



Burial Rites, Women's Rights: Death and Feminism in Haiti, 1925-1938

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The cemeteries stand as the most permanent expression of the solidarity between members of kin groups of various sizes.

– Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain (1937)

The subterranean history of death and discontinuity informs everyday practices in myriad ways.

– Sadiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997)

Abstract: This article uses Haitian anthropologist Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain's study of burial practices and kinship networks in the rural town of Kenscoff to consider the relationship between rituals for the dead and women's rights activism following the United States occupation (1915-1934). Observing her 1937-1938 field notes and unpublished writings on family cemeteries and ceremonies, alongside her publications in the feminist journal *La Voix des Femmes* during the interwar period, I argue that in Comhaire-Sylvain's navigation of the tactile and ephemeral space of the dead she articulated the values of a nascent Haitian feminism. Understanding the spaces of death and political organizing as locations to establish and refashion culture and gendered meanings, I consider Comhaire-Sylvain's research practice and production as a site of public mourning and an entry point for understanding elite women's early twentieth-century intellectual thought in Haiti.

Keywords: Haiti, feminism, Comhaire-Sylvain, death, women's rights

How to cite

Johnson, Grace Sanders. 2018. "Burial Rites, Women's Rights: Death and Feminism in Haiti, 1925-1938." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, issue 12:121-142

This essay explores how Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain's personal loss and scholarship on death uniquely intertwined with the discursive performance of early women's rights organizing in Haiti. I maintain that Comhaire-Sylvain's work, as evidenced in her notes and in her publications in *La Voix des Femmes*, revived women-centred narratives of Haitian authenticity, family and land through a public pronouncement for communion and redress. Scholars have defined Haitian feminism by legislative achievements regarding women's rights, including voting, wage and marriage laws. However, the contours of Haitian feminism were also exercised, experimented with and crafted in relation to deeply personal and familial aspirations, conflicts, negotiations and losses.¹ In this regard, I argue that Comhaire-Sylvain's work pointed her contemporary reader toward a return to Haitian origins in order to document the contradictions of modernity and barriers to women's citizenship rights, while also inviting the historical productivity of considering Comhaire-Sylvain's attention to death as a methodological impulse resonated from her own experience of familial loss. To this end, the article concludes by returning to Comhaire-Sylvain's personal negotiation of death during the interwar period. I contemplate how her family's death under occupation informed her historical and intellectual practice and contend that her writing and rapidity of her articles in *La Voix des Femmes* during her fieldwork reveal the primacy of the affective pull of mourning in this moment of feminist construction.

Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain was repeatedly drawn home by death. Born in Haiti at the turn of the twentieth century, the country's first woman anthropologist lived much of her life abroad studying in Parisian primary and secondary schools and conducting research on cultural continuities between Africa and the Caribbean. In 1924, she returned to her home country to find the nation and her family deeply entrenched in anti-United States occupation organizing. Her father, George Sylvain, was the founder of the *Union Patriotique* (UP), the leading anti-occupation political organization and her mother, Eugene Malbranche-Sylvain, helped advance the women's coalition of the UP (Johnson 1920; Sylvain 1925, 92; Schmidt 1995, 121; Sanders 2013, 60-61). Together they petitioned Haitians to denounce the "Yankee" presence in the country while

arguing for the nation's sovereignty (Sylvain 1925). Months after Comhaire-Sylvain's return to her family home, George Sylvain died. On August 3, 1925, in an open-air caravan flanked on either side by her brothers and famed "Sylvain sisters,"² Suzanne processed behind her father's body (Sylvain 1925, xvi). Moving through the centre of occupied Port-au-Prince, Comhaire-Sylvain's loss was matched by hundreds of grief-stricken city residents mourning the poet and the fallen leader who, according to his son-in-law, died "fighting the U.S. occupation" (Comhaire 1984, 104).

As her father's encased body pushed through the crowds and neared the cemetery, Comhaire-Sylvain's familiarity with the rituals of death and burial may have provided some comfort. A sickly child whose illnesses brought her close to her own mortality, Comhaire-Sylvain was comforted by folklore that her caregiver Amise told her while nursing her back to health. Enchanted by the tales, a young Comhaire-Sylvain voluntarily attended the end-of-life ceremonies—wakes, funerals and burials—of those she knew and did not know in order to hear loved ones narrate the life of the deceased (Comhaire 1984, 103). She was particularly drawn to the provocative performance of the wake, the pre-funeral ritual of sitting with or dancing around the body of the deceased while family, friends and elders told stories over the dead. According to her family, these rituals soothed Comhaire-Sylvain's physical ailments and charged her curiosity (Comhaire 1984, 103; Woodson 1937, 369-370). Comhaire-Sylvain's familiarity and comfort with the sounds and sites of celebrating the dead, did not, however, guard her from falling into a period of deep sorrow following her father's death, beginning a "long eight years" in which her eldest brother and mother also died (Comhaire 1984, 104). After her mother's death in 1931, Comhaire-Sylvain left Haiti to complete her doctoral degree at the Sorbonne.

When Comhaire-Sylvain returned to Haiti in the wake of the U.S. occupation, she, again, found herself at the site of death. A decade after her father's transition, Comhaire-Sylvain's first post-graduate research project was in the mountains above Port-au-Prince at cemeteries and burial ceremonies in Kenscoff. Recorded in several tattered journals, her field notes reflect a detailed

study of kinship networks and customs through sketches of cemetery maps, drawings of individual burial plots and ledgers of family names and land ownership. In her notes, she provided little commentary on her documentary process. However, during her time in Kenscoff, Comhaire-Sylvain published essays about her fieldwork in the feminist journal *La Voix des Femmes*. In a series of four articles published between 1937 and 1938, Comhaire-Sylvain exposed the periodical's readership to the intimate world of death in Haiti. The editors of the periodical, who were also the leadership of the first women's rights organization *La Ligue Feminine d'Action Sociale*, welcomed Comhaire-Sylvain's narration of rural Haitian culture that highlighted kinship epistemologies centring women.

Coupled with *La Voix des Femmes*, Comhaire-Sylvain's methodologies and conclusions regarding family, memory and history became representative and instructive for what feminist scholarship looked like in the first half-decade of the movement. In April 1937, an ad in *La Voix des Femmes* read:

The LFAS welcomes Mme. Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, who returns to us—her home country—after several years away. She is our one distinguished and eminent doctor of letters (Ph.D.) who, in her thesis, illustrates the brilliant intellectual capacity of men and women.[...] LFAS expresses the hope that Mme. Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain becomes the pivot point around which Haitian feminism will definitely evolve (*La Voix des Femmes* 1937, 4).

The movement hinged their feminist praxis to Comhaire-Sylvain's work. Thus, in the nascent years of the women's movement, what did it mean that Comhaire-Sylvain's essays about death and rural Haiti were the prototype for intellectual presentation in the feminist journal?

Subterranean History of Kenscoff

In 1937 Comhaire-Sylvain characterized Kenscoff as a “dead city.”³ Fifteen miles outside of Port-au-Prince, the town's proximity to the nation's capital was

evident in its shared county jurisdiction with Pétionville, a suburb of Port-au-Prince.⁴ The mountains established a lacuna between the rural and urban spaces that made the cities aesthetically, economically and culturally foreign to one another. In contrast to the growing population of over 120,000 people in Port-au-Prince, Kenscoff had a population of approximately 7,500 and was comprised of small houses spaced throughout a sea of “pine and eucalyptus trees.”⁵

In Comhaire-Sylvain’s assessment the military conflict and intranational migration that overpopulated Port-au-Prince during the occupation was irrelevant in Kenscoff. She surmised, “The peasant of Kenscoff did not see a big difference [during the occupation]. If the reason given for the occupation was that Haiti needed peace and stability, this could not apply to Kenscoff where the conditions of peace and stability have rarely been troubled by revolutions almost always run by the urbanites.⁶ Comhaire-Sylvain’s depiction of the rural-urban relationship during the U.S. occupation was unique to Kenscoff and to her perspective as a member of an anti-occupation activist urban family. Throughout the nation rural geography was not a guarantor of peace. In northern and central Haiti the greatest conflict during the occupation years, including physical combat and changes to the landscape and infrastructure, occurred in rural regions like Hinche, Milot and Gonaïves (Schmidt 1995; Alexis 2011).

If Kenscoff experienced any change from the occupation, according to Comhaire-Sylvain, it was the slight increase in the tourist industry facilitated by new roads built in the last years of the invasion. During Haiti’s hottest months Kenscoff’s altitude and close proximity to Port-au-Prince invited a small number of urbanites for vacation. The year before her mother died a new road was paved to Kenscoff; however, the journey remained laborious so the city remained relatively isolated. In her notes Comhaire-Sylvain also observed that foreigners’ and wealthy urban residents’ inability to penetrate the Kenscoff region was attributed to limited access to purchasable land as a result of vast peasant land ownership. Economically, the town was home to a “peasant elite”

who owned land in kinship groups and maintained cultural continuity as the descendants of approximately two to three families.⁷ The transfer of lands was further complicated because property was not owned by individuals, but by family collectives. These family lineages were valued above any foreign or national titles. As Comhaire-Sylvain explained, "An accumulation of state and church honors may impress some, but it does not bring a *mun vini* [*moune vini*/newcomer] up to the level of a resident of older standing."⁸ Under foreign invasion or elite desire peasant family ownership could be dissolved; however, Comhaire-Sylvain noted an additional obstacle to the outsider in Kenscoff—the collective plots of land were bound together by expansive cemeteries. Unable or unwilling to disturb the dead, visitors were deterred; thus, "the cemeteries [stood] as the most permanent expression of the solidarity between members of kin groups of various sizes."⁹ The memorialization for the dead and high regard for family lineage established continuity in land ownership. Thus, apart from a few scorching weeks, the city could have appeared to be dead.

Comhaire-Sylvain's haunted characterization of the city was, then, in reference to the public activity and population size, but her rendering was also buttressed by the landscape. In her description of the various entrances into the city she wrote that walking along the Kenscoff River, "On a slope overhanging the spring itself, this strategic spot is also covered with about one hundred gravestones, spread without any apparent order. Such disorderly appearance discourages strangers from exploring the cemetery but the peasants know their way to the tombs of their ancestors."¹⁰ Atop the mountain of tombs rested peasant homes that watched over their deceased family. Comhaire-Sylvain continued, "it is not necessary to insist on exploring the cemetery. To those who want to know about [Kenscoff's] past, and so to understand its present better, Kenscoff has plenty of living witnesses to offer. All Kenscoff, in fact, stands as a faithful witness to what the ancestors did."¹¹ As evidenced through the folktales and dates on the tombstones, the verbal and material witnessing revealed that the ancestors lived through revolution and retained and developed cultural capital in rituals of the dead. It was the connection between the faithful witnessing and the rituals of death that elicited Comhaire-Sylvain's attention.

In his work on circum-Atlantic black performance, Joseph Roach asserts that, "Cities of the dead are primarily for the living. They exist not only as artifacts, such as cemeteries and commemorative landmarks, but also as behaviors. They endure in other words, as occasions for memory and invention" (Roach 1996, xi). He continues stating that, "The social processes of memory and forgetting, familiarly known as culture, may be carried out by a variety of performance events from stage plays to sacred rites, from carnivals to the invisible rituals of everyday life. To perform in this sense means to bring forth, to make manifest and to transmit. To perform also means, though often more secretly, to reinvent" (Roach 1996, xi). In the cemeteries of Kenscoff, Comhaire-Sylvain documented the death space and landscape as a behaviour and even an entity to be communed with and consulted in the daily negotiations of rural life that unsettled urban class and cultural hierarchies. She documented how residents' actions were informed by this relationship, and she also crafted her own practice of culture through intellectual intervention. She located the cemetery as the nexus of kinship networks and the interlocutor between knowledge, land and family. Thus she returned to the cemetery again and again to map its parameters and to sketch the contours of the grave markers.

Comhaire-Sylvain's engagement with the tombs was intimate. She mapped each cemetery by plot and name. In her notebook she drew individual tombs. She wrote the names and sketched the designs on the tombs. She also measured. The detailed measurements suggest that she had to observe, but also face and touch these small monuments. Of the tombs she chose to draw in detail, rather than dictate their messaging in her notes, the majority were for women like "Marie Soufrie," who died on "20 Mars 1886 age 99." These women were born during the late-eighteenth-century Haitian Revolution and lived through the transition from French colony to independent nation. Their tombs claimed physical and historical space for women who witnessed the foundations of the nation. As Comhaire-Sylvain crafted a cartography of rural death equipped with a ledger, topographic key and stories that she heard about the deceased, she also listened at the foot of these graves where the

descendants held ceremonies. Some of these stories returned the listeners to the Haitian Revolution, but many of the stories also recalled a pre-colonial African past. These narratives and the materiality of tombs that Comhaire-Sylvain drew, emphasizing the markers of "Africain" in her notes, provided evidence of a Haitian past in which women were represented and a part of the national landscape.

Burial Rites and Women's Rights

Comhaire-Sylvain was not the first to identify Kenscoff as a research site for studying rituals for the dead. In the 1920s anthropologist, statesman and *indiginist* thinker Jean Price-Mars also studied in Kenscoff. He was known to ride his horse up the mountain from his home in Pétionville to conduct ethnographic research for days at a time. These trips became the basis for his iconic text about peasant culture and spirituality *Ainsi parla Oncle* (So Spoke the Uncle). As Comhaire-Sylvain's predecessor in research, Price-Mars understood anthropology as a patriotic act countering the racist and paternalistic hyperbole about Haiti that proliferated before and after the U.S. occupation (Renda 2001, 22, 54-55, 86; Magloire and Yelvington 2005). In his celebration of rural culture, he also scolded the elite class, admonishing them for their "collective Bovarism," obsession with European culture and negative valuation of Haitians' African past (Dash 1981).

He was particularly trenchant towards elite women. In a collection of essays titled *La Vocation d'elite*, Price-Mars argued that elite women were disconnected from their African heritage, but that through relationships with peasant women "still in the primitivity of African traditions," they could mend this divide and reclaim an authentic Haitian womanhood (Price-Mars 1919, 99). Although Price-Mars's suggestion that rural women serve as the vessels for elite women's cultural maturation is puzzling, his charge reflected an impulse shared by Comhaire-Sylvain. Comhaire-Sylvain and Jean Price-Mars were challenged by the *indiginist* charge to mend the cleavages between the class and cultures

of elite, working and peasant women. The two scholars studied similar dynamics and produced work from a similar epistemological framing that privileged the peasant voice and perspective. However, Comhaire-Sylvain's 1937 research expanded the framework and revealed the practice and product of anthropology as both patriotic and feminist. In this regard the significance of Comhaire-Sylvain's 1937-38 scholarship was not just that she documented women's lives—other intellectuals including Price-Mars and Jacques Roumain had done this—but also that her research was explicitly extended to a feminist audience as a performance of women's intellectual agility.

In 1938, the *Ligue Feminine d'Action Sociale* (LFAS) was only in its third year of social service and political activism, but the members were enthusiastic about incorporating Comhaire-Sylvain's work into the organizational platform. As LFAS president Madeleine Sylvain recalled, the organization's "progress [was] still hardly perceptible" in the first several years (Sylvain 1939, 321). When the founders of the LFAS set out to liberate and educate Haitian women, they knew their mission was prodigious. Madeleine Sylvain remarked several years into their work that, "This program may seem ambitious, but the members of the *Ligue* have faith in the potentialities of Haitian women, believing that they can work together in a friendly spirit, sustained by their devotion to their ideal" (Sylvain 1939, 10). In addition to faith, Madeleine also drew her confidence from the historical record of women's political organizing during the U.S. occupation. In her study of women and the law, historian and legal scholar Mirlande Manigat contends that women's participation in public protests and clandestine anti-occupation initiatives was a civic rebirth for women on behalf of their country and themselves (Manigat 2002, 282; Sylvain 1957). Likewise in her trailblazing text, *Haiti et ses femmes*, Madeleine Sylvain explains that women were instrumental in the nationalist movement to oust the U.S. government and as a result gained new knowledge about local and international organizing that ignited questions about women's citizenship in Haiti. Yet in the early years, with many interests, the organization used their sentient knowledge as their compass by seeking to "solve the problems nearest [to] their hearts" (Sylvain-Bouchereau 1939, 321). *La Voix des Femmes* provided a platform for wading through the intellectual,

sentient and action-oriented work and activist identity that the organization sought to cultivate. In this way, Comhaire-Sylvain found an ideal platform for the concerns of her simultaneously weighted and questioning heart and her study of the death space.

The content of *La Voix des Femmes* ranged from editorials on politics to articles about international affairs. As a monthly publication, a small portion of the pages were concerned with advertisements and social activities, but the majority of the periodical included historical and sociological essays about women. Additionally, the ethnographic research printed in the newspaper (almost exclusively conducted by Comhaire-Sylvain) provided unprecedented documentation of working-class and peasant women. The editors, Alice Garoute, Madeleine Sylvain, Jeanne Perez and Cléante Desgraves Valcin, characterized the paper as a microphone for the oppressed: "*La Voix des Femmes* will denounce injustices and abuses and will unite all Haitians in a common love for the country" (Sylvain 1947, 1). Situating themselves as social justice brokers Sylvain explained, "*La Voix des Femmes* wants to be the trade union between all Haitians who do not know enough. [*La Voix des Femmes*] will try to connect with all women throughout the world, free or oppressed, to work for women's emancipation" (Sylvain 1947, 1). In this regard, the editors and contributors to *La Voix des Femmes* were not just women journalists. Instead, they were critical thinkers on topics that concerned them and the nation.

La Voix des Femmes reflected the identity formation of the early twentieth-century feminists.¹² Here, there was a distinct difference in form and aesthetics of the paper before and after World War II. In the early years of the periodical there was an informed stream of consciousness that included opinion editorials, scholarly research, obituaries, short stories and event announcements. After World War II, *La Voix des Femmes* was more focused on legislative debates and constitutional amendments that supported women's rights. The paper's pre-war format allowed for creativity and expression that supported Comhaire-Sylvain's research and writing process. That is, as Comhaire-Sylvain navigated the tactile and ephemeral space of the dead she had a platform to perform her

relationship to a nascent feminist culture. In this context, she produced four articles in February and March of 1938 that were published in *La Voix des Femmes*.

Translating Death

Writing while still in the field, Comhaire-Sylvain put the sounds of the cemetery and death ceremonies into her first *La Voix des Femmes* publication, "Vocabulaire des croyances paysannes" (Comhaire-Sylvain 1938, 6-7). After a brief introduction to the four-page spread, Comhaire-Sylvain provides a glossary of words she heard at ceremonies coupled with words of similar diction and meaning from Dahomey (Benin) in West Africa. She begins with "ABOBO"—the expression of agreement, affirmation and invocation heard during Vodun dances and ceremonies. She explains that when saying "ABOBO", "certain individuals tap their mouth with two fingers at the same time." She then pairs the Haitian "ABOBO" with the Dahomanian expression, "BOBOBO," "a noise that one makes when tapping an open mouth with two fingers." After providing over fifty examples of words with similar linguistic structure and meaning in Haiti and West Africa, she explains that in Kenscoff and other rural areas of Haiti, "we find the strongest contingency of words with African origins. In the cult of vodou we see some of these same expression[s]." She further reports that many of the expressions she translated are derived from "an invocation to the God [Iwa] of graves and death for help with a task" (Comhaire-Sylvain 1938, 6). Drawing linguistic parallels between Haiti and Dahomey she engages her readers in the vindication of Haiti's African past, revealing the continuity of linguistic technologies and meanings between the cultures.

What did it mean for her to translate and transmit these words in a feminist newspaper? After acknowledging that only initiates understood certain words she continued to translate, pulling the reader into sacred and private communication. The presentation in the newspaper borders on an element of sacrilege. In her tone and willingness to reveal what she admits is secret, and in

some cases untranslatable, Comhaire-Sylvain appears to wander into her own "anthropological imagination" of an exotic Haiti that needs translation (Magloire and Yelvington 2005, 2). Yet placing Comhaire-Sylvain's glossary in conversation with her following three *La Voix des Femmes* articles an alternative reading comes into focus. Situating Comhaire-Sylvain's 1938 publication in the context of both her research and her personal relationship with death, she provides the readership of *La Voix des Femmes* with a lens into her own introspection and a lexicon for her grief.

Her audience was unlikely to travel to the sites of death that soothed Comhaire-Sylvain. Thus, her articles reveal the cemetery as a space for translation and for redress. In her work on raising and reading the dead and death, Sharon Patricia Holland submits that attending to the dead is "to discover in culture and its intellectual property opportunities for not only uncovering silences but also transforming inarticulate places into conversational territories" (Holland 2000, 3). In the early days of LFAS and indeed throughout their organizational history members wrestled with the inability to translate feminist desires across class and cultural lines. In this way the "inarticulate places" of women's rights organizing were also places of deep national hurt and disproportionate distribution of power exchange and wealth among women. For example, it is important to note that Comhaire-Sylvain first discovered her admiration for folktales in the arms of a working-class woman and that the space and study of death was also a fragile space for exchange and connectivity that highlighted gendered distinctions of labour and class.

This generative and fragile space of death in women's rights work become more evident in Comhaire-Sylvain's second publication, "Notre Paysanne: Adelsia." In a short story format, "Notre paysanne," harkens back to Price-Mars' title *Ainsi parla l'Oncle* as a narrative practice in centring the peasant. With her "notre" Comhaire-Sylvain asserts both camaraderie and ownership. In the narrative the reader discovers that Adelsia and Suzanne know each other from childhood. As a young girl, Adelsia accompanied her grandmother on the journey from Kenscoff to Port-au-Prince to sell their produce. Suzanne

remembered her peaches and artichokes. The young women were over a decade apart in age, but Suzanne took note of Adelsia's "smooth skin," "reddish black color," and kind disposition. Perhaps they would have been friends or she would have taken her under her wing as a "little-sister" if their worlds had not been so geographically and socially distant. But the extent of their early relationship was only in labour-fiscal exchange.

When Comhaire-Sylvain arrived in Kenscoff she was looking for Adelsia, if not in direct intention, in theory. She wanted to understand the connection between Africa and Haiti. And when she heard Adelsia's name, Comhaire-Sylvain remarked that the young peasant girl "responds to the sweet name with a French prefix and a Dahomain suffix," embodying the Atlantic resonances that animated her research (Comhaire-Sylvain 1939, 1). When she was reintroduced to Adelsia in Kenscoff she first recognizes her as an accomplished dancer at "Mardi Gras" and Rara celebrations. In her short biography of Adelsia in *La Voix des Femmes* Comhaire-Sylvain explains that Adelsia was not interested in partnered dances, two-by-two, rather "what pleases her is the footwork performed alone under the tree while the drums roar and the lwas ride over the faithful" (Comhaire-Sylvain 1939, 2-3). Here, Comhaire-Sylvain points her audience to spiritual practices in Kenscoff as Adelsia escorts Comhaire-Sylvain to the burial sites of the province.

What did Adelsia and Comhaire-Sylvain's time in the cemetery look like? Did Comhaire-Sylvain stand back and observe Adelsia? Or did they dance, sing and share stories together? Was there a moment when Adelsia and Comhaire-Sylvain touched, perhaps Adelsia reaching out her hand to escort Comhaire-Sylvain through the markers of ancestral presence? Comhaire-Sylvain's notes do not provide any direct answers in this regard, but her narration discursively bridged her life to Adelsia's and, by extension, the *La Voix des Femmes* readership. In her practice and public telling Comhaire-Sylvain drew her life closer to peasant life and in turn pronounced a closer intellectual immediacy to African origins embodied in Adelsia. Drawing her audience into the details of Adelsia's rural existence, into spaces that would otherwise only be witnessed by

family, fellow mourners and those communing with the ancestors, Comhaire-Sylvain wrote that there was an aspect of the rituals that was familiar (Comhaire-Sylvain 1939, 2-4).

Although Comhaire-Sylvain was taken with Adelsia because of their shared past and her artistic and business acuity as a dancer and vendor, noting that although she never attended school “her mental calculations are remarkable,” Comhaire-Sylvain’s analysis of Adelsia’s life revealed gaps in translating women’s experiences. For example, as Comhaire-Sylvain praised Adelsia’s business skills and parenting ethos, she questioned Adelsia’s role as a second wife to her husband. She expressed regret that Adelsia would never hold the title “Madame.” “She will one day be ‘Manzè Adelsia,’ ‘Sor Adelsia,’ and even ‘Grann Adelsia’ but she will not carry the title ‘Madame’” (Comhaire-Sylvain 1939, 3). At the same time, in her unpublished writing about marriage she wrote that *plasaj*—a common law relationship that may or may not be monogamous—was a “relatively stable union.”¹³

Within the context of the feminist newspaper Comhaire-Sylvain’s reservations regarding legal and monogamous marriage reflected an early and ongoing discord in feminist discourse. On the one hand, legal marriage provided an avenue for social mobility that blurred class, cultural and colour divisions (Trouillot 1994, 159). On the other hand, legal marriage constrained women’s social and economic freedom. For example, married women were barred from primary access to their financial earnings and land ownership, as well as mobility, since, as legal minors, women had to obtain their spouse’s permission to travel (Manigat 2002; Charles 2003; Sanders 2013). Moreover, as Carolle Charles has shown in her study of poor and working-class women in Haiti, some women viewed their unmarried status as a “counter-power” against the state that allowed them to maintain control over their material resources (Charles 2003, 45). By the beginning of World War II, however, elite feminist discourse was more closely aligned with narratives of respectability. Women within LFAS encouraged legal marriage, campaigning for and winning, for example, the suspension of

the marriage tax as an encouragement to women and men of limited economic means to legally marry.¹⁴

While her adherence to markers of respectability are at play within Comhaire-Sylvain's interwar period delineation of Adelsia's access to social mobility through naming, her concern also reveals her preoccupation and even anxiety regarding women and death. In particular, she ruminates on material assets and the distribution of wealth and status. For over half of the bio-narrative, Comhaire-Sylvain calculates Adelsia's assets and relationships as she fixates on the precariousness of family, social status and property ownership for women upon their death or the death of a family member. These concerns mirrored one of LFAS's first legislative initiatives. In the 1940s the women's organization made their first legislative campaign about women's rights to hold their wages and property within marriage. Comhaire-Sylvain understood and documented that the moments during and directly after death were periods of power brokering, where traditional gender hierarchies yielded to the supernatural and sacred. Comhaire-Sylvain framed her retelling of Adelsia's life through death, relationship to land, ancestry and relationship to other women. In her closing statements Comhaire-Sylvain acknowledges her preoccupation with Adelsia's material assets and attention to death when she concludes, "But she [Adelsia] is young and so she is not thinking about death" (Comhaire-Sylvain 1939, 6). Adelsia was, in fact, reflective about death and assets, but not in the ways that resonated with Comhaire-Sylvain. Adelsia's concern with financial resources upon death was less about material loss and more about preparation. Comhaire-Sylvain's text reflects this dissonance when she explains that "more than marriage, women were saving money to celebrate and memorialize their family" (Comhaire-Sylvain 1939, 6).¹⁵ The value in material assets for Adelsia was in her ability to serve her ancestors. Yet for Comhaire-Sylvain's audience, the narration of Adelsia's life also drew a fragile connection between women, placing them in the material and discursively-shared spaces of social and corporeal life and death.

In the spirit of the death wake and its multiple articulations, Comhaire-Sylvain's third article engages her readers in a type of reflexive play. In "La Femme dans le proverb créole," Comhaire-Sylvain takes a sarcastic tone as she provides a litany of proverbs that discuss women. She does not analyze the list of familiar statements. Rather her presentation of proverbs like, "Actions are for men, Conversation is for women," or "He who has a daughter has a son-in-law," announces the profundity and irony of the proverbs. In particular, she identifies the ways in which the woman's body ("Heavy women have virtue"), value ("Girls are poor merchandise") and relationships ("Not all mothers are mothers") were used to mark the boundaries of gendered belonging and citizenship. This rarely acknowledged disconnect between national discourse and women's rights and citizenship further enunciated the need and demand for members of LFAS to wrestle with their feminist project.

With the death space situated as a site of translation, redress and play, Comhaire-Sylvain's fourth article returns to a tale of familial loss. In the March 1938 issue of *La Voix des Femmes* subscribers were introduced to the folktale "Adelmonde." Adelmonde is the story of a mother and daughter who have a profound love for one another. Comhaire-Sylvain recorded that each time the mother and daughter saw each other "joy danced in their black eyes." In the story, Adelmonde's beauty, laughter and loving spirit capture the attention of the Queen of the Water who kidnaps Adelmonde, makes her one of her many daughters and threatens Adelmonde and her mother with death if they attempt to reunite.

Adelmonde and her mother wept and longed for each other for many days. One day Adelmonde remembered that an old woman in the hills once told her that the Queen of the Water could not exist with sickness in her presence. So, for days, Adelmonde ate charcoal to make herself sick. After convulsing and spitting up black vomit, the Queen of the Water released Adelmonde perceiving her to be ill. When she was released, Adelmonde immediately ran home where the mother and daughter found each other and had a long embrace. Yet, as the narrator within the folktale recounts, before she was able

to congratulate the mother and daughter on their reunion she was distracted by a mysterious touch and when she turned back to the women, they were gone. The folktale ends with an inquiry, “Have you seen Adelmonde? Did she return to the water? If you see her please come fast and tell me” (Comhaire-Sylvain 1939, 14). At the end of the folktale Adelmonde and her mother’s reunion results in their mutual disappearance.

By retelling “Adelmonde” on a feminist platform, Comhaire-Sylvain served as an interlocutor and transmitter of narratives centring Haitian women. Of the many folktales Comhaire-Sylvain could have translated, she chose a narrative in which the cast of characters were women who negotiated relationships complicated by deep love, desire, sister-motherhood and meanings of separation and loss. In her story choice we might first consider that Comhaire-Sylvain bears witness to her own loss—mourning and searching for her own mother (parents) at the intersection of death and women’s intellectual recovery and practice. In addition to a reflection on personal loss this narration leaves room for reading this story as an introspective moment for elite Haitian feminists. Could, for example, *La Voix des Femmes*’ readers identify with the Queen of the Water—truly desiring relationship with Adelmonde, but at the expense of ignoring the relationships and cultural framework within which she existed? Similarly, the early organizers of the women’s movement continually butted against the incongruences between their aspirations and theories of feminism alongside the diversity of women’s class and cultural experiences. Here folklore operates not only as a space of invention, but also, as Joseph Roach argues, as a medium that performs erasures. In her representative use of Adelmonde’s story as a tale of women, writ large, the retelling could also ignore and reinvent the nuances within and between different women’s experiences. Thus, the narration returns *La Voix des Femmes*’ readership to a place of curiosity and reflection.

Conclusion

In her later scholarship about funerals in Kenscoff, Comhaire-Sylvain wrote extensively about mourning. She explains that in the village “there are two kinds of mourning”: “grand deuil” and “petit deuil.” Petit mourning begins the day of the funeral and for the immediate family this period lasts six months. She also explains that ten years after the death of a mother or father the children initiate a service to begin the grand mourning, which lasts two years for the mother and eighteen months for the father. At the end of the period, the bereaved hold a ceremony or mass for the peaceful rest of the deceased spirit and sing a “libera”—a song of release and freedom for the spirit—over the tomb (Comhaire-Sylvain 1959, 197-220).

Comhaire-Sylvain arrived in Kenscoff a decade and two years—*grand deuil*—after her father’s death. What if we consider Suzanne’s first year of study in Kenscoff and her four submissions in *La Voix des Femmes* as her “libera” for her father, mother and elder brother? In her research Comhaire-Sylvain identified an epistemic and economic valuation of the dead and ancestral lineage that intertwined the worlds of the living and the dead in the materiality of daily life. In addition to a place to project sentiments of loss, the death space—cemeteries and rituals for the deceased—bound and demarcated relationships to the land and the nation. Although the Sylvain siblings reunited several times over the course of their lives to remember and celebrate their father, Comhaire-Sylvain’s record does not disclose whether the family had a *libera* for their parents and brother. Yet, Comhaire-Sylvain draws her audience toward the site of death as a balm. Presented in the guise of scholarly research, Comhaire-Sylvain indoctrinates readers and members of LFAS into her process—inviting them, even if only in an intellectual project, to bridge a divide between women’s social and class performance, and to dwell in the continuity of mourning. As a balm the site of death held space for histories and relationships that could not be easily sutured. In this regard, in the wake of death there is space to recover and remake narratives and memories, but there is also room for acknowledging what is lost. Thus, while Comhaire-Sylvain was trailblazing in her ability to make

contact, exchange narratives and disseminate and validate the processes of rural history making, her fieldwork also reveals the power relations and cultural valuations shared between women within the fragile constructions of gendered solidarity. Attending to the utility of the dead and death space for national meaning in the post-occupation and interwar periods allowed for a different approach to recuperate narratives of women as well as revealed the barriers of class and culture which made the women's movement less accessible and relevant for the women that the organizers espoused to represent. The space of death brought the lines of difference into relief as well as projected the possibilities for blurring boundaries between groups. But it required, according to Comhaire-Sylvain's practice, closeness—touching, holding, listening and mourning. In this proximity to death Comhaire-Sylvain's work reveals the nuanced articulation of early Haitian feminist meaning.

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¹ There are several texts that study the impact of Haitian women's organizing for legal and constitutional rights. These texts include: Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau, *Haiti and ses Femmes: Une Etude d'Evolution Culturelle* (Port-au-Prince: Les Presses Libres, 1957); Mirlande Manigat, *Etre Femme en Haiti Hier et Aujourd'hui: Le Regard des Constitutions, des Lois et de la Société* (Port-au-Prince: Université Quisqueya, 2002); and Grace Sanders, "La Voix des Femmes: Haitian Women's Rights, National Politics, and Black Activism in Port-au-Prince and Montreal, 1934-1986," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2013).

² The four Sylvain daughters were nationally and internationally known for their feminist organizing, but also for their historic role as the first degreed anthropologist, gynaecologist, attorney and social worker.

³ Unpublished manuscript by Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, M1835, Box 1, Folder 3. Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain Papers, Stanford University Archives (SUA), Stanford, California, US.

⁴ Kenscoff and Pétionville were classified in a shared jurisdiction until 1938 when Kenscoff became a "commune."

⁵ Unpublished manuscript by Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, M1835, Box 1, Folder 3. Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain Papers, SUA.

⁶ Unpublished manuscript by Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, SUA.

⁷ According to Comhaire-Sylvain, these families could all trace their ancestry to one enslaved African who traversed the Middle Passage.

⁸ Unpublished manuscript by Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, M1835, Box 1, Folder 3. Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain Papers, SUA. Also see "Paysans de la region de Kenscoff" by Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, M1835, Box 7, Folder 3, Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain Papers, SUA.

⁹ Unpublished manuscript by Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, M1835, Box 1, Folder 3, Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain Papers, SUA.

¹⁰ Unpublished manuscript by Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, SUA.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The newspaper had full circulation in the major cities of each region in Haiti including, Cayes, Cap-Haïtien and Jacmel (Sylvain 1957). In these areas, the core readership were most likely elite and middle-class women. During the 1937 Paris Exposition the writers of *La Voix des Femmes* were awarded a journalism prize for excellence in reporting.

¹³ Unpublished manuscript by Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, M1835, Box 1, Folder 3, Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain Papers, SUA.

¹⁴ The marriage tax was repealed on January 15, 1945 under president Élie Lescot (Lescot, 1945).

¹⁵ Unpublished manuscript by Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, M1835, Box 1, Folder 3. Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain Papers, SUA.