Should I Speak for My Sister?
Solidarity and Silence in Feminist Struggles

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If I speak for my sister, do I amplify her voice or silence it?¹ This is a question that must be considered in every attempt by scholars from the global North to build solidarity with groups from the global South² (solidarity across boundaries that are drawn roughly, heuristically, according to privilege), and also—as I shall show in the discussion that follows—in attempts to build networks of solidarity within the global South itself. I want to address this question by way of telling a story I think of as “the war of the press releases”—a contentious divergence of positions taken by two distinct groups of Caribbean feminists in 2004. The particular event that sparked the disagreement I chronicle here—the 2004 removal from power of Haiti’s democratically-elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide—is now a matter of history, and the trouble it generated has been dramatically eclipsed by the earthquake that devastated Haiti this past January. But this dispute still has something to tell us about ways in which relatively privileged groups can speak to the world about the potential for harm to others more vulnerable than they, and how their intervening speech can, wittingly or unwittingly, silence or distort precisely the viewpoint to which they are trying to give voice.

Because of differences in privilege among the communities involved, this story can be seen as an instructive lesson on the dangers and errors possible within a third-party, or “outsider” analysis, especially where the outsider is someone whose privilege may blind her to the nature
and the intractability of the obstacles that are being confronted by the marginalized group she wishes to support. Indeed, the very reason I wrote this paper was to work through these dangers and errors that the privileged scholar confronts. This analysis is not only an exercise in evaluating the respective positions of the groups I discuss; it is also an exploration of how I, as a privileged, global North philosopher interested in supporting activism that brings about a more socially just world, can respectfully and responsibly engage these discourses. Because of this commitment I have made, to an *engagé* style of philosophizing, and because the principles of feminist practice and democratic solidarity that I endorse are explicitly appealed to in the charges of silencing and distortion made by one of the groups I discuss here, I also draw on resources offered by another scholar from the global North, Fuyuki Kurasawa, who articulates a conception of global justice as social labour in his book *The Work of Global Justice*. Kurasawa’s examination of the types of tasks and obstacles we encounter in projects of global justice offers a substantive theory of this social labour that connects the abstract theory of cosmopolitanism and the formal institutions of the international community with empirical accounts of the activities undertaken by groups “on the ground.” As such, it helps us reflect on what a commitment to respectful cross-cultural critique requires. I begin with an overview of “the war of the press releases” out of which I shall later theorize the principles that should govern such critiques. The second section discusses the conflicting interpretations one can give of this story, with attention in each case to drawing out the principles of feminist practice and democratic solidarity on which they rely. Next, I offer a possible account, informed by Kurasawa, of the principles and constraints that I think cross-cultural criticism needs to adhere to, in order to be respectful, responsible, and conducive to a commitment to global justice. Finally, I step out of the background and insert myself into a self-conscious account of the considerations which should
inform the work of *engagé* scholars in the global North, arguing that our desire to make definitive judgements in support of feminists in the global South can itself be the kind of colonizing or repressive move that annuls the solidarity we seek to enact.

**J’accuse!**

The account of assertion, accusation, and counter-criticism I want to address in my “war of the press releases” narrative begins with a declaration, dated March 2, 2004, which opens: “We, the undersigned women of the Caribbean and of Caribbean descent, denounce the US-backed coup, which culminated in President Aristide’s removal from Haitian soil by US forces on Sunday, February 29, 2004” (“Caribbean Women” 1). The authorial voice of this press release recognizes, quite correctly, that two distinct issues converge in the “coup-napping” of Aristide (his term for the removal from office and country forced upon him), issues frequently conflated in the debates that have raged since then (“Caribbean Women” 1). The first issue—used by partisans on all sides to justify their positions on the second issue—concerns Aristide’s competency and integrity as president. The second concerns the damage done to democratically-elected government, in Haiti and everywhere else in the world, by manufactured emergencies that subvert the rule of law. In various ways, and for very different reasons, commentators from all points on the Haitian political spectrum use judgements of Aristide as corrupt and/or incompetent to either justify or distract from both the diplomatic and covert military pressure that the international community—primarily, the US, France, and Canada—placed on him to resign and flee the country.³ What often gets glossed over in this cut-and-thrust rhetoric is that, under a US-installed interim government, military and paramilitary forces who historically terrorized the Haitian population re-emerged and directed a systematic campaign to discredit, politically
neutralize, and, in extreme cases, imprison democracy activists and supporters of *Fanmi Lavalas*, the populist political party that Aristide led to power in 1990, Haiti’s first democratic election.⁴

Offering a more profound analysis than political debate typically allows for, the women who signed this declaration endorse the view that this forced regime change was just another moment in the ongoing opposition to democracy in Haiti by both home-grown and foreign elites (“Caribbean Women” 2). Such moves by the elite class, with their ever-present potential for triggering repressive violence against populist resistance, disproportionately affect the most vulnerable segment of Haitian society: the poor who live in the remote countryside, and in the *katyè popilè* (*quartiers populaires*, or so-called slums) of the larger urban areas (“Caribbean Women” 2). And it is hardly surprising that these women take up the plight of the most vulnerable in this crisis: at least one signatory, noted Barbadian feminist Peggy Antrobus, has been recognized by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) for her many contributions to improving socio-economic conditions for women in the region.⁵ Given the history of social activism shared by many of the signatories, their declaration of concern for the well-being of the disadvantaged in Haiti could plausibly be seen as a particular instance of a general commitment to just and equitable development of social organization. But the declaration also takes notice, in a problematic way, of Haiti’s symbolic value, deriving from its historic role in Latin American liberation struggles (for instance, the aid and equipment given to Simón Bolívar in his fight against Spanish imperialism), and in bringing an end to Caribbean slavery.⁶ The declaration announces to the world: “We have always felt deeply that we must defend Haiti because Haiti is ours” (“Caribbean Women” 2). They end their declaration with a call to the United Nations to ensure that the rights of the Haitian people are protected and a call to CARICOM to investigate
and publicize the facts about this violation of constitutionalism and sovereignty (“Caribbean Women” 3).⁷

The reaction was swift; “Dear Sisters of the Caribbean,” begins the response from the National Coordination for Advocacy on Women’s Rights / Coordination Nationale de Plaidoyer pour les Droits des Femmes (CONAP), who identify themselves as an umbrella group for feminist and grassroots women’s organizations throughout the country (“A Direct Affront” 1). CONAP objects in the strongest possible terms to both the content and the method employed by their “sisters,” calling them to task for “fallacious and racist comments” and—in language reminiscent of Edward Said’s critique of orientalism—for theorizing about Haitian women instead of talking directly to them (“A Direct Affront” 1). On the matter of the need to defend Haiti because, as the Caribbean women claimed, “Haiti is ours,” CONAP observes acerbically: “We have on the contrary found you to be both suspiciously absent and silent. Where have you all been?” (“A Direct Affront” 2). In fact, CONAP alleges, “the manner in which [the Caribbean feminists] proceeded is a direct affront to the principles of feminist practice, which should have guided [their] action and the principles of solidarity, which should have informed [their] position” (“A Direct Affront” 1).

Singling out Peggy Antrobus, one of more well-known signatories of the declaration, CONAP reproaches her for their inference that the “Caribbean Women” declaration endorses a second-class status for Haitians when it comes to political rights, governance, and accountability (“A Direct Affront” 4).⁸ Perhaps because she had been personally addressed, Peggy Antrobus then gave an interview to Janice Duddy, published in mid-April 2004, in the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) online forum, in which she reflects on post-coup Haiti, vulnerabilities in civil society, and lessons for “the global women’s movement” (Antrobus,
quoted in Duddy 7). Antrobus’s analysis of the current situation—that the violence in Haiti is deliberately targeting all Aristide supporters, civilians and chimère alike—once again goes well beyond the reporting of major media outlets and reflects a view that is only represented in North America these days in reports from human rights monitors (Duddy 3). In Antrobus’s view, many of those in the civil society organizations who demonstrated against Aristide realized within the first three months (when the Americans were providing “security” in advance of the UN force MINUSTAH) that they had made a bad bargain and had, in fact, facilitated the third US occupation of Haiti in a century (Duddy 3). In the 200th anniversary of the formerly-enslaved Haitian majority’s seizing of their own independence, Haitian dignity, autonomy, and sovereignty have been betrayed, says Antrobus: “People say that the US Ambassador is the de facto head of the country” (Duddy 3).

The CONAP response to Antrobus’s interview was published as a letter to the editor in AWID’s June 11, 2004 issue, claiming that Antrobus had misrepresented many of those who denounced Aristide’s regime by painting them as “traditional elites” who remain unconcerned with the needs and interests of the people (“Response to Ms Antrobus” 1). CONAP takes Antrobus to task for this oversimplification, and for her failure to note the broad-based representativeness of various organizations involved: student groups, labour unions, grassroots women’s organizations, and others (“Response to Ms Antrobus” 1). The overall tone of the response is combative—scathing, even—but is maddeningly vague in its claims as to what CONAP has done for women in Haiti, why they think Antrobus’s opinion should be disregarded, and—of most interest for the purposes of this paper—what exactly these feminist principles are that should guide one’s actions, and what the democratic principles are that should inform one’s position.
Conflicting Interpretations

Interpretations constructed out of the publicly-accessible materials cited above can vary wildly. As I noted in the beginning of the previous section, the two issues at play in judgements of Aristide’s removal from power are his merit (or lack thereof) as president and the effect of his removal upon the emergence, in post-Duvalier Haiti, of democracy and rule of law. Foregrounding one of these issues over the other can lead one to favour a given interpretation based on what it suggests about the legitimacy of cross-cultural criticism. If we stress the question of Aristide’s competence, the situation appears to be one in which considerable personal knowledge and experience of Haitian political, social, and economic life is required for judgement. CONAP, having this knowledge, thus seem quite justified in rejecting the intervention of their Caribbean “sisters” on the grounds that judging Aristide is an internal matter and intervention, especially when it is insufficiently informed, compromises Haitian sovereignty. If, however, we stress the effects of the president’s extra-electoral removal from power, then what is at stake is a general principle concerning the primacy of rule of law in democratic societies, and a legitimate space for criticism from outside appears to open up. One nation’s complicity in another’s change of government is of serious concern to all of us; a threat to rule of law anywhere must therefore be acknowledged and denounced for its pernicious effects on community-building and human flourishing. The right of an “outsider” community to intervene in another’s political discourse on these grounds appears all the more justified when the cross-cultural criticism is structured as a defence of Haitian sovereignty, as seems to have been the intention (if not the effect) of the “Caribbean Women” declaration.

The concern that it seems reasonable to raise here, though, is about the instrumentalization (and potential for exploitation) of Haiti that is built into positions—like that
of the Caribbean feminist declaration—appealing to Haiti’s symbolic value for other nations. Taking this concern seriously provides plausibility for an interpretation of such outsider declarations as either inadvertently insensitive or ruthlessly repressive, as well as adding an emotional resonance to CONAP’s statements. Of course they have a legitimate basis on which to object to being theorized about, and spoken for. If only, one might think, if only CONAP had taken this opportunity to offer a sustained analysis of their own position and the motivation for that position. As it happens, they had in fact offered such analysis; the vagueness I previously alluded to in their “Response to Ms. Antrobus”—far from being evasion and equivocation on CONAP’s part—turns out to be an instance of editing either so selective or so thoughtless that CONAP’s lack of trust in how they will be represented in Caribbean discourses seems warranted.11

For instance, CONAP asserts that they share Antrobus’s concern about civil society organizations being co-opted by funding, and they make clear that neither they nor any of their member groups receive funds “from the American government” (“Questioning An Aristide Supporter” 3). And despite Antrobus’s guess that CONAP represents the class interests of the privileged few, the organizational structure the full-text response describes is a very democratic one that recognizes both the individual rights of its member organizations, and their collective responsibility to fight oppression (CONAP, “Questioning An Aristide Supporter” 3-4).12 CONAP also notes the no-win situation in their complex relation to language: if Haitian women write and publish in Creole or French (Haiti’s two official languages), their work is ignored—but if they make the effort to bridge language barriers in the region by making their work available in English and Spanish, they become vulnerable to charges of elitism.13 The feminist and democratic concerns that one can understand CONAP to be publicizing are, then, concerns about
instrumentalization and exploitation (Haiti’s value as a mere symbol for others), about the right to participate in how one is represented (being part of the theorizing rather than simply the object), about the closely-related right to speak in one’s own voice (being free to contribute one’s thoughts in one’s own language), and about being assessed charitably by others (having one’s communications in foreign languages seen as bridge-building rather than a marker of one’s social privilege).

With the addition of this information from CONAP’s second press release (“Questioning an Aristide Supporter”), the moral force of their interpretation—that the initial “Caribbean Women” declaration was a silencing of Haitian voices and a paternalistic encroachment on Haitian sovereignty—gains significant ground. Here, in this interpretation, a strong home-grown tradition of contesting European and American exploitation of Haiti converges with a body of feminist scholarship that rejects attempts to justify exploitation and misrepresentation of subordinated groups of people. Within this interpretation, the cross-cultural criticism that these Anglo-Caribbean and Caribbean-American women were offering failed because of historically plausible fears that they had no real interest in the well-being of Haitian people; they were simply interested in taking up Haiti as the latest cause célèbre through which their own agendas could be advanced. The clear question to ask of this interpretation is whether it is warranted in this particular case; whether Antrobus and the others were indeed simply using Haiti as a convenient springboard from which to assert their own privileged interests within influential public policy discussions. That historical plausibility so easily trumped the principle of charitable assessment to which CONAP appealed for themselves—that it even foreclosed the question of whether Antrobus et al. were sincere in their appeal for consideration of Haiti’s most
vulnerable—suggests to me that a lack of trust played a crucial role in this particular instance of failed cross-cultural criticism.

Given the stratification of Caribbean societies generally, it’s not clear whether any group that hopes to be effective at the regional level can withstand a campaign of innuendo which equates membership in a privileged class with a narrow or self-serving agenda—a charge we can see in all of the communications I examined above, in the first section of this article. The ability to build cross-national coalitions within the Caribbean is always potentially hampered by the absence of trust and good faith that we see in CONAP’s response to Antrobus, precisely because of the plausibility with which accusations of class privilege track exploitative agendas. But it is equally important to recognize that not all bearers of class privilege use their status repressively or insensitively; many social issues have come to the attention of governments precisely because people like Peggy Antrobus have made their access to social, educational, and political resources available to social reform movements. The intervention of people with such resources into debates about how to ameliorate social and political ills can, at least sometimes, be justified on the grounds of positive results. That is, trust and credibility can be built—as well as impeded—through attention to track records.

Antrobus claims, from a class-sensitive Caribbean perspective, that the key to understanding Haitian civil society lies in understanding how race, class, and gender function in Haiti. Class divides the French-speaking, and often foreign-educated, elite from the poor who make up 80% of the population and are seen by the elite class as inferior and in need of management—that is, as less than fully autonomous human beings. “It is not just about a disparity of income … but also the cultural identity of the elite … They identify themselves with the ‘haves’ of the world,” Antrobus charges (Duddy 4). Race is largely a consequence of class
determinations, with designations of “black” and “mulatto” tracking class and income determinations: mass/elite; poor/rich (Duddy 5). When the effects of poverty arise in this already class-divided context, Antrobus explains, the gender implications begin to emerge: lack of basic needs such as food, shelter, and health care all exert disproportionate pressure upon the poorest in society, but most especially upon those who bear the children and bear the responsibility for feeding and raising them (Duddy 5). Antrobus’s concern here is that the women’s organizations charged with helping poor women in the provinces and the katyè popilè may not see this poverty as a social ill requiring substantial social reform; instead, poverty might be seen as the object of the elite’s charitable ministrations (Duddy 5). “It is possible,” Antrobus notes, “for people to be very sympathetic to the poor, to do good works, and to raise money for programs but basically not want to change the status quo” (Duddy 5).

This “concern for the other” that nonetheless remains consistent with the interests of the privileged is also a challenge for theorists and activists who seek to promote empowerment and solidarity across the global North-global South divide. One example of this effort to support grassroots democracy is Ann Ferguson’s account of how to build “bridge identities” that will allow differently-situated women to communicate across cultures in the non-paternalistic way CONAP publicly calls for. Ferguson’s analysis contains a useful and illuminating discussion of different paradigms framing the development work done by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Caribbean and Latin America. She contrasts two approaches—the “equity feminist” approach of the Women in Development (WID) group and the “empowerment” approach of Development and Women for a New Era (DAWN)—which she identifies as, respectively, Northern and Southern paradigms (Ferguson 193). The aid and development workers in Northern NGOs are, claims Ferguson, too often committed to an equity feminism
which sees women’s situation within paid and unpaid labour markets as a question of extra compensation, assumes that the equality goal in this situation is women’s equality with men, and thus ignores class, race, and other power differences between women (193-4). The concern that Antrobus articulated to Duddy about the complacency of aid and development groups is expressed by Ferguson as the perception that the often privileged/elite women who end up in charge of development projects “have a vested interest in obscuring class differences which give them more power than working-class or poor women in determining what development projects will be funded” (194).

In stark contrast, the empowerment paradigm instituted by DAWN (an indigenous development movement established by a group of Caribbean women which includes Peggy Antrobus) promotes participatory democracy as a process value in the planning and execution of projects. It includes consciousness-raising workshops as a central component of development activities so that women can situate themselves and better grasp the social domination/power structures in which they are implicated (Ferguson 194). But these workshops are not merely one more instance of Northerners bringing their knowledge to Southern communities in ways that warrant charges of cultural imperialism: the workshops start with discussion of local women’s current position and development goals, centrally include both respect for alternative representations of knowledge that are grounded in these women’s experiences and the methods that represent local ways of understanding and speaking, and—most importantly—also require of the paid researchers a commitment to self-interrogation and acknowledgement of their power positions (Ferguson 197). The workshops aim to destabilize the researchers’ status, and to make clear to all participants that the outcomes of planning are joint products of thought, not the
researching and presentation of Southern women as objects by Northern subjects (Ferguson 197-8).

This commitment to participatory democracy and the valuing of local knowledges is intended to respect and promote the human rights of the women who are working collaboratively with cultural outsiders in order to advance development projects within their communities. That Peggy Antrobus has been centrally involved in promoting a paradigm that institutes these commitments to non-hierarchical exchanges of views and to the value of local knowledges and practices suggests that CONAP’s evaluation of the “Caribbean Women” as self-interested exploiters of Haitian misery might not be warranted. Although the concern raised by references to Haiti’s instrumental, or symbolic, value is both real and warranted, there is some evidence of a track record which might have allayed those fears in this particular instance.

In Antrobus’s view, protecting women’s rights means protecting the women themselves from both physical violence and “the violence of poverty and deprivation” (Duddy 5-6). This prevention of violence involves learning more about how people are deprived of their basic needs and rights, and paying attention to the ways race, class, and gender mutually support the elite class’s exclusion of the masses from all substantive social participation and social investment (Duddy 6). It involves dedication to the social justice ideals of what Antrobus labels “people-friendly states,” instead of the neoliberal ideals of “market-friendly states” (Duddy 6).14 And, it clearly also involves publicizing one’s concerns in order to educate the rest of the world about this diminution of human flourishing. To the extent that the “Caribbean Women” declaration did publicize the plight of Haiti’s most vulnerable people, perhaps we want to say that this particular instance of cross-cultural criticism did not fail.
But, however justified and well-meaning we might think that declaration is, at the level of building solidarity across Caribbean communities it would appear to have failed dismally. Exactly how and why it failed is not obvious, though; a charitable reading of the arguments that Antrobus and CONAP offer in support of their respective positions suggest that they are committed to very similar sets of values. As I noted above, Antrobus’s track record with DAWN gives us at least some grounds for thinking that she believes, with CONAP, that all people have the right to participate in the discussions which theorize their situations, that all have the right to speak in their own voices, and that communicating in a language that some participants might deem “foreign” should not invalidate one’s right to express an opinion. The divergence of explicit value-commitments—if indeed there is a divergence—arises on the point of whether the expressed concern for Haitian people is sincere or whether this is another instance of exploiting Haiti’s misery for political profit. Again, the link between trust and charitable interpretation seems relevant: if CONAP felt any basis for confidence in their Caribbean “sisters,” perhaps they might have seen the assertion that “Haiti is ours” as a rhetorical device designed to reference a shared history of anti-colonial struggle and to convince the international community of Haiti’s importance rather than seeing the assertion itself as an act of colonization. It seems to me that the challenge in this case is not about how to understand values foreign to and different from one’s own, but how to believe that these particular others (outsiders) mean what they say. If we accept that trust can be built through acts of coalition-building like the consciousness-raising seminars that Ferguson discusses in her analysis of cross-cultural respect in development projects, then perhaps we want to explain the failure to build solidarity not in terms of the Caribbean women having spoken out inappropriately, but in terms of their having failed to do the necessary work of trust- and consensus-building that would seem to be required by their feminist commitments.
Principles of Cross-Cultural Critique

While I think a persuasive case can be made for both of the interpretations I examined in the previous section (exploitation of Haiti versus solidarity with Haiti), I also think we have to acknowledge the force of the CONAP allegation that the initial declaration does not successfully enact the feminist solidarity that it appealed to as its motivation. So what I would like to do now is turn to a consideration of how that solidarity could have been enacted and what principles it would require us to be committed to. I present this consideration first through an examination of CONAP’s account of constitutive features of feminist practice and democratic solidarity, then through the discussion of solidarity that can be found in the substantive, critical re-thinking of global justice offered by Fuyuki Kurasawa’s The Work of Global Justice.

CONAP’s full-text response to Antrobus identifies the following principles of feminist practice: participation, respect, celebration of diverse voices, and principally, honesty, which they rank “high among feminist principles” (“Questioning An Aristide Supporter” 4). As a coalition of feminist organizations, they claim to have created, over the last ten years, a broad-based consensus from which they address issues of inclusion, fundamental rights, participation in decision-making, sovereignty, and the forging of connections with regional and international women’s groups, all of which appear to function for them as normative principles of feminist practice (CONAP, “Questioning An Aristide Supporter” 3). They also recognize that inclusive and participatory practices of respectful treatment and taking responsibility for social change need to be complemented by a discursive commitment to critical self-reflection and dialogue. “Feminist discourse is central to political processes which are inclusive—and which lay the foundation for democratic practice,” they contend (CONAP, “Questioning An Aristide Supporter” 4).
So if feminist discourse—inclusive, respectful, self-critical, and honest—lays the foundation for democratic practice, what is CONAP’s vision of this practice? It would seem to be participatory in nature, genuinely representative and responsive to constituents, and above all, concerned to make space—formally and substantively—for the sharing of individual perspectives and individual contributions to agenda-setting, and project implementation, and evaluation. According to CONAP, a democratic position is one of solidarity, “built on relationships that are grounded in shared information, informed analysis, sustained commitment, and most of all, mutual trust and respect” (“Questioning An Aristide Supporter” 4).

This endorsement of inclusivity, respect, honesty, and participation in building representative and responsive social networks is evident in both the CONAP and Antrobus positions. What is in question is not the values that each group endorses, but the practices they believe to be consistent with their endorsement of feminist-democratic values. From CONAP’s allegations that their “Caribbean sisters” failed to inform themselves adequately of both the Haitian political situation and CONAP’s position on Aristide’s removal from office, and from their charge that these concerned Caribbean feminists were actually endorsing a second-class status for Haitians, we can infer that what enraged CONAP was their perception that they were being treated as objects. Relatively-privileged women (because they are English-speaking, and therefore have greater access to influential American and Canadian public policy debates, and because of economic and political relations that subject their societies, considered overall, to less crushing poverty than that which Haiti experiences) exercised their subjectivity to express support for a deposed president and to worry publicly about what might happen to the objects of their concern—all without consulting the archives of press releases that CONAP had released in
three different languages or considering that perhaps not all Haitian women shared the same experience of Aristide’s government.

Assessing CONAP’s reaction through a critique of paternalistic and uninformed scholarship—such as, for example, the critique offered by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her 1986 essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”—one can see that the initial declaration, while meant as a gesture of solidarity, and justifiable on the grounds of the Caribbean women’s right to *speak with*, was interpreted by the Haitian feminists associated with CONAP as an attempt to claim the right to *speak for* them. The right to speak about one’s own political situation is widely acknowledged as a central principle of feminist practice but it cannot, must not, be confused with a non-existent “right” to speak one’s own thoughts and claim they are the perspective of another. To present one’s own thoughts as someone else’s thoughts which are only being amplified is a “speaking for” of the most offensive kind, and it should not be allowed to pass as “speaking with”—a gesture towards solidarity that implies recognition of the situation of other, equal subjects—or even the more controversial, more ambiguous “speaking about” others. However effective the claim that “Haiti is ours” might be rhetorically, its use in a declaration that was not shared with Haitian feminists before being released to the public strongly suggests the kind of objectification that Mohanty tells us “needs to be both named and challenged” (24).

So how could this desire to express solidarity have been enacted appropriately? And what principles would it require us to be committed to? The feminist-democratic principles that Antrobus and CONAP appear to share—inclusivity, honesty, responsive participation, and a willingness to take responsibility for social change—all seem relevant but are clearly not enough, given that the solidarity which was intended by the Caribbean feminist interveners failed to
materialize. Recall that CONAP’s second press release, “Questioning An Aristide Supporter,” identified feminist discourse as foundational to inclusive democratic practices and specifically identified, as feminist, discursive commitments to critical self-reflection and dialogue. Recall too that, in the same statement, they also identified, as a precondition of solidarity, “relationships … grounded in shared information, informed analysis, sustained commitment, and most of all, mutual trust and respect” (CONAP, “Questioning An Aristide Supporter” 4). Following Ann Ferguson’s cashing out of commitment to feminist and democratic relations as injunctions to engage in shared communication and trust-building efforts, we can see that the Caribbean women might have made their feminist-democratic intentions clear (or clearer) had they engaged women’s groups in Haiti in dialogue about their intention to issue a press release, and solicit their feedback. What they might also have done—within, not instead of, this prior communication—is to respectfully offer up, for judgement by the Haitian groups, their track records of trustworthiness and credibility.

This presentation of credentials and character is a key component of the solidarity that Kurasawa identifies as both “the culmination of the work of global justice” and the prerequisite of all of the other tasks that make up the labour of global justice: bearing witness, forgiveness, foresight, and aid (157, 182). He rejects the dominant theoretical paradigm that structures discourses about what global justice means—a framework he dismisses as a “formalism” that reifies human rights, treating them as abstract and additive properties to be granted to human beings by states and institutions rather than recognizing the extent to which rights, and justice, are “enact[ed] … through ethico-political labour” (Kurasawa 194). What is overlooked in the formalist framework, observes Kurasawa, “is a vast array of kinds of socio-political action performed by groups and persons who may not seek official sanctioning … yet are still
participating in the work of global justice and its affiliated modes of practice” (194)—or, in the case of CONAP, organizations who may be seeking recognition as members of a shared cause but are not receiving it. Reconceiving human rights work to foreground collective and collaborative practices on the ground has the advantage of better explaining “the realities of participants involved in the social labour of global justice” (Kurasawa 6–8). Kurasawa believes that the sense of solidarity that both inspires and is produced by this labour can nurture a popular cosmopolitanism (“cosmopolitanism from below”), internalized by those who commit themselves to grassroots projects of popular empowerment (21-2). The great virtue of an analysis focused on grassroots action rather than official recognition by nation-states and the organizations they legitimize is that it opens up a space within which we can talk about fruitful alternatives to military interventions like the coup that prompted “the war of the press releases.”

The grassroots mobilization that Kurasawa discusses is undertaken by environmental and peace movements, humanitarian NGOs, and local advocacy groups. These organizations have little direct power to set policy, he concedes, but they do exercise significant influence over public opinion. In addition, they provide information about injustices and remedies, and help to create discursive space for citizens to participate in developing policy (Kurasawa 97). Certainly we can see these possibilities in the work done by established groups like UNICEF and Greenpeace which engage in localized projects that they publicize to a worldwide membership but there is an equally important role played by smaller, community-based groups like CONAP. For example, there is another group in Haiti called Batay Ouvriye (Bataille Ouvrière/Workers’ Fight) whose mandate is to organize sweatshop workers and farmers to demand safe working conditions and living wages. Among their activities are workers’ rights conferences and workshops, information campaigns within Haiti that give workers insight into workers’ struggles
in other countries, and participation in workers’ coalitions across Latin America. In a report on their annual activities for 2007, this workers’ rights group describes its commitment to “sharing our practices, their fruits, their results, reflections upon them, lessons to be learned, and perspectives to build … so that more workers, working class members and genuine progressives, in a structured way, may become part of them, mobilize through them, or with them” (Batay Ouvriye). While Batay Ouvriye’s work and constituency are both, like CONAP’s, based in Haiti, the group recognizes that its effectiveness derives in part from their links to other like-minded groups in other countries. These non-governmental coalitions are of great importance to Kurasawa because, as he notes, we cannot take the idea of a global civil society for granted, especially given the “continued underinstitutionalization” of the international community (98).

Because Kurasawa is primarily concerned to describe a grassroots cosmopolitanism, his account of the practices involved in the work of global justice is particularly relevant to the concerns of a group like CONAP that feels itself to be marginalized by language and privilege. He describes global justice as constituted by the constellation of practices I enumerated above: bearing witness, forgiveness, foresight, aid, and solidarity (Kurasawa 16). Both his stress on bearing witness—or, as I have been calling it, speaking for others—and his stress on solidarity—which he thinks necessarily involves a commitment to pluralism and the construction of networks that are linked by intersecting and shared interests—are, I think, obviously coherent with the feminist-democratic account articulated by CONAP (Kurasawa 16-22). But there is also, in his conceptualization of aid as an element of global justice, a call for symmetrical reciprocity and egalitarian cooperation reminiscent of Ferguson’s prescriptions for non-paternalistic NGO work (Kurasawa 17). This theorizing of global justice, which Kurasawa calls “critical substantivism” is intended to promote a dialectic of interpretation and critique that can mediate
between the important formal declarations of human rights promulgated by international organizations like the United Nations and empirical, observable realities documented by human rights monitors on the ground in a given trouble spot (9). Indeed, I would argue that we can see CONAP’s rebuke of their “Caribbean sisters” as a frustrated recognition of the need for critical substantivism, without the academic preoccupation to name it. CONAP, on the ground, objected to the lack of recognition they received from a group who understood the need for a formal declaration, but had not established lines of communication that would have enabled the working together of the formal and the empirical. Instead, in the absence of a network of relations which might have reassured all the parties that they did indeed share goals and values, two arguably well-meaning sides pitted themselves against each other.

Of course, it is possible that the work of dialogue and trust-building could be done by either side and the overture could still be rebuffed. Alison Jaggar’s account of how recognition of power inequalities can be reconciled with a feminist commitment to radically inclusive discussion contains an interesting gloss on why, for example, solidarity-building might be resisted by CONAP’s feminist groups. Jaggar notes that one central issue for feminist practice is the recognition of power relations embedded in empirical discussions, relations which govern phenomena such as participation and exclusion, who speaks, who is granted authority, what topics are addressed, what assumptions are contested, even whether the particular discussion ever happens (5). These phenomena sometimes, to some people, appear to be power-neutral features of discourse but, having already been instrumentalized by an Anglo-Caribbean declaration that “Haiti is ours,” CONAP’s members are clearly contesting inequitable power-relations.18 As Jaggar explains in more general terms, CONAP’s resistance to criticism from outside the Haitian social context might be best understood, not as a desire to restrain others from speaking about
them or with them, but as a desire to speak for themselves (4). Of course, as Jaggar reminds us, “[e]ven though there may be reasonable grounds for excluding members of dominant groups from specific occasions of discourse, outsiders’ concerns about the situation of women in specific cultures are not necessarily illegitimate” (14).

Perhaps, then, CONAP’s reaction to the solidarity gesture I have been discussing is one of understandable but unproductive anger, and nothing the Caribbean women could have done would have tempered the CONAP response. Here, however, is where Kurasawa’s analysis once again appears remarkably helpful: his deployment of Seyla Benhabib’s argument that an ethic of care “toward concrete others” can be married to an ethic of justice toward “generalized others” leads him to endorse the view that acknowledging actually-existing differences in power and privilege in no way poses a threat to ideals of moral equality (Kurasawa 132). This may well seem like a trivial and obvious observation but, as Kurasawa shows, a considerable portion of the literature he classifies as “normative cosmopolitanism” asserts moral equality in language that can be accused of assimilating, homogenizing, and just plain ignoring very real differences in access to power and privilege (162-70). The attention to particularized ethical obligations we have to distinct others that is promoted within a feminist ethic of care can alleviate worries of assimilation through a scrupulous accounting for differences, even as the ideal of moral equality that characterizes an ethic of justice is defended.19 Some of this potentially reassuring awareness of Haitian women’s diminished access to the resource of public opinion in the global North was present in Antrobus’s interview with Duddy, but it was not a reassurance that the already enraged women of CONAP were capable of hearing as sincere, hence their interpretation of the intended moral equality in “Haiti is ours” as yet another expression of colonization.
Je m’accuse

One of the commentators on an earlier version of this paper observed that my discussion of “the war of the press releases” would continue to strike readers as incomplete and unsatisfying until I came to a definitive judgement about which side is in the right—a judgement I continue to feel myself incapable of making.

If CONAP does in fact practice the democracy in organization and openness in dialogue that they claim to, then I think it has to be acknowledged that Antrobus’s portrayal of them as privileged dilettantes who occupy their time with charity work is unfair, inaccurate, and unlikely to lead to greater feminist solidarity, regionally or internationally. And if the coalition is truly representative of a cross-section of Haitian women, including those who have been risking their lives in the emerging democracy movement for the past decade, then it’s no wonder that, when women who live in postcolonial political societies where governors-general represent the Queen (of England) as head of state claim that “Haiti is ours,” we hear scathing moral outrage in response. In this light, the accusation from CONAP’s first communiqué that the Caribbean women failed to respectfully communicate with women in Haiti and failed in their attempt to stand in solidarity, creating instead a rift in regional opinion, seems like a fitting indictment. But, while “the truth” about the intentions of any group working in and across polarized and fragmented civil societies is hard to ascertain, I think it is crucially important to recognize, as all the voices in this paper appear to, that only a substantive commitment to inclusion, dialogue, and sharing of perspectives can maintain a discursive space in which critical progressive voices can be heard, and solidarity can be built through community, not imposed through silencing.

For the most part, though, my reluctance to pass judgement in this case is grounded in my uneasy relation to my own social privilege. As a white, anglophone, global North scholar who
Tracey Nicholls has studied Haitian history and politics but not yet visited the country, I think I am significantly more blinded by my privilege than Peggy Antrobus may be by hers. At the same time, I feel keenly the obligation to deploy the privilege I have as an academic in ways that are socially responsible. I know enough about the strange nature of social privilege—an entitlement to resources and behaviours that is given to us by others regardless of whether we ask for it or not, and is most likely to be deployed in those very situations when we are least aware of it at a conscious level—to know that it cannot be renounced. The privilege I have is always with me: on rental applications for apartments, in line at the bank, crossing the border into the United States. The only responsible use I have found for it, thus far, is to use it on behalf of others, as when, for example, I join my name and income to the sponsorship applications my partner submits to bring family members from Haiti to Montréal. It is the same impulse to do something constructive with my privilege that motivates my desire to speak of both the national feminist movement in Haiti and pan-Caribbean feminist solidarity; I seek not to issue verdicts but to publicize the difficulties and possibilities that both movements face. And, as I noted in the introduction, it has been my hope that in taking up this project—conceived by Kurasawa as “bearing witness”—I will also clarify for myself the constraints and pitfalls I face as a privileged witness.

In the end, though, I still don’t have conclusive answers to these questions. I am still wrestling, in all my writings, with what privilege and the obligations of its responsible exercise mean for me, and I think my only conclusion is awareness that speaking from a position of privilege means I will continue to have to wrestle with them. Any attempts I make to speak for my sister must be subjected to both my own critical self-scrutiny and the judgements of the sister for whom I claim to be speaking, in order to ensure that I am enacting the solidarity that Paulo
Freire enjoins in his contrast of “true generosity” and “false charity” at the outset of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. “True generosity,” Freire tells us,

consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and the subdued, the “rejects of life,” to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individuals or entire peoples—need to be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world. (45)

**Notes**

1 I am obviously intellectually indebted to Linda Martin Alcoff for her article “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” both for the language of the “speaking for”/“speaking about”/“speaking with” distinction that informs this paper and for the moral clarity with which she undertakes her analysis of paternalistic speech.

2 In using the terms “global North” and “global South,” I adopt what I believe is the emerging standard of terminology with respect to recognizing disparities of development and privilege among nation-states, a designation that reflects—in broad brushstrokes—geographical imbalances of wealth and political influence. The older, more familiar labels, “First World” and “Third World,” are outdated reminders of a Cold War dynamic that no longer accurately describes global hierarchies and relations. Even the less ideologically-situated choice of “developed/developing countries” seems to me to gloss over the existence of Third World/Southern communities within the territories of First World/Northern states (e.g., First Nations reserves and other such pockets of economic and political deprivation that some postcolonial scholars, in an attempt to extend labels they deem pragmatically useful, have called “Fourth World”) and the existence of pockets of bourgeois wealth and development in Third World/Southern states.

3 The US is accused by many sources (of varying reliability) of financing the political opposition that marched in the streets and organized general strikes demanding Aristide’s resignation, and of arming the ex-Army and paramilitary groups that joined forces in the Dominican Republic prior to the slow-motion coup they perpetrated in February 2004. France and Canada publicly supported the US in its demand that Aristide enter into power-sharing negotiations with the political opposition that had been created. When the US Embassy advised Aristide, in the last days of February 2004, that they would no longer protect him, then-US Ambassador James Foley arranged to receive Aristide’s resignation letter (despite it being a stipulation of the Haitian Constitution that the president submit his resignation to the prime minister) as a condition of allowing Aristide and his wife to flee Haiti aboard an unmarked US plane. Canada subsequently committed police-training resources to the UN force (MINUSTAH) that some Haitians consider to be an occupying force.
I want to make clear that this claim about a “systematic campaign” is my conclusion, based on a weighing of testimony and reportage of the last several years, and not a claim made in the “Caribbean Women” declaration. While these women do worry about damage which might be inflicted upon Haitian democracy, their analysis of the situation is a snapshot of how the political situation could be seen from a Caribbean perspective in March 2004. As such, it could not, and does not, incorporate facts and testimony that have emerged from Haiti following the events of February 2004. Documentation and further elaboration of this hostility towards grassroots democratic organization can be found in more recent reports and interviews such as Pax Christi USA’s collectively-authored Report on Pax Christi USA Human Rights Mission to Haiti; Thomas Griffin’s “Haiti: Human Rights Investigation, November 11-21, 2004”; “A Clandestine Interview from Haiti: Resistance in the Slums of Port-au-Prince,” in The Black Commentator; and “Rewinding History: The Rights of Haitian Women,” a collectively authored report by the Let Haiti Live Women’s Rights Delegation, sponsored by the Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean (EPICA).

For a summary of her contributions, see the CARICOM (Caribbean Community) webpage titled “CARICOM Triennial Award for Women: Honouring Women of Distinction.” One small clarificatory note might be in order concerning my identification of Dr. Antrobus as “Barbadian”: she was born in Grenada, holds citizenship of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and currently resides in Barbados, thus she has, as the Triennial Award committee notes, “a true Caribbean cross-national identity.”

For elaboration of both contributions to the history of human freedom, see C.L.R James, The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution.

It should be noted here that the position taken in this declaration is arguably a moderate perspective in that it contains no call for Aristide to return as president, a condition which was subsequently made into a non-negotiable demand by some of the most extreme pro-Lavalas supporters.

CONAP’s interpretation of the “Caribbean Women” declaration is that these women abrogated to themselves the right to pass judgement on Haiti’s political leadership and, in making this paternalistic judgement, they implicitly endorsed a notion of the Haitian people as incapable of sovereign political action/decision-making.

For elaboration of the human rights context, see the reports cited in footnote 4. The chimère are mostly alienated young men from the katyè popilè who Aristide is accused of arming as extra-legal militia and who are now contributing to the small-arms proliferation crisis in Haiti. They are described by the police and some who claim to speak for the katyè as opportunistic criminals but other katyè residents acknowledge them as leaders of neighbourhood aid and resistance movements.

US Marines occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934, ostensibly to prevent occupation by Germany or another European power during World War I. They left behind them a newly constituted and US-trained Haitian National Army which subsequently alternated between attempts to rule Haiti through military dictatorships and collusion with the Duvalier regimes, until 1990 when Jean-
Bertrand Aristide won the presidency in Haiti’s first democratic election. In 1991, a military coup removed him from power and the army resumed its policy of brutal repression of the Haitian people. In 1994, the US returned Aristide to power in Haiti and, in conjunction with UN forces, occupied Haiti again until the end of 1997. An account of this history that is sympathetic to the Americans can be found in Jan Rogoziński’s A Brief History of the Caribbean: From the Arawak and Carib to the Present.

During the course of my research into this group, I received an email communication from Haitian solidarity activist Kevin Skerrett which contained the full text of the CONAP press release, “Questioning An Aristide Supporter’s Disparagement of the Women’s Movement in Haiti” that AWID subsequently published as a letter to the editor. The full-text response reveals substantive claims that insensitive/uncharitable editing had made to look like gaps in argumentation and failure to respond to allegations. This full-text response is now available on the website of the Haiti Democracy Project.

CONAP describes itself as a coalition which brings together broadly representative organizations who are committed to advancing the strategic interests of Haitian women. Their list of achievements includes addressing issues of gender-based violence and politically motivated rape, fighting for the inclusion and participation of women’s voices in Haitian society, ensuring recognition of women as bearers of “fundamental rights,” and building solidarity networks with other feminist activists in the region (“Questioning An Aristide Supporter” 3). The coalition claims that it does not provide funding to its member organizations, rather it provides a space in which groups committed to fighting gendered oppression construct “a new type of political discourse which is based on feminist principles” (“Questioning An Aristide Supporter” 4).

In their first response to the “Caribbean Women” declaration, CONAP made a point of announcing their policy in this regard: “[I]n order to facilitate communication with women and women’s organizations within the region—whom we thought were our sisters; we produced these statements in English and Spanish. Therefore the oft-used excuse that you do not understand French [Haiti’s other official language] does not provide an easy out” (CONAP, “A Direct Affront” 1-2).

Antrobus tells us that, for her, the most sobering insight of this particular political crisis has been realizing “how vulnerable civil society organizations are to political manipulation” (Duddy 6).

Recall from my discussion earlier in this section of CONAP’s feminist/democratic concerns that they explained their communications in English and Spanish as being an attempt to overcome communication barriers, not a marker of class status. Although it might have been prudent of the Caribbean women to release their initial declaration in a bilingual or multilingual format (representing more accurately the diversity of Caribbean communities), the principle of charitable assessment of propositional content, regardless of which language it appears in, appears to cut both ways here. If CONAP wants to claim that charitableness for its own communications, it would seem to be equally prudent of them to accord it to others.
Mohanty identifies three presuppositions that relatively-privileged (often First World) scholars bring to their analyses of Third World women: the assumption that the category “woman” exists prior to culturally-specific socialization; the uncritical production of “evidence” that is universally applicable; and the belief that oppression is, or means, the same thing in a variety of cultures (21-22). The net effect of these presuppositions is a theorization of women, in all our diversity, as reducible to “woman,” a raw material that different socializations act upon in ways which are completely transparent (to the knowledgeable scholar) and transportable from one context to another such that what counts as oppression in the first culture must, of course, also be oppressive in the second. In the research to which Mohanty objects most strenuously, “Western feminists alone become the true ‘subjects’ … Third World women, in contrast, never rise above the debilitating generality of their ‘object’ status” (39).

See their website at www.batayouvrive.org/English/Welcome.html.

I think it is entirely plausible to speculate that at least some of the sense of marginalization felt by Haitian feminist groups stemmed from Haiti’s tense relations with other Caribbean states within CARICOM. Haiti is a new member, having joined in 1997, of this group that was formed by the English-speaking Caribbean states in 1973, and its relations within the community are strained by language barriers, developmental inequities, and population disparities. See Rogoziński, A Brief History of the Caribbean, 256; 267; 327-9; 341. Speculation that these tensions asserted themselves can partially explain why the Haitian groups inclined toward suspicion of their Caribbean “sisters.”

See Kurasawa, The Work of Global Justice, chapter 4 for a fuller explication of this point.

Works Cited


