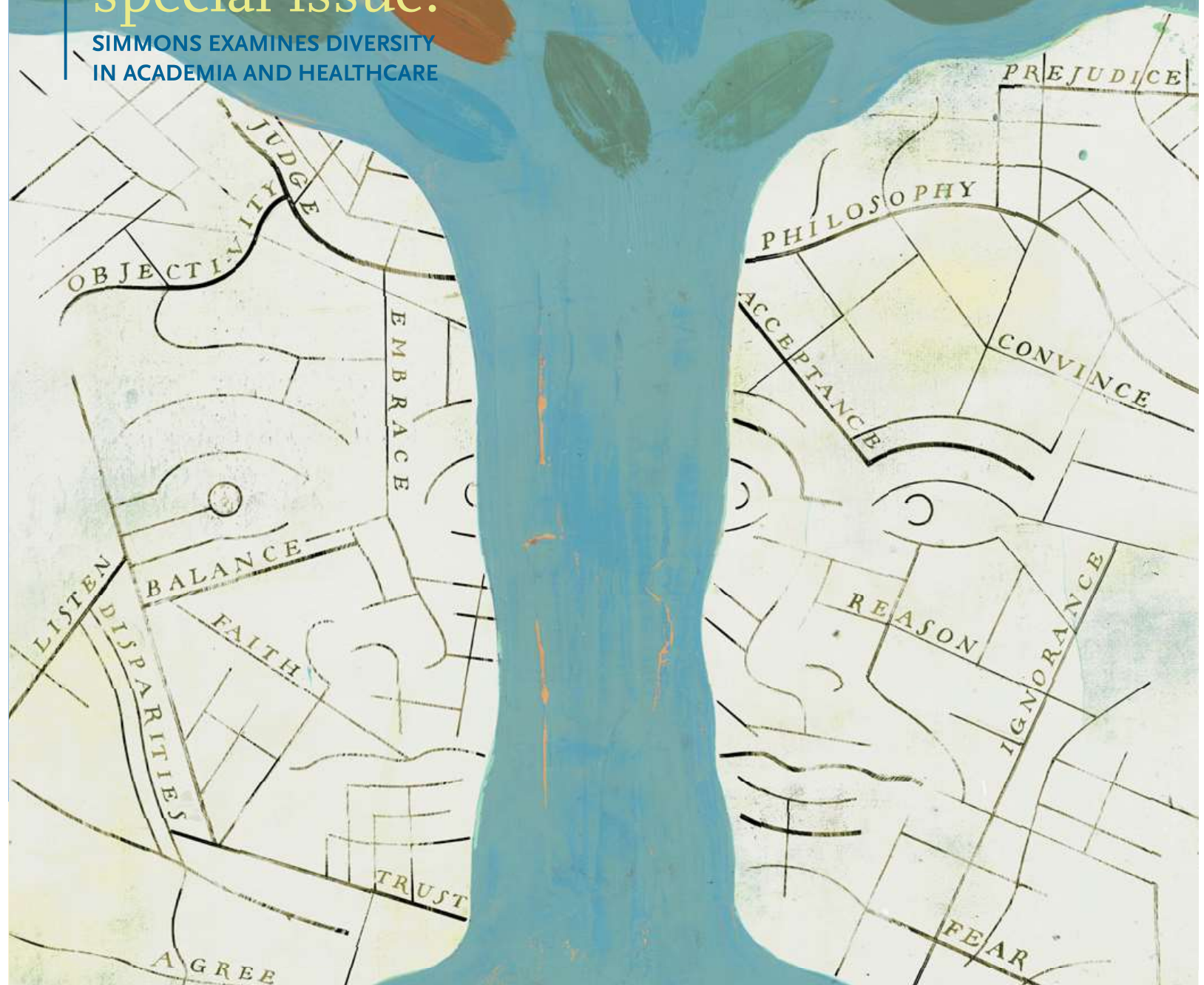


# SIMMONS

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SIMMONS EXAMINES DIVERSITY  
IN ACADEMIA AND HEALTHCARE



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# what's in a name?

BY L. MICHELLE VITAL '00

The first time I knew for sure that I was one of “them” was when I was eight years old. I had just entered the third grade and learned that Haitians were part of the “4H Club,” a select group made up of Homosexuals, Heroin Users, Hemophiliacs, and you guessed it: Haitians. As members of the 4H club, Haitians were branded as risk factors for HIV infection by the Centers for Disease Control. I remember times, as my friends and I walked to and from school, when other kids would yell, “You Haitians go back to Haiti.” and “You have AIDS.” Even at that age, it became clear to me that I was different.

In 1986, thousands of Haitians rallied across the U.S. demanding that the “4H” distinction be eradicated. My parents took me out of school the day of the Boston rally so that we could join other protesters at Government Center. I will never forget how proud I was to see so many of my people demonstrating against the injustice of this vicious stereotype.

Racial and ethnic identity is a tricky thing, a nuanced distinction that can con-

fuse one’s self-identification. Many people label me as African-American because I am black and was born in the United States. However, my socialization and culture — the food that I eat, the language I speak at home, the Konpa music I listen to, even the church I grew up in — are Haitian. On the other hand, some Haitians do not consider me Haitian because I was not born in Haiti, the first black Republic in the Western Hemisphere.

As our society becomes increasingly more diverse, it will be important for those in power to recognize and understand that the labels of yesteryear simply do not suffice.

At Simmons, like so many other college campuses, there are students of color who check “other” because Black/African American, Asian, or Hispanic does not quite fit who they are. For those students who are non-American or first-generation American like me, their identities are closely tied with their familial countries, which is quite different than being simply American or of a particular race.

So what am I? While racially I identify

as black, my identity is more closely tied to Haitian. For me, it has been a lifelong balancing act between assimilating to the American culture that surrounds me and honoring the Haitian culture that I have grown up in. So after all these years, I have proudly landed on Haitian-American as my bi-cultural and ethnic identity, honoring both my ancestry and the country in which I was born. Like many others I know, I have had to look deep within myself and beyond the superficial in order to identify who I am.

*L. Michelle Vital '00 is the assistant director for student leadership and activities at Simmons. She earned her master's degree in student affairs administration from Michigan State University in 2005 and enjoys mentoring young women, volunteering at the Colonel Daniel Marr Boys and Girls Club and with the G.I.R.L.S. Project. She serves as the treasurer for the Council of Black Administrators, Faculty, and Staff at Simmons.*