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# Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau and the Politics of Pedagogy

Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau is most well-known for her leadership and professional pioneering as the first Haitian woman lawyer and founder of the Haitian women's rights organization *La Ligue Féminine d'Action Sociale* in 1934. She is, however, less often acknowledged as one of many women in the early and mid-twentieth century who used education, in particular the design, creation, and publication of school materials, to communicate anticolonial politics and shape the intellectual trajectory of the nation's young people. This essay looks at two volumes of Sylvain-Bouchereau's authored and published social studies books, *La Famille Renaud, Volumes 1 et 2*, to consider the national and global scope of her intersectional feminist political practice in the mid-twentieth century.

## Introduction: Education and Independence

From the earliest days of independence in the nineteenth century to the post-U.S. occupation period in the twentieth century, education was an element of society that threatened to tether Haiti to its former colonizers. Battling against the racist foundations of humanistic thought that invalidated African descended people's intellect and capacity to self-govern, Haitian leaders, political organizers, and intellectuals used education as a proxy measurement of Haiti's global standing as a sovereign nation. National leaders asserted that what Haitians learned, and how that education was communicated and valued, informed the norms and meaning of citizenship. Thus the official or unofficial bonds with foreign nations were present and questioned from the Haiti's inception. For example, in his 1801 constitution Toussaint Louverture made special provisions for French educators to remain in Haiti after the revolution. Additionally, Louverture and Haitian king, Henry Christophe, both sent their children to France for education. Even when geopolitical ties between Haiti and France were restructured after independence, education remained intertwined with the European governed Catholic Church which controlled most Haitian schools after it recognized the nation's sovereignty in 1860. Educational systems from France remained the standard of intellectual advancement in Haiti throughout the nineteenth century and were celebrated as the premier education by Haitian leaders and intellectuals throughout the Atlantic World well into the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> However, as historian Chantalle Verna explains, these educational relationships were sometimes contentious, and often strategic geopolitical maneuvers to fortify the nation's economy and political systems to defend against re-colonization.<sup>2</sup>

From vocational to philosophical, educational systems in Haiti were an arena of colonial and decolonial negotiation. By the late nineteenth century Haitian intellectuals like Anténor Firmin supported a French education, but in his canonical text *De l'égalité des races humaines* he refused the philosophy of Black inferiority that was widely circulated in European

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1 Chantalle Verna, *Haiti and the Uses of America: Post-U.S. Occupation Promises*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2017, 33.

2 *Ibid.*, 31.

scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Firmin argued that Haitians specifically, and African descended people generally, were equally human and by extension capable of the creation and study of humanistic and scientific work. In the early twentieth century this affirming understanding of African humanity and intelligence was challenged by the foreign presence of the United States military through imposed education that included racist understandings of Black people and their capacity to learn. As the US occupation came to a gradual end in the early 1930s some of the most dynamic debates on education involved how education might improve or reinforce the social and class dynamics that were inherited from slavery and colonization. Discussions about educational methods, content, language (Kreyòl, French or English), and pedagogy were all incorporated into the debates of the 1930s and 40s regarding Black power, communism, labor rights, and feminism. For example, in 1936 the *noiristes* and two co-founders of the intellectual collective the *Griots*, François Duvalier and Lorimer Denis, published a widely praised article in the *Revue de la Société d'histoire et de géographie d'Haïti* titled, “Notre mentalité est-elle africaine ou gallo-latine?” In the essay, the political figures queried Haitian allegiances to French pedagogy and history asking, “Why teach the history of France to young negroes whose ancestors, a few hundred years ago, were separated from their land and that [now] have a history of their own in this country [Haïti]? What interest is it for these young minds [to learn] the adventures of Clovis or Charlemagne, Joan of Arc or the Sun King when they have Louverture, Dessalines, Christophe and so many others?”<sup>4</sup> Just months before, Haitian feminist leader Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau had posed a similar line of questioning in her essay, “Let’s Be Proud To Be Haitian,” in which she blamed a national “inferiority complex” on an unhealthy preoccupation with France, stating that “as soon as the child is old enough to understand, the hope of a trip abroad dangles in his eyes. France becomes the fabulous country of his dreams. [...] At school all his textbooks are French, on each page the child draws the love of France and the regret of

3 Anténor Firmin, *De l'égalité des races humaines*, Paris, Librairie Cotillon, 1885.

4 Lorimer Denis et François Duvalier, « La civilisation haïtienne : Notre mentalité est-elle africaine ou gallo-latine ? », *Revue de la Société d'histoire et de géographie d'Haïti* 7 (23) 1936 : 353-372. My translation from original French. Unless otherwise noted, all further translations from original French are those of the present author.

being born Haitian.” And: “yet what people can boast of having a better past than ours!”<sup>5</sup> As both the *Griots* and Sylvain-Bouchereau interrogated the relationship between national and foreign education, they both also identified an intellectual colonization in which the content of the educational material could be crafted as an anticolonial tool to ensure the efficacy of Haitian education.

For Sylvain-Bouchereau specifically, this efficacy included an education that attended to women, queried the bounds of national citizenship, and pronounced anticolonialism. Thus, in 1944 Sylvain-Bouchereau addressed the materiality of Haitian education by writing and publishing the elementary school texts, *La Famille Renaud, Volumes 1 et II*. In her study of Black women in anticolonial politics of the inter- and post-World War II eras, Annette Joseph-Gabriel argues that in Black women’s “struggle against colonialism, their activism went hand in hand with literary production. They produced texts across a range of genres that articulated their visions for a future free from colonial domination.” These texts and their creators, Joseph-Gabriel posits, situated Black women in the French-speaking world as “political protagonists” where their lives and roles as creators of anticolonial politics and literary material were centered.<sup>6</sup> In her feminist work and writings regarding Haitian women throughout the mid-twentieth century, Sylvain-Bouchereau became nationally known as a feminist philosopher and organizer. However, she is less often acknowledged as one of many women in the early and mid-twentieth century who used education, in particular the design, creation, and publication of school materials, to communicate anticolonial politics and shape the intellectual trajectory of the nation’s young people. Critically engaging with volumes 1 and 2 of *La Famille Renaud*, this essay considers the national and global intersection of Sylvain-Bouchereau’s anticolonial and literary production as a component of her feminist political practice in the mid-twentieth century.

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5 Madeleine Sylvain, « Soyons fiers d’être Haïtiens », *La Voix des Femmes* 1 (2) novembre, 1935 : 2.

6 Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2020, 6.

## Teaching Feminism

When Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau and other women's rights organizers founded the *La Ligue Féminine d'Action Sociale* in 1934 they immediately entered the debate about education in Haiti. As a collective of highly educated professionals, teachers, and school administrators, the leadership of *LFAS* articulated their political focus on and expertise in education from their inaugural events. For example, the first major organizational showcase was a workshop series in June 1934 where the month's topics were "feminism," "women's education," "Haitian women in history," "the modern organization of education," and "feminism in France."<sup>7</sup> The workshops revealed the political intersections between education and feminism. To emphasize the significance of education for the women's movement the *LFAS* leadership invited the three most popular theorists on Haitian education, pedagogy, and culture to their workshops: Jean Price-Mars, the "architect of *indigénisme*," Dantès Bellegarde, foreign diplomat and minister of public instruction, and Maurice Dartigue, director of rural education (1931-1941). Dartigue promoted vocational education, alongside the study of Haitian culture with the cultivation of educational relationships with the United States. While he supported a dynamic intellectual exchange between Haiti and the United States, he also believed that Haiti needed its own educational materials that focused on Haitian society and ways of being, which included his textbook *Géographie locale* (1931). This attention toward a nationally relevant and vibrant education curriculum was an extension of the influence of Jean Price-Mars' *indigénisme* that celebrated and studied the African history of Haiti in culture, science, and politics often found in Black peasant culture. Price-Mars' canonical text *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle* (1928) was the first text to bring this culture into the intellectual and political debate regarding the social, cultural, and economic direction of the nation following the U.S. occupation. At the same time, Bellegarde was interested in maintaining intellectual ties to France as a means by which to integrate independent Haiti into the highest levels of geopolitical power and thought. The *LFAS* workshop series ultimately communicated various approaches to education ranging

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7 Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau, « Séances d'études de la L.F.A.S. », *La Voix des Femmes* 6 (46) février, 1940 : 2.

from cultural celebration to French standards, and to a combination of cultural and vocational systems all with respective degrees of focus on relationships with the United States, France, and the African diaspora.

What was most evident from this workshop series and the future initiatives of the women's movement under Sylvain-Bouchereau's leadership was that the organizers situated education as a way to shape the contours of citizenship that would include women and girls and demonstrate their value as integral to the fabric of the nation. For *LFAS* women, Sylvain-Bouchereau explained: "We Haitian feminists, we ask above all for the ability to educate ourselves through the creation of high schools for young girls, the increase in the number of our primary schools for young girls, [and] the revision of the programs of women's education in order to make them more applicable to our needs."<sup>8</sup> As an attorney and having earned her doctorate in social work, Sylvain-Bouchereau, along with the leadership of *LFAS*, modeled the benefits of education. As a socializing institution, primary school education, in particular, was an arena of cultural crafting where teaching and caregiving was yielded to women and provided space for a self-determining education system. In their celebration of education, the *LFAS* adopted the philosophy that knowledge and intellect had an aesthetic and cultural currency. Education was a means to change the standard and quality of life for women. In this way, the *LFAS* sought to cultivate and make physical space for women's critical perspectives. To do this, the feminist organization founded two libraries, one in Port-au-Prince and one in Port-de-Paix, and organized night courses in history, home economics, and Haitian culture at the various *LFAS* chapters throughout the country. The curriculum included grammar, foreign languages (including French), writing classes, and childcare courses. While making their own spaces, *LFAS* simultaneously impressed upon the government to establish public space for girls' education by petitioning for and winning the establishment of a high school for girls in October 1943.<sup>9</sup> Although *LFAS* women were thrilled by the political gain of a girls' high school, Sylvain-Bouchereau continued work on the organization's own educational center.

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8 Madeleine Sylvain, « Notre Conception », *La Voix des Femmes* 1 (10) juillet, 1936 : 4; Johnson, 101.

9 « À propos du Lycée des jeunes filles », *La Voix des Femmes*, mars, 1939 : 11.

In November 1943, the *LFAS* also opened a women's community center in Port-au-Prince called the *Foyer Ouvrier*. The center offered classes similar to the night classes with the addition of folkloric singing, dance, and sports.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, with her sister Jeanne Sylvain, Sylvain-Bouchereau coordinated an educational curriculum across vocational and humanistic studies. As Sylvain-Bouchereau described the rapidly growing *Foyer* in December 1943, the center which already had over 400 students in one month: "It is an evolving creation that adapts to everyone's needs and achieves collaboration and understanding between the different classes."<sup>11</sup>

In their feminist organizing Sylvain-Bouchereau and the *Ligue Féminine d'Action Sociale* defined feminism as the power to self-direct and create opportunities for women through nationally specific pedagogy. The women often pointed towards gender inequality regarding access to education for girls as well as unequal access among girls across social and economic classes. *LFAS* member and Haitian anthropologist Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain conducted multiple studies throughout the 1930s and 40s about girls' access to education. In much of her research she found that girls were disproportionately distracted or discouraged from continuing education beyond the first few years of school and that girls in rural areas were attending less hours with fewer options of quality education than their counterparts in urban centers.<sup>12</sup> From these findings, *LFAS* was specifically concerned with bridging the experiential, economic, cultural, and spatial gap between girls and women of different classes and between rural and urban spaces. Sylvain-Bouchereau positioned the organization and its institutions as an educational hub and research unit that collected information about women that would be useful for national service projects and intellectual research. Additionally, *LFAS's* work in the 1930s and 40s was influenced by Haitian *indigénisme* and celebrated Haiti's African ethnic ancestry as a shared platform to plan educational curricula and

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10 Grace Sanders Johnson, *White Gloves, Black Nation: Women, Citizenship, and Political Wayfaring in Haiti*. Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 2023, 125.

11 Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau, « Une année [de] travail social », *La Voix des Femmes*, décembre, 1943 : 1.

12 Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, « Ce que font nos fillettes en dehors des heures de classes », *La Voix des Femmes*, octobre-novembre, 1940 : 7-9 ; Sylvain-Bouchereau, *Haiti et ses Femmes*, 217, 224-225.

suture the class, culture, and spatial distances between women. In 1941 Price-Mars and poet Jacques Roumain founded the *Institut d'Ethnologie* to institutionalize this kind of study. Sylvain-Bouchereau was recruited as one of the teachers for the *Institut*. During her time as an instructor, she was enthusiastic about the material, but became frustrated by the absence of materials and the skillsets of the teaching personnel. Sylvain-Bouchereau shared with her sister that, "I am trying to train my students at the Institute in a scientific discipline, I don't know if I will succeed in getting them to do even a small objective work, it is so contrary to all their previous training."<sup>13</sup> Her concerns were attributed to the foundational instruction the students and teachers received, but it was also a grievance with the limited availability of relevant texts and trained teachers. Seven years earlier than the *Institut d'Ethnologie*, Sylvain-Bouchereau had positioned the *LFAS* as an institution to study Haitian culture and women, and by the 1940s she was clear that revisions to personnel and curriculum had to be implemented at all levels of education and within shared political philosophies like *indigénisme*.<sup>14</sup>

In order to move her vision for Haitian education forward, Sylvain-Bouchereau utilized the intellectual pool of the *LFAS* membership. *LFAS* was uniquely comprised of esteemed educators, including Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, Marie-Thérèse Colimon, Fortunat Guery, Lélia L'herisson, Rose L'herisson Michel, Hélène Morpeau, Odette Roy-Fombrun, Jeanne Sylvain, and Lina Mathon-Blanchet among others. In addition to directing and teaching in schools or advising the government on education, many of the teachers also wrote and published teaching materials.<sup>15</sup> As a collective, the women maintained a high reverence for

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13 Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau. Letter to siblings, May 1944. Stanford University Archives.

14 Johnson, *White Gloves, Black Nation*, 94.

15 Sylvain-Bouchereau, *Haïti et ses femmes*, 171 – 178. Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, *Le roman de Bouki*, Port-au-Prince, 1940. Voir aussi les écrits de Marie-Thérèse Colimon Hall, *Mon premier livre de morale et d'hygiène en 18 leçons*, Port-au-Prince, Deschamps, 1956 ; *Le livre unique de français de l'écolier haïtien*, n.p., n.d. ; *La pédagogie des établissements préscolaires*, 1968 ; ainsi que ceux de Lélia l'Hérison, *Premières notions de lecture*, 1929; *Notions de lecture*, 1935; *Manuel de littérature haïtienne et textes expliqués de la littérature des Amériques*, 1945; *Hymne national haïtien - historique*, 1947; *Leçons de choses*, 1949; *Poésies et chants*, 1952; *Les héros de*

pedagogy and used political organizing as a mutually enhancing process of creating material while demanding revision to some of the national texts that governed their lives. As a result, when Sylvain-Bouchereau published volume one of the primary school textbook *La Famille Renaud* it was aligned with the national politics promoted by her feminist organizing.

### Lessons from *La Famille Renaud*

Published in 1944, *La Famille Renaud* became available to the public the same year as many of LFAS's most significant early political achievements. On January 11, 1944, LFAS won a decades long fight when the government of Élie Lescot passed a law authorizing married women to work, earn, and use their money freely.<sup>16</sup> And in April 19, 1944, the women celebrated an essential step on the road to full suffrage when a new constitutional amendment established that women could be nominated and elected to civil and political jobs.<sup>17</sup> In the midst of coordinating meetings with politicians, publicizing their efforts in the LFAS newspaper, *La Voix des Femmes*, and running the *Foyer*, Sylvain-Bouchereau was also working to find an illustrator and scheduling time to co-write *La Famille Renaud* with her sister, Jeanne.<sup>18</sup> Contracted with Henri Deschamps publishing house and approved by the Département de l'Instruction Publique d'Haiti, Sylvain-Bouchereau prioritized her progress on *La Famille Renaud* in the way that she prioritized her academic writing and public debate. The hard fought and won access to high school for girls was only a partial victory when the content did not reflect the girls' lives. In addition to access, the curriculum, according to Sylvain-Bouchereau, also needed to reflect efforts to mold and reshape the contours of institutions like school and the family. Thus, the educational institutions she established, like the *Foyer*,

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*l'indépendance dans l'histoire d'Haïti*, 1953 ; ceux de Rose l'Hérison Michel, *Histoire et géographie d'Haïti*, 1949 ; *Leçons de choses*, 1951; *Instruction civique et morale*, 1954; *Grammaire*, 1952; et ceux d'Hélène Morpeau, *Pages de Marie et d'Hélène*, 1954 et d'Odette Roy-Fombrun, *Instruction civique*, 1954.

16 Sylvain-Bouchereau, *Haïti et ses femmes*, 89.

17 Ibid., 90.

18 Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau. Letter to Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, June 16, 1944. Stanford University Archives.

mirrored a feminist aesthetic and *La Famille Renaud* was an extension of this thinking.

Presented as both a primary school French reading lesson and an introduction to the story of a family living in rural Haiti, *La Famille Renaud* starts by following siblings Lucia and Jo through their daily routine. In Book I, Sylvain-Bouchereau introduces the readers to the Renaud Family which consists of Lucia, her brother, Jo, her baby sister, Béb , mother, father, and grandparents. As the children move throughout their day and general maturation they see and expand their sphere of communal accountability. One of the earliest interactions in Volume 1 shows Lucia asking her mother: “J’ai d jeun  maman. Que puis-je faire pour t’aider?” While many of the responsibilities that Lucia and Jo participate in are divided by gender – for example, Lucia working with her mother and grandmother and Jo working with their father and grandfather – throughout the texts each member of the family teaches and works with other members to support them in their objectives. Starting with parents and siblings, and then connecting with aunties, cousins, grandparents, fellow market businesswomen, schoolteachers, and doctors, the Renaud family is depicted as an expansive Haitian family unit with intellectual, cultural, and economic acuity. From the news of the urban center to Lucia’s requests to hear the Haitian folktale “Le conte de Crapaud” at night, Sylvain-Bouchereau presents the family unit as an educational space, foundational to shaping the contours of institutions such as school, family, and government.<sup>19</sup>

As explained in the her preface to Volume I, the textbook was meant to illustrate the collective understanding of the home’s function as a teaching space in which “we present a home based on cooperation, affection and mutual work.”<sup>20</sup> While Sylvain-Bouchereau fought against the ways the family institution often socially and legally confined many women’s lives in the early twentieth century, her own family experience afforded her an example of the possibilities of learning, work, and care in domestic space that she communicated as conceptual scaffolding of *La Famille Renaud*. Thanks to her parents Eug nie and Georges Sylvain, she was supported

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19 Sylvain-Bouchereau, *La Famille Renaud*, « Introduction », Port-au-Prince, Henri Deschamps, 1944.

20 Ibid.

in her intellectual and educational pursuits. Although she gained degrees from universities abroad and held international leadership roles, her personal writing reflects her family home as a place that cared for and inspired her and her siblings' ideas and pursuits and helped them think about the unit of the family as a profoundly liberating and imaginative structure for ordering relationships.

Family as a feminist form for collective work and shared responsibility across generations and beyond the nuclear construction also provided a frame for her characters as they moved between geographic, experiential, and ideological space throughout the two volumes. The Renaud family taught and led critical dialogue across sections of society, reflecting the kind of creative future that Sylvain-Bouchereau imagined women could experience in and outside of domestic space. In particular, by Volume 2, the character development of the daughter, Lucia, communicates this possibility further as she often initiates the dialogue and asks questions that probe the concepts Sylvain-Bouchereau sought to critically engage in both volumes. As the younger sibling, Lucia asks simple but clarifying questions that lead to other lessons : "Pourquoi lavez-vous les assiettes avec de l'eau chaude ?" Her teacher's and peer responses reveal concepts about hygiene and lead to a larger conversation about microbes (germs), to which Lucia further probes : "Je voudrais bien voir ces microbes-là. Si je mets les lunettes de mon Oncle Pierre qui est revenue de Cuba, est-ce que je pourrai les voir ?" In Lucia's line of questioning and the following detailed discussion about microbes, Sylvain-Bouchereau communicates public health and science to children. Additionally, through the cross reference to Uncle Pierre and his Cuban glasses she also links this seemingly rural story to intergenerational and geographic movement and exchange, reminding the reader that the sphere of influence on Lucia's life reaches beyond her immediate family and location. The role of Lucia as the messenger of education includes both her actual sharing of information in the dialogue and what she represents as a girl character who boldly inhabits spaces, particularly the school. Sylvain-Bouchereau's use of Lucia's character to communicate that girls and women can be the center of national narratives and commonplace understandings of being Haitian. The representation and social ordering that Sylvain-Bouchereau presents was communicated in the elementary first volume, but by the second volume

Sylvain-Bouchereau uses Lucia's character to establish not only women's presence but also their influence and ingenuity on the behavior of their community and nation. She does this as she narrates girls and women in *La Famille Renaud* as solution-oriented members of their communities.

## A Feminist Environment

One area that Sylvain-Bouchereau establishes as falling under the influence and care of girls and women is the natural world. Sylvain-Bouchereau introduces knowledge and attention to the environment as an essential part of the ecosystem of communal accountability. Starting in Volume I, the adolescent audience learns about their responsibilities regarding the earth and animals. Lucia and Jo tend to the family plot and feed the chickens and pigs. The children also have a pet dog and cat to which a section of the text is devoted to each one. Interestingly, the pets are not tangential characters. Throughout both texts they speak and move. Blurring the lines between the school textbook and the folkloric quality of animals talking to one another and humans, Sylvain-Bouchereau creates an intersectional text informed by linguistic, cultural, and scientific research. Notably, she translates her sister, Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain's decades long ethnographic research on Haitian life and folklore to weave together an education for young people. Sylvain-Bouchereau explains in the preface that *La Famille Renaud* was made for children and meant to communicate their interests and experiences. Thus, it makes sense that the young characters would have pets, but Sylvain Bouchereau's attention to the living world was not just child's play.

The attention to the natural world also bridged the discontinuity between agricultural, vocational, and scholastic educational models that were at the center of social debate in the 1940s. As demonstrated in the first workshop series of the *Ligue Feminine d'Action Sociale*, different methods of education were presented for the Haitian citizenry as pathways to strengthen the nation after foreign occupation. Some, like Maurice Dartigue, who at the time of *La Famille Renaud's* publication was the Minister of Public Instruction, Labor, and Agriculture, believed in cooperation with the former US occupiers to the extent that this would move

the nation away from French education. Yet both Dartigue and statesman Jean Price-Mars advocated for a culturally specific education that celebrated the agricultural life of Haiti and advocated for vocational training.<sup>21</sup> For Price-Mars specifically, there needed to be an educational model of agricultural literacy that worked as a means for the nation to profit nationally and internationally from the natural resources and culture of the nation while building infrastructure. Concerned with Haitian educational material and pedagogy, Sylvain-Bouchereau crafted a storyline in *La Famille Renaud* wherein the children's responsibility to care for the environment and earn resources from it was equally as important as attending classes and getting a traditional education. For Sylvain-Bouchereau, students could learn formal French, with hints of Kreyòl, while cultivating and celebrating a Haitian episteme.

*La Famille Renaud* communicated a scholastic education with environmental wisdom, vocational respect, and narrative creativity that accounted for the matrix of connectivity between and within rural and urban space. As she wrote in the introduction: "This book is written especially for the children of our schools; it is based on their experiences and the resources of the environment; it also allows us to compare rural life to urban life."<sup>22</sup> Thus, the text also communicated some of the issues that might be most pressing to the next generation. The most important elements and revelatory moments for the children are about the care or abuse of the environment through lessons in their yard and trips to the river and market. Tellingly, one of the morals of the folktale that Lucia requests her father to share in Volume I is that water sources cannot be monopolized but must be made accessible to everyone.

Sustainability of the natural world and national economic and environmental independence was also connected with sustainability of the women's movement. Attention to the environment and agroecology allowed Sylvain-Bouchereau to attend to some of the most perplexing quandaries of the time. When *La Famille Renaud* was published in 1944, Haiti was a decade removed from US military occupation, with the end of

21 Millery Polyné, *From Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti, and Pan Americanism, 1870-1964*, Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 77.

22 Sylvain-Bouchereau, *La Famille Renaud*, « Introduction ».

World War II on the horizon. In her textbook writing, Sylvain-Bouchereau addressed fundamental questions about Haiti's sovereignty, anticolonial strategies, and changing global markets in a post-World War geopolitical landscape. However, these thoughts were communicated through a feminist and anticolonial perspective that located women in local and international trade. For example, in Volume 2 of the *La Famille Renaud* the student readers follow Lucia to the urban market with her mother. While her mother sets up her vending area and meets with her friends, Lucia and Carmen, one of her classmates and the daughter of another market woman, move throughout the market together buying items for their mothers. Checking off items from their list, Lucia stops to buy white bread from a vendor, Madame Jeudi. Lucia pronounces, "I love white bread." Yet, having been deeply influenced by the instructions of their primary school teacher Mademoiselle Jeanne, Carmen replies, "Me, I do not eat lots of bread. Mademoiselle Jeanne told us that it is better to eat bananas and potatoes. It's better for your health and it's less expensive. We cultivate bananas and potatoes in our garden, we do not need to buy them." Taking her friend's comments into consideration, and again being portrayed as the character who Sylvain-Bouchereau uses to push a subject further, Lucia asks Madame Jeudi, "Why is the bread you sell so expensive?"<sup>23</sup> Madame Jeudi replies, "Ma petite Lucia, the bread is expensive because I have to go by truck to buy it in the city. This is where the bakers are who make the bread." Lucia continues to question the cost of the bread by understanding the composition, "What do they make the bread with?" Madame Jeudi replies, "With wheat flour from the United States. We buy it very expensively in the stores in the city." Having established the trickle-down economics of import costs, Carmen offers a solution to Lucia's desire for something sweet, "Mademoiselle Jeanne taught us how to make cookies with corn flour." Carmen further explains, "There is a big oven at the school where we make the bread once a week." Defending her product and perhaps not willing to give up the sale because of the expense, Madame Jeudi confidently replies, "My cookies are better." Young Carmen concedes that the taste might be better if not simply more familiar, but the girl is not

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23 Sylvain-Bouchereau, *La Famille Renaud*, Volume 2, 62.

willing to sacrifice temporary pleasure for a longtime solution by replying, “It’s true..., they are lighter, but less nutritious.”<sup>24</sup>

Sylvain-Bouchereau uses the book and the intergenerational dialogue between these girls and women to reflect the daily exchange of information between women while critiquing the exploitative trade arrangements with foreign countries that ignored national resources. In this case, Sylvain-Bouchereau does not veil her concern that imported products like white flour from the United States are not only weakening the national economy but also the health and wellbeing of the people. Although the foreign military personnel were gone from the nation, the economic and resource ties between Haiti and the United States lasted unevenly throughout the twentieth century, informing trade, banking, and governance.<sup>25</sup> While Chantalle Verna has established that some of these arrangements were strategic geopolitical moves advanced by Haitian statesmen whose efforts were in the interests of the country, there has been little attention to women’s and girls’ understanding of this system.<sup>26</sup> Sylvain-Bouchereau’s textbook characters place girls and women at the center of post-World War II global exchange. Illustrating a dialogue that Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot would later argue to “abandon the Eurocentric view of peasants as atavists,” Sylvain-Bouchereau depicts peasant families as thinkers, deeply informed on and having the capacity to impact global markets.<sup>27</sup> Using the rural teacher Mademoiselle Jeanne as the source of critical advice, Sylvain-Bouchereau instructs the student readers by exemplifying the girls’ labor power and revealing how education can impact the student and their community’s behavior.

The emphasis on locally sourced products was also a part of the *LFAS* feminist philosophy. Months before *La Famille Renaud* was published and Carmen suggested that she and Lucia make corn flour cookies, an issue of *La Voix des Femmes* carried the headline, “Avec les Maïs,” on the

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24 Ibid., 63.

25 Peter James Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017.

26 Verna, *Haiti and the Uses of America*.

27 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 7.

first page of the feminist newspaper. Before listing recipes for corn bread and desserts, the top of the contribution read: “Let’s do without imported products as much as possible; with equal nutritional value, let’s use local foods. Here are three recipes that can be made with corn flour.”<sup>28</sup> While recipes on the first page of a feminist journal might have been seen as antithetical to a movement questioning the traditionally domestic role of women in society, the recipes were intertwined with the anticolonial feminist vision that *LFAS* imagined for Haiti. The ad in the feminist newspaper specifically targeted an unnecessary dependency on imported items that undermined the strength and independence of their national economy. Similar to other Black women “political protagonists” in the Francophone speaking world navigating anticolonial politics and gender discrimination, Sylvain-Bouchereau and the *LFAS* used the newspaper and *La Famille Renaud* to meet women and girls in their typical spaces and experiences, not to confine women and girls to domestic space but to use these spaces as sites to confront and influence the local and global practices, sovereignty, and economic sustainability in Haiti. As communicated in both the recipe instructions and the conversation between Lucia and Carmen in *La Famille Renaud*, Sylvain-Bouchereau showed that Haitian women and girls had the capacity and were ideally positioned in society to inform national and international markets. Sylvain-Bouchereau and *LFAS* were openly educating a new generation in anticolonial strategies and in how to develop locally sourced responses to Haiti’s geopolitical standing in the inter-war and post-World War years.

Throughout Volume 2 of *La Famille Renaud* the global financial health of Haiti was also placed alongside concerns for the physical health of the nation’s children and environment. For example, when Lucia and Carmen go to buy rice during their shopping adventure, Lucia starts to buy white rice from market woman Madame Fortuné. Immediately, Carmen comments that she prefers brown rice over white rice because Mademoiselle Jeanne says it is healthier. The girls’ questions about the rice led Madame Fortuné to teach about rice farming and cultivation in Gonaïves, Haiti. Educating the girls on the stages of rice processing, the conversation about the hull and bran layer of the crop flows into a discussion about rice’s

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28 *La Voix des Femmes*, décembre, 1943 : 1.

nutritional properties and role in Haitian food culture.<sup>29</sup> Again, Sylvain-Bouchereau uses the economics, science, and culture of local products to communicate the nuances of the nation's resources to solve national problems.

Sylvain-Bouchereau's attention to agroecology, geopolitics, and sustainability was central to the early education that balanced scholastics, self-care, and the natural world. This was probably most clear when Lucia is introduced to the environmental education program, 4C. As an older student explains to Lucia, "The 4Cs are little boys and girls who love their school, their neighbors and their country. They wear their badge on their chest. 4C means: *Coeur, Corps, Cerveau, Communauté* (Heart, Body, Brain, Community)."<sup>30</sup> During the 4C school lesson depicted in *La Famille Renaud*, the children have a discussion about healthy and sustainable practices around water consumption and use. Understanding the multiple needs for fresh water, the class has a discussion about dividing the river into 4 zones for drinking, bathing, animal feeding, washing clothes, and watering crops.

The ecosystem taught to the children also probed their thinking about their own behaviors. Mademoiselle Jeanne, for example, enquires about the students' water sources and has a discussion regarding waterborne diseases. Throughout the textbook the children are invited to think about their use of the natural world and are also encouraged to consider their personal and collective hygiene. Hygiene was a focus of several early twentieth-century elite feminist movements throughout the Americas and the Caribbean, where hygiene was used as a way to reinforce social boundaries and deepen inequality.<sup>31</sup> In some contexts, hygiene was used to racialize and stigmatize communities, while in others, hygiene was used to distinguish class and cultural difference within - the same group of

29 In the 1940s Haiti's rice importation was a small percentage of the national consumption, but by the end of the twentieth century, the majority of rice in Haiti would be imported from the United States.

30 Sylvain-Bouchereau, *La Famille Renaud, Volume 2*, 33.

31 Eileen Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920*, Duke University Press, 2000; Cheryl Hicks, "Bright and Good Looking Colored Girl': Black Women's Sexuality and 'Harmful Intimacy' in Early Twentieth-Century New York," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18 (3), September 2009.

women. In *La Famille Renaud*, however, hygiene is used as an invitation for the children to think about the spread of harmful diseases and develop scientific solutions. On the heels of a global influenza virus outbreak in 1943, Sylvain-Bouchereau used primary school education as a platform for public health education that integrated scientific thinking into everyday practice for young people in the post-World War II era.

However, while the global spread of disease in the 1940s made hygiene a national conversation, Sylvain-Bouchereau also considered the global reach and relevance of *La Famille Renaud*. In a letter from early 1945, Sylvain-Bouchereau and her sister Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, then living in the Belgian Congo with her husband and fellow anthropologist, Jean Comhaire, considered what distribution of the textbook in Belgian Congolese schools would require. Comhaire-Sylvain explained that the education system in the Belgian Congo, similar to the one in Haiti, was largely run by churches and missions that subsidized educational materials. Sylvain-Bouchereau proposed that they could buy and print books in bulk from Henri Deschamps Press in Haiti, which would lower the cost of production and make it easier for Comhaire-Sylvain to distribute the books to their core audience for roughly 0.20\$. Comhaire-Sylvain explained to her sister, “There are around a thousand Black children in the first year of French in Léopoldville.”<sup>32</sup> It is unclear whether or not the women actually figured out the logistics of distribution in the Belgian Congo, but the sisters’ discussion of the distribution process in multiple letter exchanges is an indication of the African diasporic routes and communities to which Sylvain-Bouchereau imagined herself and her work belonging. Sylvain-Bouchereau wrote specifically about Haiti, but with her understanding of the post-WWII context and global anticolonialism among Black people, she imagined that the contexts, images, and solutions presented in *La Famille Renaud* were translatable to other Black worlds. Interestingly, Sylvain-Bouchereau did not make any explicit anticolonial comments about the Belgian occupation of Congo, despite its parallels to the U.S. occupation of Haiti. Nor did the sisters openly address Sylvain-Comhaire’s role in Congo as the spouse of a Belgian official, but as Joseph-Gabriel

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32 Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain. Letter to family, January 27, 1945. Stanford University Archives.

explains, “anticolonial resistance that [Black] women...employed did not always indicate a complete divestment from structures of power and established space of political influence.”<sup>33</sup> For Sylvain-Bouchereau, *La Famille Renaud* remained an inspirational text for Black children in the Francophone world to see themselves and to think critically about the colonial and post-colonial markets in which they were directly or indirectly engaged. In her work, Sylvain-Bouchereau’s extension of her feminist scholarship beyond Haiti, and with consideration of a shared anticolonial philosophy, is aligned with that of other Black women in the French speaking world who sought to reimagine and leverage the linguist continuities for national and international freedom projects.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

With primary school literature, Madeleine Sylvain-Bouchereau experienced and facilitated the transformational possibility of girls and women educating themselves. Through Lucia, Carmen, and the other characters of *La Famille Renaud*, Sylvain-Bouchereau celebrated the curiosity and intellectual agility of Black girls. Throughout the early twentieth century, Sylvain-Bouchereau occasionally questioned the efficacy of her feminist organizing on many different social and political fronts. However, her primary school texts reveal that she understood the possibility and potential of planting a seed with the expectation that Haitian girls and women would be given equal access and legal rights to citizenship. Sylvain-Bouchereau privileged girlhood to imagine alternative landscapes for Haiti’s present and future in the early twentieth century. As Lucia moved about her home, helping with family chores, playing, traveling to the city, and learning lessons from her parents, grandparents and teachers, she joyfully contributes to her community rather than being labored by gender roles and expectations. Every space was made available to her, and she is scripted as doing everything her brother does – and more. This storytelling was both aspirational and critically practical. In her research, Comhaire-Sylvain found that girls attended school less frequently and

33 Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation*, 13.

34 Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation*.

stopped attending school more often than boys because of domestic and vending work. In *La Famille Renaud*, however, Sylvain-Bouchereau leveled the gendered attendance imbalance by having the students do a survey and math equation to determine the number of girls and boys in the school. The students concluded that by one student there were more girls than boys in school. As the newest student, Lucia's presence tipped the scales of equality.

*La Famille Renaud* was an explicit effort to cultivate, support, and strategically educate a generation that saw and understood the fragility of sovereignty but were also creative about how to strengthen the nation. Lucia also represented girls and students sharing in a Haitian feminist practice of questioning and reflexivity while learning.<sup>35</sup> Strategically, *La Famille Renaud* also established intergenerational connections within the women's movement. After a decade of organizing women and girls, Sylvain-Bouchereau and the *LEAS* would have to wait yet another decade before they were incorporated in the legislative process of the country. *La Famille Renaud* was both a tool and a reminder that a feminist and anticolonial future depended on recruitment of a new generation of thinkers for whom Sylvain-Bouchereau sowed possibility in each elementary school publication.

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35 Johnson, *White Gloves, Black Nation*, 120, 193.

*Caribbean Journal of Criticism* (2022), *American Anthropologist* (2022), *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* (2018), *Caribbean Military Encounters* (2017), and *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History* (2016). Sanders Johnson is the author of *White Gloves, Black Nation: Women, Citizenship, and Political Wayfaring in Haiti* which won the 2023 Haitian Studies Association Best Book Award and honorable mention for the 2024 Mary Nickliss Prize in U.S. Women's and/or Gender History from the Organization of American Historians. Her current research is a history of Black girls' maritime migration and maturation in the Caribbean. Sanders Johnson received her B.A. from Spelman College and a Joint Ph.D. in History and Women's Studies from the University of Michigan.



