



Lovely Nicolas
Photo: UNICEF

Poster Child

Lovely Nicolas and Elizabeth McAlister | Wesleyan University

poster child *n.* (a) a child appearing on a poster; (b) a person or thing regarded as the epitome or ideal of a specified phenomenon, movement, cause, etc.

Lovely: When I was eight years old, UNICEF chose me to be the face of the poor, young, domestic girl servant in Haiti. I was on posters, calendars, and billboards. The picture was taken around 1994, during the time of the coup d'état. Because I was a child, I was not informed about the exact message of the campaign. All I knew was that the slogan was going to read, "*Apa nou bliye m. Sa na p fè ave m?*" In Kreyòl that means "It seems you've forgotten about me. What are you going to do about me?" But since Dad was always leaving the country without me [to tour with the band Boukman Eksperyans], I related to the idea of being forgotten. That's why I was able to look sad in the picture. But I didn't realize that the UNICEF campaign was about the *restavèk*, child domestic servants.

Liza: During the coup period the U.S. imposed an embargo on Haiti. Lovely's father had decided to live with me in Brooklyn and wait out the political situation. We were distraught at how grim things were in Haiti and were worried sick about Lovely. We got married so we could apply for Lovely's visa to leave also. We were in a relationship but we were both ideologically opposed to marriage. Yet we did it, since

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it was the hetero-normative domestic family relationships that states recognize for migration criteria that would make it possible to get her here to the U.S. This poster both reveals and obscures a larger story about girls in so-called 'Third World' poverty, and how they are *seen* within domestic space but *not understood* in terms of national and international structures of economy, politics, and foreign policy.



Photo: UNICEF

Lovely: Images are powerful. If you see an image of a person before you meet them, your mind is inclined to create a backdrop behind them—but this backdrop is most likely constructed by very specific, and sometimes inaccurate, cultural conditioning. And the significance of an image changes between cultures. We are now in an age, particularly in the Western world, where representation of a narrative or history is very seldom conveyed orally. Because of the predominance of the image, traditional textual forms are losing their potency.

Liza: Development organizations use images of children as types, as you say, to stand in for a larger narrative backdrop. My colleagues Laura Briggs and Christina Klein have both written about how poor, sad-looking girls like you were in the poster, become visual tropes in a chain of logic that leads to the rescue of non-white children by white people. Laura Briggs calls these images of “the imploring waif” examples of “standardized representations of need” (2003:179-80), and argues that these formulaic images of needy children play into a larger politics of rescue of women and children around the world. These images also obscure the larger global context that shapes why so many children are poor, forgotten, and used as domestic servants in the first place.

That UNICEF campaign was a double-edged sword. I was half-joking with you the other day that “You’ve been campaigning for girls’ rights since you were a child!” Improving the situation of domestic servant girls is crucial, and that poster was one of the earliest efforts to intervene. Yet we were also saying that the campaign focused mainly on the Haitian household, which is only the most immediate location of the problem. The poster drew the viewer’s attention away from larger structural causes of the situation: issues of unequal foreign trade deals, the huge

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debt burden Haiti carries, and the covert political operations the U.S. launched against the Haitian government. It strikes me now that it's absurd that UNICEF was calling for legal and social rights for girls just at the moment when the international community played a role in the suspension of legal rights during the coup period. We could even say that creating concern for children shapes foreign policy initiatives like embargoes, peacekeeping occupations, and IMF and World Bank loans, which in turn seem to be creating more poverty. The innocence of children in such photographs directs people's attention away from the not-so-innocent deals that politicians and bankers make behind the scenes. Briggs says, "these kinds of photos recast international politics as family drama" (186).

It's ironic that for us, this poster does relate both to international politics and to family drama. In a way we played right into the rescue narrative, as Dad and I (the liberal white American woman) became a straight married couple so we could rescue you from the violence in Haiti. It's almost a cliché, although our case is more complicated than a rescue story cliché. For one thing, your Dad was the one who went to Haiti and got you, and in that sense, we fit the more typical pattern of chain migration, where one family member sends for the next.

Lovely: Another way we disrupt the cliché of the poster is that now that I am twenty-three years old looking back at myself at eight years old in this UNICEF poster, *I represent the lens*. I am now seeing Haiti. Am I now the audience and am I supposed to help that child in the poster? Right after the earthquake I saw a girl on television whose picture really affected me. I totally identified with that little girl. I remember why I'm in the U.S. to begin with, and how Haiti really wasn't a pleasant place to be raised. I sent her all the money I had in my savings account. I mean, I sent it to Haiti relief, but I sent it for her.

I still represent Haiti. I was part of the Haitian landscape, but who says I still don't represent that here in the U.S.? I *am* this landscape. I had the map of Haiti tattooed on my foot—I have been walking with Haiti, bringing it with me everywhere I go, even though I am no longer physically on the soil anymore. I think in general I have used my body as a bridge across the separation between the two cultures, Haitian and American. As a dancer, I bridge the two spaces.

I carry the connotation of what it means to be from Haiti—the many ugly things Americans and other Caribbean people say about Haiti. There are many times I have had to display pride for my nation. I also have to respond to the immense fear the world has had of the Haitian Republic, since it is entirely Black, and was *the* first Black republic. The fear of poverty and its offspring—violence and disease—brings clouds over the ways in which the country may prosper. And I have had to respond to the romanticization of the music, culture, language, and Vodou.

I use dance to dig into the complexities of my identity, both my childhood growing up in Haiti, and the transition to the U.S. Being transplanted to the U.S. at the height of my childhood

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created a subconscious disruption and culture shock. I use my body through and through, both to heal, and for the re-creation of my self through dance and rhythm.

When this disaster happened, I experienced an internal quake. The initial quake as well as the aftershocks sent waves through my body. The shock threatened to break the bridge that I have built to maintain the connection between my origins and the U.S.

Liza: You're teaching your dance students how people form bridges between Haiti and its diasporic spaces. How the body in diaspora disrupts national boundaries. And your art and your writing show how the "rescue story" doesn't end with the "rescue." The story continues and extends itself in ways that poster images can't possibly show.

One story the focus on children can't show is the family context. Often these sorts of campaigns are silent about what families go through to raise children in extreme poverty and violence. One thing that complicates the *restavèk* issue is the elaborate, healthy networks that Haitian families mobilize to raise and educate children. By having the honor of being a member of your extended family, I have gotten to be part of their network. I respect them so profoundly. The women in your family are strategic and resourceful, always ready to help each other through reciprocal child-raising relationships. We were talking about how you and your siblings have spent months or weeks with family members, being taken care of by Mommie Ben, Mimerose and Vya, Romane, Tati Claudie, and Yakini. Meanwhile, Toutouba, Ti-Paul, Tesha and Ti-Jo have stayed with us. Your Dad's aunt, Tant Geneviève, basically ran a dormitory in her house in Port-au-Prince for all the children in the extended family from Cap-Haïtien. That way your Dad, Mimerose, Minot, Jocelyn, Claudie and about forty-five cousins, over the years, could go to school, since most advanced schools were in the capital. (Meanwhile, ironically, Tante Geneviève had servants and *restavèks*, children domestics who worked in the house, who went to their own school in the evening.) This was part of the ongoing post-colonial education system in Haiti where there are not enough upper-level schools in the country. The quake has caused a major setback in education, since so many schools collapsed and countless teachers were killed.

The more we talk about the photograph UNICEF did of you during the coup, the more we can see similar patterns at play since the quake. Haitian children are in the headlines, on the telethons, and on new posters for relief aid. There is a lot of debate about Haitian orphans and the question of international adoption. Actually, UNICEF itself has some good people working with the Haitian Women's movement to prevent gendered violence. Meanwhile, the international community is occupying Haiti in a new way. International banks and foreign governments are calling the shots by means of the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission. This was a plan that seems to have been written mostly by the United States State Department, where a panel of seven Haitians and eleven foreigners will determine how to rebuild Haiti for the next eighteen months. Both during the coup and now, we see the suspension of government, an

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increase in foreign involvement, and more campaigns for vulnerable children.

Lovely: I know. It's as if when the earthquake shook Haiti, that poster fell off the wall.

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