



A true coin of their dreams Imaginary monies in Haiti

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This article examines a singular feature of Haitian monetary practices: the generalized use of a currency that lacks material existence as an object, coin, or banknote—the Haitian dollar. I propose a historical and ethnographic pragmatics of currencies and units of measure to illuminate (a) the dynamic of the daily economic life of Haitian people, mostly of those living in the slums of Port-au-Prince; (b) the geographies of monies and calculation that constitute the highly pluralized Haitian monetary space; and (c) the relational productivity of fictional currencies. Through an ethnographic inquiry into the meanings and uses of such currencies, this article problematizes the relations between materiality and immateriality that cloud our thinking about money, monetary transactions, and calculations.

Keywords: Haiti, money, calculation, measures, transactions, materialities

I examine here a singular feature of the Haitian monetary universe: the generalized use of a currency without any material existence, past or present, as a coin or banknote: the Haitian dollar. In most transactions in Haiti (price negotiations in markets, working out wages and contracts), calculations are made in the Haitian dollar, while payments are made in other currencies, principally in gourdes (HTG, the national currency), but also in US dollars, Dominican pesos, telephone cards, and other forms, such as the pieces of plastic or metal that smooth the flow of various commercial circuits of basic goods, like water and coal, among the poorest people.

The rate of conversion between the Haitian dollar and the gourde is one Haitian dollar to five gourdes. After haggling over a bag of mangoes in a street market, for example, the buyer and seller may agree on a price of three Haitian dollars: the



buyer pays with a fifty gourde note (ten Haitian dollars), the seller keeps three dollars for the mangoes (fifteen gourdes), and gives seven Haitian dollars in change (thirty-five gourdes, in three notes of ten and one coin of five). Or another example: a supermarket bill comes to 234 HD (Haitian dollars). The buyer pays with 1500 gourdes (300 Haitian dollars), the cashier says, “Here’s your change: sixty-six dollars” and gives the buyer 330 gourdes, keeping the 234 Haitian dollars for the purchase.

All travel tips for foreigners (in tourist guidebooks or websites aimed at ex-pats) warn about this “bizarre” way of undertaking transactions. The Haitian government, with the support of public intellectuals, has tried many times to ban use of the Haitian dollar, condemning it as just another sign of the country’s barbarity or backwardness.¹ Nevertheless, people continue to calculate in Haitian dollars while they exchange other currencies.

Many dollars circulate in the monetary space of the contemporary Caribbean, including the US dollar, the Jamaican dollar, the Belize dollar, and the East Caribbean dollar—issued by the islands forming a Common Market, like Bermuda, Dominica, and Grenada. From the viewpoint of standard monetary theories, all of these are “normal” currencies: they serve as a unit of account, means of payment, medium of exchange and store of wealth. They are identified by a symbol (USD, JMD, XCD, etc.) and exist in a physical form, minted and available to be handled. The Haitian dollar also has a symbol (HD), but unlike the other Caribbean dollars, it is an imaginary money, a pure unit of account. Although basically an oral and conceptual phenomenon, the Haitian dollar is also written and objectified in supermarket receipts, restaurant menus, gas station price signs, contracts for international cooperation projects, notebooks recording debts and credits for bets or lotteries, and at banks, where we can find conversion tables like this: 1 USD:8 HD:40 HTG.²

One of my main aims, then, is to examine the entanglements (rather than oppositions) between materiality and immateriality, the reality and the conceptualization of the Haitian dollar. As we know, this tension traverses the social history of money. On the one hand, there is the materiality of metals (like gold) and other objects that serve as “ballast,” the objectivity of the coins and banknotes themselves, and the strength of the states responsible for their stability and trustworthiness. On the

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1. “Whatever we do, we seem unable to rid ourselves of a fiction: the Haitian dollar” (“Quoi que nous faisons, nous n’arrivons pas à nous défaire d’une fiction: le dollar haïtien”), a columnist complained not long ago in one of the country’s main newspapers (Boyer 2012).
 2. While the equivalence between the HTG and the HD is always the same (1:5), the gourde (and thus the Haitian dollar) fluctuates in relation to the US dollar. The rate of exchange shown in this table (1 USD:40 HTG) was valid from 2007 to 2013. It is interesting to note that, given all the political commotion, the constant rise in food prices, and the turmoil caused by natural catastrophes, the gourde’s value in relation to the US dollar has remained relatively stable—somewhat surprisingly to eyes trained in other economies (like my own, educated in the long monetary instability of countries such as Brazil or Argentina; Neiburg 2006). This topic—the stability or volatility of real and imaginary monies—is beyond the scope of the present article.



other hand, there are symbols and conventions—in the contemporary world, as we know, it has become increasingly common to contrast real currencies (and economies) with fictional monies (and economies), identified through numbers, indices, financial assets, bitcoins, and other digital currencies (see Nelms and Maurer 2014).³

Historians and anthropologists have shown that this extreme monetary pluralism is truly widespread, always present in everyday monetary transactions around the world. There is nothing exceptional or abnormal in this fact. The convergence between currency and sovereignty or the currencies that perform the four functions (unit of account, mean of payment, medium of exchange, and store of wealth) is situated more at the level of normative ideas than at the level of empirical reality. In the everyday world of transactions, we encounter multiple monies, currencies that perform just some functions, yet are deeply embedded in social life, enabling and facilitating calculation and exchange (with other currencies and with physical and intangible objects), shaping economic spaces, establishing hierarchies of scale and value. Deductive analyses drawn from theoretical definitions of money are replaced by inductive empirical accounts that emphasize multiple monetary practices, the diverse social meanings of currencies, and the historical processes underlying the creation and disappearance of some and the persistence of others, thereby throwing into question the difference between soft and hard currencies and between material and fictitious monies.

The expression “imaginary money” was proposed by Luigi Einaudi ([1936] 1953) in his extraordinary and challenging exploration of how people dealt with the instability and extreme plurality that accompanied the creation of new nation-states in Europe before the unification and standardization of systems of weights, measures, and currencies.⁴ Marc Bloch decisively contributed to comprehension of the multiplicity and articulation of units of account and means of payment in premodern Europe, anticipating contemporary debates that emphasize the calculative dimension of money, its social existence as a calculative device or instrument of commensuration (see, e.g., Ingham 2004; Callon and Muniesa 2005; Maurer 2006; Amato, Doria, and Fantacchi 2010). Analyzing why currencies are born, transform, and vanish, Bloch proposed replacing every a priori theoretical definition of money, “every intention to establish a set of functional criteria that would qualify (once and for all) all currencies,” with a “minimalist and pragmatic definition which recognizes that, above all else, currencies (physical and fictitious) are measuring instruments” (1954: 48–49).

Two complementary approaches have lately examined currencies that, like the Haitian dollar, serve as pure units of account. Akinobu Kuroda (2008a, 2008b) shows how money’s four classical functions may appear to become detached, and how pure units of account possess an integrating function, enabling conversions between means of payment and stores of wealth. Jane Guyer (1995), setting out from a similar premise in order to observe “the currencies of people” (Guyer 2004, 2011),

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3. On the modern dichotomy between materiality and immateriality see Miller (2005). On the dichotomy between real and fictitious economies also see Guyer (2016).
 4. Bompaire and Dumas have shown how the notion of imaginary currency is multi-form, covering a variable semantic field, which “is only unified in opposition to the real money used in payment operations” (2000: 46). Also see Day (1998) and Lardin (2007).

provides a historical ethnography of monetary practices in West Africa, situating pure units of account within a “monetary interface.” For Guyer, fictional or imaginary currencies are entangled with boundaries and thresholds between scales of value; they also “mediate both the memorization of non-reductive transactions and their nature as conversions” (Guyer 2011: 2016).⁵

Rather than attribute the Haitian dollar’s existence to “Haitian-ness,” however singular a feature of the country it is, my interest is in observing ethnographically its uses in the present and over time.⁶ Through this historical pragmatics, I wish to show how the Haitian dollar forms part of an extremely diversified, dynamic, and creative space bringing together units of measure and means of payment, currencies and calculation, all of which modulate the daily economic life of the majority of Haiti’s population—particularly in urban slum areas like the Greater Bel Air region, in the center of Port-au-Prince, where I have carried out fieldwork since 2007 and where people at the same time literally have almost no money and are extremely concerned about it. Following Sidney Mintz (1961), I also show how this space of currencies and calculations has a historical dimension, constituted by a multiplicity of superimposed chronologies that are ever-present in daily transactions. This historical pragmatics of the Haitian dollar reveals how monetary cultures are deeply embedded in social relationships and in historical formations and how calculative devices (as monies of account) are also deeply relationally productive, providing unique insights into the understanding of everyday socialities through their web of equivalences and conversions. The uses of Haitian imaginary monies, singularly intense in urban slums such as Bel Air, located at the very margins of the global capitalist system, have integrative effects, by providing the texture of an interface across different circuits of various physical currencies.

Links, detachment, and the scale of five

Units of measure are cognitive sociotechnical artifacts that express relations of equivalence, difference, order, hierarchy, and scale. Generalization of the use of a single unit of account or the formation of a determined monetary culture reflects a complex historical process that resists teleological or causal explanation. Links and detachment between units of account and means of payment can be traced showing how the material and immaterial, imagination and reality, concepts and things all combine to inform a preference for the Haitian dollar and the use of the scale of five to fix prices and calculate transactions.⁷

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5. The links between money and memorialization could also be explored through Hart (2001) and Hart and Ortiz (2014). Maurer (2005: ch. 4) has questioned the teleological and lineal trajectory involved in the dematerialization of money, which supposedly starts with barter and material monies and ends with huge trade and meta coins.
 6. Trouillot stimulates us to think about Haiti’s “oddities” positively and historically: “Haiti is not weird,” he says. “It is the fiction of Haitian exceptionalism that is weird” (1990b: 11).
 7. Following Charles Taylor (2005), it is important to grasp the modern dimension of the concept of imagination, which has nothing to do with any kind of supposed

Hans Van Werveke stated that behind every “fictional currency” there always lies “a link with some kind of real means of payment” (1934: 125). In the case of the Haitian dollar, this link is the five gourde banknote, first issued in 1920 with the text (in French): “This note is payable to the bearer in legal money of the United States at the rate of five gourdes to one dollar.” The note was part of the monetary reform launched after the start of the US occupation of Haiti (1915–34), when the new central bank (formally controlled by the American City Bank) established a fixed parity system (or *currency board*) for making conversions between the US dollar and the gourde at a rate of 1:5.⁸

In his compelling studies of Haitian markets, measures, and transactions conducted between 1958 and 1961, Mintz does not mention the Haitian dollar.⁹ Michel Laguerre (1983), on the basis of research undertaken in Bel Air in 1974–76, likewise never speaks of the currency, even when describing credit systems and lotteries, both of which are today calculated in Haitian dollars. An early 1970s tourist guidebook in English only mentions the gourde and its parity with the US dollar, whereas today, as mentioned earlier, any such publication would forewarn visitors of the complexities of Haitian monetary transactions.

Calculating in the Haitian dollar seems to have slowly become more general, triggered by the end of fixed parity between the gourde and the US dollar in 1979 (sixty years after its implementation), during the dollar crisis and ensuing economic turmoil, causing the currency to fluctuate, opening up markets, fueling a rural exodus, and massively increasing the number of Haitian migrants to the United States. At the same time that the unit of account lost its primary material connection (the five gourde banknote convertible to one American dollar), other material attachments were created, reinforcing calculations in the scale of five and the use of Haitian dollars. Just after fixed parity ended, the central bank issued gourdes on a scale of five: first a five coin was created, then 10, 25, 50, 100, 250, 500 denominations, and later 1000 notes, were issued. The means of payment (the gourde) thereby became a “support” (Weber 2009) for a long-term cultural disposition to make calculations in imaginary monies on a scale of five.¹⁰

The scale of five has a long history in Haiti’s monetary “space of calculability” (Mitchell 2002) that precedes the parity between the gourde and the US dollar introduced in 1919. It is an older colonial legacy, not American but French. The first gourde banknotes circulated in 1813, nine years after the country’s independence from France. The incipient national currency joined the Caribbean’s very diverse monetary universe, coexisting with currencies of the old and new empires, coins

backwardness of premoderns who handle incomplete currencies and calculate exotically.

8. A few references to monetary management during the occupation period can be found in Chatelain ([1954] 2005: 121ff.), Schmidt ([1971] 1995), Plummer (1988), Castor (1987) and Renda (2011).
9. Mintz confirmed (personal communication, January 20, 2009) that he had never heard of the Haitian dollar during his fieldwork there.
10. This preference for the scale of five echoes the national currencies of Madagascar and Mauritania, which seem to be the only ones based on such a scale.

minted in the islands, and those issued by private companies (such as the Dutch East India Company). In this universe, governed by commerce and crisscrossed by trade routes, in 1872 Haiti's national currency gained a special relationship with the French franc, the currency of the former metropolis, based on a fixed parity system of five gourdes to one franc.¹¹ In contrast to foreigners, who need time (and often calculators) to multiply and divide, Haitians have internalized the scale of five. As Jane Guyer would say (2011: 2018), it has acquired a mnemonic function, serving as a cognitive benchmark. For those who calculate in Haitian dollars, there is a natural and immediate relationship between unit of account and means of payment: they are "indexed" (Peirce [1897] 1932), so that five is one, ten is two, fifteen is three . . .

Undisciplined spaces

In contrast to Witold Kula's (1986) classic demonstration in the case of modern France, the sociotechnical history of measures is not always about the unification and standardization of state systems of measure (including monetary unification). In many places, both today and throughout history, measures resist standardization; people's practices and conceptualizations seem to confront states; and monies and other measures proliferate. Mintz (1961) brilliantly showed how this proliferation has been constitutive of the formation of Haitian society.¹²

The passage of time since Mintz did his fieldwork in Haiti only seems to have strengthened this entanglement between the proliferation of monies and measures and Haitian markets and sociability, fueled by three processes: urbanization, transnationalism, and the routinization of emergency regimes.

Today the country is predominantly urban: 60 percent of its inhabitants live in cities, whereas in 1950 the figure was below 30 percent. In 1960 Port-au-Prince had 300,000 inhabitants; today more than two million people live there. Most people living in the metropolitan zone come from elsewhere, a movement that intensified in the 1970s and continues today, stimulated by land shortage and a rural economic crisis caused by soil erosion and competition with cheap imports. As people moved to the cities in huge numbers, there was an increasing exodus from Haiti. Today around ten million people live in the country itself, while more than three million Haitians live abroad.¹³ According to some estimates, money and other objects sent

11. On the complexities of the Caribbean monetary system during colonial times, see Mintz (1964a). On the colonial monetary history of Saint-Domingue, see Lacombe (1956).

12. The expression "undisciplined" is inspired by Trouillot (1992: 20), who uses the term to speak of the Caribbean as a whole. We can connect the idea of indiscipline with his sketch of Haitian social history as a permanent confrontation between society, state, and nation (Trouillot 1990a).

13. Diverse sources (like the UNDP) agree on an emigration rate of around 8/1000. However, these statistics fail to count illegal nonregistered migrants and the comings and goings of Haitians from the neighboring Dominican Republic.

from overseas are the top item in the country's GDP.¹⁴ After the end of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986, an "emergency regime" (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010) became endemic. Characterized by foreign military intervention (either by one country, a coalition of nations, or the UN) and the massive presence of international aid agencies (IAAs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), these emergency regimes distribute services (like medical care), goods (like water and food), and small quantities of money through "development projects" that hire people on unstable short-term contracts.¹⁵ Mobility in space between the city and the interior and between the country and abroad, and the predominance of a humanitarian apparatus, both drive the contemporary Haitian popular economy, based on small profits, small trade, and small monies, and on the pluriactivity of people.¹⁶

Bel Air is a privileged place to observe these transformations and mechanisms. It was the city's first black district—according to Laguerre, "one of the oldest black districts in the western hemisphere" (1983: 167). By the late nineteenth century, it had become a mixture of slums and homes for an incipient middle class of professionals, public employees, and factory workers—a rare occurrence in a social universe with few wages. It gradually turned into something like a complex of favelas, closely in tune with the political and economic life of the country, "swamped" by migrants, becoming stigmatized by violence, the absence of infrastructure and sanitation, and extreme poverty.¹⁷ As in the city's other popular districts, most people survive by doing many different things, following the logic of small profits (*ti benefis*) obtained in small jobs (*ti travay*) and small trading (*ti biznis*). According to some estimates, less than 10 percent of Bel Air's population is employed in the formal labor market, 80 percent of people live on less than US\$2.5 per day, and more than 50 percent live on less than one US dollar a day.¹⁸

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14. In 2012, remittances to Haiti amounted to just over 25 percent of GDP (UNDP 2013). On contemporary forms of mobile money linked to the mobility of people, see Maurer (2011) and, in relation to Haiti, E. B. Taylor (2011). On Haitian mobility and the diaspora as a Haitian trope, see Ulysse (2007) and Handerson (2015).
 15. An account of these changes in the "political economy of aid" to Haiti in the 1990s can be found in James (2010), Marcelin (2011, 2015), and Schuller (2012).
 16. The idea of pluriactivity is central to Hart (1973). Comitas (1963) developed the theme of occupational multiplicity for the Caribbean.
 17. For a recent history of Bel Air, see Danticat's extraordinary novel (2007), as well as Laguerre (1983), Ribeiro Thomaz and Nascimento (2006), Beckett (2008), Kivland (2012), Neiburg (forthcoming), and Braum (2014).
 18. A hundred thousand people lived in the Greater Bel Air area before the 2010 earthquake (Fernandes and Nascimento 2007). According to the World Trade Organization (Portes, Itzigsohn, and Dore-Cabral 1994), only 7.7 percent of the workforce was formally employed in 1987. The Viva Rio Census (Fernandes and Nascimento 2007) found that 78 percent of families in Bel Air have a monthly per capita income below US\$43 and 38 percent earn less than one dollar per day. This matches the findings of the latest UNDP report (2013), which indicates that 75 percent of the country's population live on less than US\$2.5 a day.

Located in the heart of the capital, Bel Air merges with the Croix de Bossales region, the epicenter of Haiti's market system, where the main wholesale market is located, the main link between the rural interior, the city of Port-au-Prince, and international trade circuits.¹⁹ Croix de Bossales is next to the port and was originally a market and cemetery for slaves. Today the area covers more than 350,000 square meters and contains four "public markets" and dozens of streets that are totally or partially taken over by commerce which radiates out from Bel Air to every corner of the city.

The capillary nature of this network is reflected in the dynamics of the popular economy: progressive fractioning of products; multiplication of mediations; the amplified reproduction of small gains; and interplay between different units of measure and scales. At one end of the network, large sacks of coal are unloaded at the port or from big trucks arriving from the interior of the country or the Dominican Republic. At the other end, the traders sell small tins with a few lumps of coal that are used to cook lunch. (In the poorest regions, coal and plastic from rubbish dumps are used as fuel for cooking.) At one end, the import stores sell sacks of powdered detergent weighing twenty pounds or more, while at the other traders sell small bags the size of a marble. The same mechanism extends throughout chains in which products measured in one kind of unit are converted into others, multiplying transactions, distributing small profits, and undoubtedly increasing the final price of what is consumed by the poorest (who can typically only afford one *kob* or coin of detergent).²⁰ At one extreme, people calculate and pay in US dollars; at the other, they calculate in Haitian dollars and pay in gourdes.

The most recent foreign military intervention in the country (conducted by the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti, MINUSTAH) was launched in 2004 and began in Bel Air. Even today the zone is classified by the UN as "red," meaning that for security reasons "under no circumstances may civil staff circulate in the area," including employees of UNDP and UNICEF. This has not prevented the UN from participating in "stabilization" and "development" projects through the mediation of local associations and NGOs, distributing resources and small quantities of money. After the January 2010 earthquake, for example, the UN developed large-scale programs in the region such as "Cash for Work"—which paid individuals thirty Haitian dollars (150 gourdes, a little less than four US dollars) per working day, for periods of fifteen days, to remove the rubble left by the tragedy. This also distributed money to a large number of people (hence the fortnightly rotation).

In places like Bel Air, people have to remain pluriactive. Two expressions in creole reveal what pluriactivity means in Haiti's popular districts: *mwen gen plizyè chapò* and *mwen gen plizyè badj*. In the first expression, someone with "many hats" may be dedicated to various activities simultaneously, or may receive payment from more than one source to perform the same activity. A privileged few may simultaneously participate in a development project financed by an NGO,

19. On the Haitian market system, see Mintz (1959, 1960); on the street markets in the country's capital, see Bazabas (1997).

20. Mintz (1964b) showed how profits are made by playing between scales and units of measurement. Along a similar line, Guyer (2004) developed the idea of marginal gains to describe the logic of accruing small profits in West Africa.



work as a warehouse guard, participate in small-scale street trading, nurture close contact with a local government body, and so on. The second expression, “I have many badges,” sheds light on the multifaceted relations between pluriactivity and the “humanitarian” universe. Badges, which function like ID cards, become part of the social games generating opportunities and small jobs. When worn on a person’s chest, they have various meanings: they may signify a boss or a notable person with many resources (social capital and money), or show the “frustration” of someone who was once waged, employed, “a contender,” or was trained but is now unemployed.

Managing a public water tap, a popular pharmacy, or cyber café; refurbishing a space for arts or languages courses, workshops, or band rehearsals; promoting neighborhood festivals—all generate an infinite range of small jobs and small business, in an universe formed by many kinds of collectives at street, sector, and district level, including youth and women’s associations, associations of musicians and artists, and even associations of associations. Their names and acronyms (like the Rue Saint Martin Civic Service Committee, CSCSM) may be seen on badges, in the minutes of association meetings, on posters in head offices, or sometimes as graffiti on their neighborhood walls. This affinity unites the logics of popular economy, local associations, and international cooperation in local space.

Associations linked to “humanitarianism,” which receive official recognition from the government and cooperation agencies, distribute badges and form part of a much wider universe of groupings that help shape the social organization of Haiti’s popular districts. The most general term for designating these groupings is *baz* or base—a key social form connecting the popular economy with local government.

As has been shown elsewhere (Braun 2014; Neiburg forthcoming), the base is a location and an area of action, a crowd that protects, ensures somewhere to sleep, supplies a plate of food, helps in need, and provides the chance for a small job and small monies. Bases bring people together, equalizing and hierarchizing them, creating belongings and animosities, leaders and followers in an unstable dynamic. Bases are segmentary formations that exist in different contexts and at different scales, allowing multiple belongings in tune with the needs of *small jobs*, which in turn produce and reproduce the bases, serving as channels for the circulation of money. They could involve development work, the promotion of cultural events (especially musical, such as performances by *rara* bands and *band a pye*), illegal trading, armed actions linked to politics, small or large crimes (ranging from theft to kidnapping), and the control—especially near the markets—of rates and flows of money and goods.

In this universe of small jobs, small trading, and small profits, oscillating to the rhythm of the money supply and the opening and closure of one or other channel of intermediation, people cultivate an acute sense of opportunity, while doing—or trying to do—various things simultaneously.

Trading, small jobs, and illegal activities, for their part, are inserted in money flows sustained by credit.²¹ Without credit, generating the capital needed for small

21. Mintz (1964b) explored the native notion of capital, *manman lajan*, “mother money,” in his studies of Haiti’s rural markets. On capitalization in small-scale popular urban trade, see Sergio (2010).

commerce or small arms is impossible. Sources of credit include loan and payment deferrals given to traders (ranging from big wholesalers to small shopkeepers) and a myriad of credit associations—an endless variety of formats in which the number of people involved, the timescale for repayment, the amount lent, and the interest rates all vary. All, though, tend to converge on the figure of a manager whose book-keeping is recorded in Haitian dollars.

These financial microcircuits also include pawn shops (which temporarily exchange goods for money) and betting on the lottery, which in many senses also functions as a mechanism for savings and capital formation (Laguerre 1983; Baptiste, Heather, and Taylor 2010). Thus, for example, a resident from Bel Air spends between six and eight Haitian dollars (thirty and forty gourdes) every day on the lottery, about a third of what she makes from selling juice in the street (around thirty Haitian dollars or 150 gourdes). Each morning she, her two daughters, and a woman friend who lives with them discuss which numbers to choose for the day's bets. At night they discuss why they failed to win anything or, rarely, how to spend their winnings. They always conceive their bets and speak about their success or failure in Haitian dollars.

The imaginary currency can also organize “earmarking” (Zelizer 1998): Madame K. sells food in a busy area of the Portail Saint Josef region, between a corridor linking the interior of the *gueto* (ghetto) with the zone's main road. Her customers can purchase a fried banana at prices varying between one gourde and one Haitian dollar. Madame K. keeps the money she receives in three separate places. Money worth over one Haitian dollar is placed in the first, which is used to buy the raw ingredients for the next day, while in the second she places her house money (*lajan lakay*). In the third place, she stores money worth less than one Haitian dollar, the small money (*ti kob*)²² which is used to buy food and water for the next day.

Relations with numbers, monies, and business also involve questions that relate to politics and magic. At this level, even the images printed on the banknotes could become relevant. Some notes may be felt to be more positive or favorable to the business, others more dangerous. Some people might declare their preference for the Haitian dollar and disdain the gourde, since for decades gourde banknotes bore images of the Duvaliers—reflecting a mixture of militancy and fear provoked by the still powerful faces of money (Strassler 2009), even if they are no longer on the notes: Papa Doc and Baby Doc were banned from appearing on the gourde notes after the end of their dictatorship. In this universe of loans and savings, trading, magic, and politics, involving the physical handling of some currencies and the imagining of others, subjects are formed who become enthusiastic experts in numbers—specialists in units of measure and, we could say, in those “games of scales” implied by accounting and conversions.

22. The word *kob* has two meanings: as a hundredth of a gourde (a cent) and as a generic synonym for currency. I lack the space here to explore the Creole vocabulary distinguishing *monnen*, *lajan*, *kob*, and so on, in relation to more analytic distinctions between money and currency, for example.



Geographies of monies and calculation

Some years ago, the country's president, René Préal, complained on public radio about his low pay packet, lamenting the fact that he received just 12,000 dollars a month. He was clearly talking about Haitian dollars, then equivalent to about US\$1500. But the Haitian dollar is not used in all transactions nor in all calculations. By mapping uses of the different units of measure and means of payment, we can trace the geography of monetary spaces and of spaces of calculation, composed of currencies, measuring instruments, spheres of exchange, units of measures, and scales. As Guyer (2004) has suggested, their interplay and entanglements constitute and reveal social hierarchies and inequalities: not all subjects exchange and calculate with the same units and scales, nor do all subjects have the same capacity to use one currency or to exchange some currencies for others.

In Port-au-Prince, as elsewhere, these hierarchies and inequalities are projected onto the territory: in the urban islands of foreigners scattered across various regions of the city, the US dollar predominates as a unit of account and means of payment in sectors such as the housing market, as well as in restaurants, hotels, night clubs, and supermarkets (which used to double as currency exchange bureaus) that cater for upper-class Haitians and the legion of ex-pats, relief workers, and consultants. As we move down the social scale, the US dollar begins to be used as a means of payment for transactions calculated in Haitian dollars. Lower down—where the majority of transactions are to be found—people calculate in Haitian dollars and pay in gourdes. And lower down still, among the thousands who literally have no money and perform transactions involving less than one Haitian dollar, people use gourdes, *kobs* (gourde cents), *gouden* (half a gourde), or *penis* (equivalent to five *kobs*). The latter may also be physically represented by US cents. These are not hard to find on the streets, even though the US one cent coin is actually equivalent to almost fifty *kobs*. Imagination of monetary scales is not bound to the nominal value of the money being exchanged.

There are also situations in which people pay with US dollars but calculate in Haitian dollars. In small international trade—involving female sellers who travel to Miami and Panama, for example—people handle US dollars and buy in the foreign currency. On their return to Port-au-Prince, though, the money invested in purchasing goods and the price fixed on the market are calculated in Haitian dollars. The development officers, “facilitators,” drivers, translators, and other specialists linked to the NGOs and AAs negotiate their contracts in US dollars, but frequently refer to their wages in Haitian dollars during conversations with friends or relatives.

I observed negotiations with money changers expressed and calculated in dollars (Haitian and American).²³ Sometimes people used calculators to convert and divide by eight. When negotiating with foreigners, the money changers count in gourdes, but when the exchange is between Haitians, people calculate in Haitian dollars. In a transaction involving fifty US dollars, for example, a foreigner would

23. Medieval historians have called attention to the importance of money changers in context of extreme currency plurality and the presence of pure monies of account (for a synthesis, see Ingham 2004: 113).

calculate the receipt of twenty 100-gourde banknotes as 2000 gourdes, while a Haitian would calculate the value as 400 Haitian dollars, or simply 400 *dolà*. The adjective Haitian (*aysien*), as in *dolà aysien*, is only used when one of the participants in a transaction is foreign. Among Haitians, when people say *dolà* they always mean *dolà aysien*.

The *dolà aysien* seems to be more present in urban than rural settings, probably due to the more intense presence of currency plurality. Likewise, the *dolà aysien* is more present in the Haitian territorial space than in the diaspora, where hard currencies predominate. But these are not absolute distinctions, and since the Haitian national space is a single social space due to the intense circulation of persons, things, and currencies, the Haitian dollar does not disappear in these settings (rural or diaspora); it continues to be present in certain contexts and conversions, as when people from outside call to their relatives to speak about money and remittances.

The unit of account is used between Haitians, in the markets and small jobs, remittances, and lotteries, in the heart of the popular economy, where people speak in creole and calculate in *dolà*. In some contexts, people differentiate between foreign money (*lajan blan* or *lajan diaspora*) and national money (*lajan kreyòl*). In fact, the Haitian dollar could be said to be a “creole currency,” in the sense of being “of the country,” born locally, and engaged in struggles of appropriation and autonomy, as with so many other objects and habits to which Haitians attach the adjective *kreyòl*.

Conclusion

In 2007, the government banned use of the Haitian dollar and made it compulsory to set prices in gourdes, forbidding the display of HD prices in supermarkets and gas stations, for example. As I observed at the outset, intellectuals supported the measure, condemning the imaginary currency as just another sign of the country’s backwardness, a display of the state’s weakness or failure, and proof of its inability to maintain a true currency.

One newspaper article argued that the government’s measure had the merit “of inviting a less schizophrenic approach to the calculations in which our compatriots are engaged in every day . . . forever attached to their arithmetical gymnastics.” With the condescension typical of social elites who claim to comprehend while simultaneously disparaging the “pathetic practices of the population,” the author condemned “this dexterity of our vendors, workers and other scarcely literate economic agents . . . who reproduce the automatism of the older generation.” She ended by encouraging young people to “practice the gourde” (Manigat 2007).

Even though these attempts to modernize the country’s monetary culture failed—since people continue to calculate in Haitian dollars while they exchange other currencies—other preferences may indeed be emerging: some young people use the Haitian dollar but condemn the imaginary currency for being linked to “old people.” In fact, as we have seen, teleology has no place in the history of monies and calculation.



Once conventional premises concerning the normality or sickness of currencies are stripped away,²⁴ the social productivity of imaginary currencies—previously invisible in analyses of the Haitian economy and its markets—becomes clear to see and explore.

Relations between the different functions of money are embedded in social interactions and their history, modeling ways of conceptualizing and practicing transactions. Indeed, stabilization or unification policies are always in dialogue with monetary cultures created over generations and with the concrete economic conditions that, in cases like Haiti, are intrinsically connected to plural, nonunified systems of measures and currencies.

Maybe that is why (without some exceptions cited in this article), until now, sociologists and anthropologists have given such scant attention to the social and cultural meaning of pure monies of account. From the perspective of monetary theory and policy, a pure unit of account is no more than a passing curiosity or just another symptom of a weak state, unable to govern its systems of measure and its national currency. Here I have tried to show how nonunification is in line (in the Weberian sense) with the ways in which people live in an environment of extreme monetary scarcity. The Haitian dollar, a central element in the country's contemporary monetary universe and forms of calculation, offers a pathway to understanding the dynamics of Haiti's popular economy and its history.

Haitian imaginary money allows us to realize the reality of money in terms other than those of the binarism that characterizes the prevailing conceptualizations of money—not to choose or to condemn one or other monetary form, but rather to integrate them within a more holistic and humanistic view. Money's existence as a synthetic form of personal and impersonal relations (see Hart 2007), and its capacity to be relationally productive (Zelizer 2012: 155ff.), are both entangled with the multiple, real, and fictional existence of monies. Combining a relatively small scale with a transnational scope, the Haitian monetary space reveals the contours of a larger universe of the simultaneous realization and imagination of currencies, socialities, and human lives.

As we have seen, this monetary space (which includes both material and imaginary monies) is extremely local and at the same time intensely transnational, integrated with global flows of currencies, people, and commodities, fueled by a singular entanglement of commerce, humanitarianism, and remittances. With its unique blend of noun and adjective, realities and fictions, the Haitian dollar also tells us something about the relationship between money, national currencies, and the national imagination. The Haitian dollar, which was created as a material banknote of five gourdes convertible to one American dollar in the context of US occupation of the country at the beginning of the twentieth century, and incorporates longer French colonial legacies, such as the scale of five, has in more recent times been transformed into a pure unit of account—a development that can be seen as a sort of national affirmation. And like all forms of national affirmation, this is ambivalent: on the one hand, the Haitian dollar associates Haitianness with negativity, exoticism, and backwardness; on the other, Haitian dollars produce sociability, connect people in everyday life, and synthesize collective history with all kinds

24. On sick currencies, see Neiburg (2010).

of current relations and transactions, currencies, and forms of ordinary language. Inverting the Hubert and Mauss formula about the false coins of the dreams of society,²⁵ the Haitian dollar is a real coin that connects people in the present with their collective pasts and their imagined futures.

Thus far all attempts to extinguish the Haitian dollar have failed, just like the projects to contain street trading and “formalize” the economy. The streets continue to be filled with crowds of people selling, buying, and consuming, even late into the night and without electricity, relying on candles and kerosene lamps. In this streaming multitude, which appears to outsiders to be as chaotic as the monetary transactions themselves, theft and violence are as rare as police and soldiers. Instead, a legion of well-known local leaders and networks connect sellers, commercial circuits, and territorial spaces. For local people, these streets and markets are orderly places where they can enjoy the arts of trading, chatting, and sometimes singing and dancing, live with their families, make friends and find lovers, find food and water, imagine individual and shared futures, while they cultivate numeric habits and exchange monies, even imaginary ones.

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25. “En définitive ce toujours la société que se paie elle-même de la fausse monnaie de som rêve” (“Finally, it is always society which pay to itself the false coin of its dreams”) (Hubert and Mauss 1960: 119). David Graeber (2001) has used the formula in a quite different way for the subtitle of his book on value.



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Une véritable pièce de leurs rêves: Monnaies imaginaires à Haïti (Lecture Sidney Mintz de 2010)

Résumé : Cet article examine une propriété singulière des pratiques monétaires à Haïti, le recours généralisé à une monnaie sans existence matérielle. Il s’agit d’une monnaie sans objet, pièce, ou billet—le dollar Haïtien. Je propose une pragmatique ethnographique et historique des monnaies et des unités de mesure afin de montrer: (a) la dynamique de l’économie quotidienne du peuple haïtien, en particulier les habitants des bidonvilles de Port-au-Prince; (b) les géographies des monnaies



er les calculs qui constituent la pluralité des espaces monétaires Haïtiens; (c) la productivités relationnelles des monnaies fictives. Avec une étude ethnographique du sens et des usages de ces monnaies, cet article complique les relations entre matérialité et immatérialité qui obstruent notre manières de penser la monnaie, les transactions monétaires, et les calculs.

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