Migration, Memory and Longing in Haitian Songs

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INURED Haiti

Abstract: With over three million Haitians living abroad and the nation’s reliance on remittances and other forms of exchange for its survival, Haiti is shaped by an imagined transnational community found within and outside its geographic borders. In this article, we explore music as a prominent cultural form bound up in identity, examine the structural inequalities that have made migration the principal strategy for surviving social, political, and economic turmoil, and consider migration’s impact on transnational families. Through Haiti’s folk, konpa, and rap music genres, we explore how songs of migration evoke and suspend memory, express longing, and convey hope for (re)connection between migrants and those in Haiti. These songs exemplify cultural identity, authenticity, and innovation as they recount the perseverance, pain, and suffering of Haitians on both sides of the Caribbean Sea. This musical dialogue suggests solidarity but also signals antagonism between those living abroad and those who remain in the homeland. In examining this cultural form, we conclude that what is revealed in this music is what’s truly at stake in Haitian migration: more than the survival of families, it is also the hope for revival of a faltering nation.

Keywords: Migration, imagined community, transnational identity, diaspora, Haiti, music

Introduction

In this article, we explore music as a prominent cultural form bound up in identity that for Haitians — both within and beyond Haiti’s geographic borders — constructs an “imagined transnational community.”1 Anderson conceptualized nations as “imagined political communities” that are “limited and sovereign,” yet they are imagined because “members… will never know all of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion.”2 We examine how Haitians in Haiti and in the diaspora construct this imagined transnational community through songs of migration that evoke and suspend memory. Haitians express longing and hope for (re)connection between migrants dispersed across the globe and families as well as communities in Haiti through the folk, konpa, and rap music genres. These songs exemplify cultural identity, authenticity, and innovation as they recount the perseverance and suffering of transnational families.

This musical dialogue suggests solidarity but also signals antagonisms between those who remain in the homeland and those living abroad, a result of longstanding structural inequalities and a broken social contract between the Haitian state and its citizens. We draw attention to the historic inequalities articulated through class politics in the origin country along distinct geographic (urban versus rural), cultural (French versus African), linguistic (French versus Creole), and religious

1 Anderson 1991.
2 Ibid.
(Catholic versus Vodou) divides. These inequalities have served as the fundamental drivers of migration, contributing to social indifference reflected in the Haitian government’s failure to protect its most vulnerable migrants, particularly in the Global South, from rising xenophobia, anti-Haitian sentiment, and restrictive migration policies. In this regard, South-South migration as a phenomenon often perpetuates inequalities across borders and, in this case, reflects the persistent vulnerability of Haitians migrants whose government lacks the capital or political will to protect them.

With an estimated three million Haitians living abroad and Haiti’s reliance on remittances and other forms of exchange for its survival, the nation has been equally shaped by those living within and beyond its borders. We begin with a brief discussion of the historical roots of migration dependency that has characterized the formation of Haitian society and the dispersion of Haitians abroad. We then contextualize why, over the past half-century, international migration has become the principal strategy adopted by Haitian families to survive social, political, and economic turmoil in the homeland. We follow this with an examination of how Haitian migrant circulation combines with the flow of various cultural forms, specifically music, to generate an imagined transnational community that shapes practices in the homeland and abroad. We feature Haitian songs of migration produced in Haiti and the diaspora. We draw from the lyrical content of various musical genres to examine the ongoing dialogue between those on the other side of the sea: Haitian migrants, the diaspora, and the families and communities remaining in Haiti. Through these songs we explore how this transnational community manages love; maintains hope; withstands loss, disappointment, betrayal, and marginalization; fosters solidarity; handles acculturation; and contends with cultural ruptures, change, and innovation across generations.

Through migration music, Haiti’s transnational community explores how structural inequalities have propelled its urban poor, rural peasants, middle class, and even its educated youth to flee in search of greener pastures. These songs feature love of family and country that transcends borders and endures through time and space. Youth lament a nation that has failed to invest in them; those in Haiti wanting to leave, while those abroad plead for changes that would allow them to return. Paradoxically, migration music also calls upon Haiti’s children to return and contribute to its development, though the call has largely gone unheeded. These songs share the transnational community’s vision and aspirations for a better, more inclusive Haiti. Therefore, we conclude that the music reveals what is at stake in migration: more than the survival of Haitian families, it is the revival of a faltering nation.

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3 Hurbon 1987.
4 Marcelin and Cela 2017 (3).
5 Ramsey 2011.
6 Fuentes 2021.
7 INURED 2020 (1).
8 OECD & INURED, 2017.
9 World Bank 2015.
Constructing Haiti’s Transnational Community

Haiti’s history has the indelible mark of voluntary and involuntary migration. African slaves were forcibly brought to the island as early as the 15th century. From 1791 to 1803, their descendants would launch the only successful revolution against slavery and colonization resulting in significant outmigration to France and its colonies, while creating the first refugee crisis in the US, which received more than 25,000 Creoles — some with slaves and free Blacks in tow. Marginalized globally by Western imperialist powers, threatened by the existence of a free republic of former slaves, Haiti’s independence was overshadowed by the constant threat of invasion, the absence of diplomatic recognition by other nation-states, and the inability to establish fair trade partnerships. Haiti would deplete its coffers on military protection, while struggling to revive its economy or establish a functioning democracy.

Following a period of sociopolitical instability that resulted in successive coup d’états, the US would occupy the country from 1915-1934. US policy reinforced structural inequalities by establishing the urban mulatto elite as intermediaries while further marginalizing the rural, largely African-descended, poor, stimulating a new wave of rural migration to sugarcane plantations in Cuba and the Dominican Republic (DR). The DR would eventually become the destination of choice for rural migrants, due to the nations’ shared border, Haiti’s political instability, and US investments in the DR sugar economy. During this period, a small group of elites would also migrate to the US.

By the mid-20th century, opposition to the François Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1971) by Haiti’s elite and segments of the middle class would initiate the next significant wave of migration to the US, France and its colonies, Canada, and newly independent nations in sub-Saharan

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10 James 1989.
15 Nichols 1996.
16 Geggus 2002.
17 Foreman 2016.
18 Robinson 2008.
19 Robinson 2008.
20 Trouillot 2000.
22 Martin et al. 2002.
24 Wah 2013.
26 OECD & INURED 2017.
Africa. During Duvalier’s reign, Canada liberalized its immigration policies, allowing entry of non-British professionals, while the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act in the US opened its borders to non-European skilled and semi-skilled professionals. It is estimated that by 1967, migration to Canada more than doubled, to approximately 53,000 while some 25,000 Haitians migrated to the US by the 1970s. At the same time, rural peasant migration to the DR remained constant, despite xenophobia and rising anti-Haitian sentiment, resulting in the state-sanctioned massacre of between 17,000 and 30,000 Haitian migrants.

Following the death of François Duvalier, his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, ascended to power, continuing his father’s legacy of political repression and retribution. As the global economy staggered and living conditions in Haiti deteriorated, exacerbating social and economic inequalities, the urban and rural poor began seeking refuge in the US and other Caribbean nations. The tenuous practice of paying intermediaries for transport to the shores of Miami, Florida, via kantè [small fishing boats] became common practice for those of modest means and little hope for legal entry into the US. The costs and associated risks of pran kantè resulted in a gender disparity, with disproportionate number of Haitian men engaging in this migratory practice. For the perilous journey, many migrants relied upon “the protective powers of the vodou spirits” for safe passage and entry into the US and other destinations in the region. It is during this era that the term “boat people” was adopted, characterizing thousands of migrants, including poor Haitians, who had taken to the Caribbean Sea in search of a new life in the US.

Between 2000 and 2016, high levels of poverty, successive political crises, widespread deforestation, more than 10 major disasters (an earthquake, a cholera epidemic, 9 hurricanes) and

28 Wah 2013.
29 Akbari 1999.
30 Blad & Couton 2009.
31 Icart 2006.
32 Fouron 2020.
33 Labelle, Larose, and Piché 1983.
34 Wah 2013.
35 Dreby & Turits 2005.
36 Martin, Midgley, and Teitelbaum 2002.
37 Trouillot 2000.
38 Kim 2019.
39 The literal translation is to “take a boat,” however in the Haitian context it is understood as “to migrate by boat.”
40 Gammage 2004.
41 Kim 2019: 59.
42 Richman 2005.
44 Stepick 1982.
weak governance would render Haiti extremely vulnerable in the era of climate change.\textsuperscript{45, 46} Further driving out migration.\textsuperscript{47} Presently, the US and DR host the largest Haitian populations outside of Haiti.\textsuperscript{48} Following the 2010 earthquake, conditions made Brazil a choice destination for Haitian migration. Having led the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) from 2004 through the post-disaster period, Brazil held significant geopolitical influence in Haiti.\textsuperscript{49, 50, 51} The disaster exacerbated poor living conditions in Haiti and accelerated the emigration to Brazil as the latter sought to fill unskilled labor positions in preparation for the 2014 World Cup games.\textsuperscript{52, 53} By 2015, some 95,000 plus Haitians were living in Brazil, representing the largest migrant labor group in the country.\textsuperscript{54} Yet soon thereafter (between 2015 and 2016), the Brazilian economy would stagnate, with unemployment almost doubling.\textsuperscript{55} Haitian migrants suffered significant job losses, and rising xenophobia led many to migrate onwards.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, in this post-earthquake context, Haitian migration within Latin America rose significantly, to the DR, Brazil, and other locations, creating a new transnational community.

Haiti’s transnational community is an “imagined community,” constructed internally by its own members through an array of organizations (e.g., mutual solidarity groups, cooperatives, neighborhood organizations, hometown associations, health volunteer groups, foundations, etc.), the density of exchanges, the circulation of cultural forms as well as externally by governments and state-sanctioned policies and institutional practices, multilateral and international organizations, capital investments, markets, etc. Although perpetually fluid and, at times, highly contested, the transnational community is unified by its members’ elaboration of what constitutes “the” community, in the same way Anderson\textsuperscript{57} defines community. The implicit criteria for inclusion establish different layers of belongings, mutuality, commitments, and obligations which, in turn, foster different degrees of solidarity, enmities, rivalries, and comradeship within this transnational social field.\textsuperscript{58, 59, 60} We posit Haiti’s transnational community—which is shared by migrants, the diaspora, and those remaining in the homeland—as an imagined community where music is a cultural form through which membership is defined and “the” community is validated and

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{45} Marcelin and Cela 2017 (1).
\bibitem{46} Marcelin and Cela 2017 (3).
\bibitem{47} Marcelin and Cela 2017 (2).
\bibitem{48} OECD & INURED 2017.
\bibitem{49} Audebert 2017.
\bibitem{50} Dias et al. 2020.
\bibitem{51} Muira 2020.
\bibitem{52} Muira 2020.
\bibitem{53} Schlabach 2020.
\bibitem{54} OB Migra 2019.
\bibitem{55} Wejsa and Lesser 2018.
\bibitem{56} Wejsa and Lesser 2018.
\bibitem{57} Anderson 1991.
\bibitem{58} Glick Schiller 2005.
\bibitem{59} Glick Schiller and Caglar 2009.
\bibitem{60} Glick Schiller 2011.
\end{thebibliography}
celebrated.

Music is often used as an entry to the study of race and ethnicity vis-à-vis the immigrant experience.\textsuperscript{61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67} However, scholarship on migration music often privileges migrant experiences, cultural production, and integration in the host nation, rendering invisible the role that families and communities in the homeland play in migration, generally, and in producing art that reflects the migratory experience, more specifically. Migration music created in the homeland provides another perspective on the migration phenomenon and, in the Haitian context, the inequalities which family members remaining in country continue to endure. For these reasons, our analysis is framed within a continuum of shared, challenged, and entangled ideas, sentiments, aspirations, recriminations, lamentations of migrants and their homeland counterparts, all captured in songs of migration. As these songs reveal, migration music is part of this transnational community’s endless process of co-construction. By acknowledging both the production of such music by migrants and their counterparts in the origin country, we aim to generate a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the impacts of migration on the Haitian transnational community as those in the homeland.

**Migration: The Search for a Better Life and the Destruction of Life**

Migration music occupies a distinct space in ethnomusicology. Its themes of loss, longing, preservation (of culture), identity (crises), assimilation, exclusion, and ostracism, respond to Rice’s call for an anthropology of music that captures “troubled times and places.”\textsuperscript{68} Much of the migration music emanating from Haiti details the structural inequalities and environmental conditions that have compelled their compatriots to leave. The frequency of natural disasters,\textsuperscript{69} ongoing economic crises\textsuperscript{70} and marginalization experienced by the urban and rural poor,\textsuperscript{71} in particular, have contributed to this exodus. These events are detailed in Mizik Mizik’s 2000 Haitian konpa\textsuperscript{72} song titled, “Sa Pou n Fè (What Are We to Do)”\textsuperscript{73} The song was highly influential musically,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{61} Baily and Collyer 2006.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} DiMaggio and Fernandez-Kelly 2010.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Kasinitz 2014.
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Kasinitz and Martiniello 2019.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Lafleur and Martiniello 2010.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Martiniello and Lafleur 2008.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Sardinha and Campos 2016.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Rice 2014.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} See After Hurricane Matthew: \url{http://www.inured.org/uploads/2/5/2/6/25266591/reportonline__051117.pdf}.
  \item \textsuperscript{70} See The Impact of COVID-19 on Families in Urban and Rural Haiti: \url{http://www.inured.org/uploads/2/5/2/6/25266591/impact_of_covid-19_on_haitian_families_eng.pdf}.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} See Republic of Haiti: Country of Origin Information Paper: \url{http://www.inured.org/uploads/2/5/2/6/25266591/impact_of_covid-19_on_haitian_families_eng.pdf}.
  \item \textsuperscript{72} Konpa, Haiti’s popular music, was developed in the 1950’s and is still among the most popular genres.
  \item \textsuperscript{73} \textit{Sa Pou n Fè?} was released in 2000. \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sCosrMk8_c}.
\end{itemize}
ushering in the revival of twoubadou, a traditional musical form consisting of one or two acoustic guitars, a tanbou (barrel drum), and maracas (also referred to as rumba shakers).

Sa Pou n Fe? [What Are We to Do?] by Mizik Mizik

Si lavi ap dekouraje w - sa pou n fè
Bagay yo vin du pou ou - sa pou n fè
Lafanmi dekouraje - sa pou n fè
Lakay pa gen lamanjay - sa pou n fè
Ah…gen de bagay ki soti pou l dekouraje w
Yon pè de famiy leve maten l pa gen travay
Sa pou l fè, lakay pa gen lamanjay o
Mezanmi…ahhhh
Madann, piti leve chak jou pou bay manje
4h du maten w leve w pa gen dòmi nan je
Sa pou w fè, lamizè janbe limit
Lapli pa tonbe, jaden pa pouse
Mayi pa leve, menm pitimi pa donnen
Menm le lapli tonbe jaden pa jann pouse
Tout bon tè k nan mòn yo glise tonbe nan lannè
Ah… gen de bagay ki soti pou l dekouraje w

If life is discouraging you, what are we to do
Things have become difficult for you, what are we to do
The family is discouraged, what are we to do
There is no food at home, what are we to do
Ah…there are things that happen to discourage you
A father of a family wakes in the morning without a job
What should he do, there is no food at home
My friends…ahhhh
Wife, children wake up daily and must be fed
4am in the morning you wake up and can’t sleep
What are you to do, misery has passed its limit
It has not rained, the land is unproductive
Corn doesn’t grow, neither does sorghum
Even when it rains, the land is unproductive
All the good highlands have slid into the sea
Ah…there are things that happen to discourage you

The lyrics suggest that the song’s protagonist is a rural dweller. From the use of the word lamanjay — a rural term for food — to references to land that is no longer productive, this family’s deeply personal experience of hunger is not uncommon. Currently, the most optimistic estimate of Haiti’s tree coverage is just under one-third of what it once was, a testament to centuries of environmental degradation dating back to the export of wood to France during the colonial period. With much of its land no longer arable, imports are almost on par with agricultural production, at 44% and 48%, respectively, of the nation’s food availability. Low food production and dependence on foreign food imports have had dire consequences for the average Haitian family.

74 Twoubadou is a traditional musical genre in Haiti. The word is derived from its Spanish equivalent, troubadour. Twoubadou music generally features songs about the highs and lows of love. The music is believed to be influenced by Cuba’s guajiro music and combined with Haiti’s merengue music which was popular at the time. The new song would have been introduced by seasonal migrants circulating between Haiti and Cuba, demonstrating the influence of migration on music.

75 All translations are ours.

76 “Mezanmi,” translated literally from the French “mes amis (my friends),” has become an expression alerting others of one’s shock or distress.

77 Churches et al. 2014.

78 Ramsey 2011.

79 Glaeser et al. 2011.
The World Food Programme\textsuperscript{80} reports that 1 in 3 Haitians require immediate food assistance, and in 2018, half of the population was undernourished.\textsuperscript{81} The devastating effects of soil erosion and natural disasters\textsuperscript{82} in this largely agrarian society\textsuperscript{83} has exacerbated disparities in wealth and health between Haiti's urban and rural communities and contributed to internal migration from rural towns to cities and international migration. Environmental degradation has decreased interest in land cultivation contributing to food deprivation at the rural household level and food insecurity nationally.\textsuperscript{84}

Discouraged by the inability to feed one's family, “Sa Pou n Fé” offers one solution in response to its title question: migrate. For the protagonist, a poor peasant, migration is a high risk, high reward option. In addition, his circumstance only affords him the possibility of migrating illegally via fishing boat: “The sea is deep, and I can’t swim, there are many sharks I don’t think I will survive.” Fearing the migrant’s imminent death at sea, he invokes the vodou spirits that have abandoned him: “Simbi of the waters\textsuperscript{85} where are you, give me strength to swim. Jigowo Kano\textsuperscript{86} where are you, come [buttress] my waist. Saint Michael the Archangel where are you, give me wings to fly. Father God, where are you?”

A year after “Sa Pou n Fé” was released, then President René Préval would use the expression, “Naje Pou Soti [Swim your way out]” during a meeting with rural peasants seeking relief from the 2008 global food crisis. During the crisis, more than 2.5 million Haitians required food assistance due to pre-existing conditions of food insecurity and the absence of safety nets.\textsuperscript{87} The expression of, paradoxically, self-reliance and abandonment became a permanent fixture in Haitian popular culture enshrined in song by one of Haiti’s most popular bands at the time, Djakout Mizik. Their song of the same name, “Naje Pou Soti,”\textsuperscript{88} reminds Haitians that they are responsible for their own survival. Over time its water reference would extend its meaning into the realm of migration.

Many of Haiti’s most vulnerable cannot afford to fly from one destination to another. They must take to the sea, a very risky means of survival given the mode of transport (a rickety boat) and the undocumented status of the boats’ human cargo. While performing “Naje pou Soti,” the lead singer engages in call and response with the audience: “They say the sea is choppy…swim your way out! Those who can’t swim…must float!” Initially understood as a general reference to survival, the expression would take on new meaning. Local Haitians as well as Haitian migrants

\begin{itemize}
  \item World Food Programme 2020.
  \item World Food Programme 2021.
  \item Marcelin and Cela 2017 (1).
  \item Although engagement in agricultural activities has steadily declined, it remains one of the most important sectors in the labor market, second only to the urban informal economy (See: Institut Haïtien de l'Enfance 2018 and World Bank 2015).
  \item Marcelin and Cela 2017 (1).
  \item In the context of migration, Simbi nan dlo [Simbi of the waters] is the spirit called upon for protection while traversing bodies of water.
  \item This is a reference to the founder of judo, Jigoro Kano, and should be understood as a call for strength in order to fight.
  \item Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations 2008.
  \item Naje pou Soti can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a83MNH77jmY
\end{itemize}
shared the common fate of fighting to survive under exceedingly difficult circumstances at home and en route to a new land. Djakout’s song demonstrates that “the political significance of music belongs both to the process of production by the artists and that of reception by the audience.”

Beken’s somber ballad “Chache Lavi, Detwi Lavi [Searching for Life, Destroying Life]” also captures the risks of undocumented migration. The Haiti-based artist laments the trials and tribulations of those who have made the difficult decision to migrate by kanté. It depicts the often-contradictory nature of migration, which begins as part of a quest for a better life, but sometimes ultimately destroys life:

Chache Lavi, Detwi Lavi [Searching for Life, Destroying Life] by Beken

Tout lajounen map domine
All day I am worried
Tout lannwit mwen pa jann dòmi
I never sleep at night
Men poukisa mwen pa konnen
But why, I don’t know
Map domine avèk lavi vye frè m yo
I am worried about the lives of my poor brothers
Kap pase mal nan tout movèz kondisyon
That are suffering under many terrible circumstances
Vye frè m yo fin touen la
My poor brothers have become bacon
nan dyòl pwason etranje
in the mouths of foreign fish

Ou gen madann, ou gen piit
You have a wife, you have children
Lamizè pa dous
Misery isn’t sweet
fò w al chèche wè kot lavi a fè kwen
You must see if you can find where life is possible
Angiz sa menm
Instead of this
chache lavi detwi lavi lakay vye frè m yo
Search for life, destroy the life of my poor brothers

Mamman chèche lavi detwi lavi
Mama search for life, destroy life
Chèche lavi detwi lavi
Search for life, destroy life
Lòt bò lanmè yo pral peri
On the other side of the sea, they will perish
Nape mande si ya chape
We wonder if they will survive
Pasyans vye frè m yo
Patience my poor brothers

Depi w tande gen yon mouvman ki prale fèt
Whenever you hear something’s about to happen
Ki ti kannè, yo tout deja reziye yo
A little fishing boat, they resign themselves
Pou yal peri nan movèz kondisyon
To perish under terrible conditions

Chen grangou pa jwe, Sak vid pa kanpe
A hungry dog doesn’t play, an empty sack doesn’t stand
Anpil timoun sou do w
You’re responsible for many children
Fòk wal chèche lavi
You must search for life

89 Martiniello & Lafleur 2008: 1196
90 See Chache Lavi Detwi Lavi: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WFUI8wjQZk.
91 These are two Haitian proverbs: “A hungry dog that doesn’t play” signaling its distress, while “an empty sack doesn’t stand” is a metaphor for a human being that cannot survive without food. These proverbs suggest that the migrant’s decision to leave Haiti under such perilous conditions is both desperate and rational.
As this song illustrates, music can serve as a form of political expression that challenges local social orders and status quo arrangements\textsuperscript{92, 93}. The decision to migrate has traditionally been understood as a strategy of hope adopted by those in search of a better life for themselves and their families.\textsuperscript{94} For many in low-income countries, the decision to migrate is also motivated by socioeconomic constraints, food insecurity, unemployment, political crisis, or natural disasters.\textsuperscript{95}

Boat people are among the most vulnerable migrants who, as suggested by Anthony Phelps, take an immediate risk for a long-term reward.\textsuperscript{96} In Haiti, this form of migration emerged in the early 1970s, as Haitians fled the economic misery and political repression of the Duvalier dictatorship.\textsuperscript{97} Beken's composition captures the risks associated with migrant sea crossing in precarious boats en route to the US, Belize, Cuba, Honduras, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela, even as the Haitian government signed agreements blocking access to the Florida coast in 1981, heightening the risk of deportation.\textsuperscript{98} The next major wave of Haitian boat people would occur almost two decades later (1991 to 1994) following the coup d'état that deposed Haiti’s democratically elected president Jean Bertrand Aristide.\textsuperscript{99} Migrants took to the sea, some fleeing political repression and others a declining economy exacerbated by an economic embargo.\textsuperscript{100}

Chache Lavi, Detwi Lavi highlights the precarious nature of migration during the time when all boats intercepted (through May 1994) were immediately returned to Haiti.\textsuperscript{101} At that same time, all Cuban migrants received immediate residency upon reaching US shores due to the Wet Foot/Dry Foot policy.\textsuperscript{102} This was demonstrative of the political interests and distinct power differentials (and geopolitical interests of the US government) between Haitians and Cubans in the US. This song describes the hope that nourished these clandestine voyages as well as the mourning of those who didn’t make it to their destination or worse, perished. Beken notes in his song that the cadavers of the most unfortunate were “buried in boxes, sent back to their country,” some never to be claimed by family members.

Musicians in the diaspora would respond in-kind, producing their own songs lamenting the plight of these victims. In 1991, Tabou Combo released “Yo [Them],\textsuperscript{103} asking for compassion for Haiti’s beleaguered migrants, acknowledging those who “stuffed themselves into a boat, [women who] miscarried at sea [while] caught in [inclement] weather.” According to the song, the US’s restrictive interdiction policies suggested that “the Americans didn’t want them because they

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[92] Kasinitz and Martiniello 2019.
\item[93] Martiniello and Kasinitz 2008.
\item[94] Marcelin and Cela 2017 (2).
\item[95] OIM 2014.
\item[96] Souffrant 1985.
\item[97] Icart 2017.
\item[98] CIDH 1993.
\item[99] CIDH 1993.
\item[100] CIDH 1993.
\item[101] Icart 2017.
\item[102] Labott, Liptak, and Oppmann 2017.
\item[103] Found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wsqphwONBA.
\end{footnotesize}
weren’t Cuban.”

Migration music has been used as a tool to facilitate integration in the host country,\textsuperscript{104,105} it can also help preserve tradition among migrant communities.\textsuperscript{106,107} However, the examples provided here demonstrate how it can serve as a form of political action.\textsuperscript{106} Beken and Tabou Combo challenge their audiences to acknowledge the experiences of marginalization in the homeland that lead one to make the difficult choice to migrate, on the one hand, while advocating for the humane treatment of Haiti’s boat people in the US, on the other. In this same vein, Dirksen\textsuperscript{109} showcases Haiti’s carnival music as a distinct form of cultural expression that can be leveraged for political gain or to project a new vision for political engagement, civic participation, and social change. The circumstances that give rise to migration are certainly ripe with political content, whether migration is the result of civil war, political repression, neoliberal policies, or access to a privileged passport that facilitates one’s movement across borders.

The phenomenon of boat people has featured prominently in Haiti’s 20th century migratory landscape, garnering significant international media attention. What the media often failed to capture is the role of intermediaries in facilitating this dangerous process. Rodrigue Milien’s Rakêt [Racket],\textsuperscript{110} released in 1980, explains how the raketè [informal intermediary] exploits the vulnerable, “…nèg yo sa yo fè, yon vye kannòt san motè, san vwal, san manje. Yo vòlè lajan m pou mennen m Miami, enhen epi m nan peyi m byen pwòp […]what the guys do, (they get) an old fishing boat with no motor, with no sail, no food. They stole my money to take me to Miami].” Often potential migrants enlist the services of an informal intermediary as a strategy to avoid the bureaucratic red tape associated with legal processes and procedures in Haiti and/or the exorbitant fees charged by formal intermediaries, which may also include bribes. A cost benefit analysis may lead one to decide that informal intermediaries are more efficient, less expensive, or both. Thus, the intermediary plays a crucial role in facilitating migration.\textsuperscript{111} In Haiti, the services of informal intermediaries are solicited for both legal and irregular migration alike. However, Milien’s song suggests that the decision to migrate is not always made from desperation or the need for survival but is at times the result of the influence of friends and social networks\textsuperscript{112,113} as his song implies: “It’s friends…friends put me in this predicament. Migrating via rakêt when I was doing just fine in my country.”

Once again, as the journey across the sea becomes more dangerous, the migrant appeals to the vodou spirits for protection and safety:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{104} Hemetek 2006.
  \item \textsuperscript{105} Hemetek 2010.
  \item \textsuperscript{106} Allen and Groce 1988.
  \item \textsuperscript{107} Reyes 1999.
  \item \textsuperscript{108} Martiniello and Lafleur 2008.
  \item \textsuperscript{109} Dirksen 2020.
  \item \textsuperscript{110} Rakêt can be heard on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=au9ZD6A1RYU.
  \item \textsuperscript{111} Jones and Sha 2020.
  \item \textsuperscript{112} Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2020.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} Joseph 2017.
\end{itemize}
“Migration, Memory, and Longing in Haitian Songs” — Cela, Charles, Dubuisson, et al.

Rele Danbala wèdo\(^{114}\) yo pa vini
Rele Erzulie\(^{115}\) yo pa reponn
Nou rele mèt Dagwey\(^{116}\) yo pa tande’n
Kisa pou nou fè mezanmi \(2\times\)?
Fanmi nou yo konnen nou riveeeeee
Se nan mitan lamè nou pral mouri
Se nan mitan lamè nou pral peri
O Bon Dye kisa pou m fè?

I called Danbala Wèdo they didn’t come
I called Erzulie they didn’t respond
We called Mèt Dagwey they didn’t hear us
What are we to do, mezanmi \(2\times\)?
Our families think we arrived
We are going to die in the middle of the sea
We are going to perish in the middle of the sea
Oh God, what am I to do?

Scholarship on Haitian migration often emphasizes the sea and the invocation of vodou spirits associated with water to ensure safe passage and protection. Some Haitians who migrate by boat have, indeed, perished on their journey toward a better life. Others have been intercepted at sea, detained at Guantanamo Bay, and/or deported to Haiti. For those who make it to their destination on the other side of the sea, migration music “offers a possible insight into [their] own interpretations of their migrations and visions of their new societies” and may help migrants and their families cope with some of the more painful aspects of the migratory experience.\(^{117}\) Some are disillusioned by a reality that is in stark contrast with their expectations as Milien’s Rakét suggests, “I don’t have a social [security card], I don’t have a green card to work, I have no home, I have nowhere to sleep, I’m cold.” For this migrant, the paradise sought is never found. This may surprise many in the homeland who view migration as a step towards success in life, to whom he issues a warning: \textit{woch nan dlo pa konn mize woch nan soley} [rocks in the water know nothing of the misery of rocks in the sun].\(^{118}\)

Recently, the plight of Haitian laborers has received significant international media coverage due to their exploitation and the recent de-nationalization of Haitians in the Dominican Republic.\(^{119}\) Joseph Emmanuel “Manno” Charlemagne, a Haitian political folk singer exiled in the 1980’s and 1990’s, documents life on the bateys [sugarcane plantations] in his melancholy song, “Dwa de Lòm [Human Rights].”\(^{120}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nan mitan yon chan kann</th>
<th>In the middle of a sugarcane field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bò Higuey an Dominikani</td>
<td>near Higuey in the Dominican Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Ayisyen chita nan yon batey</td>
<td>Two Haitians sit on a plantation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pye atè, do touni</td>
<td>Shoeless, shirtless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youn ape pale youn ap koute</td>
<td>One is talking the other listening</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{114}\) Danbala wèdo is often referred to as the “met dlo” the Master of Water and is the vodou spirit that possesses all the keys. This spirit is called upon to open doors or find solutions.

\(^{115}\) Erzulie Freda is the spirit of love who protects the home or family. There is also Erzulie Dantò is a warrior spirit called upon to fight.

\(^{116}\) Mèt Dagwey is the master of the sea.

\(^{117}\) Baily and Collyer 2006: 180

\(^{118}\) This is a Haitian proverb similar to the English proverb, “The grass is always greener on the other side.”

\(^{119}\) Marcelin 2017.

\(^{120}\) Dwa de Lòm can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqgiqEwKWhg.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Haitian Words</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yo pa fè bri</td>
<td>They don’t make noise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van nan kòm nan sèlman kò tande</td>
<td>Only the wind in the sugarcane hears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sa yape di</td>
<td>What they are saying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kouzen pral fè tè Ayiti</td>
<td>Cousin, I am going to plant in Haiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Si w ge yon komisyon</td>
<td>If you have a message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ma bay mandon ou pou ou</td>
<td>I will give it to your wife for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kouzen li mèt 10 pesos</td>
<td>Cousin, it might only be 10 pesos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kouzen…</td>
<td>Cousin…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lè ou rive lakay</td>
<td>When you get to my house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>si w jwenn mandon mwen plase</td>
<td>If you find my wife living with [another]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wa bay mandon mwen li pou mwen</td>
<td>Give it to my mother for me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kouzen ale kouzen touen</td>
<td>Cousin went cousin returned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avèk nouvèl ki bay kò plen</td>
<td>With news that burdens the heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandon mouri sa genyen kèk ane</td>
<td>[Your] mother passed several years ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen moun ki di ke se chagren</td>
<td>Some say it was sorrow [that killed her]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madanm nan la li la lape kenbe</td>
<td>Your wife is there holding on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo di timoun yo mal okipe</td>
<td>They say the children are not well cared for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premye a grandi tankou chwal</td>
<td>The eldest has grown like a horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ti dènye a pa menm sonje papa l</td>
<td>The youngest doesn’t even remember his father</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Human Rights” is distinct in that it captures the impact of migration on families over time. The migrant has missed many milestones in his children’s lives as well as the passing of his mother. This song predates cellular phones, social media, and other technologies that have facilitated instantaneous communication among transnational families. Prior to these technological advances, the *komisyon*\(^\text{121}\) was central to Haiti’s migration landscape, requiring an intermediary to facilitate communication across borders. It is how migrants, their family members, and their friends-maintained contact, updated one another of new developments in the origin or host country, and how migrants, in particular, maintained their commitments and obligations to those in the homeland. A komisyon comes in many forms and has many delivery methods, including the postal service, a messenger service, wire transfer company, or a traveler or migrant.

Prior to the internet and communication platforms such as WhatsApp, the migrant was completely disconnected from his/her family’s day-to-day realities until s/he received a komisyon. In the song “Human Rights,” the migrant acknowledges his extended absence. He considers the possibility that his partner may have moved on and that his role in this transnational family remains uncertain.\(^\text{122}\) The migrant’s wife has proven faithful, requesting that her patience be rewarded: “li lò pou w touen [it’s time for you to return]. This is consistent with the findings of a national study of migration in Haiti which found that family is the principal motivation behind a migrant’s

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\(^{121}\) A komisyon is a message that can include a letter, gift, money, or combination thereof.

\(^{122}\) Razy and Baby-Collin 2011.
return. The migrant’s wife makes an additional request: _lè wa janbe lakay menmsi w pa pot anyen pa kite machèt ou déyè_ [when you return home if you bring nothing else don’t leave your machete behind]. The machete is an integral tool for the rural peasantry used for gardening, farming, in vodou ceremonies and also serves as a weapon of self-defense. However, the wife’s reference to the machete, in this instance, is an expression of her long-awaited desire for physical intimacy; the machete represents the man’s anatomy that is used tend to his wife’s personal “garden.”

By the 1970s, cassette letters would replace written letters as the primary form of transnational correspondence. However, before the advent of the cassette tape, written correspondence from migrants and family members who were functionally illiterate required the dictation of letters to others. In “Nostalgie Haïtienne [Haitian Nostalgia]” Martha Jean-Claude sings of a female migrant in Cuba dictating a letter to her chosen scribe. Jean-Claude’s song is unique in that it predates the study of women as international migrants - in their own right - despite accounting for almost half of the migrant population since the 1960s.

Nostalgie Haïtienne [Haitian Nostalgia] by Martha Jean-Claude

_Hola Compay vinn fè yon lèt pou mwen_                 Hello Compay write this letter for me
_pou bay lakay ak yon ti pake_                  To take home with a little package
_tanpri souple di Konmè Altima_                Please tell Konmè Altima
_m’pa pi mal gras a Konpè Anibal_               I’m not too bad thanks to Konpe Anibal
_ki bann pliy anba yon parapli_                Who allowed me to fold [myself] under an umbrella
_lèm fèk rive pat anko travay_                When I arrived, I wasn’t working
_sonje Bondye ak Konpè Leon_                    Remember God and Konpe Leon
_voye ti je sou timoun nan yo ke mwen kite_       Keep an eye on the children I left

_Wa di yo konsa lè m soti kiba,_                   Tell them when I leave Cuba
_m’pe pote yon dan lò pou yo_             I will bring a gold tooth for them
_m’pe travay nan mwit kou la jou_         I am working day and night
_pou lèm touen m’ achte yon ti tè,_     So that when I return, I can buy a little land
_yon ti kabrit, yon ti vach, yon ti pouso_      A little goat, a little cow, a little pig

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123 OECD & INURED 2017.
125 Kim 2019.
126 Richman 2005.
127 Nostalgie Haïtienne can be heard here: https://youtu.be/Tne74ENmKOU
128 Boyd 2021.
129 Leinonen 2021.
130 Compay is a Spanish term derived from compadre, co-father in English. The term signifies the relationship between parents and godparents; however, in parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, including Haiti and Cuba, the term is attributed to a peer with whom an informal kinship has been formed. The Creole equivalent is konpè.
131 Konme is co-mother denoting an informal kinship. For further explanation, see footnote above.
Je trempe ma plume dans mon chagrin
bonjou anpil m’voye pou tout lwa
Compay Cubano wa dim konbyen m dwe w
Yon jou konsa lakay ma resevwa w
m’pa konn siyen wa banm, ma fè yon kwa

I wet my pen in my chagrin
I send my greetings to all of the [vodou] spirits
Compay Cubano you’ll tell me how much I owe you
One day, I will host at my home
I don’t know how sign give it to me I will mark an X

During the early 20th century, many Haitians had migrated to Cuba as agricultural laborers. Diederich and Burt\textsuperscript{132} describe the Great Depression — which had cascading negative effects on the Haitian economy — as a peak period of Haitian migration. This period also coincided with US occupation and the prohibitive taxes imposed on commodities and services accompanied by population growth, land tenure issues, and agricultural degradation.\textsuperscript{133, 134} This combination of factors disproportionately affected the rural peasantry, propelling many, including women, to seek labor opportunities on sugarcane plantations in Cuba and the Dominican Republic:

Cutting cane is a backbreaking job and living in the sugar bateys almost subhuman, but Haitian peasants, who had more and more difficulty making little patches of land feed growing families, welcomed the work. They left with the hope of returning home with a little cash to purchase livestock and rebuild their [homes] or expand their land holdings. Most returned but many stayed on from one season to another.\textsuperscript{135}

While Haitian women are more likely to migrate internally from rural to urban areas of Haiti\textsuperscript{136, 137} and less likely than men to migrate internationally,\textsuperscript{138, 139} these two linked phenomena have led to an increase in female headed and female-supported households.\textsuperscript{140} As the breadwinners of their families, some Haitian women eventually make the difficult decision to migrate. International migration, thus, has been more than a strategy of survival but an investment in the future for heads of households. Jean Claude’s lyrics capture the short-term regional migration of agricultural laborers which was undertaken with the expressed intention of generating resources that could be invested upon their return home.\textsuperscript{141}

In “Haitian Nostalgia,” the demographic of the migrant is captured explicitly by her goal of purchasing land and livestock upon her return. It suggests that she is from rural Haiti, which is further corroborated by her inability to write her own letter. Even by 2016, despite making

\textsuperscript{132} Diederich and Burt 2005.
\textsuperscript{133} Dupuy 1989.
\textsuperscript{134} St. Jacques 2015.
\textsuperscript{135} Diederich and Burt 2005: 47.
\textsuperscript{136} Gammage 2004.
\textsuperscript{137} Smith-Greenaway and Thomas 2013.
\textsuperscript{138} Gammage 2004.
\textsuperscript{139} OECD & INURED 2017.
\textsuperscript{140} Gammage 2004.
\textsuperscript{141} Diederich and Burt 2005.
significant gains in terms of access to education, Haitian women (ages 15-49) were still more likely than men to have no formal education, at 13% and 9%, respectively, and almost twice as likely to be unemployed, at 13% and 8%, respectively.\textsuperscript{142} Jean-Claude’s song “evokes memories and captures emotions separate from the lyrical content”\textsuperscript{143} by intimating a longing for home through unspoken memories captured in her expression of chagrin.

In very few words, the song touches upon the additional toll migration places on mothers who must deputize others as surrogate parents to the children who remain in the homeland.\textsuperscript{144, 145} Several studies of women migrants have examined how the gendered roles assigned to mothers persist even as they migrate. Migrant mothers are expected to provide material assistance and emotional care from abroad.\textsuperscript{146} Their transnational parenting skills are subject to the judgements of community members in the homeland\textsuperscript{147, 148} as well as the resentments harbored by the children they have left behind.\textsuperscript{149, 150} Perhaps to preempt such judgements, she reminds the family that her absence is not in vain and will benefit them all in the long run.

The letter also illustrates that the decision to migrate should not be understood strictly as a personal one but one that is placed within a larger social context that includes the household and communities at home and abroad.\textsuperscript{151} The formality and politeness with which she addresses the person she has asked to “keep an eye on the children” suggests that this person is not a family member but rather someone from the community. Therefore, family responsibilities have been extended beyond blood relatives. In another stanza, the migrant informs the letter’s intended recipient that she was received by Anibal as a new arrival at a time when she was unemployed. Such acts of solidarity play a critical role in the decision to migrate, as the absence of such support may render migration wholly impossible and particularly dangerous for female migrants.

Jean-Claude’s salutation to all of the spirits is not inconsequential. As Kim argues, “Voudouisants believe in an invisible world that interacts with this one, inhabited by the souls of the dead, who do not vanish but rather join this spirit realm underneath the ocean.”\textsuperscript{152} Jean-Claude acknowledges the family spirits that have ensured her safe arrival and integration in Cuba, her health, and ability to (eventually) realize her goal of amassing sufficient resources to return home and support her family.

Expressions of longing figure prominently in migration songs, both among migrants and those in the homeland. La Relèv,\textsuperscript{153} written in the early 1990’s, laments the future of a nation with

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\textsuperscript{142} Institut Haïtien de l’Enfance 2018.

\textsuperscript{143} Baily and Collyer 2006: 168.

\textsuperscript{144} Contreras and Griffith 2012.

\textsuperscript{145} Dreby 2010.

\textsuperscript{146} Haagsman and Mazzucato 2021.

\textsuperscript{147} Abrego 2009.

\textsuperscript{148} Dreby 2006.

\textsuperscript{149} Cebotari et al. 2016.

\textsuperscript{150} Menjivar and Abrego 2009.

\textsuperscript{151} De Haas 2010.

\textsuperscript{152} Kim 2019: 59.

\textsuperscript{153} The video for La Relèv can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgoBttLgTeQ.
no one left to take over now that so many have gone.

La Relev [Relief] by Jean Steve Brunache

Gade kisa egzòd fè lakay mwen
Look at what the exodus has done to my home

Gade kiyès batey pran lakay mwen
Look at who the plantations have taken from my home

Gade kisa egzòd fè lakay mwen
Look at what the exodus has done to my home

Gade kiyès batey pran lakay mwen
Look at who the plantations have taken from my home

Nèg ayisyen gason vanyan yo
Haitian men the brave men

Nèg Nago gaga, nèg ginen yo
The Nago, the African man

Kilès kap ede m chante
Who will help me sing

Kilès kap ede m sakle
Who will help me with weeding

Kilès kap ede m plante
Who will help me sow

Ki va ede mwen rekôleteee
Who will help me harvest

Frè m yo ale simbi nan dllo
My brothers have gone, simbis in the water

Frè m yo ale ginen nan bwa
My brothers have gone, ginen in the woods

Frè m yo ale simbi nan dllo
My brothers have gone, simbis in the water

Frè m yo ale ginen nan bwa
My brothers have gone, ginen in the woods

Kilès kap ede m rache diri
Who will help me pull rice

Kilès kap ede m kase mayi
Who will help me harvest corn

Avèk ki ma va al nan sori
With whom will I go to a sori

Avèk ki ma va al nan köve
With whom will I go to a köve

Kilès kap ede m keyi kafe
Who will help me harvest coffee

Kilès kap ede m simen pitimi
Who will help me harvest sorghum

During this same period, many Haitian migrants were detained on the US’s military base in Cuba where some were released to the US as parolees where they could apply for asylum and others were returned to Haiti. In this same period there was a mass exodus of young Haitians

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154 Ginen nan bwa refers to the protective spirit (Ginen) associated with one’s family and ancestral land (nan bwa literally meaning in the woods or on the land). Ginen is a symbolic restoration of Africa among vodou practitioners in which land (Haiti) meets sea (the route back to Africa) where the spirit of Haitian people is derived and will return upon death (See: Hurbon 1987).

155 The sori is a form of mutual aid in rural Haiti which includes an impromptu offer of agricultural labor offered by a group to a beneficiary who cannot refuse. The beneficiary must provide a meal for the laborers at the end of their day of work.

156 The köve is a widespread mutual aid practice in rural Haiti in which laborers collectively weed and plant in small groups without remuneration. In turn, each member of the group benefits from this collective practice on their plot of land. During this activity, they sing, dance, and eat at the beneficiary’s expense. This practice is slowly disappearing as farmers are increasingly choosing to serve as paid day laborers (See: Jacques Romain, Masters of the Dew).

157 Paik 2016.
recruited to work on the sugarcane plantations of the Dominican Republic. By 2012, data revealed that almost two-thirds of these migrants were male, and most were under 35 years of age. In the majority of cases, the employment obtained in the host country barely met their basic needs, serving as a source of disillusionment.

As many before him, Brunache calls upon the vodou spirits for assistance. Is Brunache calling upon Simbi, the spirit of rain and water, to combat drought by watering the land? Or is he calling for the protection of migrants that have taken to the seas? Is he calling upon Simbi to transform this exodus to a return home? In this passage, Simbi reminds us of the significance of water in the migratory route as a space of encounters and the creation of linkages and networking. Brunache’s calls to the lwas may also represent a double bind. The departure of his “brothers” signals the discontinuity of agricultural labor, but more significantly, of Haitian culture and identity. “Simbi, you are in trouble,” Brunache exclaims, alerting the spirit to its potential weakening foreshadowing the eventual disappearance of the lwas who will have no one left to serve them.

Brunache’s fundamental question is: “Who will relieve me [of my duties] to help Haiti rise up?” Almost two decades earlier Marie-Clotilde “Toto” Bissainthe, an artist-activist exiled during the Duvalier regime, made her own call for a return to the homeland. In “Dey [Mourning],” the exiled singer warns that for Haiti to “rise up” it will need its diaspora. The complementarity of these two songs in which the homeland calls out to the diaspora and the diaspora calls out to the homeland can be found in the levity of La Relèv’s musical arrangement, which in some ways belies its lyrics, and the somber lyrics of Mourning with its acoustic guitar, bass, and the cries of its songstress:

Dèy [Mourning] by Toto Bissainthe

Dèy ohh mwen rele dèy ohh, Ayiti woy
Dèy ohh map chante dèy ohh, Ayiti woy
Ayiti cheri, men pitit ou mouri
Men lòt yo do touni
Sa k ap pote dèy la pou ou woy

Mourning ohh I cry mourning, Haiti woy
Mourning ohh I sing mourning, Haiti woy
Haiti my dear, your children have died
The others are bear backed
Who will mourn for you woy

Whereas Brunache laments the departure of his “brothers,” Bissainthe intimates a desire for return that may not be shared by compatriots at home. “Dèy” captures the pain of a nation that has lost many of its children to migration, while conveying the yearning of those children to be called home:

158 Lozano et al. 2016.
159 INURED 2020 (1).
161 Lozano et al. 2016.
162 Camille 2006.
163 Dey was released in 1977 and can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeedTeSKNIU.
164 Woy is a cry of mourning, pain, or suffering in Creole.
“Dèy”’s lyrics and melody express profound grief and sorrow, mourning a country on the brink of death. In what appears as a final act of defiance, Bissainthe declares: “Haiti will rise up!” while referring to the konbit as a symbol of the communion needed between Haiti and its diaspora for the nation’s revival. As this song illustrates, migration music can serve as a therapeutic outlet to express pain, rejection, sadness, disappointment, hope, and eventual redemption. When we examine “Dèy”’s lyrics against that of “La Relev,” we also see the complexity of the relationships in Haiti’s transnational community. Both songs express some form of rejection by the other, a reproach of the other, and a collective, though unmet, desire for a unified effort toward rebuilding Haiti. Thus, migration music serves multiple purposes at the micro- and macro-levels; it can serve as a warning to individuals contemplating migration, remind migrants of their obligation to family and community, or serve as a broader call for solidarity towards the development or reconstruction of the homeland.  

Calls for unity would reach fever pitch following the 2010 earthquake, as it appeared that Haiti would finally have its chance at revival. The disaster was a critical event that left an indelible mark on Haitians around the globe. The collective trauma experienced by Haitians abroad was evidence of their deep emotional ties to the homeland across time and space. The disaster was expected to reorganize power relations and redefine relations between Haiti and the international community, as well as between Haitians at home and beyond. With billions of dollars in aid committed to the nation’s rebuilding effort and calls made for diaspora engagement

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165 Konbit is a collective agricultural activity similar to the kòve.
166 Baily and Collyer 2006.
167 Das 1995.
169 Audebert 2017.
in its reconstruction, in its reconstruction, many believed that the time had finally come when Haiti would chart a new path forward. It was in this context that Beethova Obas, a Haiti-based musician, would release “Lavi [Life]” calling for solidarity between Haiti and its diaspora as the nation recovered from the disaster and embarked on the rebuilding process: “Each Haitian is a poto mitan that’s supporting the arbor of development. They know Haiti can’t achieve anything; it is Haitians who have to [work] hand in hand with those who live far to build Haiti. What are we waiting for to work together?”

Lavi is yet another illustration of the call for unity that carries an implicit rebuke of Haitians’ failure to come together. The song is one of hope that recognizes the interdependent yet antagonistic nature of the relationship between Haitians in the homeland and abroad. Prior studies have shown that Haiti’s relationship with its diaspora is at best, ambivalent, due to power differentials and often characterized by distrust and resentment on both sides, paternalism on the part of members of the diaspora, and perceived exploitation by both parties. These tensions are further exacerbated by divergences in what Haitians in the homeland and those living abroad propose as solutions for the nation’s development.

The 2010 disaster further unveiled the complex features of this interdependent relationship between Haitians at home and abroad. During a 2015 study of 130 youth of Haitian descent in the US, almost 1 in 5 participants reported that their diasporic identity emerged or was strengthened by the disaster. Yet for many youths the call for unity and cooperation found in this song rang hollow, given the level of distrust and lack of solidarity between Haiti and its diaspora. Studies of post-disaster engagement in Haiti have also pointed out the need for leadership that articulates a plan for rebuilding and effectively channeling the resources Haitians in the diaspora have to offer the homeland. This suggests that contrary to the song’s lyrics, the problem of engagement is not individual reluctance but lack of political will.

The process of rebuilding a nation is a politically contentious endeavor. Das asserts that societies are reconstructed, social relations reconfigured, and new constituencies emerge during such reconstruction. The post-disaster reconstruction project, in some ways, hampered emerging solidarity between those in Haiti and those abroad. Haiti’s appeals to the diaspora privileged financial

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171 Cela 2021.
172 OAS 2010.
174 Lavi can be found here on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JxMIPmXGO4.
175 Poto mitan is the central pillar that holds up a vodou temple.
176 Cela 2021.
177 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
180 Cela 2021.
181 Ibid.
183 Ibid.
184 Das 1995.
contributions and, to a lesser extent, technology transfer and capacity building potentials,\textsuperscript{185, 186} challenging the diaspora’s desire for a greater political role that included dual citizenship.\textsuperscript{187, 188} In essence, the political marginalization of Haitians living abroad belies the fact that it is their ability to remit that has kept Haitian families and the national economy afloat in times of normalcy,\textsuperscript{189, 190} and, especially, during and in the aftermath of crises and disasters.\textsuperscript{191}

**Youth, Migration, and the Political Dimension of Music**

As migrants tend to be younger, able-bodied persons, their loss to migration has had devastating impacts on Haiti. These young migrants leave a country that has failed to meet its obligations to its citizens yet is the only home they have ever known. This section analyzes songs that capture the complexity of migration for Haitian youth who wish to secure their future while maintaining a glimmer of hope that their success abroad will alleviate the suffering of family members in Haiti.

BelO, a Haitian jazz artist renowned for his conscious-raising lyrics, is one of Haiti’s most popular contemporary artists of the mizik angaje [engaged music] movement. Dating back to the colonial period, mizik angaje is a “genre-crossing expressive form [that] features politically and socially engaged lyrics”\textsuperscript{192} that has increasingly sharpened its focus on the plight of Haiti’s poorest in the wake of the island nation’s tenuous transition toward democratic rule.\textsuperscript{193, 194}

In “Istwa Dwòl [Bizarre Story]”,\textsuperscript{195} BelO describes the frustration of Haiti’s youth who take to the seas with the goal of leaving Haiti at all costs:

**Istwa Dwòl [Bizarre Story] by BelO**

Istwa 5 jèn gason ki pran kanntè

K al chèche kibò la vi fè kwen

Nèg sa yo te gentan bouke ak mizè

Yo blije pati kite fammi lwen

Yo pat memn gen on destinasyon

Yo sou dlo sou kont vag sou kont van

Nèg sa yo te gen on sel vizyon

Kite Ayiti fe kap yo pran van pou yale

The story of five young men who [migrated by] fishing boat

In search of a place where life is possible

These guys were already tired of misery

They had to flee leaving family far behind

They didn’t even have a destination

They’re on water depending on the waves and wind

These guys had only one goal

Leave Haiti, find wind for their kites to fly

\textsuperscript{185} Cela 2021.

\textsuperscript{186} Group de Travail sur l’Éducation et la Formation 2010.

\textsuperscript{187} Cela 2021.

\textsuperscript{188} OECD and INURED 2017.

\textsuperscript{189} Marcelino 2012.

\textsuperscript{190} OECD and INURED 2017.

\textsuperscript{191} INURED 2020 (2).

\textsuperscript{192} Dirksen 2013: 47.

\textsuperscript{193} Averill 1997.

\textsuperscript{194} Richman 2005.

\textsuperscript{195} The video for Istwa Dwòl can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Xo_xbyhHn8.
Migration has depleted the nation’s human resources with millions of Haitians living outside of its borders.¹⁹⁶

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Haitian Song</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peyizan ale ale</td>
<td>Peasants have left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Komèsan ale ale</td>
<td>Petty vendors have left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atizan yale ale</td>
<td>Artists have left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Se peyi a kap kraze</td>
<td>The country is falling apart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moun anwo ale ale</td>
<td>The well-off have left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machan dlo ale ale</td>
<td>Water vendors have left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nèg geto yale ale</td>
<td>The guys from the ghetto have left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ata ti zwazo yale</td>
<td>Even little birds have left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pwoletè ale ale</td>
<td>The proletariat have left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pwofesè ale ale</td>
<td>Teachers have left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitaden yale ale</td>
<td>City dwellers have left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizisyen yo fin ale vre</td>
<td>Musicians have gone for good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the end of the Duvalier era in the early 1980’s, the succession of political, economic, and social crises¹⁹⁷, ¹⁹⁸, ¹⁹⁹, ²⁰⁰ have affected Haitians across all social strata, fueling an exodus that has led BelO to conclude that: “The country is […] falling apart.” Haiti’s youth, who make up most of the population, are faced with a future characterized by intermittent employment and low compensation, mostly in the informal sector.²⁰¹ Therefore, many are condemned to a life of precarity and disillusionment, with migration seemingly offering the only solution.

Songs released by Haiti’s young migrants, many of whom have migrated to nations in the global South, including Brazil and Chile, reflect on the socioeconomic conditions that have forced them to leave their homeland. Some of these youth can also be found in Mexico, where many journeying to the US across the Central American isthmus have been forced to settle due to restrictive migration policies adopted by the Obama,²⁰² Trump,²⁰³ and Biden²⁰⁴ administrations. T Lion, a young Haitian rapper living in Mexico, details his excitement at the prospect of migrating in “Le m Tap Kite Ayiti [When I Was Leaving Haiti]”.²⁰⁵

Mwen sonje lem tap kite Ayiti
Mwen patka domi telman m tap panse
I remember when I was leaving Haiti
I couldn’t sleep, I was thinking so much

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¹⁹⁶ World Bank 2015
¹⁹⁷ INURED 2020 (1).
¹⁹⁸ Marcelin and Cela 2017 (1).
¹⁹⁹ Marcelin and Cela 2017 (2).
²⁰⁰ Marcelin and Cela 2017 (3).
²⁰¹ World Bank 2015.
²⁰² Charles 2016.
²⁰³ Christi and Bolter 2019.
²⁰⁴ Borger 2021.
²⁰⁵ The video Le m Tap Kite Ayiti can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4IgfX9C_Qw.
There was only one thing I saw
Leaving Haiti to live abroad
I felt my misery would end
I felt the chord would finally break free for me
I felt the rock would roll for me
I felt that I would find success

Migration allows these youth to escape socioeconomic uncertainties of life in Haiti and aspire to a better life abroad that is often idealized:

Le m santi m razè m mwen di manman m grangou      When I’m broke, I say mom I’m hungry
Ban m 10 gourdes pou m ka mete papadap 207    Give me 10 gourdes for papadap
Mwen jenn gason m gen kouraj m’ka travay      I’m a young man I am strong I can work
Mwen oblije met kò m deyò pou m al chèche      I’m forced to leave to go search
Ayiti, tout moun konnen bagay yo konplike     Haiti, everyone knows things are complicated
Se sak fè anpil nan nou pati nou pa vwayaje    That’s why many of us leave we don’t travel

T Lion chronicles a situation in which the young migrant is willing but unable to work and a burden on his parents. This song diverges from many of those produced in Haiti by the generation that precedes him. His male predecessors were older father figures unable to support their families. This song mirrors that of BelO’s Istwa Dwòl, which documents the plight of Haiti’s youth, many of whom began migrating in large numbers after the earthquake.208 They may not have families to feed but face a bleak future that compels them to “al cheche [go search for]” a better life elsewhere.

As Reyes suggests, “Musics cross over, blend with, sample from other music…”209 Through music, identity is negotiated and expressed.210 Some songs from the Haitian diaspora, irrespective of generation, infuse the language of the host country. Martha Jean-Claude starts off with a greeting in Spanish to her “Compay,” T Lion raps in Creole, Spanish, and English. They are no longer monolingual (Creole) or bilingual (Creole and French) Haitians but multilingual transnational

To met may is an expression that alludes to struggling to survive. An equivalent Haitian saying would be to “whip water to make butter.”

Papadap is the term used for cellular phone credit provided by Haiti’s most popular telecommunications company, Digicel.

Marcelin and Cela 2017 (2).
Reyes 2019: 46
Martiniello and Lafleur 2008.
migrants. T Lion further demonstrates the influence of rap, a dominant US cultural form with global impact and a history steeped in political expression, on Haitian music.

In “Migrasyon [Migration]” Haiti-based rapper Toby documents the changing landscape of Haitian migration in his lifetime:

Migrasyon [Migration] by Toby

Lontan e te Bahamas — Before it was Bahamas
Avan ki lè ou tande — Before you know it
On nèg Lage naso — The guy is in Nassau
Sa ki vwayaje al chèche lavi — Those who travel search for life
Repiblik dominicana — [in] Dominican Republic
Sityasyon peyi a fè tout — The situation in the country has made all
  ti jèn Ayisyen fin egzile — the Haitian youth exile [themselves]
Sa kap mennen kounye a se — Now what’s popular is
Lage Chili ou byen lage Brezil oh — to go to Chile or go to Brazil oh
Kote ti Andre — Where is Ti Andre
Li lage Chili — He’s in Chile
Kote Antoinette oh eeeeh — Where’s Antoinette oh eeeeh
Li lage Chili — She’s in Chile
Kote Krem peyi — Where’s the cream of the country
¾ lage Brezil oh — ¾ are in Brazil oh
Yo lage Chili — They’re in Chile
Yo ale ,Yo ale,Yo ale — They left, they left, they left
Yo go, yo go,yo go,yo Gooo — They went, they went, they went

Ayisyen ap briye aletranje — Haitians are shining abroad
Laba yo pap boule Mache — Abroad they don’t burn [down] markets
Laba malfektè pap tiye yo — Abroad bad people won’t kill them
Laba zafe mache oh — Abroad things work [out] oh
Laba famni pap echwe yo — Abroad family won’t fail them

Laba pa gen mechanste oh — Abroad they don’t find evil oh
Laba yo pap menace yo — Abroad they won’t threaten them
Laba travay se libête yo — Abroad work is their freedom

Toby provides a brief history of Haitian migration within the global South ending with contemporary flows to Brazil and Chile, the more recent destinations of choice. From Haiti, he imagines the accomplishments of his contemporaries abroad, contrasting their self-actualization and security against the constraints and insecurities of Haitian life. One might argue that his lyrics

211 The rap song Migrasyon can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=597QEi-NxI.
212 Fauchaux 2018 and Laurince 2014.
idealize migration and life abroad, through his lyrics, which are “the component in music which have the most obvious political meaning.”

We suggest that by accentuating the most positive outcomes of international migration, Toby is directing his political statement against the poverty, structural violence, and social exclusion to which Haitians, in general, and Haitian youth, in particular, are subjected in their homeland.

Alix Georges’ “Ayisyen Kite Lakay (Haitians Leave Home)” highlights the shortage of employment opportunities in Haiti, linking it to the decision to migrate to Brazil and Chile:

**Ayisyen Kite Lakay [Haitians Leave Home] by Alix Georges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindi</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ayisyen kite lakay pou y al chache travay</td>
<td>Haitians leave home to find work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo ale o Chili pou y al chache lavi</td>
<td>They go to Chile to search for life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayisyen kite lakay pou y al chache travay</td>
<td>Haitians leave home to find work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo rive o Brezil, pou y al chache lavi</td>
<td>They go to Chile to search for life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Se gason ak famm vanyan de 15 a 60 tan</td>
<td>Brazil men and women ages 15 to 60 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ki chaje konesans, ki chaje ak talan</td>
<td>Filled with knowledge, filled with talent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genyen ki enjenyè, gen nan yo ki dòktè</td>
<td>Some are engineers, some of them doctors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genyen ki enfimyè, genyen k analfabèt</td>
<td>Some nurses, some illiterate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The song goes on to capture the diversity of experiences of Haitian migrants in South America:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindi</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen nan yo ki fristre, yo desepsyone</td>
<td>Some are frustrated, they are disappointed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo di yo pa t konnen si se konsa Brezil te ye</td>
<td>They say they did not know if this was how Brazil was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen nan yo ki santi rèv yo reyalize</td>
<td>Some feel that they have realized their dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>….</td>
<td>….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tout peyi a fin ale!</td>
<td>The whole country is gone!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Du nord au sud de l’est à l’ouest, oyoy Djah!</td>
<td>From the north to south from east to west, oyoy Jah!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ale raboto, solino ale</td>
<td>Go to Raboto, Solino is gone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nèg solèy, Fòtouwon yo ale</td>
<td>Guys [from] Cité Soleil, Fòtouwon are gone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nèg geto, nèg anwo ale!</td>
<td>Guys [from the] ghetto, guys from the hills²¹⁸!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machan Dessalines, moun Okay yo ale</td>
<td>Marchand Dessalines, people [from] Aux Cayes are gone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nèg gonayiv, nèg tomasik yo ale!</td>
<td>Guys [from] Gonaïves, guys [from] Thomassique are gone!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

²¹³ Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008: 1196.
²¹⁴ Kolbe and Hutson 2006.
²¹⁵ Marcelin and Willman 2017.
²¹⁶ Willman and Marcelin 2010.
²¹⁷ The video for Ayisyen Kite Lakay can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wxoM1j7FTc.
²¹⁸ Anwo (up) when contrasted against anba (down), represents the affluent Haitians who live up in the hills of Petionville, Kenscoff, etc. above the city of Port-au-Prince with those who live below in the metropolitan areas’ numerous ghettos.
Etidyan pwofèse ale!  Students and teachers are gone!
Sot o Brezil pou Chili ale!  Left Brazil for Chile gone!
Pran wout apye pou Miyami ale  Traveled by foot en route to Miami gone
Tout peyi a fin ale! Ale!  The whole country is gone! Gone!
Tout peyi a fin ale! Ale!  The whole country is gone! Gone!

Similar to Istwa Dwòl, Georges provides some insight into the diverse sociodemographic of those who have migrated; they include men, women, young, old, urban, rural, rich, and poor. Perhaps the song’s greatest contribution is that it captures an important part of the often-contradictory nature of the migration phenomenon, the desperation of those left behind. While many are eager to leave a country they believe is in decline and/or offers few to no opportunities, those who have left often yearn to return as suggested in the songs Haitian Nostalgia, Mourning, Racket, among countless other migration songs. The paradox of the migration phenomenon is that many in Haiti hope to leave while those who have migrated maintain a desire to return as expressed in Tabou Combo’s song “Lakay [Home]”: “[My] Dear Haiti, you gave me life. Even if I leave you one day I must return to your feet.”

Return is also a complex matter, as those who do encounter a country unlike the one, they left behind. As Baily and Collyer note, “…displacement is not only spatial but temporal—the culture with which the migrant is familiar no longer exists, even in the place they left. In the migrant’s absence the home society has moved on, such that they no longer feel that they are fully a part of that society either, since they had no role in, and were not witness to, the developments that have occurred.” Migrants may, therefore, occupy a liminal space in which they are a foreigner in the host country, and they have now become foreigners in their homeland.

Conclusion

As structural inequalities in Haiti persist, Haitians look abroad for opportunities to support their families, self-actualize, and, in the best of circumstances, support homeland development. Haitian migration continues to evolve, with new migratory routes emerging in Latin America following the 2010 earthquake and onward migration to the US-Mexico border adding a new dimension to the search for a better life in the face of Haiti’s cascading crises.

Migration evokes movement and temporality, yet in our scholarly pursuit of understanding migration through the migrant, we often neglect the simultaneous evolution and passage of time in the homeland. Through migration music, we apprehend the changes that occur across transnational space, and this cultural form can be readily shared and widely diffused. It is an expression of one’s life experience as well as the group identity that connects people. As Kasinitz and

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222 Baily and Collyer 2006.
224 Roy and Dowd 2010.
Martiniello assert, “Music is an increasingly important social space for the creation of identity.” Haiti’s migration music, thus, connects those who have left with those remaining in the homeland, contributing to the construction and evolution of this imagined transnational community.

The songs shared herein represent an ongoing dialogue of the experiences, perspectives, challenges, and triumphs of a people embroiled in a historically contentious nation-building project that began under the most violent of circumstances in the 19th century and continues today. These songs capture the suffering that propels so many to abandon the only home they have known. It documents the sacrifices, contestations, and possibilities offered by migration and the yearning for return, a return that is predicated on structural political, economic, and social change. Music provides an outlet for migrants and the diaspora to communicate with Haitians in the homeland and vice versa. It provides a venue for Haitians within and outside of the island nation’s borders to express, project, envision, and aspire to create a new, more inclusive Haiti. Bound by blood, the mutuality of shared sociocultural experiences, and history, Haiti’s music brings to life an imagined transnational community engaged in the collective project of defining what Haiti is and what it shall become.

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225 Kasinitz and Martiniello 2019: 862.
“Migration, Memory, and Longing in Haitian Songs” — Cela, Charles, Dubuisson, et al.


