

# “Singing, Religion, and the Quake in Haiti: From the Rubble to the Telethon.”

**Elizabeth McAlister**

Wednesday, October 20, 2010

6:30pm – 8:00pm

Casa Bacardi

1531 Brescia Avenue

Coral Gables 33146

**SPACE IS LIMITED**

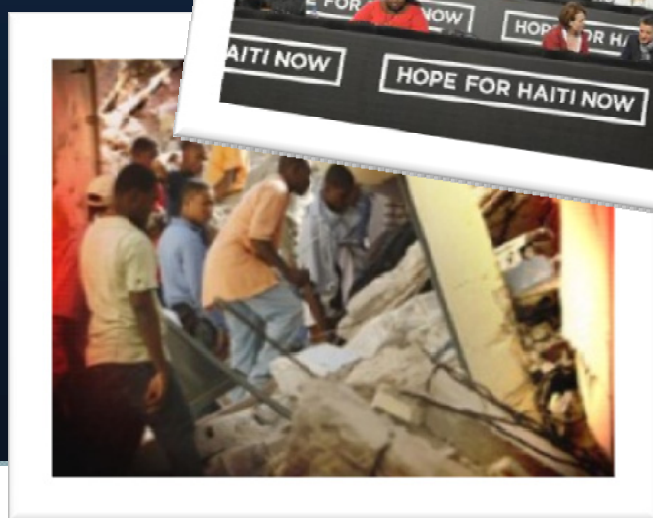
**RSVP REQUIRED**

[maiaprogram@miami.edu](mailto:maiaprogram@miami.edu)

or call 305-284-8783

*UM Sponsors:*

- *Africana Studies*
- *Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS)*
- *MAIA Program*
- *Religious Studies*



**UNIVERSITY  
OF MIAMI**

MASTER of ARTS in  
INTERNATIONAL ADMINISTRATION  
MAIA PROGRAM



## Elizabeth McAlister

Wesleyan University

[emcalister@wesleyan.edu](mailto:emcalister@wesleyan.edu)

“Singing from the Rubble to the Telethon: Music, Religion, and the Haiti Quake”

The Haiti earthquake on January 12, 2010, reportedly began with a giant roar. Almost every account of the disaster begins with a deafening noise that alerted people to the disaster. Yet, predictably, it was images of collapsed buildings and suffering victims that flooded the media, and most observers outside Haiti absorbed information through the visual register. However there was also some coverage of sound and music in the aftermath of the disaster. This talk looks at the uses of music directly after the Haiti earthquake. On one hand I look at music made by Haitians, for Haitians, close to the epicenter, in the direct aftermath of the quake. On the other hand, I examine music made by Americans for Americans, in telethon performances far away in New York and Los Angeles, weeks after the event. I argue that Haitians used music, and particularly religious music, self-reflexively, to orient themselves in time and space, and to construct a frame of meaning in which to understand and act in the devastated Haitian capital. Americans also used music to orient themselves and other Americans, as participants in religious national mythmaking. Americans appealed to one another as compassionate moral citizens of a strong, leading world power. Wyclef Jean, himself both Haitian and American, played a mediating role through his music, and served to orient the Haitian diaspora with his telethon performance, which used Rara music, a style distinctive only to Haiti.

*This talk will work best with powerpoint, which uses embedded audio and video, so a tech support person on hand would be best. I use a MAC Powerbook and will bring the program on the laptop. There is always a tricky moment getting it to run through the projector!*

### BIOSKETCH ON MCALISTER



Elizabeth McAlister is Associate Professor in the Religion Department and also teaches in African American Studies and American Studies at Wesleyan University. Her research focuses on Afro-Caribbean religions, Caribbean music, and race theory, with a focus on Haiti. McAlister is author of *Rara! Vodou, Power and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora*, a book and CD published by University of California Press in 2002 which is an ethnography of a musical, religious, and political festival in Haiti. Her second book, *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas* (Oxford University Press, 2004), is a volume co-edited with Henry Goldschmidt, which theorizes race and religion as linked constructs. McAlister has produced three compilations of Afro-Haitian religious music: *Rhythms of Rapture* (Smithsonian Folkways), *Angels in the Mirror* (Ellipsis Arts), and *Rara*, the CD that accompanies her first book. Her current research focuses on relationships and spatial and sonic imaginings shared by American and Haitian evangelicals. Her writing on religion and the Haiti earthquake appeared on Forbes, CNN and Newsweek On Faith. She is currently a member of the Social Science Research Council working group on Spirituality, Political Engagement, and Public Life.