



# Discussion Guide

Season 3.0, 2011

*The Other Side of the Water (USA/Haiti), 71 minutes*

Supported by



# Introduction

This guide contains suggested discussion questions to orient viewers and discussion facilitators on how best to frame conversations about the films featured in AfroPoP: The Ultimate Cultural Exchange, Season 3 (2011).

First there is a short list of general discussion questions that can be used to initiate a discussion of all the films after the screening or broadcast. These general questions provide a solid platform for channeling the immediate emotional response of the audience into a collective experience or narrative.

After the General Discussion Questions, each of the AfroPoP films contains content for a discussion guide to frame the historical, aesthetic and emotional reactions of the viewer in a participatory way.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Prior to screening the film, remind the audience that there will be a discussion afterwards (with the filmmaker if s/he is in attendance). It's generally a good idea to start the discussion immediately after the film with a few broad questions.

Following are some suggestions:

- What are your immediate reactions to this film?
- What did you learn from this film?
- Describe a moment in the film that you found particularly moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling to you?



# **THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WATER: THE JOURNEY OF A HAITIAN RARA BAND IN BROOKLYN**

A Film by Jeremy Robins & Magali Damas

[www.othersideofthewater.org](http://www.othersideofthewater.org)

TIME: 71 minutes

## Targeted Audience

- Haitian Americans
- Haitian Immigrants
- Americans interested in Haiti and Haitian Culture
- West Indian community
- Musicians

## Film Summary

*The Other Side of the Water* follows a 20-year journey of the Haitian-American Community, told through the lens of a vodou-based walking band in Brooklyn. The story of this unlikely group offers a unique insight into the contemporary urban immigration, and a glimpse into the heart of the Haitian-American experience.

On Sunday nights during the summer, thousands of people come together in the darkness of Prospect Park for an event without advertising or official organization. The crowd gathers around a group of young musicians carrying traditional drums, bamboo tubes, and four-foot pressed-tin horns. The band holds a prayer around a circle of flaming rum, then leads 10,000 people in a procession through the park, and eventually a charge through the streets of Brooklyn. It's an event that's part-religious ritual, part-demonstration, and part-transnational stampede. The music is called Rara: part-carnival, part-vodou ceremony, and grassroots protest, and one of the most breathtaking and contested forms of music in the Americas. Rara originally served as a voice of the slaves in their revolt against the French and as the voice of those struggling against ongoing dictatorships in Haiti.

This documentary focuses on the journey of the poetic visionary Pé Yves. Yves has led a Rara movement in New York since the late '80's, through an era when the media accused Haitians of bringing AIDS to America, to times of civil chaos in Haiti, to police brutality riots in New York – each time re-imagining Rara as a voice for an evolving Diaspora. Yet when a new generation arrives bringing a radically different vision of the music, and the Haitian Christian community attacks Yves for promoting a Vodou ritual, he's caught in the middle of a

struggle for the meaning of Haitian identity. Ultimately, *The Other Side of the Water* is about the struggle to merge the traditional and the modern; the island and the City; the imagined and the real. The documentary tells the story of one man who learns to hold true to a vision; a motley band that comes to speak for a larger community; and a music that manages to create a new meaning of home in the Diaspora.

### For Discussion

- The film opens with footage of drums being made. How do these film clips set the tone for the history of rara?
- Rara functions as a site of confluence, or crossroads. How is this similar to what you know about voodoo spirituality? Are these dynamics also present in the spirituality of western religions? If so, is there a musical medium where the crossroads can be explored (or exploited) or celebrated like it is in rara?
- “Church people have nothing to do with rara.” Describe how the film tells the story of the conflict between religion and rara. Who are these “church people” and what church or religion do they participate in?
- Discuss the various “birth origins” for rara? In what ways do they speak to the beginnings of a musical genre, a movement, or both?
- Describe which of the stories on the birth of rara most appealed to you, and why. Why were the other stories less compelling to you?
- One speaker describes rara as having its origins during the “kombit” or harvest, when those working in the fields were drawn together by the sound of a drum to sing and work. In what ways is this similar to the role music played in other parts of the African Diaspora where people were enslaved?
- “[With rara] there is less of a separation between work and enjoyment, and between culture and religious activities.” What societal forces or institutions have an interest in keeping these activities separate? Describe the consequences of their vested interest.
- “Little people don’t have a voice... unless a rara band passes by and they can put it inside the rara.” What does Pe Yves mean by this?
- What role does gender play in who participates in the rara? Did you notice women depicted as participants in a different way?
- “Rara – like voodoo – was not only an expression of Haitian culture, it was an expression of resistance... against a dominant society [that was saying] that the culture was worthless.” Describe other norms that rara bands operate to subvert?

- In a recent roundtable published in The New Yorker, Laurent Dubois reflected, “Haitian music keeps reworking a long history of intense exchange even as it carries on and confronts cycles of exile.” Discuss the topics at issue in the exchanges within and about rara in the film.
- Does the film offer a parallel between voodoo and the birth of Haitian independence, and rara in New York and the 1990 election of Aristide? Do you think that this connection is valid – why or why not?
- What do you think of Pe Yves’s attempt to “organize” DJARARA? What are his motivations for doing so? In what ways are these attempts consistent and/or inconsistent with the dynamics inherent in rara as a cultural movement?
- Elizabeth McAlister who has written extensively on rara has said, “Rara creates a sonic signifier of Haitianness like no other.” Is the message of the film consistent with this opinion? In what ways? Do you think the Haitians in the film who are Christians would agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- At one point a young man confesses with a smile, as he runs to catch up with the rara music, “Man, I am Christian but this is bigger than me.” How do you think the film contrasts the dynamics of choice and division in western religion and the acceptance of all in rara or voodoo?
- What role does DJARARA play in the lives of the young men who play in the band? Do you think this is an element that’s particular to an experience of exile?