take place. Women living in, and working from, shotgun houses—a structure with a small street facade that allows for both private and commercial life—use these houses to build moral economies woven around familial solidarity and egalitarian relations. Working in houses that formerly belonged to Haitian black middle classes implies inheritance of respectability values based around home caretaking, religious life, and intimacy. In their economic inventiveness, women who do not have access to formal employment mobilize the power and politics of these houses in a distinctive mode of work and entrepreneurship. Houses and acts of commerce, together, form a particular kind of Haitian respectability for women that offers visibility, social networking, and risk adversity. These domestic spaces that open up new political, social, and economic horizons are threatened by top-down urban planning projects. Through the narration of the life history of Clomène Firmin, this article details female economic and moral practices and phases of urban planning that had for effect, since the devastating 2010 earthquake, to dismantle female economies in urban centers.

Keywords Haiti; Women; Informal Businesses; Moral Economy; Space; Urban Planning

The eastern half of Rue du Champ de Mars is a narrow rectilinear street in downtown Port-au-Prince, Haiti, within walking distance of Haiti's government ministries. It is one of few streets near the capital where electricity is reliably available. Among the medley of produce and clothing vending stands that occupy most of the sidewalk space, many small businesses requiring power also dot the street. New and secondhand electronic goods and appliances, along with water and cold drink businesses, abound in the semiprivate space of front porches and courtyards of dwellings used as both commercial and residential structures. Set against this streetscape, this area of the capital was severely damaged by an earthquake on January 12, 2010, that took the lives of more than 200,000 people. The buildings erected along this artery range from quake-shattered cinder block commercial structures to wooden houses, brand-new funeral homes, and apartment buildings of all shapes and colors. From sunup to sundown, hawkers crisscross the neighborhood, navigating between the more permanent sidewalk vending stands and the constant traffic that animates this busy administrative and commercial part of Port-au-Prince.

Oftentimes, unoccupied sidewalk space indicates the entrance of a restaurant or, more commonly, a *ti komès* (small business) where economic activities occur around a house or in the front room of a residence. The vast majority of these houses are shotgun houses—structures with a small street facade and rooms that recede in the back in a trainlike fashion. These home businesses are run by women merchants with little financial capital who efficiently navigate a commercial arena where they have historically been “peze soue (squeezed and sucked) by the economic elite through inequitable trade practices and tax burdens, without benefit or political enfranchisement” (McAlister 2002:11). Indeed, small-scale businesses led by women form the bulk of Haiti's economic activities. However, in light of the abundance of these informal yet highly organized sectors, women merchants are never invited to participate in the planning decisions that often conflict with their interests.

This article explores the symbiotic relationship between the most common Haitian residential structure—the shotgun house—and the female-run commercial activities that form the backbone of the rural and urban economy in Haiti (Anglade 1982; Rémy 2008). Previous scholarship has examined how historically relevant built environments shape cultural, social, and political practices by exploring “the affects of an outer environment and those of interior human selves, as they are interrelated” (Navaro-Yashin 2012:24; Allen 2014). In their businesses and economic inventiveness, women mobilize the power and affect politics of these houses in a distinctive mode of work and entrepreneurship. I build on this previous scholarship by detailing daily life and commerce in a shotgun house. I focus here on how women living in, and working from, shotgun houses use these houses to build moral economies woven around familial solidarity and egalitarian relations. Working in houses that formerly belonged to Haitian black middle classes, women’s social entrepreneurialism taking place in a domestic sphere I describe appears as a practice traversed by multiple social positions and flexible modes of organization and values.

My work considers space as “produced through a complex set of overlapping societal agencies” (Till 2009:126). The contemporary realities of postearthquake urban planning are analyzed as result of the disintegration of complex social nodes by institutions that conceive of space as a blank, abstract surface that can be measured, divided, sold, and reshaped at whim (Lefebvre 1991:57). Yet, in contrast to Arendt (1973) and others who emphasized these intimate economic–domestic spheres as sheltered from political action and public life, I argue that commercial use of domestic space opens up new political, social, and economic horizons through the fluid entanglement of differential moral values, spatial textures, and practices.

In drawing on the life history of Clomène Firmin, a *ti komesan* (small merchant) who lived and worked in Rue du Champ de Mars from 1994 to 2014, my work explores the intertwining relationship of gender, commerce, and space. I describe flexible economic practices and their relationships to urban built environments and argue that a legacy of house rules, morals, and class values associated with the appearance and function of houses condition the spatial and economic expansion of female-led businesses. Though the 2010 earthquake deeply reshuffled popular economic networks in the capital, the destructiveness of top-down urban planning and renewal in the postearthquake moment, ultimately, is far more comprehensive than “natural” disasters in the way it destroys the grace, aesthetics, capital, and connections that women achieve with these houses. Using the context of a 2014 phase of destructive state-sponsored urban planning in Haiti, I analyze how the loss of specific social and spatial configurations enabled many women to get by and thrive as *ti komesan*.

Urban planning along Monatuf

In the mid-eighteenth century, French urban planners designed this part of town near the capital that included a square-mile grid of rectilinear streets named Monatuf. Construction was completed in 1751, but it was reduced to rubble the same year by an earthquake. In 1770, Monatuf was again ravaged by an earthquake, followed by multiple fires and bombings throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Jérémie 1922). During the colonial period, this neighborhood was surrounded by produce markets and administrative buildings and was the residential hub of both state employees and “small traders and merchants, all the urban population that works hard all day to make ends meet” (Corvington 1992:54). The colonial grid has been, and remains, a socially mixed neighborhood in a highly compartmentalized port city.

In the 1950s, Monatuf became the main residential hub of the black middle classes who consolidated themselves during the presidency of Léon Dumarsais Estimé and the dictatorship of François Duvalier. During the 1960s, however, mass rural migration to Port-au-Prince diversified Monatuf as a working class and small merchants moved in while middle-class homeowners started slowly but steadily to move away (Manigat 1997:94). After the ousting of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986, Monatuf became denser as rural migration picked up. While confined in the many

produce markets of the city during the dictatorship years, merchants began to use street and home space in the well-trafficked part of the capital to settle all kinds of businesses. With the closing of the majority of formal shops in the main streets of downtown after the 2010 earthquake, Rue du Champ de Mars became one of the main commercial centers in *intra muros* Port-au-Prince.

Alongside the historical contexts that have shaped urban planning decisions since the colonial era and throughout most of the nineteenth century, shotgun houses were the predominant residential and commercial structures on Monatuf (Vlach 1975; Corvington 1992:111). Shotgun houses are trainlike rectangular structures comprising a small front porch (12–14 ft.) and multiple 12-by-12 rooms that can retreat deep into back courtyards. Often called *ti kay* (literally, “small house”) in the countryside, where it is ubiquitous, the shotgun house “likely had its origins among African maroons who built houses of a similar type in the rural mountains of Hispaniola during colonial times” (Shujaa and Shujaa 2015:765). These houses remain the emblematic buildings of the rural *lakou*—a central courtyard surrounded by homes of extended family groups that stands as the main mechanism of a rural “egalitarian system without a state” (Barthélémy 1990:28). The shotgun house has been and remains the residential and organizational space of a fiercely independent peasantry whose commercial and social practices built against “the mode of production of the large sugar plantations” (Nesbitt 2013:2) infuse daily life in urban centers.

The front porch of the rural shotgun house often serves as a social gathering space, while urban shotguns’ front porches and first rooms are often used as commercial spaces. Adding or removing rooms from these houses is common practice, and the modular possibilities of the shotgun house allow spatial recombination for familial or commercial needs. It is a form of architecture that is always in the making and that escapes static symbolic interpretations (Kahn 2007:53; Marchand 2001:x). Moreover, with its elevated ground, steep roof, and light building materials, the shotgun house has the ability to resist disasters. Among vernacular structures, wood frame with stone or brick infill buildings sustained the earthquake very well, while infilled concrete frame systems performed poorly (Fischer 2010; Lang and Marshall 2011:345). Some of the shotgun houses of Haiti have been standing since the early eighteenth century (Edwards 2009:66) and have sustained multiple disasters. The spatial configuration and architectural details of these houses provide a built archive reflecting at once the values of the rural *lakou* and the spatial needs and tastes of their former middle-class owners.

Most businesses located in shotgun houses or buildings based on a shotgun plan (Edwards 2004:184) are managed by women, who have formed the majority of the merchant class in urban and rural Haiti since the 1804 independence of the country (Anglade 1982; Mintz 2010:107). As Mark Schuller notes, “women are overrepresented in the lowest-paid informal sector (77 percent) while vastly underrepresented in the professional private sectors (11 percent) and public sector (4 percent)” (2015:192). Marlène Rémy estimates that women sell 90 percent of basic-necessity products in the country. They range from itinerant sellers of agricultural produce in bulk and retail to market vendors and merchants who sell small quantities of goods from their homes (Rémy 2008:164).

Rural migrations

Rural migration within Port-au-Prince and the concomitant rise of small businesses increased during periods of the twentieth century, marked by a concentration of services and industrial jobs in the capital while the robust rural market economy was left abandoned (Anglade 1982; Tobin 2013). The American occupation (1915–34) and the Duvalier dictatorships reinforced and achieved centralization of administration, services, and industries in Port-au-Prince. At the end of Duvalier’s rule, and notably under the impulse of the 1983 Reagan Caribbean Basin Initiative that provided trade and tariff benefits on certain products, Haiti “operated as a supplier of garments, dolls, magnetic tapes, and electronic equipment” (Trouillot 1990:202). Because of the concentration of seemingly stable jobs and educational opportunities in the capital, migrants moved to the capital and began to transform the city by creating spaces where they could live and trade on their own terms.

The massive importations of goods and food from the United States that began in 1994 after the end of the coup years (1991–94) only reinforced rural migration and the withering of rural economies. For instance, when the Haitian government decided to cut the tariff on imported rice from 35 to 3 percent, artificially low-priced American rice replaced Haitian-produced rice in the markets. Where previously Haiti was self-sufficient in rice production, the country now only produces 20 percent of its rice (Ansari 2010:11; Dupuy 2013). These importations greatly disrupted market economies in which women found work as vendors, intermediaries, and bulk sellers of Haitian-grown produce (Lundahl 2013). Even though trade liberalization reinforced male-dominated formal sectors, women vendors were able to adapt to these processes. They operate on a small scale and make use of social relations and trust-based credit systems in their transactions. They manage restaurants; sell produce; and import dry goods, cold drinks, ice, frozen goods, and cosmetics, working from their homes, while male vendors perform the riskier business of peddling goods on the streets. As Laura Wagner (2014:368) notes, though experienced with domestic work and subaltern low-paid positions in industries and services, many women prefer *ti komès* because it enables them to work with flexible schedules, engage with people they trust, and do the domestic and familial chores in continuity with their businesses.

Clomène Firmin: A *ti komesan* in downtown Port-au-Prince

Clomène Firmin moved into Rue du Champ de Mars in 1994, when her daughter Franceska was four months old. I first started visiting her house in September 2013 when my field associate, art historian Aland Joseph, introduced me to her. Clomène's quiet front courtyard is an ideal place to rest and relax in this very busy part of the city. As a friend of Aland, I was invited into the circle of acquaintances who could enter the gate and enjoy refreshments in the front courtyard. I came there to read and write frequently and had my first conversations with Clomène's husband, Alain. Clomène, her family, and I slowly built our friendship, and I began to document her life and work when she learned her house would possibly be demolished in January 2014. We used parts of her life story, which we collaboratively crafted, to generate funds through online crowdsourcing when she and her family lost their business and house in July 2014. Often, along with Aland Joseph, I took photographs, recorded conversations in my notebook, and wrote down my observations. Here I use field notes and three interviews recorded with Clomène and her sister Monique in February 12, 2014; March 23, 2014; and June 2, 2015.

Clomène Firmin was born in 1972 in Chambellan, a small commune located in the mountains at the southwestern tip of the island. She was 11 years old when she moved to Port-au-Prince to perform domestic work for a family inhabiting the southeastern *katyè popilè* (popular/low-income neighborhood) that started to expand after 1986. Until May 2014, she lived in the shotgun house where she had worked as a maid from 1994 to 1997 for a widow who held a job in the Presses Nationales, a state-owned printing company.

Since the 2010 earthquake, Clomène's sister Monique and three of her children have lived in this 13 × 48 ft. four-room house. The house was likely built in the 1910s, given the stucco Greek columns sustaining the gable and ornamenting the front porch that became fashionable during this era in the Caribbean (Crain 1994). It has a corrugated iron steep roof and high ceilings, with elevated floors tiled with pink and green earthenware tiles. Its well-built timber and brick structure enabled it to resist the earthquake. The back courtyard comprises a small outdoor bathroom with a deep well and an area covered by a tin roof that covers the three large chest freezers that enable Clomène to manage a sustainable cold drink business. Monique sells fruits from the front courtyard, starting in late afternoon, when she is done with her daily chores. By adding covered space to the house, Clomène takes full advantage of the modular possibilities of her shotgun house without compromising the privacy of her family. The three main rooms are locked during the day, except when Clomène receives clients or friends in her living room, which is richly ornamented with original sculpted wood. Both sisters were able to generate

sufficient income to allow their families to live, and they often told me they found their lives in this part of the city agreeable.

Race, class, and gender

While Clomène Firmin's story and trajectory are unique, the physical violence, tense and often humiliating hierarchical relations, and lack of economic possibilities she had to overcome are common among women from the provinces who seek employment in Port-au-Prince (Wagner 2014). Geographical origins, skin color, and social class powerfully restrict access to the small pool of jobs offered in the nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector, state administration, or private industry. Women face structural violence in the form of often invisible legal and economic systems fostering inequality and feminizing poverty in a context where "intersectionality, or the multiple forms of oppression based on distinct but overlapping identities," limit their possibilities (Schuller 2015:190).

Even though structural constraints are great, *ti komès* and market economy developed a highly heterogeneous commercial field that ranges from subsistence activities to profitable businesses. Given the constraints and stigma black women face in Haiti, it is not surprising to hear Clomène say that she suffered a great deal in her life: "*pase anpil, anpil soufrans*." Coming from a rural region adds another layer of stigmatization, as urban elites and middle classes reject *moun andeyò* (people from the outside) as nonmodern and unfit for city life (Barthélémy 1990). Clomène's poignant life history is unfortunately very common:

I left Jérémie (a major city in southwest Haiti) when I was 10 or 11. In 1982, I remember. I lived in Chambellan, in the commune of Grand Fond. You have to cross a big river to reach my house. It's a beautiful place with plenty of good fruits and vegetables. Not rice with pea sauce [*diri ak sòs pwa*—the most common food in Port-au-Prince]! You have so much more produce. Here it's rice!

I was a child when I left. I was born in November 1972. My mother's cousin placed me as a domestic servant in a home. It was a tough life. I washed, cooked for them. The husband overworked me. I cooked for him, made him coffee. He showed me how to clean with a wet towel, how to mop. If Madame woke up and my morning chores were not finished, she would bang my head on the wall. I cried and cried. If the pan wasn't clean well she would hit me in the head with it. I know what misery is. Madame did not have children. She was newly married.

Then, I went to stay with my aunt [in the Monatuf neighborhood]. I actually ended up longing for my previous employer. My aunt almost killed me by hitting me with pans. If I was long fetching water, she would hit me with a stick. I came to a point where I was asking God to let me die in a car accident. Every day, every day. Before I go to sleep I would pray: God, let a car crash me so my misery ends. I was just a child. One day, she misplaced one earring and accused me of stealing it. It was in a jar and she had forgotten about it. She beat me so hard I still have the scars. I cried, cried, cried. She was a savage person and I've been beat a lot. This is the reason why I manage my own affairs in my own way [*m jere bagay mwen pou kont mwen*].

Clomène found love and affection only in her neighbor's house, which is located a block away from Rue du Champ de Mars. There Madame Batiste, a woman who also came from Chambellan in 1944 to join her husband who worked in the military in Port-au-Prince, took care of her. Madame Batiste, who is today 85 years old, still calls Clomène *pitit mwen* (my little girl) and takes pride in the fact that Clomène carved out a good life for herself despite all she endured. She receives food, gifts, and long weekly phone calls from her surrogate daughter, who recalls that her *manman* taught her how to trust people again. Clomène often stated that she and her family would never go hungry in this part of town because Madame Batiste and her daughters would always take care of them. In this family, Clomène rediscovered the egalitarian practices of the *lakou* that she employs in her daily business. *Ti komès* and the relations of trust and reciprocity it mobilizes allowed Clomène to escape the physical and psychological violence many women endure as domestic workers. See Figure 1.



Figure 1 Clomène Firmin, February 2014. Photograph by Aland Joseph.

Moral economies in domestic spaces

Clomène operates as the head of her household, controlling finances and labor, while her husband, Alain, works in a *bank bolèt* (lottery kiosk) and participates full time in the street economy. According to Abrahams, these gendered spheres of work mark off “differences of orientation, activity and value systems between the female system of respectability and the male valuation of reputation maintenance” (McAlister 2002:89). Clomène’s business practices, however, oscillate between the values of middle-class self-interest and autonomy linked to the so-called formal sector and the dominant values of multiple small-scale economies in which “the outcomes of residents’ reciprocal efforts are radically open, flexible and provisional” (Simone 2004:408; Kinyanjui 2014). She was raised on a small farm where she lived with her extended family, sharing food and chores and partaking in spiritual practices in the familial *lakou*—the compound where familial, social, and work life is organized from (Wagner 2014:80). Port-au-Prince rural migrants kept the *lakou* household pattern even if its most salient spatial dimensions couldn’t be reproduced (Laguerre 1984:173). Notably, the horseshoe-shaped organization of *ti kay*—vernacular houses, mainly shotgun structures—has almost disappeared in the capital. Nonetheless, the *lakou* is still an effective form of cooperation and social organization in Haiti today (Bulamah 2013).

Many people living in Monatuf today have work or kin relationships with proprietors who passed away, went to live abroad, or moved elsewhere in the city. In February 2014, my field associate, Aland Joseph, and I conducted a small survey to see who rented and who owned the places they lived in. On a random sample of 50 housing units in the Rue du Champ de Mars area, we found out that 8 percent of the units were occupied by proprietors, 44 percent were rented, and 40 percent were inhabited by people who had ties to proprietors or worked in these houses. This short survey pointed to a peculiar mode of inheritance where bonds with house owners allowed people to stay in the houses.

After years of difficult low-paid domestic work for family members and people who mistreated her, Clomène came to Rue du Champ de Mars to work for Madame Lucille in 1994. She developed a strong relationship with her that entailed adherence to certain social and moral obligations. Once Madame Lucille settled in Canada in 1997, Clomène was allowed to stay with Clomène’s family in Madame Lucille’s house to keep it in good shape and to have it ready whenever she would visit Haiti. As Clomène states,

I like Madame Lucille because we lived well together. When she comes back from Canada, I prepare the house for her. I know she likes shallots, so I buy shallots. I know she likes smoked herring, so I buy smoked herring and I make *paté* for her [a savory pastry filled with tomato and herring sauce]. I fix the house and prepare her meals because I don’t want her to suffer [*m pa vle li soufri*]. That’s why she loves me too.

Her distant family gossips about me. Her cousin and distant relatives do. But she says that I am the one who needs to take care of her house. Her house looks good, and she appreciates that. When she last came in 2008, she felt the house was beautiful and clean. She's very old, she cannot work, so I'm taking care of her. We're like family I am very careful not to engage with too many people in the neighborhood because people gossip. I don't engage with people living too close to my house. I visit people in the neighborhood I know very well, but not very often. You have to be very careful. Madame Lucille always told me not to engage too much with people in the neighborhood, she doesn't want too many of them coming here. And I'm the same, I don't want too many people coming here. I live here by myself, with my children, my friends and my family. I don't go and sit at other people's houses. I don't like these kinds of things.

In this excerpt of an interview I conducted in her courtyard in March 2014, Clomène explains how she maintains her respectability by limiting her pool of relations. While Madame Lucille wasn't financially wealthy, she was educated, spoke French fluently, and had strict rules for herself as a woman of relatively high social status. She valued her middle-class standing based on formal work, privacy, family, and home, all of which fill the contours of European-influenced Caribbean respectability for many women of her social class (Burton 1997). However, Clomène accommodates Madame Lucille's rules by using the front room of the house as storage space and by engaging with her network of extended family and friends she built over the past 30 years living in the Monatuf area. Churchgoing, participating in children's school activities, screening relations for herself and her relatives, practicing an absence of neighborly promiscuity, and a desire to appear as a married and morally upstanding woman are values and practices Clomène makes a part of her own social self. This way of self-presentation enables her to access middle-class social networks she would not otherwise have access to as a black woman born in the countryside.

To demonstrate her ability to tap into broader social networks than one might expect given her social background, during my field research, I noted that state employees, teachers, and professors or Haitian NGO workers stop by Clomène's house to check out her merchandise, including new shoes, shirts, and cosmetic products. These visitors whom she allows in her house will sit, engage in small talk, and drink an ice-cold *gazeuze* as if it was a courtesy visit. During these particular visits, her living room operates as a shop, with all sorts of commodities carefully lined up on tables covered with white cloth. In these moments, the ornamental and material details of her house allow for the former owners' *praesentia*, a term used by Kevin Hetherington (2003:1940) to account for "the involvement of the absent Other within the material presence of social life." Madame Lucille is present not only through her remembered house rules but also in the materiality of the house itself. The furniture and objects she left behind, along with the nonfunctional elements of the house, such as the interior wood lattice, create an aura of middle-class respectability. In the meantime, the cups overthrown by the earthquake in a glass cabinet whose key has been lost or Clomène's belongings packed in crates out of fear of sudden eviction make for an atmosphere that exudes melancholy and ephemerality. Multiple social worlds coexist in a space where social relations are affected by the tangible presence of differential class markers that discharge a sense of stability and vulnerability.

Small commercial operations in Port-au-Prince are highly systematic as they make wide use of codified social relations and rely, like most "community economies," on "trust, care, sharing, reciprocity, cooperation, divestiture, future orientation, collective agreement," and so on (Gibson-Graham 2014:S151). While engaging in commercial respectability by using the inside of her home as a shop and reception parlor for her wealthiest clientele, Clomène also uses the semiprivate space surrounding her house to sell cold drinks, water, and fruit to people she knows and trusts and who may pay her at a later date or exchange other goods and services for what they receive. Respectability and reputation are not oppositional gendered categories; they "overlap, interlink, and mutually reinforce each other" and allow for flexible identities within varied social spheres (Browne 2004:188). Preserving one's perceived integrity and honesty and following principles that help build both reputation and respectability are key characteristics of how Clomène uses domestic settings and spatial, social, and commercial practices. This multivalence in spatial relations enables her to be successful and reinvent herself in an open and community-based female business sphere.

Doing *ti komès* in a shotgun house

Clomène started her business in 1997, when she bought her first freezer and started to sell cold drinks. She quickly saved money and bought two more chest freezers around which, until 2014, an important network of people gravitated. The chest freezers, in less busy hours, became places where one could lounge and take a nap. Rather than being inanimate objects, they are cherished items Clomène and Francesca take great care of, and they are deemed more precious than any other furniture in the house. As Clomène states,

My freezers make me live! They make me live! I don't make credit. I sell water bags [*sache dlo*] to four men. There's a water truck that comes by every day. I buy from them, then we put the water bags in the freezers, making sure each freezer is always full. I sell drinks in bulk, and as you know, by the unit to people I know. I have clients who come just for a cold drink. I've been living in the neighborhood for about 30 years, so I know people!

I do all kinds of commerce [both Clomène and Monique laugh at my interest in the details of *ti komès*]. I sell beds but right now I don't have any. I sell mattresses. I sell *pèpè*, I buy *pèpè* Kennedy [secondhand clothes coming from the United States]. You find them in depots not far from the port. Sometimes you make nothing. It's a lot of work to sell clothes. I sell from the front courtyard. Lots of people are coming, they try the clothes, they hesitate, and you need to cajole them in buying ... I sell the good things by the unit [inside her house] and buy bulk the bad clothes. For a while, I also sold cosmetics, but it's a tricky business. If you don't sell fast enough, products go bad. Lipsticks, lotions, soap, brushes, toothpaste, perfume, shampoo, combs, makeup, pedicure sets, body lotion, you know ... Well, I never sit! That's why I'm getting old fast. My body is stiffening. I don't rest enough.

During the day, she will open and reach into the freezers many times. When she walks Kyra to school, Monique replaces her. Clomène almost never sits. Often, when I came to have lunch at her house, it would take her an hour or so to finish her plate as she would come and go from the dining room in short bursts. Water sales keep Clomène's business viable, and she estimates that she makes about US\$150 of profit per month. Her expenses during a month are quite high. Her husband Alain pays for the school, clothes, and supplies of the two children they had together, Bob and Kyra. Clomène takes care of these expenses for Francesca, who was born before she met Alain. Both Francesca and Bob generate money through small businesses: Francesca cuts hair and gives manicures during the weekend, while Bob repairs small electronic devices and charges batteries of phones and other items for a small fee. Monique contributes as best she can, often bringing discounted produce she obtains through her extensive networks of friends in produce markets.

Everyone in the household also participates in *sòl*, a popular short-term money-saving method ubiquitous in Haiti. For instance, on each Saturday, Monique participates in a *sòl* of seven women and contributes US\$2 for a total pool of US\$14. The lump sum will go to one person in the group each time the money is collected. Clomène explains, "You make *sòl* with people you trust and can reach easily. That's my way of doing it. I'd never engage in something risky like *sòl* with people I never met." As such, Clomène and Monique participate in "solidarity entrepreneurialism," defined by Mary Kinyanjui (2014:96) as self-organized businesses in which "individuals make investments ... in collaboration with others" while sharing "business information, ideas and space." Drawing from social practices learned in their hometown, they create and participate in an urban *lakou* where trust and reciprocity are the driving forces of business.

All the women living at the time at Clomène's worked long days. Money was tight, but since 1997, the family has been able to get by, even at times when the prices of all goods suddenly soared. For hardworking women like Clomène, *ti komès* is a way to enter into relations of reciprocity that are disrupted in the violent spheres of domestic work or poorly paid factory work (Schuller 2009). Despite structural constraints that reduce work possibilities for black and low-income women, *ti komès* is a dignifying practice and a desirable life project for women stuck in factories or working long hours in private homes where they are subjugated to psychological and bodily pressures (Wagner 2014). *Ti komès*, to quote Kathleen Millar (2014:49), "opens up the possibility of other ways of fashioning

work and life.” In the case of Clomène, it enabled her to sustain the life she desired and to maintain forms of respectability through the use of a house that opens multiple social positions and relations.

Experiencing destructive urban planning

Since the designation of northeastern Monatuf as a space of public utility through eminent domain laws, residents of this area have experienced deep anxieties because of frequent rumors of demolition. In 2012, the Unit for Housing and Public Buildings Construction, an institution created by the government after the 2010 earthquake, proposed a plan to rebuild what it termed “la Cité Administrative.” In the development plan published on its website, no mention is made of the unmistakable presence of thousands of *ti komesan* who live and work there. Instead, the plan calls for the creation of “conditions susceptible to attract private national and international investment” while turning this functional mixed neighborhood into the “heart of central power and of its national institutions” (UCLBP 2012:12). Computer-designed images of the future Cité Administrative present a radically different Monatuf, where four-lane roads cut through corridors of high-rise buildings. The state has never hesitated to demolish entire residential parts of downtown Port-au-Prince without timely warning, as it did for the extension of the national prison in 2008 and for the construction of the Ministry of Justice in 2011.

On April 24, 2014, Clomène called to let me know that her neighbor had shared a letter that stated the neighborhood would be demolished soon. Nobody knew when this would happen, but April 30 was the rumored date. On April 25, I went to see Clomène, who was sitting in her living room at 3:00 p.m., a time when she usually works. That day, however, she felt depressed and didn’t feel like working. We sat down together and began talking about the possible demolitions. I recorded parts of our conversation:

I don’t know when they will start the demolition. I don’t know when I will start to move I need to pack my belongings, I’ll pull out parts of the house to build myself a little place in Onaville [in the desertlike spaces located 30 minutes north of Port-au-Prince]. I don’t have money, there’s nothing else I can do. All the people from this area will do that. The state will take this place. People are angry, but you cannot beat up the state . . . you cannot beat up the state [*Ou pa ka goumen leta . . . ou pa ka goumen leta*]. I need to save Madame Lucille’s stuff. That will cost money! Her furniture is so heavy, it’s solid wood! Beautiful furniture. I’ll go to Onaville, to live on state-owned land, like everyone does.

On May 28, 2014, around 5:30 a.m., Clomène heard the rumbling noises of trucks and bulldozers (Figure 2). In anticipation of this moment, she had already moved her belongings, along with Madame Lucille’s furniture, to a small property she owned in Carrefour. At the time, I was bedridden because of chikungunya, a mosquito-borne disease, and could not witness the destruction or help my friends move. Aland Joseph documented this human-made disaster with photographs and audio recordings. Together, we published an article in *Le Nouvelliste*, Haiti’s main newspaper, where we described both the megalomaniac downtown masterplan and the sudden loss of homes and businesses for hundreds of Monatuf residents (Joseph and Joos 2014).

Clomène and Monique have not fared very well since the demolitions. Aland Joseph and I led two crowdfunding campaigns that generated US\$2,000 between 2014 and 2015. The money raised helped Clomène and Monique find new homes, but both of them have been depressed since the demolitions. As Clomène receives only 3–4 hours of electricity a day, her freezers stand empty under tar paper on the roof of the house. Monique now lives far away from her sister and survives by selling sandals on the streets. I came to visit Clomène in Carrefour on June 2, 2015. It had been 10 months since I had last seen her. Clomène explained her situation:

The morning of the demolitions, very early, I took away with me what I could take away. We rented a truck, and Mrs. Lucille called some of her tenants who lived in a little house she owns in Kafou. You have people who got hurt



Figure 2 Clomène Firmin’s demolished shotgun house, May 2014. Photograph by Aland Joseph.

during the demolitions, some of them died being crushed in their houses. Some of them died of utter surprise [*sezisman*].

Mrs. Lucille allowed us to stay in the tiny two rooms she owns on the top of her house here in Kafou. I saved all her belongings. So ... we’re not homeless, but it’s very hard on me. My children go to downtown schools, and I have to pay for transportation for all of them. That makes me spend two hours crisscrossing the city every day.

We’re in this house, but there’s no life here [*pa gen lavi*]. There’s no pedestrian traffic, our street is a cul-de-sac. I try to do business but it doesn’t work. I tried to buy water, but since electricity comes and goes, my water rots. What I sold in one day in Monatuf, here, I sell in 15 days ... I used to sell soda pops, and it was a nice distraction. Friends would come and go and ask me: “Clomène, give me a little soda!” I felt alive! I was well organized. Here, you don’t have anything. Everyone here in Kafou lives reclusive lives. Sometimes, a neighbor will come to buy 10 cents of water, a bottle of coke ...

I lost so much by losing my home in Rue du Champ de Mars ... Here in Kafou, I can spend a whole day without seeing anybody. I raised my children downtown. In a zone like Kafou, where you don’t know anyone, if you’re hungry, you will stay hungry [*w ap fe grangou net*]. When I was in Rue du Champ de Mars, I could go to see friends and eat something. I would never be able to go hungry there [*m pa ka grangou*]. Here, you can remain starving. I’m not someone who can sit on a chair and do nothing. I need to find a way to raise my children. I’ll find a way. I did all possible businesses you can think of. I’ll find ways to make a living, but now my life is upside down [*lavi m tet anba*].

Clomène had lived in this part of town for 30 years. She still goes back there on a daily basis to bring her daughter to school and to see Madame Batiste, who now lives a block away from the dusty rubble. As Gordillo (2014:20) suggests, rubble is not simple inorganic matter and can be considered to “have an afterlife, or a history of its own.” The rubble of Monatuf is a wound and the trace of social destruction. It is also a form of materiality that has a second life. As Aland Joseph documented, when Clomène’s house was demolished, a crew of young men stacked the rare and valuable red bricks filling the wood frame of the shotgun house in their pickup truck and sold them on the spot. The debris of Monatuf feeds the vernacular reconstruction of Port-au-Prince and takes on a life of its own in the peripheral neighborhoods where people turn rubble into livable dwellings again.

Conclusion

In June 2015, in lieu of the houses of my friends and acquaintances, I found piles of rubble where a few young men were still trying to extract whatever resalable they could find. A few *ti komesan* I knew were still vending from stands they placed in front of their former homes. Of the 17 *ti komès* located in shotgun structures I frequented and studied from 2012 to 2014, only 6 survived the demolitions. As Gordillo (2014:81) argues, “destruction disintegrates not just matter but the conditions of sociality that define a particular spatial node.”

People use, transform, and give meaning to shotgun houses and use them to fashion themselves as agents of the social, economic, and moral fabric of Haiti. The shotgun house is a vernacular structure emblematic of a strongly independent peasantry that organizes its economy around egalitarian values and female financial control. Clomène’s businesses and lifestyles were infused by the ambivalent qualities of a vernacular house that radiated both her belonging to a rural *lakou* and her desire to appear as a respectable and independent woman. Haitian feminist organizations have long placed stable housing as the prime condition to enhance women’s security and well-being (Schuller 2015). The actual reconstruction of Haiti through industrialization and destructive top-down urban planning suffocates female-run independent small businesses, narrows an already limited horizon of female work possibilities, and disintegrates socially produced spaces that sustain and support a hardworking population. Clomène’s economic practices were not guided by self-interest but are more akin to risk-adverse moral economies described by James Scott. Developing a “number of steady customers [and] pursuing several minor occupations to minimize the danger of ever being entirely out of work” (Scott 1976:24) are strategies that prevail in Clomène’s businesses. Her commercial activities are geared toward the constitution of moral spheres where *lakou* values of trust and reciprocity become major assets in times of disaster.

Yet, despite the infusion of *lakou* into commercial activities in shotgun houses, the fact remains that the social life of Monatuf and its intrinsic characteristics have been disregarded by state urban planners who reduce space to a “‘mental thing’ or a ‘mental place’” that can be destroyed and reshaped to fulfill the purely abstract notion of an administrative center capable of attracting investors (Lefebvre 1991:10). What is destroyed is not only physical space but also, to use the words of Henri Lefebvre (1991:312), “a rare qualitative complexity” crafted through social production. Instead of being a land compartmentalized upon abstract functions, Monatuf was a space produced through appropriation of the built environment, self-management of territories, and the constitution of communes. Haitian writer Charles Frédo Grand-Pierre (2014:47) poignantly detailed the destruction of Monatuf: “The space that inhabits us and that we inhabit was rebuilt on our own terms. It was cradled by our dreams and is imbued with unsuspected thoughts which conserve a past that should be inherited by future generations.” Bodies cannot be “spirited away” from the space they inhabit. The creative social body “as produced and as the production of space” is a producer of difference that calls for a break “out of the temporal and spatial shell developed in response to labour” (Lefebvre 1991:384). In the case of Monatuf, a maze of corridors linking buildings and people, the houses where independent female-run businesses could thrive and the social relationships that made this place a node of fragmented yet functioning urban *lakou* have vanished.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Rudolf Colloredo-Mansfeld, Townsend Middleton, Peter Redfield, Laura Wagner, Samuel Shearer, Paolo Bocci, stef shuster, Amelia Fiske, and David Font-Navarrete, my colleagues at the Duke Thompson Writing Program, and two anonymous reviewers who helped in clarifying the article. In Haiti, the author thanks Aland and Rachel Joseph, Carl and Dieumeys Fils-Aimé, Clomène and Monique Firmin, the book sellers of Rue de la Réunion, and the librarians at the Faculté d'Ethnologie de Port-au-Prince.

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