

*'NAP CHACHE OUVÈT'* (WE'RE SEEKING OPENNESS):  
TRANSLATION, PRODUCTION, AND SONGWRITING  
AMONGST HAITIAN ARTISTS IN BRAZIL



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Approval of the Thesis

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Doctor of Philosophy in Music

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## **Dedication**

To Jeffrey Verilus (a.k.a. King Kong Lion) and all those who died in the Darién Gap in search of a better life.

To all Haitians who remain in Brazil, especially the artists and musicians, who continuously inspire me with their love for music and stubborn hope for a better future.

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To Júlia and Teresa, the loves of my life.

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## Abstract

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The present thesis concerns an ethnomusicological study of the musical endeavours of Haitian migrants living in Brazil during the transition from the 2010s to the 2020s, with special emphasis on the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. It investigates different instances of the music making of Haitians who have afforded central importance to the development of careers as independent artists and musicians in the country, seeking to bring to the fore how their experience as diasporic Haitians and Black Caribbean migrants in search of a better life in Brazil has impacted and shaped their music.

The research supporting this study is based on a multi-sited ethnography, which included online and offline participant observation, direct musical collaboration, and interviews with key members of what I propose to call the diasporic Haitian musical community in Brazil. This community primarily consists of young men aged between twenty and forty years. They are part of the recent post-quake Haitian migration to Brazil and lead

double lives as both low-skilled workers and independent artists. Given the distribution demographics of Haitians in Brazil, this community is predominantly concentrated in the country's south and southeastern regions. Through theoretical framings that explore the music-related actions of translation, production, and songwriting, I consider the aesthetic agencies of musicians, singer-songwriters, and beatmakers/producers, attempting to provide a portrait and a critical analysis of the music-making practices of recently arrived migrants.

With the recent expansion of the Haitian migratory system towards South America during 2010s, my research attempts to follow the lead of recent scholarship on Haitian migrant experiences in South America by scholars of the Global South. The goal is to diversify and complexify scholarly understandings of music and its relations with the transnational Haitian diaspora, migration, and the lives of marginalized non-white migrants in Brazil. I foreground how music has played an integral part in Haitians' search for and negotiation of belonging and recognition within Brazilian society, using it to foster and advocate intercultural sociability in a relationship in which power is unequally distributed and prevalent stereotypes about Haiti and Haitians exert negative impact on their reception and appraisal by Brazilians.

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## PREFACE

Throughout the thesis, the reader will discern the presence of text boxes, marked using smaller, italicised font. All the texts in the boxes stems from entries originally recorded in my fieldwork diary, re-worked with the addition of comments and reflections triggered by my reading of the diary whilst writing the thesis. They offer glimpses of noteworthy moments of fieldwork which relate to the general argument or context of each chapter and/or section, and aim to enrich the discussion undertaken in the main text by adding a more personal, reflexive, and less varnished layer of ethnographic representation.

Although it is specifically addressed in the first chapter, translation has represented a central element and challenge throughout both fieldwork and the writing of this thesis. All text translated from Portuguese to English is my own. For the translation and revision of text in Kreyòl, however, I hired the services of Alix Vladimir, a Haitian language teacher who lived for eight years in Brazil and now resides in the UK. The lyrics of songs in Portuguese (or with sections in Portuguese) were transcribed by me, while lyrics in Kreyòl were either supplied by the composers themselves (in most cases) or transcribed by Alix Vladimir. As guides for the orthography of Kreyòl excerpts hereby presented, I have used Targète and Urciolo's *Haitian creole – English dictionary* (1993) and the Haitian Creole Grammar available on MIT's webpage.<sup>1</sup> Any responsibility for inaccuracy in the orthography or translation is my own.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <[http://web.mit.edu/D-Lab/Website%20Redo/haiti/creole\\_grammar.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/D-Lab/Website%20Redo/haiti/creole_grammar.pdf)> (Accessed 13 January 2023)

*Economically, Haitians won't fit in the Brazilian system, with the [low] wages, with all the prejudice there is, Brazil is not ready to receive foreigners, I won't even say Haitians, but foreigners. Brazil isn't ready even for Brazilians.*

*Haitian migrant known as Chamara to the BBC<sup>2</sup>*

*Haiti (Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil)*

*When you're invited up onto the terrace  
Of the House of Jorge Amado Foundation  
To watch from up above the line of soldiers, almost all black,  
Beating on the necks of the black riff-raff,  
Of mulatto thieves and other almost white men  
Treated like black men  
(And they are almost all black),  
How is it that blacks, poor men and mulattos,  
And almost white men, so poor they're almost black, are treated?  
And it doesn't matter if the eyes of the whole world  
Might be turned for a moment toward the square  
Where the slaves were punished.  
And today a drumbeat a drumbeat  
With all the innocence of boys in secondary school uniforms on a parade day  
And all the epic grandeur of an orderly people  
Attracts, stuns, and excites us.  
Nothing matters: not the architectural detail of the second story,  
Not the camera lens from the TV show "Fantástico", not Paul Simon's record  
No one, no one is a citizen.  
If you go to the party there at Pelô, and if you don't go,  
  
Think about Haiti, pray for Haiti.  
Haiti is here – Haiti is not here.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <<https://bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-56342515>> (Accessed 8 May 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Lyrics as translated by Browning (1998).

## INTRODUCTION

*Justice for Moïse Kagambe, Largo da Ordem, Curitiba – 5 February 2022*

*On 24 January 2022, Moïse Kagambe, a 24-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rio de Janeiro, was brutally beaten and then killed in front of the Tropicália kiosk in Barra da Tijuca, an upper-class neighbourhood in Rio's West Zone where he worked informally, after complaining about back wages. This shocking crime exposed the vulnerable situation of non-white migrants and refugees in the country, bringing to the fore the intersection of precarious labour, racism, and xenophobia that shapes their experience in Brazil. Human rights and migrant/refugee organizations, as well as the Black movement in Brazil were quick to respond, calling for the due prosecution of the guilty parties and demanding restitution for Moïse's family. Simultaneously, they denounced the racist legacies of colonialism by connecting the predicaments of nonwhite migrants and refugees in the country to those faced by Afro-Brazilians for centuries. I decided to take part in the protest at Largo da Ordem, in Curitiba's historical city centre, in front of the Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Homens Pretos de São Benedito. The church was founded and built by enslaved Africans and Afro-Brazilians in the mid-seventeenth century, due to the ban on their presence in the city's two other churches. Close to a hundred people gathered and listened to the speeches of political leaders from left-wing parties, leaders of social movements, and migrants and refugees living in the city. Dozens of banners demanded for justice for Moïse and Black migrants in the country. Homages were paid not only to Moïse but also to recent Black victims of police violence like female politician Marielle Franco and George Floyd. There were performances by an all-girl Slam group, and a Black female singer performed a cappella renditions of an Umbanda ritual song and Cidinho and Doca's 'Rap da felicidade', a classic of 1990's Brazilian hip-hop. Amongst the many stories of prejudice and violence shared by African and Haitian migrants, the speech of Jean, also a Congolese migrant, was particularly consequential in highlighting what it means to be a Black migrant in Brazil. Jean stated, 'Here in Brazil, we have the "gringo" and the "foreigner". We are the foreigners, and you know who the "gringos" are. [...] I want to ask you a question: With what eyes do you look upon Black foreigners? I have always felt that I was seen as secondary. [...] Brazil is the most miscegenated country I know, but it's also the most heterogeneous one. [...] But it's a strange miscegenation, because it's nice to say Brazil is miscegenated, but we don't live that homogeneity, it's so segregated, you know? People ask me if I have Brazilian friends. I have three. And I've lived in Brazil for ten years'.*

In August 1993, world-renowned Brazilian songwriters Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil released the song ‘Haiti’ on their album *Tropicália 2*. The gloomy and sober hip-hop-infused track explores, with great poetic depth, the interconnectedness of violence, inequality, and race, all of which have been structuring forces of Brazilian society since the start of the colonial period in 1500. In the chorus, Veloso and Gil symbolically link Brazil and Haiti, singing the (apparently) self-contradictory lines ‘Haiti is here, Haiti is not here’ (*O Haiti é aqui / O Haiti não é aqui*). As Barbara Browning (1998) notes, the song’s themes, social critique, and style evince the common ground of a wider history of racialized segregation and resistance shared for centuries by members of the African diaspora. The Haiti ‘in’ Brazil sung by Veloso and Gil, hence, was metaphorical. Many years later, the unforeseen migration of thousands of Haitians to Brazil after the Port-au-Prince earthquake on 12 January 2010 would bestow Veloso and Gil’s words with an air of prophecy, as Haiti did suddenly become ‘here’, and Brazil progressively emerged as a relevant new setting for the transnational Haitian diaspora. Nonetheless, the antithetical second line (‘Haiti is not here’) also gradually revealed great prophetic potency. In ways both extremely violent and casually disinterested, the growing Haitian presence in the country was neglected, marginalized, and even rejected: for many Brazilians, there was no place for Haitians in Brazil.

The present thesis deals with the musical endeavours of Haitian migrant artists in Brazil. Fundamentally, it deals with the lives and music making of ordinary people, unknown and frequently socially invisible Black Caribbean migrants seeking to make a living in a new context fraught with ambivalence: Brazil presents itself as (and, in many ways, is) migrant-friendly and hospitable, yet simultaneously treats them and other non-white immigrants as alien and limits their possibilities of integration and social mobility. As potently formulated above by both

Chamara and Jean, combinations of race, colour, and country of origin designate different social places and possibilities for foreign-born populations in Brazil, a country difficult to navigate even for Afro-Brazilians, which constitute the majority of its population. Registering Stuart Hall's trenchant remarks on how music can offer 'the most telling insights into the early days of migrant experience' (2021[2002]: 291), throughout the four chapters of this thesis I seek to provide readers with an encompassing and critical ethnomusicological study of a recently formed (and already partly waning) Black diaspora in (and of) the Global South, highlighting music's epistemological potency for understanding migrant experience. Furthermore, I intend to provide an appreciation of how, in a new-found diasporic context, popular music remains 'an important component of the connective tissue of the Haitian transnation' (Averill 1994: 269).

The micro-scale of events, processes, and people considered here has profound connections with crucial trends and events on national, continental, and global scales. Post-quake Haitian migration to South America cannot be understood in isolation from increasingly restrictive immigration policies in the Global North that have emerged in response to the global escalation in migration at the beginning of the third millennium. Additionally, the post-2010 Haitian exodus reveals the continuation of imperial and neo-colonial attitudes towards Haiti in international geopolitics, the racialized workings of capitalism on the arrangement of labour in a globalized world (Robinson 1983), and the escalating violence and state ineffectiveness in Caribbean societies, particularly in Haiti (Feldmann et al. 2019). Extending far beyond the case of Haitians, this broader picture reveals the increasing complexity and heterogeneity of migration patterns in the Global South (De Lombaerde et al. 2014: 105) and the growing irrelevance in distinguishing between forced and other types of migration, with the emergence of a 'widespread pattern of survival migration' (Feldmann et al. 2019: 11).

Haitian migration to South America in recent years also partakes in what Haitian-Brazilian anthropologist Handerson Joseph has described as a ‘Blackening of migration’, a concept meant to highlight the increasingly important role Black individuals play in migratory movements around the world (2021: 81). This idea accounts for more than statistical significance, seeking to counteract representations of non-white migrants as ‘economically, politically, and intellectually miserable’ (2021: 79). It emphasizes ‘the agency and protagonism of Black migrants, the networks created, and the profound changes provoked by them regarding education, culture, religion, language, and politics in the countries of residence according to trajectories built since the origin countries’ (2021: 79). In this sense, the present thesis aims to corroborate Joseph’s argument by providing insights into how the agency shown by Haitian migrants in their musical endeavours reveals a potent sociocultural phenomenon that has had impacts on Brazilian society and the transnational Haitian diaspora.

Within this thesis, I also aim to portray how Haitian migrants’ engagement with music may be seen as a cultural practice of resistance linked to the precarity and vulnerability of their daily lives in Brazil. While Haitian music making in Brazil is not usually constructed as an overtly political form of resistance, I have come to see that their music often reveals how ‘vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment’ (Butler 2016: 22). Such concern with the politicized agency of migrant music making has been addressed by ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman (2011) through the idea of ‘the political aesthetics of migration’, offering important considerations about the relations of music, migration, and politics which inform the broad conceptual framing of the thesis. Working from the axiom ‘[m]igration is always political, and the forms of aesthetic expression that arise from it are necessarily politicized’ (2011: 151),

Bohlman foregrounds the relevance of migrant music making (and migrant sounds) in resisting silence (2011: 152). As a white Brazilian researcher engaged in the musical and social world of newly arrived Black migrants in Brazil, the political aesthetics of migration have provided me with both ethical and conceptual inspiration, as the moral drive of Bohlman's idea condenses my own vision of the responsibility of music academia towards migrants:

It is the active voice of music that we witness when we engage the music of the politically suppressed and silenced. It is the active voice of music we engage when we enter the everyday worlds of the immigrants with whom we live in our own communities, or on the streets of the cities through which they pass, joining with them in the anthems that make the places we together can share, sounding the music of migration along the path toward a future enriched by difference. (2011: 164)

As I prepared for fieldwork in early 2020, the highly unlikely event of a pandemic erupted, affecting people around the world in unprecedented ways. Writing in 2023, with life 'back to normal', it somehow feels easy to forget or belittle the critical impacts the pandemic had on my personal life and doctoral studies. The required postponement of face-to-face fieldwork activity implemented by the university and the calamitous effects of scientific denialism in the Bolsonaro administration combined to delay the start of fieldwork for over a year. When it finally commenced, I faced a highly unpredictable, volatile, and risky scenario, as Covid-19 was an ever-looming concern and the general situation of Haitian music making in Brazil I once knew had changed dramatically. Having been involved with Haitian artists in the state of Rio Grande do Sul since my master's degree (Santos 2018), I was a witness of the first years of Haitian musical activity in the country. Yet, when I returned for doctoral fieldwork, what previously seemed like an increasingly dynamic and expanding musical community had dwindled into a nearly static, almost silent scene, as musicians faced unprecedented limitations on their performances and struggled to navigate the precarious and uncertain circumstances of

the pandemic. The next sections of this introduction provide a necessary historical and contextual framing for the thesis, setting the terrain for the in-depth exploration of Haitian musical endeavours of the main chapters.

### **Intersections of race, immigration, and national identity in Brazil**

Immigration has been of enormous importance to Brazil's formation as a nation and to notions regarding Brazilian national identity ever since its independence from Portugal in 1822 (Lesser 2013).<sup>4</sup> Throughout the course of Brazilian history, views on immigrants have flickered between national 'salvation' and alien 'threat', appraisals always contingent on national, cultural, and – most importantly – racial and ethnic parameters (Lesser 2013). Given the widespread use of race 'as criterion for selection and hierarchization' in Brazilian immigration legislation in different periods (Silva and Sá 2017: 2), a study of the musical agency of Black migrants in Brazil must consider how contemporary manifestations of this ideological heritage shape the experience of Haitian migrants. Here I draw on scholarship concerning immigration to Brazil to offer an exposition of the intricate entwinements of race with immigration, national identity, and social hierarchies in Brazil from the early nineteenth century to the present, considering how this scholarship might inflect particular understandings of Haitian migration.

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<sup>4</sup> Immigration's importance to Brazilian history, furthermore, extends back in time to the forced migration of enslaved Africans between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Having received close to 10 million enslaved Africans (Eltis as cited in Behrendt 2006), Brazil is considered the main destination point of the transatlantic slave trade, and people of African descent have formed the bulk of the country's population ever since.

## **Racial whitening through immigration and the making of Brazil**

Carefully governed by the country's slaveholding elites, Brazil's independence constituted a process seeking to free the country from 'colonial limitations in terms of trade and administration' while maintaining 'the social structure of the country intact' (Nunes 2004: 66). Soon after independence, elites' concerns centred on occupying the vast territory (Seyferth 2014) and 'improving an imperfect nation' tainted by 'Portuguese colonialism and African slavery' (Lesser 2013: 2). The solution devised for such imperatives was a racially inflected immigration policy focused on attracting (and occasionally sponsoring) the immigration of white Europeans to the country (Lesser 2013; Seyferth 1996, 2014; Nunes 2004). This process progressively gained ideological traction in the second half of the nineteenth century through the notion of *branqueamento racial* (racial whitening).<sup>5</sup>

Racial whitening was both an ideology and a set of practices, which simultaneously drew from and creatively adapted the logics of eugenics and social evolutionism (Hernández 2012). It represented a process of 'racial construction' whereby white Europeans' selective miscegenation with Brazil's Black and mixed-race population would in time produce a white 'Brazilian race' (Seyferth 1996, 2014; Lesser 2013; Nunes 2004; Hernández 2012). Reinforcing beliefs about the inferiority of Africans, Native Brazilians, and mixed-raced people, the logics of whitening envisioned their gradual disappearance and established European immigrants' dual role in Brazilian society: to whiten its population's phenotype while concomitantly assimilating to Brazilian society and culture (Hernández 2012; Lesser 2013). This 'crucible of races' would coalesce into an idealized, modern 'Brazilian type' that would steer the country towards a bright

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<sup>5</sup> Estimates indicate an influx of almost two million Europeans to Brazil between 1820 and 1920 (Lesser 2013: 12).

and successful future amongst the nations of the world (Seyferth 1996, 2014; Lesser 2013; Nunes 2004). The uneven distribution of immigrants in the country would also significantly impact Brazil's racial make-up across its different regions. Following reasonings concerning border protection, economic 'modernization' (chiefly slave labour substitution), and environmental motives, successive Brazilian governments focused on settling immigrants in the southern and central provinces of the country, progressively establishing a questionable, heavily stereotyped distinction between a whiter, progressive, and more 'European' south and a darker, reactionary, and more 'African' north (Lesser 2013; Seyferth 1996, 2014; Nunes 2004).

If immigration 'was and is about creating a future, superior Brazil' where 'whiteness would eclipse Blackness' (Lesser 2013: 3; 7), whitening needed an accompanying legal apparatus to ensure its success. Beginning in the 1820s, the Brazilian government carefully inserted, in what Seyferth (1996, 2014) characterizes as 'dissimulated' ways, racial criteria in immigration legislation. After the abolition of slavery in 1888 through the Golden Law (*Lei Áurea*), racial restrictions in immigration regulation became even more prominent, manifesting both as presences and absences: while Hernandez (2012: 48–52) posits Brazil 'as the nation with the most extensive legislative network of racial restrictions' in Latin America crossing into the twentieth century, Seyferth notes that the absence of direct references to Africans in legislation serves as a conspicuous reminder that they 'were not even imagined as immigrants' (2014: 138).

In sum, Brazilian immigration policy between the nineteenth and early twentieth century was consistently defined through imperatives of a racial nature, embodying a view of non-white immigration as a 'backward' movement unfit for a modernizing nation adapting to a system of free labour (Seyferth 1996; 2014: 155). While immigration to Brazil certainly brought challenges to white Europeans, the Brazilian state's preference for them instead of non-white immigrants

such as Africans and Asians materialized in generous state-sponsored benefits such as the financial sponsoring of immigration to Brazil and (in some cases) laws granting automatic naturalization (Hernández 2012: 50; 56).<sup>6</sup>

### **Haitianism**

Haiti and the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) also played a significant role in moulding Brazilian elites’ project of ‘racial regeneration’ and nation-building, with substantial repercussions in official immigration policies (Sá 2019; Silva and Sá 2021; Morel 2017; Schwarcz and Starling 2019). The Haitian Revolution’s example of racial and national liberation exerted a widespread and enduring impact throughout the Americas, disseminating the fear of Black revolt among slave-owning elites and inspiring enslaved populations across the continent (Geggus 2001; Nunes 2004). In Brazil, its impact in the first half of the nineteenth century was fundamental to the elite’s conceptualization of the national project and its implied notions of Brazilianness, whose discursive formulations were considerably fashioned through the ‘invocation of Haiti as a foundational “Other”’ (Silva and Sá 2021: 3). As Schwarcz and Starling put it: ‘[t]he country reinvented itself as staunchly anti-Haiti: in contrast to the island governed by Africans, Brazil was white, Christian, and civilized’ (2019: 441).

The ideological use of Haiti as a ‘foundational Other’ amidst the Brazilian nation-building process had further consequences epitomized by the concept of Haitianism, a discursive

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<sup>6</sup> Attention to non-European migration from places such as Japan and Middle East is important in nuancing the dominant European narrative about immigration to Brazil (Lesser 2013: 15). Mass migration from Japan to Brazil started in 1908, climaxing in the 1920s and post-WWII (Hernández 2012; Lesser 2013). Approximately 250,000 Japanese entered Brazil between 1908 and 1960 (Hernández 2012: 54). Another significant non-white immigration to Brazil was that of Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon and Syria, whose majority arrived in the early twentieth century (Demartini 2009; Karam 2008).

phenomenon particularly salient in political debates and the press during the Regency Period (1831–1840), when Brazil saw the outbreak of regional separatist revolts throughout its territory. Haitianism encompasses a group of interrelated terms (Haitianism, to ‘Haitianize’, Haitian) that composed repertoires of ‘racist provocation’ in parliamentary debates and political commentary in the press (Sá 2019: 84). It drew on racist representations of Haiti and Haitians as savages, unruly, and uncivilized to offend and critique political opponents (Sá 2019; Silva and Sá 2021). Revealing ‘a constant reaffirmation of the Haitian as the anti-Brazilian, anti-patriot, traitor of the Brazilian cause’, its use helped to shape notions about the ‘good Brazilian’ in direct opposition to the citizens of the first Black republic in the world (Silva and Sá 2021: 4). Haitianism’s legacy, Silva and Sá observe, ‘served as a substrate to explicitly racialized legislation on immigration’, offering a paradigmatic example of ‘the way Brazil’s official discursivity forged its notions of citizenship and nationality amidst the racial question’ by positing a nexus between race and nationality ‘through words and silences; acts and omissions’ (2021: 3; 8). Being essentially anti-Haitian, Brazilian Haitianism forms part of a wider network of narratives, representation techniques, and behaviours grouped under the idea of anti-Haitianism. Anti-Haitianism is an ideological construct which, despite regional particularities, has drawn on racial eugenics and social evolutionism to configure Haiti (and Blackness) as the opposite of civilization, order, and whiteness, dating back to colonial societies’ reaction to the Haitian Revolution (Zacair 2010; Dash 1997; Torres-Saillant 2012).

From the nineteenth century onwards, Haitianism ‘participate[d] in the production of a discourse on the racial identity of the nation’ and emerged as a ‘technology of political power’ with geopolitical implications which still manifest today (Sá 2019: 133). As noted by Sá (2019) and Greenburg (2013), official military discourse regarding the deployment of the Brazilian

army in United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH, 2004–2017) drew on ‘enunciative modalities emerging from Haitianism’s genealogy’ to frame and praise its control of racially-othered subjects, drawing parallels between the non-white populations of Haiti and those of Rio de Janeiro’s *favelas* (shantytowns) (Greenburg 2013: 105; Sá 2019: 231–38). Summing up, the authors convincingly demonstrate that Haitianism has left an enduring ideological legacy, as Haitians ‘continue to be objects of otherness in Brazilian political and international discourse [...] narrated as a source of threat and, at the same time, as subjects in need of care and biopolitical control’ (2019: 147).

### **From the Foreigner’s Statute to the new Migration Law: changing immigration legislation amidst the rise of right-wing populism in Brazil**

Though centred on the relationship between race and national identity, Haitianism’s ideological substrate also relates to a general and persisting tendency of Brazilian immigration restrictionism, which frames immigrants as threats to national security, the economy, or culture (Silva and Sá 2021). Though this proclivity has had clearer contours during authoritarian (or authoritarian-leaning) periods such as the Estado Novo (1937–1945) and the Military Dictatorship (1964–85), it has surfaced as well during the post-1985 democratic period (Filomeno and Vicino 2020: 598-9).

This ethos is aptly exemplified by the Foreigner Statute (1980), the military dictatorship’s legislation on immigration which remained active until the year of 2017, nearly thirty years after redemocratization. The statute embodied a manifestation of ethnic nationalism, criminalizing foreign-born people as potential threats to national security and creating a legal category (foreigner) that superseded that of the immigrant (Silva 2013). While the promulgation of the

New Republic and the 1988 Constitution ushered in an era of re-democratization focused on the principles of civil and human rights which gradually undermined the paranoid fear of foreign elements of the military period, the Statute's substitution would only come three decades later. Most significantly, such important legislative change is itself intimately tied to the influx of Haitian migrants in the 2010 decade (Uebel 2016), which gradually built increasing political pressure from migrant and civil society organizations. In 2017, after significant debate among civil society organizations, migrant associations, the public sector, and academia, Brazil enacted the new Migration Law (13.445/2017), which represented unequivocal progress over the previous legislation. Its more inclusive and humanitarian approach to migration encompassed new legal devices that allowed immigrants easy access to regularization, permanent residency, and public services as well as mobility and labour rights (Silva and Sá 2021: 13).

Many of its most progressive items, however, were subsequently vetoed by then-President Michel Temer, effectively scaling back its pro-immigrant nature (Filomeno and Vicino 2020: 604). This backlash cannot be disassociated from Brazil's economic and political turbulence from 2013 onwards and the societal and political turn towards right-wing populism epitomized by the presidential election of the nationalist and conservative former military officer and congressman Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. The short period between the controversial impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in April 2016 and the inauguration of Bolsonaro's government in January 2019 has been characterized as one of the fragilization of Brazilian democracy and the reversal of civil and social rights in Brazil. This period had an especially acute impact on minorities and socially vulnerable populations, compelling social scientists to consider 'the past of the present', or 'how the Brazil of yore sometimes explains – but sometimes belies – the country of today' (Schwarcz 2021: 13). Bolsonaro's election represents a culmination of these

profound, long-standing social and political phenomena. Long before the election, he was publicly known for his xenophobic posture, framing ‘immigrants as threats to public order, security, and Brazilian culture’ (Filomeno and Vicino 2020: 604). Echoing the authoritarian and racist ethos of restrictionism in Brazilian immigration policies, his pronouncements on immigration to Brazil ‘articulated an ethnic version of Brazilian nationalism and posed assimilation into Brazilian culture as a requisite for immigration to the country’, besides famously referring to immigrants from Haiti, Senegal, Bolivians, and Syrians as ‘the scum of the world’ (2020: 604).<sup>7</sup>

Bolsonaro’s government was responsible for significant anti-immigrant actions such as withdrawing Brazil from the 2018 United Nations Global Compact on Migration, issuing an ordinance that loosened the urgent deportation regimes of ‘dangerous’ immigrants without due process, and the selective use of border control during Covid-19. As an example of the latter, the border with Venezuela was closed due to sanitary reasons to stop the influx of migrants while the country’s aerial borders remained open and free from any form of sanitary control in the first years of the pandemic (2020: 606-7). As myriad polls suggest, during this period public opinion on immigration also indicated a significant alignment with Bolsonaro’s views and policies. Advocating for stronger border control was frequent, along with overestimating foreign-born populations in Brazil (sixteen percent, while the actual proportion is less than one percent) (2020: 605). According to historian Marco Morel (2017: 18-19), a ‘Haitianist mindset’ is also a significant component of opinions on Haitian migration during the rise of right-wing ideology in

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<sup>7</sup> Available at: <<https://exame.com/brasil/bolsonaro-chama-refugiados-de-escoria-do-mundo/>> (Accessed 29 December 2023)

the 2010 decade. As Haitian migration to Brazil peaked in the mid-2010s, critics of the governing left-wing Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores; PT) raised rumours and fake news in social networks about the formation of a Haitian ‘army’ by the ‘communist’ government, threading together anti-communism and anti-Haitian prejudice as threats to the wellbeing of the nation.

### **Race, immigration, and social hierarchy in Brazil: concluding thoughts**

Considered from a critical perspective on racial politics, the policy of racial whitening and the abandonment of the free Afro-Brazilian population by the Brazilian state after abolition in 1888 configured the most central strategies for maintaining the racialized socioeconomic order of the slaveholding era, representing the elite’s consummate disinterest in ‘fully integrating or according substantive citizenship rights to its black occupants’ (Hernández 2012: 47).

Throughout different periods of Brazilian history, such racist ideologies were reaffirmed and rearticulated in new political and juridical contexts (Jaccoud 2008), inscribing racial categories as markers of social difference in close association with class (Schwarcz 2012: 49) and establishing a racial hierarchy that placed ‘whiteness at the top and blackness at the bottom’ (Lesser 2013: 10).

As indicated by Silva and Sá (2021: 18), a ‘centenary attempt at denying the bond between the definition of nationality and the notion of race’ has run through the formation of the Brazilian nation (2021: 7). It has manifested itself in immigration policy through hierarchizing norms which have ‘entailed over a century of violence and rights denial disguised as the obstruction of the entrance, the criminalization, and the imposition of barriers to the settling of Black people in this country’ (2021: 18–9). Such time-honoured ideological frameworks and

social dynamics strongly influence the experiences of Black and other non-white migrants arriving in the country. Alongside a generalized dearth of integration and welcoming policies at local levels, they frequently condition their trajectories to the social place of clandestinity, underemployment, and political ‘inexistence’, enforcing a state of precarity and hyper-vulnerability (Bertoldo 2021: 14; Silva and Sá 2021).

### **Haiti, migration, and diaspora**

Human mobility has been constitutive of Haitian history and society since the colonial times of Saint Domingue, when it constituted one of the most important destinations of the transatlantic slave trade in the New World.<sup>8</sup> Both during and in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution, important migratory routes and connections were established with American cities such as New Orleans, Charleston, Philadelphia, and New York, all of which received a significant and racially diverse influx of white colonists, mixed-race *affranchis*, and formerly enslaved Blacks fleeing the conflict (Laguerre 1998; Geggus 2001). Human mobility remained a fundamental part of the country’s history from then onwards, with the progressive establishment of a transnational diasporic community spanning different countries beginning in the mid-twentieth century, especially following the installation of the Duvalier dictatorship (1957–86) and its violent political repression on the Haitian people.

Regarded by many scholars as a constitutive component of the Haitian nation and of the mentality and culture of its people (Laguerre 1998; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001; Jackson

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<sup>8</sup> Alongside Brazil and Jamaica, in the eighteenth century Saint Domingue was one of the three largest slave colonies in the Americas (Behrendt 2006).

2011; Audebert 2017; Handerson 2015; Zacaïr 2010), the diaspora has assumed growing political, economic, social, and cultural importance for Haiti in the last decades of the twentieth century, a significance epitomized by its official recognition as the country's *Dizyèm Depatman* (Tenth Department) in 1990 during Jean-Bertrand Aristide's government (Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001).<sup>9</sup> Mobility, migration, and diaspora have gradually become entangled with notions of Haitian cultural identity and the material, everyday reality of Haitian life, in a progressive 'diasporization' (Audebert 2022) of Haitian society which has impacted native understandings of mobility 'as a way of life, a form of being in/with the world' (Handerson 2015: 266

As the twenty-first century began, Haiti's deep-rooted structural and endemic crisis (Beckett 2020) escalated to unprecedented levels of systemic insecurity (Audebert 2020). The 2010 Port-au-Prince earthquake, along with recent developments in international geopolitics, have intensified the magnitude and breadth of the dispersion of Haitians abroad, with a significant and novel expansion of the Haitian migratory system towards South American destinations such as Brazil and Chile (Audebert 2017, 2020, 2022; Handerson 2015; Audebert and Joseph 2022). In such a context, though migration has increasingly appeared as a survival and social mobility strategy (Audebert 2022: 77), it has also been 'perceived not so much as a fracture – or a hiatus – but as a way of expanding one's social networks and living space' (2022: 73). Estimates of the total number of Haitians living abroad in 2020 varied between 1.7 to two million, a number which corresponds roughly to one fifth of the country's current population (Audebert 2020).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Most scholars credit Haitian geographer Georges Anglade with the coining of the term *Dizyèm Depatman* (Jackson 2011: 1).

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <<https://un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>> (Accessed 11 December 2023)

Despite having produced a rich and vast corpus of knowledge about the transnational Haitian diaspora, it is not surprising that anthropological and ethnomusicological research on the matter of the Haitian diaspora has been mainly limited to Global North contexts. Amongst some of the most important works about Haitian migrants in the US which remain relevant to the investigation of new South American contexts are those by Laguerre (1998) and Glick-Schiller and Fouron (2001). Focusing on collective and individual dimensions of diaspora by examining feelings of displacement, reattachment, and recognition amongst Haitians in the US, Laguerre's study highlights how diaspora 'implies difference from both the homeland and the nation of residence' and usually stands in a subjugated position in relation to majority culture (1998: 9–10). His notion of diasporic citizenship refers to 'the subjective reality of belonging to two or more nation-states' which is key to binding homeland and receiving country in a 'transnational spatial flow' (1998:12–3; 4). Glick-Schiller and Fouron's work (2001) has likewise been fundamental in illuminating Haitian migrant experience in the US and the importance of 'long-distance nationalism' in the lives of diasporic Haitians. Through their engagement in 'networks of social relationships that link together an array of transmigrants and individuals in the homeland', Haitian migrants have shaped 'transnational social fields' spanning different countries (2001: 3). In similarity to the two-edged nature of Laguerre's idea of diasporic citizenship, the authors note how even if Haitians 'challenge the concept of the bounded nation-state through their long-distance nationalism, they paradoxically reconstitute a concept of national sovereignty' (2001: 26) and cultivate 'a shared nostalgia for a proud Haitian past and shared dreams for a brighter Haitian future' (2001: 14).

The recent expansion of the Haitian migratory system to South America has brought with it an opportunity for prompting scholarly debates on Haitian migrant experiences through the

input of research conducted in the Global South, frequently carried out by local scholars. To that end, alongside research on Caribbean contexts (Jackson 2011; Zacaïr 2010), recent investigation about Haitian migration to South America has been of great value to highlight the diversity and complexity of Haitian experiences in such spaces (Handerson 2015, 2017; Audebert 2017, 2020; Audebert and Joseph 2022). Finally, as the Haitian diaspora has increasingly become a ‘network-based and poly-centric space’ (Audebert and Joseph 2022: 83), more important than fitting the realities of Haitians abroad into a particular definition of diaspora (Averill 1994: 253) is the investigation of the meanings diaspora assumes in new contexts (Handerson 2015a) or of how diaspora constitutes an epistemology, a way of knowing the world that is produced and used in practice/context, and thus illuminates local dynamics, histories, and cultures that shape Haitian experiences of mobility (Jackson 2011: 8–9).

### **Race and social place in Haitian diasporic contexts**

Diasporas, James Clifford writes, are always ‘embedded in particular maps and histories’ (1994: 302). As Jackson notes regarding the Haitian case, the histories and maps behind the progressive establishment of the Haitian diaspora offer a testimony on how ‘distributions of Haitians in various places that seem “natural” were in fact created under the influence of structural factors, at once economic, social and political’ (2011: 7). A critical understanding of the transnational Haitian diaspora, hence, must position it within ‘the long-term construction of the modern Caribbean and of the different stages of globalization’ (Audebert 2022: 312), considering it as the ‘complex product of a long and continuous exercise in colonialism and neo-colonialism’ (Trouillot 1983: 216).

Following this rationale, one of the most glaring aspects of the literature on Haitian migrant incorporation into different diasporic contexts is the exposure of Haiti's and Haitians' 'relationship to global processes of racialization and blackness' (Jackson 2011: 8). Since the mid-twentieth century, Haiti's position in the global economy has increasingly become one of providing cheap labour both at home and abroad, in a process which provides solid confirmation of perspectives from Cedric Robinson (1983) and Eric Wolf (1982) on the racialized nature of global capitalism, and substantiates Achille Mbembe's affirmation of how '[t]he birth of the racial subject – and therefore of Blackness – is linked to the history of capitalism' (2017: 179). As Haiti's main export commodity has gradually become mobile migrant labour (Richman 2008; Beckett 2020), literature on the experience of Haitian migrants in various settings has accordingly revealed the common themes of legal insecurity and discrimination, insertion at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, stigmatization, racism, xenophobia, and ethno-racial segregation (various authors in Zacaïr 2010; Glick-Schiller and Fournon 1990, 2001; Richman 2008; Jackson 2011; Audebert 2020; Handerson 2015).

Research on the experience of Haitian migrants in Brazil has unequivocally pointed to a similar scenario whereby the conflation of national identity and race has worked towards the marginalization and social invisibility of Haitian migrants through a process of 'racialized xenophobia' (Faustino and Oliveira 2021). Racialized xenophobia denotes a situation in which the 'signifiers mobilized by the appearance of determined bodies, [their] corporeality and attire transcend the merely economic or national dimension', mobilizing time-honoured anti-Black sentiment to conform to a 'selective hospitality'. Even in periods of relative openness in immigration policy, racialized xenophobia has conditioned the ways in which distinct groups of migrants are received and welcomed into Brazilian society. Usually deemed darker than Afro-

Brazilians (Uebel 2015), Haitians migrants and African refugees face the ‘structuring force’ of racialization ‘based on Brazilian racial and color classifications’, with Blackness operating as a dominant classifier overriding all others (nationality, language, legal status) to allocate the difference they represent in spaces of exclusion (Machado and Pardue 2020: 116; 113).

In further confirmation of Haitians’ ‘diasporic conundrum’ – ‘hailing from a place always associated with Blackness and Africa’ (Jackson 2011: 8) – Haitians in Brazil have not only been lumped under the ‘African’ category (Diehl 2017), a stereotyped label standing for Black foreignness, but have also been paradoxically ‘included’ in a national system of representation (Hall 2013) in which they are subjected to the same racist stigmas directed towards Afro-Brazilians (Soares and Andreola 2017; Jensen and Dias 2022). This came as a surprise for most recently arrived Haitians, who previously viewed Brazil as a predominantly Black country with a common African ancestry (Cogo 2014; Handerson 2015, 2015a, Audebert 2017).

Examining a wide range of media narratives on Haitian migration to Brazil, Jensen and Dias note recurring tropes of suffering, vulnerability, misery, ‘irregularity’/ ‘illegality’, and dependence through discourses which use ‘race as a central basis for Haitian exclusion’ (2022: 1809). Binding Blackness with helplessness and incompetence, these narratives ‘reproduce and extend an anti-black ideology of dehumanization’, depicting Haitian migrants as subjects without agency, ‘a largely inconsequential surplus of cheap labour [...] unable to adapt’ (2022: 1804–1809). Haitians themselves have also offered telling testimonies regarding their experiences of racial othering and marginalization in Brazilian society, with frequent allusion to slave-like treatment and work regimes, deprivation from labour and human rights, and anti-Haitian

prejudice (Cogo 2018).<sup>11</sup> Similar to Morgan's account of anti-Haitianism in the Dominican Republic, the overall circumstances Haitians face in Brazil demonstrate how '*antihaitianismo* [anti-Haitianism] is not only an external ideological, structural, or discursive force, it is living in the body' of Haitians and people they encounter in their quotidian life abroad (Morgan 2019: 326). The intersection of racialized xenophobia and long-standing anti-Haitian prejudice which characterize Haitians' experience of living in Brazil reveals a paradoxical combination of official legal inclusion with the exclusionary forces of marginalization, social invisibility, racism, and precarity, a context which has had crucial implications for their musical endeavours.

### **Post-quake Haitian migration to South America and the formation of Brazil's Haitian diaspora**

While Haitian migration has historically been directed towards North Atlantic countries (such as the US, Canada, and France) and neighbouring Caribbean nations (including the Dominican Republic, the French Antilles, Cuba, the Bahamas, and French Guiana), the tragedy of the 2010 Port-au-Prince earthquake and the escalation of Haiti's structural crisis in the latter part of the 2010s have occasioned momentous changes in the patterns and configurations of the Haitian migratory system (Audebert and Joseph 2022). Notably, new frontiers opened up in South America, with Brazil and Chile constituting the main destinations (Audebert 2017; Handerson 2015). These countries quickly assumed great relevance as new diasporic locations for Haitians, equalling or even surpassing the numbers seen in traditional destinations such as Canada and

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<sup>11</sup> Available at: <<https://sindicomerciariosviamao.com.br/alguns-brasileiros-tratam-os-haitianos-como-escravos-denuncia-associacao-de-imigrantes/>> (Accessed 29 February 2024)

France by the mid-2010s and re-configuring the flows of Haitian transnational networks towards the Global South (Audebert 2017, 2020; Audebert and Joseph 2022).

While Haitian migration to Brazil cannot be dissociated from the 2010 Port-au-Prince earthquake and Brazil's long and consequential military presence in Haiti through the UN's MINUSTAH mission (2004-2017), its understanding begs a more complex examination which considers Haitians' multidimensional vulnerability (economic, ecological, political), and Haiti's status as a supplier of cheap workforce in the international division of labour. Handerson (2015) and Audebert (2017) offer a number of elements that allow us to glimpse the complex origins of post-quake migration from Haiti: more restrictive immigration policies in traditional Global North destinations, the emergence of Brazil as a regional power, its geopolitical and diplomatic relations with Haiti through MINUSTAH, work opportunities associated with the hosting of international events such as the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, the initial use of Brazil as a migration corridor towards other destinations, and fake news regarding the Brazilian minimum-wage, living standards and government incentives for Haitian migration.

Many authors also note the widespread idea among Haitians that Brazil was a 'racial paradise' due to common African heritage (Audebert 2017; Cogo 2014; Handerson 2015). In that regard, Brazil's leadership of MINUSTAH was particularly relevant in establishing asymmetric geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic relations between Haiti and Brazil. Its furthering (in institutional and ideological ways) of a positive image of Brazil as a 'helping hand' (Greenburg 2013), the country of football, and an African-heritage nation helped to install the country in 'a special and unprecedented place in the imagination of the Haitian migrant' (Audebert 2017: 64). Denise Cogo also makes a brief allusion to how music was also part of this process, stating that

Brazilians' presence in Haiti helped to strengthen 'affective and symbolic bonds related mainly to elements such as common African ancestry, music, and football' (Cogo 2014: 26–7).

From a Brazilian perspective, Haitian migration to Brazil in the 2010s participated in the momentous shifts in immigration patterns during the first two decades of the third millennium. These shifts have been seen to characterize a new immigration 'boom' (Uebel 2015; Uebel and Rückert 2017) even though the foreign-born population in Brazil continues to account for less than one percent of its population. Amongst the relevant characteristics of this immigration surge was a sharp increase in the numbers of migrants and refugees (from half a million to circa 1.3 million) and an unprecedented diversification of origin countries, with a noticeable presence of non-white migrants from the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa (Uebel 2015; Cavalcanti et al. 2017; Cavalcanti et al. 2021). The main migrant flows during the 2010s came from Venezuela and Haiti, which according to official statistics accounted respectively for 172,306 and 149,085 migrants (Cavalcanti et al. 2021: 13). While gradually surpassed by Venezuelans from 2018 onwards, Haitians were the most significant population between 2010 and 2017 (Cavalcanti et al. 2021). They began arriving in Brazil just weeks after the 2010 earthquake, either requesting asylum in border towns of the Amazon region or using Brazil as a migration corridor to continue towards French Guiana (Handerson 2015). To arrive in Brazil, Haitian migrants took long and arduous routes that included combinations of aerial, terrestrial, and fluvial transportation through multiple intermediary countries such as the Dominican Republic, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, frequently spending significant sums of money on the services of agents/smugglers, in a process which commonly involved the decisive participation of family circles and information exchanged through diasporic communication networks (Uebel 2015: 136; Cogo 2014: 25; Handerson 2017; Audebert 2017).

The unforeseen arrival of large numbers of Haitians without visas quickly gained the attention of the government, then under the presidency of Dilma Rousseff. Through Resolution N° 97 in 2012, the government created the Humanitarian Visa, an unprecedented legal solution giving Haitians a permanent right to reside in Brazil and access to basic social rights. While this legal provision undoubtedly contrasted with Haitians' experiences of irregularity and exclusion in other diasporic locations, its enactment also permits a double reading: on the one hand, it allowed Haitians the possibility of living legally in Brazil; on the other, it worked to limit Haitian entrances according to pre-established quotas, which gradually increased in the following years (Handerson 2015: 34).

After entering Brazil via terrestrial routes in the northwestern states of Amazonas and Acre or via Brazil's primary international airline hub in São Paulo, most Haitians eventually settled in the south and southeastern regions of Brazil. These areas constitute the industrialized heartland of the country and are strongly associated with nineteenth-century European immigration and a 'whiter' population descended from that migratory flow (Audebert 2017: 67).<sup>12</sup> This geographical configuration is owed to the spread of news regarding the availability of work in migrant communication networks, which themselves were actively shaped by the participation of southern-based companies who set up hiring offices in border posts such as Brasiléia (Acre) and Tabatinga (Amazonas). In that manner, Brazilian businesses took advantage of the vulnerability of recently arrived Haitian and African migrants, who were hired on the spot to fill precarious work positions in unknown locations thousands of kilometres away (Uebel and

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<sup>12</sup> As evinced by 2018's electoral statistics, such regional divide has also expressed itself politically in greater support for nationalist right-wing politician Jair Bolsonaro in southern states (Schwarcz 2021; Gethin and Morgan 2018).

Rückert 2017). As Mamed (2017) has shown, most companies aimed to hire young and healthy men fit for hard work, and worker selection process in such instances entailed dehumanizing instances of physical aptitude evaluations which occasionally included genital examination.

Though later influxes also brought a significant contingent of women, children, and elders (Cavalcanti et al. 2021), Haitian migration to Brazil initially was comprised of a majority of young adult men with at least a secondary education and considerable linguistic capital (speaking varied combinations of Kreyòl, French, Spanish, and English). Haitians typically found employment in low-skilled activities such as construction, meat and poultry processing, and basic services (Cavalcanti et al. 2018). By 2013, they already occupied the first position among foreign-born groups in the Brazilian formal labour market (Cavalcanti et al. 2017: 193), and by 2020 Brazil had risen to become Haiti's fourth largest diaspora community (Yates 2021: 2). The percentage of Haitians amongst foreigners in the Brazilian formal labour market has increased from less than 1% in 2011 to 38.9% in 2020 (Cavalcanti et al. 2021). This sharp growth was accompanied by a compatible increase in the participation of non-white immigrants, who presently account for the majority of the country's immigrant workforce (Cavalcanti et al. 2021; Neto and Simões 2020). Haitians and migrants from African nations have corresponded to the lowest levels of earnings amongst all national and ethnic groups of foreign workers in Brazilian economy (Neto and Simões 2020: 110). Reports about work environments have frequently reported 'precarious conditions, lack of recognition, need of training, retributive discrimination and vulnerability' (Cavalcanti et al. 2018: 146–7). As summed up by Joseph, racially marked immigrants in Brazil 'face different structures of social opportunities, mainly with regard to qualified work in the formal market and average monthly earnings' (Joseph 2023: 152). Such structural constraints limit the upward social mobility of non-white migrants, creating

a context in which ‘the increment in the volume of Black and brown immigrants does not necessarily leads to their social and professional ascension in the formal labour market; on the contrary, they remain in the lowest and most stigmatized socio-occupational locations’ (2023: 153).

The economic recession and political crisis which progressively developed in Brazil from 2013 onwards had significant impacts on the dynamics of the Haitian diasporic community in the country and on the mobility of Haitians across the Americas. The joint effects of economic recession, lack of social mobility, exposure to racism, and growing anti-migrant sentiment that accompanied Brazil’s reactionary wave (Junge et al. 2021) have propelled a gradual movement of Haitians out of the country from 2016 onwards (Montinard 2020). While up to 2018, most headed towards nearby Chile (seen as a more stable and economically advantageous country), during the Covid-19 pandemic Haitians increasingly opted for the long transcontinental terrestrial route across Central America towards the Mexico-US border (Montinard 2020; Miraglia 2016; Yates 2021). Despite the significant magnitude of the Haitian exodus from Brazil in recent years and the anti-migrant posture of Bolsonaro’s government, Haitian migration to Brazil has nonetheless become a ‘self-sustaining’ migratory movement, with migrants continuing to arrive in the country as generalized insecurity increasingly plagues Haiti and alternative options are scarce and challenging (Audebert 2020). These developments attest to the complexity and relevance of recent shifts in Haitian migratory networks and routes, which (similarly to other older Haitian diasporic contexts) do not manifest in one-way linear dynamics but remain open, ‘reversible and subject to new orientations, depending on the economic situation in the settlement country’ (Audebert 2017: 68–9).

## **Migration, diaspora, and music: zooming in the diasporic Haitian musical community in Brazil**

As ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes has recently argued, ‘musicology has never not been interested in migration’ (2020: 3). Likewise, without denying the escalation in human mobility registered at the beginning of the 2000s, as the long record of migration in Haitian history attests, ‘the migration of peoples, musics, and cultures is more the norm than the exception’ (Rasmussen et al. 2019: 281). From the last quarter of the twentieth century onwards, however, music scholars (especially ethnomusicologists) and social scientists have in a notable manner increased their attention to the issue of migration and refuge and its interactions with sound and music. To perform such task, they have availed themselves of different theoretical and methodological approaches to consider how musical processes and sonic phenomena taking place within instances of human displacement elucidated important questions around issues of diaspora, race/ethnicity, identity, belonging and segregation, survival, gender, inequity, affect, and myriad others (Stokes 2004, 2020; Slobin 1994, 2012; Rasmussen et al. 2019, Turino 2004). In recent years, the occurrence of various so-called migrant/refugee ‘crises’ throughout the world has been accompanied by a marked proliferation of ethnomusicological engagement with such groups – often with a pronounced ‘activist’ or ‘interventionist’ approach (Stokes 2020: 7). The volume of scholarly production on the topic has been so remarkable that it has prompted remarks on the difficulty in accurately ‘mapping’ such significant breadth of studies, themes, and approaches (Aksoy as cited in Stokes 2020: 1), as well as substantiated claims for the reshaping and reorientation of the field in ethic and theoretical terms (Stokes 2020), calling for an ‘ethnomusicology of migration’ in substitution of an ‘ethnomusicology of nation’ (Rasmussen et al. 2019: 7).

Regardless of the need to change disciplinary labels or shorthand definitions, as a scholar working in the intersection of music and migration I stand in agreement with the growing ethical and scholarly importance of studying musical processes connected to human displacement, as music certainly remains a unique framework capable to ‘sort out’ some of its most ‘thorny’ issues (Slobin 1994). Amongst many others, authors such as Shelemay (2011) and Turino (2004) have highlighted the strong connection between music and diasporic and migrant collectivities, respectively noting how migrant musicians have had a ‘prominent role in both sustaining social ties and in galvanizing new collectivities during the processes of migration and resettlement’ (Shelemay 2011: 351) and how as ‘social formations based on subjectively recognized and objectively articulated cultural similarities, diasporas depend on expressive cultural practices for their very existence’ (Turino 2004: 4). New theoretical discussions have proposed important frameworks and gave increasing attention to sound, asserting migration as a sonic phenomenon as much as a spatial one (Kun 2016), highlighting the significance of sound in forging migrant/refugee subjectivities in the fight for human and citizenship rights (Western 2020), and exploring how migrant sonic invocations of place and movement across borders coalesce into ‘sounds of crossing[s]’, which in turn concern boundaries of race and nation (Chavez 2017).

Given the centrality of the manifold experiences of human mobility in Haitian history, it is not surprising that Haitian popular music is also deeply connected to issues of migration and diaspora. The migration of Haitians has had profound impacts on the development of music styles deemed typically Haitian, such as twoubadou (Averill 1997; Manuel and Largey 2016), in addition to some of the music styles of the areas in which they settled, such as tumba francesa in Cuba and gagá in the Dominican Republic (Manuel and Largey 2016, Landies 2009). With the establishment of the Haitian diaspora in North America during the second half of the twentieth

century, ethnomusicologists studying Haitian musicking in the transnational social space between Haiti and the diaspora have stressed how music played a fundamental part in the articulation and representation of cultural, religious, national identities, the struggle for political and citizenship rights in Haiti and abroad, the establishment of ethnic and inter-ethnic connections with host communities and other migrant groups, as well as in countering anti-Haitian prejudice (Averill 1994, 1997; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1990; McAlister 2002, 2011; Mason 2012; Butler 2008; Landies 2009; Cela et al. 2022). In the 1990s, the connection between music and diaspora gained official state recognition when President Jean-Bertrand Aristide appointed female singer Farah Juste as the first minister of the Tenth Department (*Dizyèm Depatman*), in recognition of the ‘leading role of musicians in constructing and sustaining a notion of a Haitian nationhood *lòt bò dlo* (across the water)’ (Averill 1994: 253).

To the arguments advanced by this thesis, the works of Averill (1994) and McAlister (2011) provide some of the most important conceptual framings. Examining the ‘musical linkages’ between Haitian migrants and homeland from the context of the Haitian diaspora in the US’s in the late twentieth century, Averill uncovers how Haitian popular music and musicians have ‘helped to configure new postnational social spaces and social relations that span homeland and diaspora’, noting that ‘both the musical process (the circulation of transnational musics) and the discursive products (especially musical texts) have served to construct transnational Haitian identity’ (1994: 254). In likeness to the evidence presented by some of the cases studies in this thesis, he argued that, in the aforementioned context, Haitian bands ‘were the core around which community building events and “rituals of return” were constructed’ (1994: 262) and ‘song texts about migration formed a discourse on migration that informed personal and family decisions’ (1994: 257), also citing how the need to explore potential audiences and patronage outside the

ethnic group of origin was a driver of musical change in performance practice, style, and content (1994: 263–4). In a notable contrast to the case of Haitian artists in Brazil, however, he notes that Haitian musicians then were ‘able to cross national borders with relative ease’ and ‘often came to their new communities with patronage networks already in place and promoters willing to help them with residency permits and relocation’ (1994: 257–8).

McAlister’s (2011) exploration of music as a ‘sonic compass’ in Haitian diasporic life also contributes with key insights to some of the issues discussed in the following chapters. Opening a space for the consideration of heterogeneity and religious tensions within Haitian diasporic settings, she offers an original interpretation of how music and sound compose cognitive maps which help to locate Haitian diasporic individuals and groups with regard to ethnic and religious horizons. Looking at the musical choices, behaviour, and habits of ‘self-consciously diasporic’ Haitians, she convincingly demonstrates how ‘the sounds of music, with their capacity to index memories and associations, become sonic points on a cognitive compass that orients diasporic people in time and space’, and how ‘[m]usic making is a way individuals and groups position themselves towards privileged geographies and locate themselves in the spaces they construct’ (2011: 209). Cela et al. (2022) have also discussed issues of migration, memory and longing in Haitian popular songs, stressing (similarly to Averill) how music provides ‘an outlet for migrants and the diaspora to communicate with Haitians in the homeland and vice versa’, and ‘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’, besides bringing to life ‘an imagined transnational community’ (2022: 218). Though not particularly devoted to the relations between music and migration or the Haitian diaspora, Dirksen’s (2020) work on the entanglements of politics and social critique with music symbolized by the Haitian notions of

*mizik angaje* and *mizik sosyal* is also highly relevant to the discussion of case studies of songwriting by Haitian artists in Brazil (see Chapter 3, Songwriting).

Unfortunately, research on Haitian music making in South American contexts remains scant, particularly outside Brazil. In my master's degree research, I delved into Haitian musicking in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (Santos 2018), focusing on issues of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism of locally-based artists. The only other study up to date has been Rosa's investigation of Haitian migrant 'sonic subjectivities' in the countryside city of Chapecó, Santa Catarina (Rosa 2023), in which he applies the ideas of Western (2020) and Kun (2016) to foreground how sound is constitutive of Haitian migrant experience in such locality. Bibliographical research on works about the recent musical experiences of Haitians in Chile or other South American contexts has failed to produce any relevant scholarly source. To frame the in-depth study of Haitian music making in Brazil contained in the following chapters, the remainder of this section offers a brief consideration about the formation of a diasporic Haitian musical community (Shelemay 2011) in Brazil and a characterization of my research interlocutors, which I choose to refer to as Haitian artists in Brazil.

### **The diasporic Haitian musical community in Brazil**

Despite the considerable challenges presented by geographical distance, limited investment capacity (deriving from a combination of low wages and the sending of economic remittances), and little rapport with local professional music milieus, Haitians have developed a remarkable degree of musical activity in Brazil. Moreover, across the six years of my master's and doctoral research, I have witnessed the gradual formation of a shared sense of collectivity amongst research interlocutors which points to the emergence of a Haitian 'musical community' in Brazil,

following Shelemay's (2011) conceptual framing. Rejecting narrow views of community based exclusively on physical materiality and geographical delimitation, she argues that a musical community is a social entity resulting from 'a combination of social and musical processes, rendering those who participate in making or listening to music aware of a connection among themselves', and which 'may exist most fully in the realm of a virtual setting or in the imagination' (2011: 364–5). This postulation allows one to explore how musical performance, creation, and transmission are not only expressions of certain social groups but 'processes that can at different moments help generate, shape, and sustain new collectivities', a situation which she claims is particularly notable amongst migrant communities (2011: 350–1). Thus, while perhaps this type of collectivity emerged in the form of musical events and performances only in sparse and fleeting ways, many other instances (both virtual and physical) experienced during fieldwork allowed me to witness and participate in what was conceived as a collective Haitian musical environment spanning artists residing in different areas of Brazil.

Haitian music making in Brazil has encompassed a rich variety of contexts and forms, traversing the performance of gospel/worship music in Haitian and Brazilian evangelical Protestant churches, the creation of bands focused on playing *konpa dirèk*, individual artists attempting to make professional careers performing a variety of popular music genres (especially hip-hop and its variants such as trap and drill), and the establishment of home studios by Haitian beatmakers/producers, perhaps the main and most typical space in which I evidenced the coalescing of a Haitian musical community in Brazil. Music has been an ever-present and important feature of Haitian diasporic life in Brazil, a present sonic feature of individual and collective migrant life in numerous ways. It permeates communal celebrations and events, key amongst them the *Jou/Fèt Drapo* (Haitian Flag Day) on the 18th of May, where it helps to

nurture and commemorate a sense of Haitian cultural identity abroad. Besides the playing of Haiti's national anthem, 'La Dessalinienne', such events habitually include performances by Haitian artists and DJs, usually those based in the locality but also, on occasion, by others based in different cities or by famous Haitian artists and groups from abroad. Music also contributes towards the coalescing and strengthening of communal bonds in less corporeal ways through migrants' entrepreneurship in the area of communication and broadcasting, with the setting up of numerous web radios which supplied Haitian listeners with familiar musical repertoires, news, and political commentary in Kreyòl. Further, music making represents a key undertaking for many Haitians (musicians, hip-hoppers, DJs, and producers) who occupied various positions along an amateur to professional sliding scale, either for their own personal fulfilment or with hopes of eventually achieving commercial and professional success. This is the group with which this thesis is primarily concerned.

Despite the notable concentration of Haitian migrants in the south and southeastern regions of the country, the vast dispersion of Haitians across Brazil and the high levels of internal mobility presented a considerable challenge to the development of the Haitian musical community, a predicament frequently invoked by research interlocutors. On one occasion, the situation in Brazil was contrasted to the Chilean case, where the significant concentration of Haitians in the metropolitan area of the capital Santiago had allowed a local Haitian hip-hop scene to gain considerable momentum since artists, producers, and audiences were hardly more than a couple of hours apart (BaadBadu, interview with the author, 2022). Other important aspects raised by many interlocutors included the relatively short period Haitians had been living in Brazil, the challenges of linguistic adaptation, limited opportunities, the difficulty in

acquainting themselves with local musical scenes, and their demanding work schedules and low salaries.

The notion of a diasporic Haitian musical community in Brazil took considerable momentum in early 2018 with the creation of a WhatsApp group entitled *Artistas Haitianos no Brasil* (Haitian Artists in Brazil, henceforth HAB). The group was created by Rafael ‘Gran Blan’ (meaning ‘big white/foreigner’), a Brazilian social activist, educator, and amateur singer based in the city of Cuiabá in the Central-West region of Brazil, with previous experience doing voluntary humanitarian work in Haiti.<sup>13</sup> Continuing his activist work with Haitian migrants in Brazil, Rafael recognized the need for greater propagation of the musical work done by many Haitians in Brazil and greater integration amongst Haitian artists themselves (personal communication, 2020). Through peer-to-peer sharing on Haitian communication networks, the group quickly grew to more than one hundred participants and established an eponymous Facebook Public Group which reached close to six thousand members.<sup>14</sup> Both instances saw increasing activity until the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. The group’s participants included instrumentalist musicians, beatmakers/producers, and independent artists from all regions of the country, with a greater proportion of the latter. Haitian artists used the group to publicize new songs, video clips and upcoming performances, to share their social media posts and exchange encouragement, and share information, news, and political commentary on both Haitian and Brazilian matters.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> While literally *blan* can be translated as ‘white’, Handerson (2015: 23–4) highlights how the term is polysemic and surpasses the racial connotation: ‘*Blan* comprises alterity, it means also the other, the foreign, the non-national, besides being associated to a certain social class and certain behaviours. It’s also used to qualify objects, houses, money, and actions.’

<sup>14</sup> Available at: <<https://facebook.com/groups/170745387054004>> (Accessed 19 December 2023)

<sup>15</sup> The group also proved fundamental for ensuing doctoral fieldwork, as through my participation in HAB I was able to meet with artists settled in other Brazilian states and chat about their musical work, gradually widening the scope of online and offline fieldwork.

Though physical distance and financial costs still presented an obstacle to the realization of regular performances (especially from the onset of the pandemic), the HAB group was fundamental in generating the sense of collectivity which accompanied the progressive consolidation of a reasonable number of individual musical projects on a local scale, such as the creation of home studios and the release of individual albums. Another expression of the expanding dynamism of Haitian musical activity in the country between 2018 and 2020 was the significant number of tours organized by Brazil-based Haitian artists. Additionally, renowned Haitian artists based abroad visited relevant sites of the Haitian diaspora in Brazil and, often, Chile as well (see Figure 1). The organization of such tours involved a collective effort which was mainly undertaken by Haitian artists themselves, with support from businesses run by Haitians in each locality. Despite the considerable investments required to put on such musical events, most reports by those involved in their organization frequently expressed dismay with audience numbers below expectations and financial losses (Alix Georges, interview with the author, 2022; Princeneer, interview with the author, 2023).



*Figure 1 - A virtual flyer of Kenny Haiti's show in Porto Alegre, which featured performances by local Haitian artists such as B-Wade, Komandan Kòbòy, Dadysemalè and Poony BTAG (from left to right), all of whom I worked with and now reside in the US (source: HAB WhatsApp group)*

Hence it is possible to affirm that a diasporic Haitian musical community slowly took form in Brazil from mid-2010s onwards. Though sporadically manifesting itself in 'offline' processes and events, this community was fundamentally supported by the communicative power of digital communication networks and its linkages with the transnational Haitian diaspora.

Additionally, in important ways for Haitian migrants it was also an imagined community (Anderson 1983), connecting many of the most musically active Haitian migrants in Brazil through their desire to promote the larger entities of ‘Haitian music’ and ‘Haitian culture’ in Brazil, enterprises which they saw as fundamental to the well-being of Haitian migrants in Brazil.

### **Haitian artists in Brazil**

The Haitian diaspora in Brazil encompasses a wide range of musical actors: instrumentalists, DJs, singer/songwriters, beatmakers/producers, choir vocalists and directors, all of whom make music in significantly different contexts, at professional and/or amateur level (in addition to those who whose artistic practice and identity span two or more of these categories). Since the start of my work with Haitian artists in Brazil, however, I noticed how even though research collaborators used specific categories such as *maestro*, the generic Kreyòl word *atis* (artist) was the preferred term used amongst those involved in music making when referring to themselves.<sup>16</sup> It is due to the widespread emic use of the word that I choose to use it in its English form to describe my research collaborators. In addition, this stance also reflects a political, activist stance that recognizes and values the artistic work of those who are generally framed as ‘just’ workers and/or destitute Black migrants by Brazilian society. Despite the term’s flexibility and the richness of contrast in the individual trajectories and aptitudes amongst my research

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<sup>16</sup> The use of the term *maestro* is widely disseminated amongst my research collaborators as a form of conferring distinction to an individual involved in music making. It usually designated one or more of the following characteristics of an individual: a reputed above-average musical capability, some level of knowledge of music theory, a position of musical authority/management (such as those of director, producer or arranger in music groups).

interlocutors, it is possible to use it to foreground a particular profile of the most prevalent features of Haitian artists in Brazil.

Insofar as it regards my experience, the Haitian musical community in Brazil presents a significant degree of gender inequality. Throughout the contexts in which I conducted fieldwork, the overwhelming majority of those involved in music making are men, in a gender proportion incompatible with the general demographics of Haitian migration to Brazil. Such a situation evidences the power imbalances in the intersections of gender, race, and migration, in addition to a dynamic of subordination and inequality also existent in Haitian (and Brazilian) gender relations, in which women are overburdened with family and household responsibilities, and work (Braum et al. 2014, Mejía and Cazarotto 2017). Despite playing a fundamental structural role in family migration projects as well as increasingly opting to migrate individually, Haitian women remain more secluded in the domestic environment and subject to male domination, lacking the same opportunities for intercultural engagement available to Haitian men. This negatively affects their command of the Portuguese language (Mejía and Cazarotto 2017, Mamed 2017) and their opportunities to make music. While Haitian women were not absent from my fieldwork experience and frequently displayed a high level of musical competence and interest (mainly as singers, often at church environments), they represented a very small percentage of the participants I met in fieldwork contexts. With few exceptions, Haitian migrant artists would incorporate women only seldomly in their activities, usually in supporting roles as guest appearances in tracks or as dancers and participants in video clips.

In likeness to the general demographic pattern of Haitian migration to Brazil, Haitian artists are usually young men in the 18 to 35 age group. All my interlocutors (with the notable exception of a few beatmakers/producers) have earned their living working in other occupations,

regularly investing their wages in the pursuit of their musical dreams. Such a situation foregrounds the important and pervasive work-music nexus, which constitutes the rule of thumb for Haitian artists in Brazil. Their absorption into Brazilian society as cheap labour and the widespread negative conceptions about Haiti and Haitians merge to create an incredibly challenging context in which to pursue an artistic career.

Their musical taste and inclinations bear obvious marks of both motherland culture and the expressive cultures of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993), with konpa and hip-hop (occasionally referred to in its Haitian iteration, rap kreyòl) usually cited as favourite styles and dominating their musical output alongside other Caribbean music styles (such as reggaeton, reggae, dancehall, zouk and bachata).<sup>17</sup> Knowledge about and identification with hip-hop culture were certainly the most striking features of the musical preferences of most research collaborators. Despite the relevance of predecessors such as Master Dji (who is widely regarded as the founder of Haitian hip-hop in the 1980s), the mid-2000s were frequently characterized by research interlocutors as the heyday of rap kreyòl, with the success of super-groups such as Barikad Crew prompting a multiplication of hip-hop groups and collectives in the country (Larose and Exantus 2021; Lizaire 2018: 65). The varied stylistic repertoire listened to and practised by Haitian artists was also frequently communicated in their discourse as part of a rich and cosmopolitan Caribbean and African musical heritage, to which soon enough Brazilian popular genres such as funk carioca, Brazilian hip-hop, and sertanejo universitário began to be progressively incorporated, either in what could be described as their original forms or in

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<sup>17</sup> According to Lizaire (2018: 52), '[i]n Haiti, in the discourse of rap professionals (rappers, beatmakers, DJ, managers, etc), in radio emissions and across written and televised media, the term "rap creole" is adopted almost unanimously'.

attempts at creating new hybrid musical styles such as trap-funk and konpanejo (see Chapter 2, Production).<sup>18</sup>

When narrating their relationship with music, research interlocutors made important references to music education in Protestant church settings and the practice of hip-hop freestyling as young adolescents growing up in Haiti. With the notable exception represented by my experience playing live music with BigUp#1 and by beatmakers/producers, all Haitian artists I researched with did not play musical instruments as a part of their musical activity. They usually considered themselves to be singers and/or rappers (*rapè*), an activity which they frequently seemed to frame as less ‘distinguished’ than the work of instrumentalists and beatmakers/producers. They produced their songs mostly in home studios owned by Haitian beatmakers/producers in Brazil or abroad, although on some occasions Brazilian producers and studios would be used (normally, these required greater financial investment and offered less immediate rapport between artist and producer). Concerning their live performance, the dominant modality I witnessed during fieldwork involved the presence of a DJ, who would control the beats over which the artist would sing and/or rap. Over the years, performance opportunities for Haitian artists were almost always the result of their own initiative and organization, funded through their own savings and those of other countrymen, who also formed the absolute majority of the audience in Brazil (see Figure 2).

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<sup>18</sup> The Cravo Albin dictionary of Brazilian Popular Music defines sertanejo universitário as a ‘musical movement’ which incorporates influences from different musical styles (such as 1990s ‘roots’ sertanejo, American country rock, vaneirão, pagode, electronic music, axé, and funk carioca). It constitutes an increasingly popular dance music style which has achieved immense popularity throughout Brazil and internationally from the 2000s onwards. Available at: <<https://dicionariompb.com.br/termo/sertanejo-universitario/>> (Accessed 14 September 2023)



Figure 2 - A virtual flyer of a collective show/party organized by Haitian artists from the Porto Alegre metropolitan area, featuring research interlocutors Poony BTAG (centre) and B-Wade (far right) (source: HAB WhatsApp group)

Haitian artists' songs are frequently multilingual, using two or more languages in their lyrics (mainly Kreyòl, French, Portuguese, English, and Spanish). Despite the challenging nature of writing songs in a new language, many Haitian artists have gradually begun to compose and sing in Portuguese, as they envisioned the need to reach Brazilian audiences in order to grow as professional artists. Most research collaborators also made considerable investments in recording

high-profile video clips to accompany their songs, later uploaded to YouTube and heavily publicized in their social media and smartphone apps such as WhatsApp, hence disseminating them transnationally through communication networks of the Haitian diaspora.

To conclude this brief characterization of Haitian artists in Brazil, I emphasize how they have had to work independently with little support of the Brazilian state or society, who has generally failed to see Haitian migrants as producers and bearers of cultural capital and artistic potential. From a position of multidimensional precarity and social invisibility, however they have patiently crafted their music and artistic careers in a ‘DIY’ fashion, producing and sustaining consistent musical activity in a laborious and until now scarcely successful struggle to be noticed and recognized as artists amidst Brazilian society.

## **Methodology**

This thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork developed with Haitian migrants in Brazil. As my previous research experience in the southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul pointed to increasingly translocal forms of organization amongst Haitian producing music in Brazil and the relevant Haitian musical activity in other poles of Brazil’s Haitian diaspora, I chose to expand the geographic boundaries and develop a multi-site ethnographic study of the phenomenon (Marcus 1995), which would allow me to portray a wider, national spectrum of experiences and stories of Haitian music making. The mobile nature of multi-sited fieldwork design, which privileges ‘following the threads of cultural process[es]’, has thus allowed me to trace an emergent ‘cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity’, constructing a more thorough representation and analysis of the diasporic Haitian musical community in Brazil (1995: 97; 96).

Fieldwork locations were chosen through ongoing conversations with new Haitian artists through digital communication networks (WhatsApp and social networks such as Facebook and Instagram) and the continuation of previous engagements with former research collaborators, themselves also responsible for widening of my research networks with recommendations in ‘snowball’ effect. Unsurprisingly, although the ethnographic relevance and significance of musical activity by Haitian in other regions of Brazil cannot be denied, the location of my fieldwork sites conformed to the general demographic concentration of Haitians in the urban centres of Brazil’s south and southeastern regions, as represented in the following map (see Figure 3).

Fieldwork, Cooley and Barz remark, is an ‘imperfect experimental method’, a ‘process that positions scholars as social actors within the very cultural phenomena they study’ (2008: 4). So has been my gradual involvement with Haitian artists in Brazil. Since my master’s degree fieldwork (Santos 2018), my research engagement with Haitian artists has included collaborative strategies defined in close negotiation with research collaborators. In our dialogues, their perception about my usefulness to them as a researcher and musician familiar with their receiving society played a central role. My collaborative engagements took myriad forms: arranging and mediating interviews on public radios, the promotion of social media advertising campaigns, even the lending of musical equipment. The most frequent mode through which I was summoned to collaborate, however, was as a musician, either recording at studios or playing in live music situations.

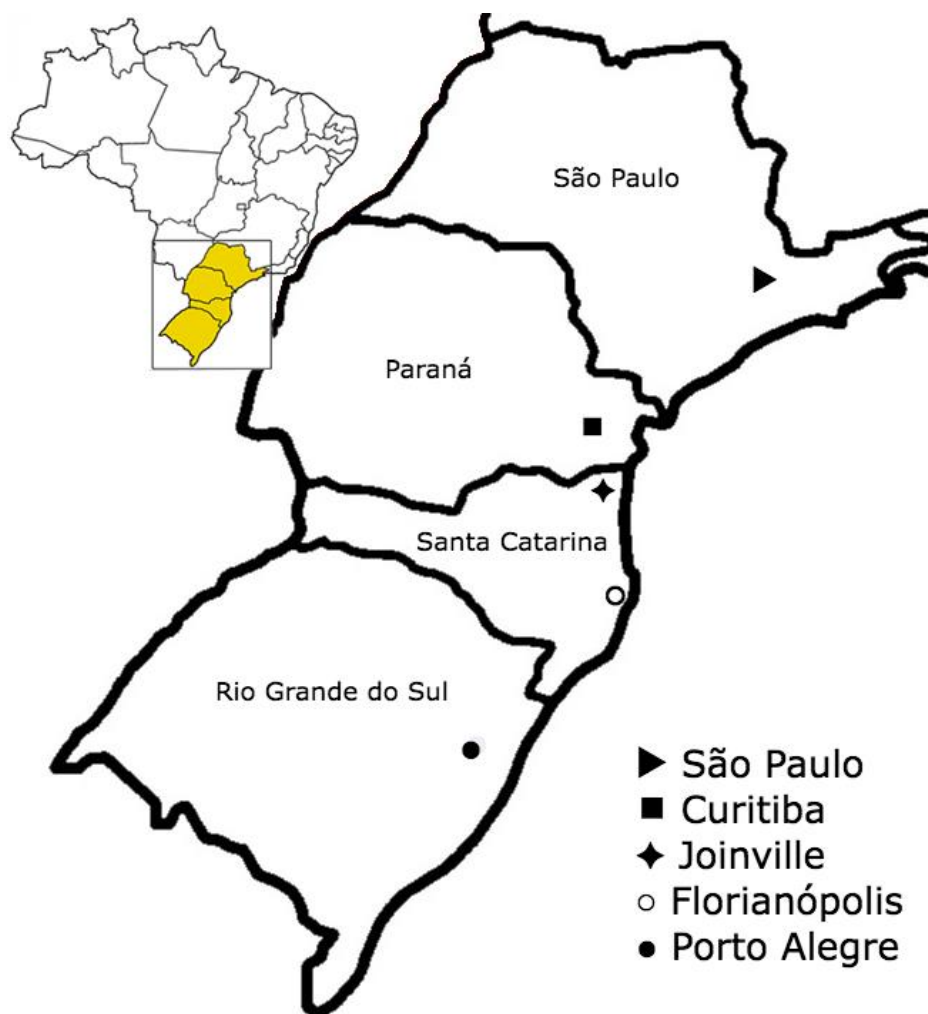


Figure 3 – Fieldwork locations in a map of Brazil’s four southernmost states.

While I am resistant to considering this thesis an instance of applied ethnomusicology, I have attempted to follow good ethnomusicological practice, grounding my intervention and participation on principles of social awareness and responsibility. I also adopted a hand-on approach, assuming a double identity as both researcher and musical partner. As noted by Hemetek (2015: 269), such active engagement as a musical ‘partner’ (*patnè*) of various Haitian artists was of great use establishing personal relationships in fieldwork, facilitating and deepening intercultural exchanges and intimacy (Hemetek 2015: 269), mitigating – though never

leveraging – the power imbalances in our relationship. Ultimately, they revealed how the interest and participation of a Brazilian musician and researcher became both a valued form of cultural capital for Haitian artists and an instance of recognition of their cultural and musical heritage.

Ethnomusicologists have long discussed the value of the study and performance of the musical instruments and genres of the cultural groups they study (Solís 2004; Witzleben 2020; Cooley and Barz 2008), a disciplinary tradition that goes back to the mid-twentieth century and Mantle Hood's notion of bi-musicality (Hood 1960). However, I am also reluctant to frame my own musical trajectory in this research as the development of a bi-musical skillset, as I do not see myself as an expert practitioner of any Haitian popular music style. Despite having progressively acquired some practical musical knowledge of Haitian popular music styles, artists, and songs (especially with the playing of konpa guitar), my musical interactions with Haitian artists were mostly developed either in the 'common ground' of international popular music styles or in an improvisational (and sometimes precarious) manner. In this form, my musical input was forged in the heat of the moment, using my musical capability to serve the demands and ideas of research collaborators. Such a participative stance also resulted in my direct participation a fair portion of the songs and moments analysed in the following chapters (as exemplified in Figure 4), which, in alignment with the growing questioning of notions of objectivity and scholarly distance in ethnomusicology since the late twentieth century, I deem as healthy and responsible academic practice.



*Figure 4 - The virtual flyer for a performance by Alix Georges featuring my participation, on May 20, 2018 (source: Alix's Facebook profile)*

Complementing musical collaboration, fieldwork also involved instances of participant observation of Haitian musical events, interviews, and informal conversations with collaborators. These interactions took place mostly in Portuguese, but also occasionally in Kreyòl. Taking inspiration from Beckett's (2020) sensible treatment of 'Haitian accounts of crisis', my posture towards the contributions of research collaborators has been one of dwelling 'in the lived experience of others as they encounter the world' (2020: 10) and from such reflection departing

towards a critical analysis of music and lived experience based on what I deemed to be relevant theoretical framings. By listening to their stories and representing them through my own writing, I have hereby tried to balance the treatment of research collaborators ‘as theorists of their own experiences (2020: 11) with my own perceptions as ethnomusicologist, musician, and Brazilian citizen concerned with issues of social equity and diversity in contemporary Brazil.

The hybrid online/offline configuration of the Haitian musical community in Brazil (a strong feature of my research collaborators’ lives even before the pandemic) along with the importance of the virtual world of digital communication networks, streaming platforms, and social media for Haitian artists, demanded a methodological concern with addressing such a multidimensional realm of experience. As it became necessary to observe, interact, and record information in digital and physical field spaces, while also considering their interactions, by necessity my work increasingly assumed the characteristics of what Liz Przybylski describes as hybrid ethnography (2021). This refers to the increasingly common situation in which ethnographers must deal with ‘multiple streams of data from changing sources’ and struggle to maintain the personal and relational component of ethnographic fieldwork ‘from the offline to the online and in-between’ (2021: 3; 4). Throughout this thesis this feature of my fieldwork (which was also important during periods of quarantine) will be evident to the reader.

Lastly, this thesis represents my particular view and framing of a much larger, heterogeneous, and complex sociocultural and musical phenomenon, and is unquestionably influenced by my positionality, interests, and political biases. As McDonald has observed, ‘[a]s ethnographers our perceptions of the world are circumscribed by our positionality within particular discursive networks and relationships, thus necessitating a critical stance on the topics we choose to investigate and the observations we choose to make’ (2021: 78). As a white,

Brazilian, middle-class researcher associated with one of the most prestigious universities of the world, my relationship with research interlocutors was always framed in a remarkably unbalanced set of power relations, and these structural dynamics represented a continuation of anthropology and ethnomusicology's problematic relationship with colonialism. This contrast became even sharper during the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. While I could move safely between fieldwork sites, not to mention entire continents, my research interlocutors faced life-changing disruptions that either forced them to move in search of a better life or hindered their mobility. As aforementioned, however, I have strived to ground both research and ethnographic accounts on sound principles of scholarly ethics and social responsibility, and my concern as a Brazilian citizen working with Black migrants has always been directed to the fostering of intercultural relations marked by openness, recognition, and the valuing of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Thus, while the ethnomusicological portrait of Haitian musical endeavours in Brazil hereby offered is undoubtedly also a reflection of my own academic and political interests, I believe it provides a careful and responsible piece of scholarly research which will contribute to the visibility, recognition, and valuing of the work of Haitian artists in Brazil as well as to the scholarly literature in the fields of ethnomusicology, migration studies, cultural studies, and Haitian studies.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Intending to present an encompassing portrait of the musical endeavours of Haitian artists in Brazil during the late 2010s and early 2020s, I have structured this thesis into four chapters. The first three chapters are conceptually centred on three music-related actions (translation,

production, and songwriting), which serve as conceptual frameworks for analysing some of my key ethnographic experiences working with research collaborators. Though it touches on some of the main concepts and theories discussed in the previous chapters, the last chapter provides a considerably different take, attempting to provide a broader conjunctural analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic and its repercussions amongst Haitian artists living in (and leaving) Brazil.

Initiating my ethnographic account, the first chapter looks at the intersections between migration, music, and translation by considering two case studies of song translation by Haitian migrants living in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The discussion focuses on the dynamics of racial othering, hybrid identity, and belonging as articulated by the musical agency of two Haitian artists. It mainly aims at critically considering the linguistic challenges and predicaments lived by Haitian migrants in Brazil and their efforts to articulate their belonging as Black migrants within the racial hierarchy which structures Brazilian society. The second chapter considers the efforts made in music production by Haitian migrants in Brazil, drawing on Yúdice's discussion of culture as expediency in the globalized capitalist world (2003). Seeking to draw important contrasts but also structural similarities connected to the generalized state of precarity faced by Haitian migrants in Brazil, this chapter considers two different modes of music production. First, it examines the production of live music by a Haitian konpa group in São Paulo. Second, it explores the home studios set up by Haitian beatmakers/producers in different locations of Brazil's southernmost states.

The third chapter revolves around the action of songwriting by considering case studies of three Haitian artists. Its theoretical framework proposes a view of songwriting as a form of autobiographical storytelling of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993), analysing song lyrics and the life stories of each artist with special interest given to how their migration to Brazil impacted

notions about the self, racism, and their musical dreams and ambitions. Finally, the last chapter presents a consideration of how a global and national conjuncture of the pandemic, right-wing populism, and economic recession deeply affected the lives and music making of Haitians living in Brazil, coalescing into a massive exodus of Haitians from the country towards the United States. This chapter expands the range of sonic ‘sources’ examined in the thesis by looking at how other sonic phenomena, such as the voice and silence (or its imposition, silencing), embody and give form to the predicaments faced by Haitians constantly seeking better lives during this period. It also presents how music making may represent an act of resistance to the oppression and silencing inherent to such circumstances.

Finally, the epilogue seeks to provide a more poetic and reflexive account of my feelings and perceptions about the migration of research collaborators to North America and the uncertain future of the Haitian musical community in Brazil, acknowledging the appropriation and creative use by some of my interlocutors of the Portuguese untranslatable *saudade* (Santoro 2017).

## CHAPTER 1: TRANSLATION

*Haitian Flag Day (Fèt/Jou Drapo Ayisyen) at the Centre for Migrant Service, Caxias do Sul – 18 May 2017*

*I took a bus to Caxias do Sul to attend the Haitian Flag Day celebrations at the Centre for Migrant Service, a charity devoted to assisting migrants. Caxias, as it is popularly referred to, is a medium-sized industrial city founded by nineteenth century Italian immigration, on the northern plateau of Rio Grande do Sul. It has attracted many Haitian and African migrants due to a large availability of industrial jobs. The activities planned for that day included an historical introduction to the Haitian flag and a Kreyòl workshop. When I arrived, Exavier Lückmann, a 35-year-old Haitian civil engineer, was explaining that the Haitian flag was created out of the French banner by Catherine Flon, following Dessalines's suggestion of ripping out the middle white stripe (which represented the French colonizers) and uniting the blue and red ones, which stood for Blacks and mulattos, as a symbol of their union in achieving independence. As he switched between Kreyòl and French, he was helped by other Haitian and Senegalese migrants and a French-speaking member of the centre's staff, in a rather improvised collective exercise of translation. Later, when I explained to him my intention to research Haitian artists in Brazil, he made the point of 'translating' to me the 'myth of origin' of Haitian popular music: if for Western art music it all begins with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, he said, for Haitian music it begins with Nemours Jean-Baptiste, the father of konpa dirèk.*

### **Introduction**

It might be argued that translation is concomitant with migration. As people of multifarious backgrounds move around the globe in increasingly connected ethnoscapas (Appadurai 1996), so do their cultures, languages, idiomatic expressions, and accents. The capacity and means to move, resettle, and recreate life anew, however, are unequally distributed along the lines of class, race, nation, and gender, all of which significantly impact the prospects of vastly dissimilar mobile subjects. For forced migrants and refugees, to whom a free choice of destination country, condition, and means of transportation is rarely available, the issue of translation assumes fundamental importance. Far more than 'a matter of idle theoretical speculation or a hidebound classroom exercise', translation becomes 'a question of real, immediate, and urgent seriousness'

which often comes to bear upon their very survival and living conditions (Cronin 2006: 45). As Stuart Hall has superbly articulated, translation becomes a mode of living:

[C]ontemporary forms of globalisation enforce a ‘cosmopolitan from below’; it bears down on people who have no choice as to whether or not to become cosmopolitans. They have to learn to live in two countries, to speak a new language and make a life in another place, not by choice but as a condition of survival. [...] So, culturally, they’re *living ‘in translation’* every day of their lives. (Hall and Werbner 2008: 347, my emphasis)

Being unfamiliar with Portuguese, Haitian migrants living in Brazil have been affected by their capacity to learn a new language and translate in decisive ways. Pressed by the need to earn a living, their level of competence in speaking Portuguese has had direct consequences on the kind of jobs they are able to access (as better paying jobs usually demanded a superior control of the language) and influenced their ability to avoid situations of labour exploitation (such as signing contracts which they could not properly understand) (Barbosa and São Bernardo 2017: 64, Aguiar and Cotinguiba 2015). In a revealing paradox, despite the swift response by religious and civil organizations in offering language courses for Haitians throughout the country, the mere attendance of such courses was itself a considerable challenge for many, as intense work schedules left them fatigued or with little time to attend classes (Barbosa and São Bernardo 2017; Giacomini 2017). The difficulties displayed by some Haitians in acquiring Portuguese have also been linked to underemployment, as many of those with university-level education would not find opportunities consistent with their qualifications (Barbosa and São Bernardo 2017). In an ironic twist of fate, most Haitian migrants in Brazil speak three or four languages: Kreyòl, French, Spanish, and English; Brazilians, on the other hand, are by and large monolingual. These considerable linguistic competencies offer a glimpse of the persistence of colonialist and imperialist legacies in Haitian education (DeGraff and Dey 2019), the strength of Haiti’s diasporic connections in North America, and previous experiences of mobility to the

neighboring Dominican Republic and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean nations. While their levels of proficiency in these languages can vary substantially, such linguistic and cultural capital has found little recognition from employers and Brazilians in general (Cavalcanti and Tonhati 2016: 147).

Such novel sociocultural settings engendered by increasing forms of human mobility offer fertile ground for cultural analysts interested in the relationships between translation, migration, and identity, linkages in which music is also frequently a prominent presence. In spite of what is now a long-standing (if no longer exclusive) epistemological tradition based on encounters with cultural difference and Charles Seeger's still pertinent attention to the linguocentric predicament (1977), ethnomusicologists have given surprisingly little formal attention to the issue of translation.<sup>19</sup> Within the field of translation studies, a similar situation ensues: despite the progressive opening to non-canonized media associated with a 'cultural turn' in the end of the twentieth century, music has nonetheless remained at its periphery (Susam-Sarajeva 2008). Elaborating on the reasons for music's marginal position in the field, Şebnem Susam-Sarajeva enumerates the challenges involved in the 'can of worms' opened in discussions about the translation of popular music: the fuzzy boundaries between 'translation' and 'adaptation' or 'version', the complexities from the methodological point of view (music's specificity as an aesthetic form of cultural expression), the necessity of multi or interdisciplinary approaches and the ensuing demands of specific competencies (2008: 188–9). Still, she ponders,

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<sup>19</sup> A survey of three of the main English language journals in ethnomusicology (*Ethnomusicology*, *Ethnomusicology Forum*, and *Ethnomusicology Review*) only produced two articles whose main theme was musical translation and contained the word translation in its title (Ciantar 2013; Zambrano 2014). Since 2015, the Society for Ethnomusicology has also offered a peer-reviewed publication of translations of ethnomusicological literature into English. Available at: <[https://ethnomusicology.org/page/Pub\\_EthnoTrans](https://ethnomusicology.org/page/Pub_EthnoTrans)> (Accessed 24 January 2024)

‘ignoring such practices might mean missing out on very illuminating cases, both in terms of intercultural communication and of the social, cultural and linguistic practices prevalent in a given target system’ (2008: 189). Expanding on the epistemological potential of investigations into music and translation, she highlights its connection with issues of ‘allegiance, self-identification, inclusion/exclusion, heritage, exoticism, and representation’, along with its specific relevance within diasporic contexts, where music may be involved in processes of ‘self-translation’ (2008: 194–5). Throughout this chapter, I seek to address such a gap in between ethnomusicology and translation studies by investigating how the translation of Brazilian songs by Haitian migrants arises as a relevant prism through which to analyse relationships between migration, race, and culture. After setting forth my theoretical framework regarding translation, I draw on my ethnographic experience and collaboration with Alix Georges and Widler Oris to analyse their respective translations of ‘Canto Alegretense’, a popular *gaúcho* song by group *Os Fagundes*, and ‘Lamento de um nordestino’, a popular *nordestino* ballad by Francis Lopes.

### **Living in translation: considering migrant acts of translation**

As advanced by translation scholar Susan Bassnett, though possessing a linguistic core, translation has always encompassed extra-linguistic criteria and dimensions, belonging effectively to the domain of semiotics (2014: 24). The veritable purpose of translation theory, hence, lies not in a fixed set of rules prescribing the precise correspondence between the source language and the target language, but in reaching ‘an understanding of the *processes* undertaken in the act of translation’ (2014: 47, my emphasis). Such an understanding owes itself to a radical criticism of traditional translation theory inaugurated by German Marxist intellectual Walter Benjamin in his 1923 essay *The task of the translator* (1970/1923). In this piece, Benjamin

emphatically dismisses literalness (the precise carrying of information) as the ‘hallmark of the bad translator’ and advances a characterization of the good translator’s intentions as ‘derivative’ and ‘ideational’. By introducing a dimension of alienness to translation – ‘all translation is a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages’ (1970: 75) – he foregrounds notions of change and creativity as corollaries to translation, hence calling attention to its processual nature and positing a tangential relation between original and translation:

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux. (1970: 80)

Benjamin’s essay inaugurated a deconstructionist approach to translation – a counter-tradition, as it were – whose development reaches a turning point with Homi Bhabha’s idea of cultural translation (Buden et al. 2009: 200). In *The location of culture* (1994), Bhabha situates cultural translation as a critique of essentialist notions of cultural identities embedded in multiculturalism, developing earlier ideas on hybridity and positing the notion of a Third Space, the space in-between cultures ‘which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, *translated*, rehistoricized and read anew’ (Bhabha 1994: 124–5, my emphasis). From the Third Space emerges the possibility of newness, of transforming the world through intercultural negotiation and translation, processes which he sees as politically subversive (Buden et al. 2009: 201). In Bhabha’s words,

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates *a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation*. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. (1994: 58–9, my emphasis)

Cultural translation, as understood and developed in postcolonial studies, entails a sense of translation as transposition (Conway 2012). Kyle Conway suggests that such a framing bears an intimate relationship with the movements of people (i.e. migrants, refugees), and how ‘the linguistic and cultural disjunctures brought about’ by human mobility ‘draw a community’s received sense of itself into question, opening a hybrid space, neither foreign nor familiar, where *interactions have the potential to operate contingently, outside of the prevailing cultural logics*’ (2012: 269, my emphasis). By further questioning translation theory tenets such as equivalence, the stability of meanings, and expanding the notion of translation (frequently to the level of metaphor), cultural translation scholars also brought questions of power, inequality, race, and ethnicity to the foreground of discussions on translation (Shamma 2018; Papastergiadis 2011; Apter 2011). Scrutinizing how political inequalities carry over to linguistic and cultural interactions, those who embraced the idea sought to

emphasise that even the most mundane translation choices cannot be separated from the wider context of communication between the two cultures, which include the history of representation between them, images about the other culture, and the current social and political realities in each – all with the added emphasis on the power differentials governing the translation act. (Shamma 2018: 279–80)

Cultural translation also provides a fundamental prism through which to grasp the bounded horizons of translators’ agency, considering the interplay of the specific structural and institutional conditions derived from historical and social circumstances and the room they have to manoeuvre in such an environment (Conway 2012: 277). Issues of boundedness, limitation, and resistance to translation were already foregrounded in Benjamin’s thoughts on translation. He remarked that ‘[i]n all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized’ (Benjamin 1970: 79).

Translation scholars such as Barbara Cassin and Emily Apter have addressed these challenges through conceptualizations regarding the ‘untranslatable’. Cassin (Cassin et al. 2014) conceptualizes untranslatability as the ‘symptoms of difference’ between separate systems of meaning (2014: 59). A sign of how ‘neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed’ in the movement between languages, the untranslatable signals not that which cannot be translated, but rather ‘what one keeps on (not) translating’, that which ‘creates a problem, to the extent of sometimes generating a neologism or imposing a new meaning in an old word’ (2014: 59). In a thought-provoking exploration of the idea of untranslatability, Apter (2011) considers how in Algeria – as Haiti, a country indelibly marked by French colonialism – both its literature and ‘Algerianness’ have acquired a status of ‘untranslatability’ in the global market, a situation connected to stylistic complexity, anti-Arab prejudice, conditions of local censorship, and a postcolonial legacy (2011: 105).

In parallel to Stuart Hall’s ‘living in translation’ quote, translation scholar Michael Cronin also characterizes migrants as ‘translated beings’ to whom translation takes place ‘both in the physical sense of movement or displacement and in the symbolic sense of the shift from one way of speaking, writing about and interpreting the world to another’ (2006: 45). Considering specifically the case of migrant workers, Cronin suggests that migrants are ‘not so much lost in as lost to’ translation. His phrasing emphasizes the crucial and persistent effects of migration in shaping migrants’ notions of self. This sense of a division in one’s life and personal history – before and after migrating – arises from moving into a new linguistic and cultural setting:

The workers cannot easily undo the daily traces of the hermeneutic work involved in living in another country, in many cases with a different language and culture. What is revealed in fact is *how momentous and life-altering the process of translation is*. To treat it lightly or to ignore it as it impinges on the lives of migrants is to brutally abbreviate the human capacity for constructive empathy. (2006: 70, my emphasis)

Both Hall and Cronin highlight the quotidian and relational dimension of translation in migrant life in their exchanges with host societies, and how it affects migrants' self-understanding in dramatic ways, simultaneously cultural, social, and psychological. Consequently, an analysis of acts of translation by migrants requires a consideration of the interconnected issues of identity/identification, belonging, and interactions with host societies. Expanding on his previously quoted rationale, Hall also links translation and identity – which he foregrounds as ‘not an essence but a positioning’ (Hall 1990: 226) – in the context of the ‘new diasporas’. The twentieth century has seen the emergence of ‘millions of displaced cultures and fractured communities of the south’ who are ‘obliged to inhabit at least two identities, to speak at least two languages, to negotiate and translate between them’ (Hall 2017: 281). For Hall, this lived experience of displacement and relocation engenders the production, reconstruction, and negotiation of new (and old) identities, which he foregrounds as the products of cultures of hybridity and a ‘diasporic consciousness’:

They are the products of the cultures of hybridity. They bear the traces of particular cultures, traditions, languages, systems of belief, texts and histories that have shaped them. But they are also *obliged to come to terms with and make something new of the cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them*. They are not and will never be unified in the old sense, because they are inevitably the products of several interlocking histories and cultures, belonging at the same time to several ‘homes’ – and thus to no one, particular home. [...] They are the product of a diasporic consciousness. They have come to terms with the fact that in the modern world identity is always an open, complex, unfinished game – always under construction. It moves into the future through a symbolic detour through the past, produces new subjects, *who bear the traces of the specific histories, traditions and identities that not only formed them but enable them to produce themselves anew and differently*. (2017: 281–2, my emphasis)

Translation is frequently a central part of the nexus between experiences of displacement and the ‘positioning’ and re-positioning of migrant identities, even if the maintenance or eventual return to essentialist responses mobilizing ‘original’ national identities can never be ruled out.

However, in this chapter our attention is directed towards the realm of migrant experiences that point to newness, hybridity, and cosmopolitanism, to the momentary or sustained shifts in identity their mobility provokes, in addition to the way in which the dialogic dimension of exchanges with host societies provides glimpses of belonging (or lack thereof) in new places of settlement (Inghilleri 2016: 34).

While often used as a descriptor of the mixed racial composition of the diasporic cultures of the New World, Hall reminds us that hybridity does not reference ethnic make-ups but is in fact ‘another term for the process of cultural translation, an agonistic process since it is never settled and complete, but is always “in transition”, in translation, marked by an ultimate undecidability’ (2016: 50). Bhabha’s original formulation of the Third Space (where ‘signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew’, Bhabha 2004: 125) posits the relation between hybridity and translation in migrant contexts as ‘an ethical and political force originating in the liminal spaces within society, a force that allows *alternative voices and visions to emerge* that counter attempts at universalizing hegemonic discourses’ (Inghilleri 2016: 20–1, my emphasis). Its epistemological value thus resides in foregrounding changing sociocultural realities and the moments in migrants’ lives where the inevitable effects of displacement render clear transformations in migrant identity (2016: 19). In translation studies, concerns with ‘hybrid texts’ have focused on debates about plurilingualism, creolization, transtextualization, and diasporic cultural expressions involving bilingualism and double consciousness (Simon 2011). Drawing on the work of Bhabha and Benjamin, Sherry Simon argues that hybridity is an apt characterizer of those texts which reveal their double allegiance to separate meaning systems, that bear the marks of the ‘relation’ that brought them into existence (2011: 50):

Hybrid texts are those that display ‘translation effects’: dissonances, interferences, disparate vocabulary, a lack of cohesion, unconventional syntax, a certain ‘weakness’ or ‘deterritorialization’. This mixing can be expressed either at the level of linguistic codes or more broadly at the level of cultural or historical references. While the hybrid text affirms the dividedness of identity, often becoming an expression of loss and disorientation, it can also become a powerful and emancipatory place for the writer to occupy. (2011: 50)

Contemporary cosmopolitan theory (also referred to as ‘new cosmopolitanism’), departs from a post-Kantian perspective that critiques the particularistic origins of the universalist ambitions which characterize Kant’s original formulations, nurturing a special interest in the context of contemporary migration and diaspora. Due to its critique of the elitist nature of such a cosmopolitan ethos and its attention to those who would not be thought of as cosmopolitans, it is also frequently understood as a cosmopolitanism *from below*. Performing a critique of cultural essentialism and of the centrality of the nation-state (Beck 2006; Delanty 2009), it has focused on the consequences of globalized late modernity and sought alternative approaches to envisioning social realities in the context of an increasingly entangled world (Bielsa 2016: 22). While it nurtures an analytical focus on the utopian potentials of increasingly diverse sociocultural settings, it also importantly ‘emphasizes tensions and conflict (between the global and the local, between the universal and the particular) rather than simply plurality, as constitutive of modernity’ (2016: 28).

One of the main derivations of this theoretical (and political) shift has been the focus on migrant and diasporic subjects as cosmopolitan agents in the mediation, amplification, and circulation of cultural codes, texts, and local forms of knowledge. The ‘cosmopolitan condition of living in translation’ is defined as a practice or competence related ‘to the ability to make one’s way into other cultures and to actively engage with those living in or through different cultures, languages, or milieux’ (Bielsa 2016: 57). As such, it aligns with Cronin’s remarks on

‘the possibility of thinking about translation as a way not only of thinking but of being and acting in the world’ (Cronin 2006: 10). The active posture of engagement with alterity contained in such view of the relationships between cosmopolitanism and translation is also foregrounded in the idea of (a cosmopolitan) conversation presented by Anthony Appiah in *Cosmopolitanism* (2006):

Conversations across boundaries of identity – whether national, religious, or something else – begin with the sort of *imaginative engagement* you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. So, I’m using the word ‘conversation’ not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others. (Appiah 2006: 218–19, my emphasis)

A conversation, be it literal or metaphorical as Appiah intends it, is a relational exercise, requiring a minimum of two subjects who, ideally, endow speaking and listening to one another with equal importance. Accordingly, the framing of cosmopolitanism as a practice of conversation across boundaries of identity in the context of migration must bring to the forefront issues of power relations involving the receiving society. To this end, Bielsa highlights thinking about the ‘social and cultural significance of the stranger’ who, embodying the cosmopolitan condition of living in translation, confronts receiving societies with ‘inextricable difference’, ideally promoting ‘a degree of cosmopolitan reflexivity, a re-examination of the self in light of the difference of the other’ (Bielsa 2016: 57–8). The responses of receiving societies in such ‘precarious moments of attempted mutual recognition’ (Inghilleri 2016: 3), as Bielsa suggests, may point to the ‘degree of cosmopolitan openness’ (2016: 58) of receiving societies, spanning a wide range from xenophobia and ignorance to tolerance and inclusion, postures which rarely manifest in isolated ways.

Cronin (2006) offers two distinct pairs of categories that help to critically interpret both migrant responses to their new linguistic situation and host societies' 'cosmopolitan openness' to their new interlocutors. The first of these relates to migrant responses to their new linguistic environment and is expressed through the ideas of translational assimilation and translational accommodation, options which are not mutually exclusive. Translational assimilation corresponds to migrants' efforts 'to translate themselves into the dominant language of the community', positing a metonymic relationship between language and culture, based on the view that language provides privileged access to the community (2006: 54). Translational accommodation, on the other hand, corresponds to the endeavours of migrants in 'maintaining their languages of origin though this does not rule out limited or indeed extensive acquisition of the host-country language' (Cronin 2006: 52). It is often linked to resistance to total assimilation by migrant communities and their role in promoting cultural, religious, and social components connected to their origins, besides being closely entwined with how the transnational flows and networks facilitated by communication technology significantly shape the daily life of migrants today (2006: 62).

The second pair of concepts advanced by Cronin directs its attention to the sonic/auditive elements of migrant conversations with receiving societies. Using the sonic traces of native languages in migrants' accent in their new linguistic settings as an example, Cronin outlines what he calls 'translator's audibility', referring to the situations in which the 'practice of translation is audible in the mouth and language of the newcomer as translator' (2006: 73). While translator audibility emphasizes the crucial importance of listening in discussions around translation and migration, it also accounts for how the perception of foreignness can 'lead to ready identification of the immigrant (who "sounds" different)', in effect rendering them

vulnerable to discrimination (2006: 73). Its opposite, translator inaudibility, signals the failure to hear the voices of translators and ‘the manner in which *the translation labour of the immigrant is rendered inaudible through a zealous pursuit of translational assimilation.*’ (2006: 73, my emphasis).

The theoretical framework of this chapter assumes a wide-ranging view of translation as a multidimensional, corporeal, and dialogic intercultural *process* embodied in the notion of cultural translation. Although it also addresses the more practical and literal dimensions of song lyric translation, I believe that it is only through a multi-levelled understanding of translation that their ethnomusicological and sociocultural significance is revealed. When considering acts of translations involving music in the context of Haitian migrant artists in Brazil, I advance a framework that takes into consideration the following aspects: 1) the motivations and choices of the translator as an autonomous subject – albeit immersed in historical and social circumstances traversed by power relations; 2) an enlarged view of cultural translation as a multimodal process that transcends linguistic and textual dimensions, with special attention to the speech of the translator, sonic and musical aspects, and the role of receiving audiences; 3) the connections between acts of translation and issues of belonging and identity.

### **‘Finally, a Frenchman in the family!’: the bypassing of Haitianness in the translation of a *gaúcho* anthem**

To begin unravelling the acts of translation involving music and Haitian migrants in Brazil, I consider the case of Alix Georges’s translation of a popular *gaúcho* regional song, ‘Canto Alegretense’ (Alegretensean Chant), into French. Alix Georges is a Haitian-Brazilian computer engineer, composer, singer, and activist in his early forties who has been living in Brazil since

2006.<sup>20</sup> Having left his native town of Marchand Dessalines in Haiti years before the main Haitian migration wave to Brazil, Alix settled in the city of Porto Alegre, the capital of Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul. Over the best part of two decades, he worked to develop an artistic career as a singer/songwriter while earning a living from various occupations such as French teacher, party promoter, DJ, and computer engineer (Alix's life story and migration to Brazil are further discussed in Chapter 3, Songwriting).

The song in question, 'Canto Alegretense', was composed in the 1980s by Nico and Bagre Fagundes, members of the family-based *gaúcho* regional music ensemble *Os Fagundes* (The Fagundes). The group is originally from the city of Alegrete, a countryside town in the southwestern region of the state known as *Campanha*, a grassland and cattle-raising area bordering Argentina and Uruguay closely associated with dominant ideas about 'gaúcho culture'. The gentilic for the state, *gaúcho*, indexes the male horse rider and cattle ranch worker typical of the region and has come to symbolize the iconic figure of the state's regional identity (Oliven 1996). Through its hegemonic rise from the 1950s onwards, the cultural symbol of the *gaúcho* and its associated narratives and representations have largely ignored the state's demographic and cultural diversity. This omission has been to the detriment of the significant numbers of people of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous heritage, resulting in the symbolic invisibility (and the silencing) of Afro-diasporic and Native cultures in the state and the dominant association of *gaúcho* regionalism with (Europeanized) whiteness (Oliven, 1996: 83–4). As ethnomusicologist

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<sup>20</sup> Alix has claimed Brazilian citizenship before completing fifteen years living in the country due to his marriage to a Brazilian woman in 2018.

Maria Lucas importantly notes, notions regarding regional music have been central to the affirmation of hegemonic narratives of *gaúcho* regionalism and its ethnocentric logics:

References to musical roots, tradition, authenticity and alien threats form a common discursive ground within gaucho regionalism. The intense circulation of origin myths to account for certain musical styles, song repertoires, dance genres and musical instruments in this milieu operate as social markers of ethnic, social, age and class differences, constituting signs of identity that separate ‘us’ from ‘them’. (Lucas 2000: 50)

As is true of many newly arrived migrants, Alix routinely used television as a tool to acquaint himself with the Portuguese language and local popular culture. One of his favourite TV shows was *Galpão Crioulo* (Creole Ranch), a Sunday morning show centred around *gaúcho* culture. The show reproduces the visual environment of the rural countryside and always features musical performances by *gaúcho* regional music groups and artists. Airing since 1982 on RBS TV, a regional affiliate of Brazil’s powerful Rede Globo media group, the show has close associations with the Fagundes family, members of whom have been its hosts for decades. The first televised performance of ‘Canto Alegretense’, unquestionably their most famous song, was at Galpão Crioulo in 1983.<sup>21</sup> The group’s strong mediatic presence and the popularity of the song have contributed to its widespread recognition as a ‘second anthem’ of the state, and it arguably stands in a metonymic relation with feelings of ‘gaúchiness’.

The song strongly indexes local identity in its lyrics, proclaiming love for the homeland and advancing the song’s own composition as the ‘payment of a debt of gratitude and devotion’. It sets the geographical referent of Alegrete and the *Campanha* region in metonymic relation to local identity, as the core of a *gaúcho* sentiment of belonging, and describes in a passionate tone some of the region’s iconic landmarks, landscape, and flora, signalling the sound of the nylon

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<sup>21</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=3YkG9Jze7NY>> (Accessed 23 March 2023)

guitar and accordion as sonic cues of the *gaúcho* heartland. The opening verse and chorus are as follows:

Não me pergunte onde fica o  
Alegrete  
Segue o rumo do teu próprio  
coração  
Cruzarás pela estrada algum  
ginete  
E ouvirás toque de  
gaita e de violão

Don't ask me where  
Alegrete is  
Just follow your heart's path  
You'll cross paths with a  
horserider  
And hear the playing of  
accordion and guitar

*Chorus*

Ouve o canto gauchesco e  
brasileiro!  
Desta terra que eu amei desde  
guri  
Flor de tuna, camoatim de mel  
campeiro  
Pedra moura das quebradas do  
Inhanduí

Listen to the *gaúchesque* and  
Brazilian chant!  
Of this land that I've loved since  
childhood  
Cactus flower, wild bee honey  
Moorish stone of the bends of the  
Inhanduí

It was while watching Galpão Crioulo that Alix first heard 'Canto Alegretense'. Alix's explanation about why 'Canto Alegretense' impacted him highlights his identification with this expression of affection for native soil – which he related to his deep love for Haiti, therefore perceiving a similarity between feelings of gaúchiness and Haitianness. Hence, through *Galpão Crioulo* and The Fagundes' song, Alix began to familiarize himself with the local soundscape and hegemonic narratives of local identity and started to postulate, in an idiosyncratic manner, connections between it and his own identity as a Haitian. Such a process would have important consequences for in his life in Porto Alegre. At that point, Alix worked as a French teacher at *Québec Sans Frontière*, a private company which offers Brazilians interested in emigrating to

Canada personalized immigration assistance and preparatory French courses. In his teaching, Alix frequently included translation exercises involving Brazilian popular songs, translating them from Portuguese to French, as a way of working with content familiar to students and satisfying his penchant as a music aficionado. Therefore, he started using the song's initial verses as teaching material, rendering them in French: *Ne me demande pas ou se trouve Alegrete / Seulement suis le desir de ton coeur* (Don't ask me where Alegrete is / Just follow your heart's desire).

The song's opening lines also became important in his daily encounters in Porto Alegre, as even after years living in the city his encounters with *gaúchos* were frequently framed by experiences of racial othering. For those perceived as being from somewhere else due to their skin colour, the apparently routine question of 'Where are you from?' carries important racial underpinnings, reinforcing their out-of-placeness and imposing on them what Judith Butler has termed the need for an 'account of oneself' (Butler 2005). In this confrontation prompted by perceptions of racial difference, Brazilians usually expect Black migrants' answers to align with national frameworks of citizenship (Haitian, Senegalese, Nigerian, etc), answers which reveal the ubiquity of the nation as a 'normative scheme of intelligibility', the 'frame within which I can see and apprehend the other in her separateness and exteriority' (Butler 2005: 13). Difference in skin colour is further compounded by national frameworks of othering, in a manifestation of the racialized xenophobia which frames Black migrant experience in Brazil. In response, however, Alix gradually began to creatively mobilize his knowledge of local culture to evade othering by claiming to be 'from Alegrete', and then singing the opening lines of the song. Surprising his interlocutors, he established a conversation across the boundaries of (national) identity (Appiah 2006) and created space for his own affirmation of belonging through an imaginative (and

humorous) engagement with local musical culture. He later condensed this story in a news piece about the debut of his CD, *Música 'mente vol.1* (Music [and] mind vol.1):

Every time Alix Georges [...] meets someone new or gets somewhere he is questioned about his country of origin: ‘People ask me so much “Where you’re from?”’, due to my demeanour and appearance, I developed a funny way of answering. I say, ‘I’m from Alegrete!’’. Then they go: ‘You? From Alegrete?’’, and I start singing: ‘Don’t ask me where Alegrete is!’<sup>22</sup>

If such intercultural dialogues initially set the terms of engagement through frameworks of national citizenship and the visibility of skin colour, Alix creatively used music and his voice to evade, even if momentarily, his racialized othering. Such a strategy is evocative of some of the strategies observed by Jennifer Roth-Gordon amongst Rio de Janeiro’s marginalized Afro-Brazilian youth, which involved the selective use of language and musical verses to ‘improve’ their racial appearance (achieving ‘situational whiteness’) before the military police or to assert ‘modern Blackness’ before peers (Roth-Gordon 2012, 2016). The latter strategy, named ‘conversational sampling’, involves the quoting of verses from popular rap songs in conversations, and hence bears great likeness to Alix’s response to the uncomfortable inquiries he faced on a daily basis (Roth-Gordon 2012: 39). By quoting the initial verses of the song, Alix may be seen as performing a kind of ‘conversational sampling’ which allowed him to divert attention from his skin colour and demonstrate his knowledge of local music and culture.

In early 2017, I was working as an accompanying musician for Alix. During a rehearsal at his place in late May, he mentioned his desire to translate the entire song into French. On that same occasion, I met Extenson Thelus, a Haitian multi-instrumentalist who would also

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<sup>22</sup> Available at: <<https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/cultura-e-lazer/musica/noticia/2017/11/depois-de-criar-versao-em-frances-do-canto-alegretense-haitiano-lanca-cd-na-capital-cj9is8hi9017601pg3gggdpvj.html>> (Accessed 23 March 2023).

participate in Alix's version of 'Canto Alegretense' and play with Alix during that year. Alix's mention of the idea struck me as a peculiar and strange idea, a reaction which is also telling regarding my own expectations about his repertoire (which then mostly consisted in Haitian and French popular songs). Alix's idea quickly turned into improvised music making, however.

The song's melody and harmony were familiar to my ear, and as I began fingering its initial chords, Alix and Extenson (playing keyboard) followed suit. Our improvised rendition differed significantly from the original recording by The Fagundes. Instead of the powerful rhythmic drive of the chamamé, I tentatively fingerpicked a slow chord-melody guitar accompaniment; in place of the reedy sound of the accordion, Extenson (who mainly played in Haitian Protestant churches in Haiti and Brazil) followed my lead, improvising a harmonic background with a smooth electric piano patch, in a style clearly indebted to Afro-American gospel music.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Alix's interpretation of the few verses he could then translate to French pointed to yet another aesthetic reference: his raucous but soft singing in the French language recalled well-known artists of *chanson française* like Charles Aznavour and Serge Gainsbourg, one of the many genres which make up his cosmopolitan musical taste. Our tentative and improvised rendition marked a symbolic moment when the meeting of our individual musical (and cultural) backgrounds fleetingly coalesced into a hybrid musical text(ure), with our 'disparate [musical] vocabularies' clearly evincing a 'lack of [musical] coherence', a type of musical 'deterritorialization' (Simon 2011): we sounded neither *gaúcho*, Haitian, nor French.

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<sup>23</sup> A genre of popular dance music originally from the Corrientes province in northeastern Argentina (neighbouring Rio Grande do Sul's *Campanha* region) which combines a basic 3/4 rhythm with a melodic 6/8 rhythm, and is strongly rooted in the sound of the accordion. (Ruiz 2001).

Our playful improvisation quickly came to an end, since despite using the song to subvert his racialized othering in daily encounters for many years, Alix had never fully translated its lyrics. So, he asked for my help to produce a full translation. It was a complex task, not only for a Haitian migrant such as Alix but also for me, an ‘urban’ *gaúcho*, as the song was fraught with translational challenges. It contained words in the indigenous Tupi-Guarani language referencing Alegrete landmarks (Inhanduí, Ibirapuitã) and expressions which resonated with the cultural repertoire and rural landscape of *gaúcho* rural life (*ginete*, *flor de tuna*, *camoatim de mel campeiro*). Such expressions represented untranslatables (Cassin 2014) which signalled how ‘neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed’ in the movement between languages’ (2014: 59) and made evident a cartography of cultural differences which moved with tension ‘between historically and nationally circumscribed contexts to unbounded conceptual outposts, resistant yet mobile’ (Apter 2008: 586).

While some of the song’s untranslatables ‘kept on not translating’ (notably the Tupi-Guarani topographic nomenclature), others, such as *ginete*, provided interesting examples of how translation’s effects can disclose semantic movements ‘at the level of cultural or historical references’ (Simon 2011: 50). In the local idiom, the word *ginete* denotes a skilled horse-rider. Its etymology, however, takes us back to Moorish Spain and even deeper to Berber tribes that shared the *gaúcho* penchant for horses: [t]he word ‘*jinete*’ derives from the Spanish Arabic word ‘*zanáti*’, the gentilic of ‘*Zañata*’, a confederation of Berber tribes known for their mastery of horsemanship and horse breeding.<sup>24</sup> In the translation process, such nuances were inevitably lost,

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<sup>24</sup> Real Academia Española, Diccionario de la lengua española, 23.<sup>a</sup> ed, Available at: <<https://dle.rae.es/>> (Accessed 02 October 2023)

as we likened *ginete* to the rough Portuguese equivalent of ‘*cavaleiro*’ (horse-rider or knight), a term less specific and conceptually closer to the French term ‘*chevalier*’. But even if these untranslatables brought forth a cartography of cultural differences and evinced the pervasiveness of hybridity in what we have (problematically) come to see as cultural units, in the end, Alix’s approach to the translation of the lyrics betrays a literal approach: as he would later comment, his desire was one of ‘preserving’ the song while singing it his ‘own way’. In that sense, his approach to text harkened back to the traditional method of translation criticized by Benjamin as the ‘bad translator’s work’: the literal carrying of information across languages. Here is the final French translation of ‘Chant Alegretense’, alongside my English rendering:

Ne me demande pas ou se trouve  
 Alegrete  
 Seulement suis le desir de ton  
 coeur  
 Tu croiseras sur le chemin  
 quelques chevalier  
 Et écouteras sonner la  
 guitarrre et l’acordeon

Don’t ask me where  
 Alegrete is  
 Just follow your heart’s desire  
  
 On the path you will cross a  
 horserider  
 And will hear the playing of the  
 guitar and the accordion

Celui qui vient de Rosário  
 fin de l’après-midi  
 Ou qui vient d’Uruguaiana au  
 matin  
 Il y a le soleil comme une flame  
 qui encore brûle  
 Plongé dans la rivière Ibirapuitã

Those who come from Rosário at  
 the close of the day  
 Or who come from Uruguaiana in  
 the morning  
 Find the sun as an ember  
 that still shines  
 Sunk into the Ibirapuitã river

*Chorus*

Ecoutez le chant *gaúcho*-brésilien

Listen to the *gaúcho*-Brazilian  
 chant

De cette terre que j'aimé depuis  
petit  
Fleur de cactus, frelon de miel de  
la campagne  
Pierre mauresque chez les  
Inhanduí

Of this land that I've loved since  
childhood  
The cactus flower, the beehive of  
country honey  
The 'Moorish' rock of the bends  
of the Inhanduí

Et dans la dernière heure que je  
merite  
Voir le soleil d'Alegrete qui se  
couche  
Comme les poulins, je tournerai la  
tête  
Vers ma terre natale avant de  
mourir

And in the waning hours that I'm  
worthy of  
See the Alegretean sun  
lie down  
As a colt, I will turn my  
head  
To my home country before I  
die

Dans mon regard j'apporterai  
l'admiration  
Cette terre que j'ai aimé avec  
dévotion  
Chaque vers que je compose c'est  
un paiement  
D'une dette d'amour et de  
reconnaissance

In my eyes I will carry the  
enchantment  
Of this land I loved with  
devotion  
Each verse I compose is the  
payment  
Of a debt of love and  
gratitude

But why did Alix choose French if his first language is Kreyòl? To understand this, one must consider the status that the French language and culture have held in Haiti and Brazil since colonial times. In the words of Haitian linguist Michel De Graff, despite the official status of Haitian Creole as the first language since the promulgation of the 1987 constitution (following the downfall of the Duvalier dictatorship), 'neo-colonization and class domination through French have become part and parcel of every corner of Haitian society, relegating monolingual Kreyòl speakers to second-class citizenship even though they constitute the numerical majority

and should have the most influence in political matters' (DeGraff 2019: x). In Brazil, the Eurocentric upper echelons of society (and consequently the country's main institutions) have cultivated a special relationship with Francophone culture since the nineteenth century, when the spread of French literature, language, and diplomacy contributed to an exceptional dissemination of 'French culture' in Brazil (see Freyre 1940). Had Alix chosen Kreyòl as the target language (a move of 'translational accommodation') his work would have been incomprehensible for Brazilians. Yet, even if translating to French did not represent a move of 'translational assimilation', Alix would have a better chance of enticing the attention and admiration of local audiences, in addition to reaching an international French-speaking listenership. Hence, despite De Graff's fundamentally important critique of how the colonial heritage represented by the French language and French education in Haiti continue to promote forms of social segregation in the country, one must also consider how France and the idea of French culture remains important references and resources for many Haitians. In the diaspora, they may benefit from claiming and displaying such an ambiguous colonial legacy which is globally regarded as a distinct linguistic and cultural capital, and thus may elevate their position and esteem *vis-à-vis* the receiving society.

Following our rehearsal, Alix asked me to record a folk guitar backing track for the song using my home studio equipment and send it to him as soon as possible, as he wanted to record his version and use it to promote his upcoming new CD. A few days later, he and Extenson took my backing track on a memory stick to Zokot Studio, a Haitian home studio located in the lower-class neighbourhood of Bom Jesus, on the outskirts of Porto Alegre's East side. Zokot Studio was set up in the bedroom of Junior Mortimer, a 28-year-old Haitian migrant who was active as a producer and video maker between 2015 and 2018. The final recorded version bears evidence of

instances of musical and sonic translation. Like our first improvised attempt at the song, it sounded significantly different from The Fagundes' original version: notably slower, it substituted a gentle fingerpicked folk guitar for the driving rhythmic pulse of the chamamé rhythm, and Alix's gentle, throaty and nasal *chanson française* vocal performance for the powerful, clear and vibrato-filled vocal harmonies characteristic of the group. Extenson's part, however, had changed significantly. Wishing to infuse his translation with an element of vernacular authenticity, Alix asked Extenson to substitute the Afro-American gospel piano accompaniment from our rehearsal for an accordion patch on his keyboard, seeking to provide his version with a sonic synecdoche of *gaúcho*-ness identifiable by local audiences.<sup>25</sup> Playing chords and short, ornamented countermelodies, Extenson attempted to emulate *gaúcho* accordion styles with which he was barely acquainted. In a peculiar twist of fate, a Haitian migrant unfamiliar with *gaúcho* music was entrusted with performing an aesthetic and cultural connection between the two versions, or, we might say, Benjamin's 'tangential link' between original and translation. The undeniable artificiality of the digital accordion patch and the tentative and unassertive character of Extenson's act of imaginative (musical) engagement (Appiah 2006), however, are resounding sonic testimonies of the dissonances and lack of cohesion which came to compose a hybrid sonic and musical text(ure) (Simon 2011).

Junior was also hired by Alix to produce a video clip for the version.<sup>26</sup> Filmed in a small square at the doorstep of Junior's house in Bom Jesus, it bears the mark of a quick and

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<sup>25</sup> Brought to Rio Grande do Sul by Italian and German immigrants in the late nineteenth century, the accordion became, in the mid-twentieth century, perhaps the most important musical icon of *gaúcho* culture. Along with the 6-string nylon guitar, it progressively formed a standard instrumentation which became regarded as 'mandatory to index an authentic, pure, vernacular [*gaúcho*] music' (Lucas 2000: 53).

<sup>26</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=hRHKvQJQ80I>> (Accessed 26 March 2023)

unambitious grassroots production, yet carefully references the hegemonic narratives of *gaúcho* culture. In the opening and closing scenes, Alix sits on the grass holding his guitar in hand while a small girl dressed in the attire of a *prenda* (the *gaúcho*'s female 'equivalent') brings him a *chimarrão*, as if symbolically greeting and 'welcoming' him into *gaúcho* land. Yet if Alix's counterpart is recognizably acting as a representation of local identity, the 'visual dissonance' noticeable in Alix's attire may be seen as pointing to an unfinished process of translation, with his combination of jeans outfit and dreadlocks, visually evoking a more urban and cosmopolitan look, rather than the stereotypical *gaúcho* appearance (see Figure 5).



Figure 5 - Alix receives a *chimarrão* from an infant '*prenda*' in the '*Chant Alegretense*' video clip (screenshot by the author)

After receiving the song – still unmixed – from Junior a few days later, Alix decided to share it with some of his Brazilian friends through WhatsApp. This apparently innocuous move effectively caused the song to circulate widely in local and transnational networks through organic peer sharing, not only among members of the transnational Haitian diaspora but also amidst the local population and the *gaúcho* diaspora around the world (Oliven 2000). The surprise extended even to me, as I received the song from a Brazilian acquaintance on WhatsApp before even knowing that Alix and Extenson had recorded their parts. Alix suddenly became the centre of considerable media attention, and both Extenson and I followed him to numerous local TV stations in Porto Alegre and its vicinity to talk about his French version of a *gaúcho* anthem. During one of these interviews, the remarks of a well-intentioned TV host summarized the expectation of translational assimilation by host societies, highlighting the process of cultural translation undergone by migrants such as Alix in trying to adapt to their new environments. After commenting on how Alix’s act of musical translation and fluency in Portuguese denoted admiration for *gaúcho* culture, the host commented: ‘I’m not sure if you agree, but to learn a language we *must* immerse ourselves in its culture. It’s no use learning grammar or vocabulary, we need to *enter* the culture and you did this very well with “Canto Alegretense”, which is like an anthem for Rio Grande’.<sup>27</sup>

Alix’s version eventually found its way to the composers of the original song, who decided to do a special television report on RBS’ lunchtime news program *Jornal do Almoço*, in July 2017. It was recorded at the Casa de Cultura Mário Quintana, a cultural centre housed in

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<sup>27</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=LEpfSroEjmw>> (Accessed 26 March 2023)

one of the most iconic buildings in the historic downtown of Porto Alegre.<sup>28</sup> At Alix's request, both Extenson and I attended to back him performing the song. Holding a *chimarrão* in his hand while being interviewed by the reporter, Alix unfolded once again his account of himself: the story of his migration and adaptation to Porto Alegre, his discovery of and fascination with *gaúcho* regional music through Galpão Crioulo, and the reasoning behind the translation of the song after experiences of racial othering.<sup>29</sup> He was suddenly interrupted by the reporter: 'Are you *gaúcho* already?' – not the same question he had heard so many times, but one which revealed expectations of assimilation. Alix's rather sardonic smile was followed by an unflinching answer: '*Haitiúcho*', amending the reporter's suggestion and putting forth an original hybrid moniker that cleverly combined Haitian and *gaúcho*. This emic formulation of hybrid identity posited his belonging to *gaúcho* society by making something new from the culture he inhabited without simply assimilating (Hall 2017; Bhabha 1994). To become a *gaúcho*, he did not need to relinquish his Haitianess. This in-between space of identification creatively put forward by Alix, however, would not be emphasized during the rest of the recording session by the composers of the song, whom in this setting appeared as powerful representatives of *gaúcho* society and culture.

The surprise appearance of The Fagundes immediately following such an important moment would introduce further dissonance in the translation process. Wearing *pilchas*, Bagre, Neto, and Ernesto Fagundes, respectively in possession of *gaita-ponto* (diatonic button

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<sup>28</sup> Available at: <<https://gshow.globo.com/RBS-TV-RS/Galpao-Crioulo/Extras-Galpao-Crioulo/noticia/fa-do-galpao-crioulo-haitiano-que-mora-em-porto-alegre-apresenta-canto-alegretense-em-frances.ghtml>> (Accessed 25 March 2023)

<sup>29</sup> A bitter tea of Indigenous origin, drunk from a gourd through a silver straw, a paradigmatic symbol of the *gaúcho* (Oliven 1996: 138).

accordion), folk guitar and *bumbo legueiro* (a large frame drum) had come to personally meet the creator of the French version of their song (see Figure 6).<sup>30</sup>



Figure 6 - Bagre Fagundes, Alix Georges, Neto Fagundes, and Ernesto Fagundes. (source: Neto Fagundes' personal archive)<sup>31</sup>

Despite having the friendly atmosphere of an encounter between (musical) peers, the ensuing conversation between The Fagundes and Alix offered fertile evidence of how they (mis)read his Haitian origins. Alix was enthusiastically greeted in French with a cordial ‘*Bonjour, mon ami!*’ and received compliments about the ‘beauty’ and ‘difference’ of his

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<sup>30</sup> The *pilcha* is the *gaúcho*'s typical attire, including baggy pants, boots, bandanna, and hat (Oliven 1996: 138).

<sup>31</sup> Available at: <<https://redeglobo.globo.com/rs/rbstvrs/galpaocrioulo/colunas-galpao-crioulo/noticia/chasque-do-neto-gauchosco-brasileiro-e-haitiano.ghtml>> (Accessed 30 March 2023)

‘chanson’. He was also discursively framed as a migrant subject in need of care and integration, hearing from them how *gaúchos* needed to be hospitable in practice, and not just on the level of discourse, and how ‘this song is for integrating, how nice that we’re doing this together’.

Regardless of this sincere display of friendliness, The Fagundes’ discursive framing of Alix demonstrated a juxtaposition of language and nationality towards a binary frame of ‘Us/Natives’ (Portuguese speakers) and ‘Them/Migrants’ (French speakers). Evading the very fact of his Blackness (to quote Frantz Fanon’s famous chapter in *Black skin, white masks*), it kept his Haitianness at bay, ironically preferring the linguistic corollary of Frenchness, in tandem with the (dominant) sonic and linguistic ambience of Alix’s version. In a still overtly Eurocentric society that is blatantly ignorant of Haitian history and culture, it was easier to recognize his French cultural and linguistic capital than to acknowledge him as Haitian or *Haitiúcho*. This misinterpretation culminated in a simultaneous mishap and act of inclusion by Bagre: ‘his name, I think, must change. It’ll be Alix Fagundes! Finally, a *Frenchman* in the family!’ To belong to this archetypical *gaúcho* family, Haiti and Blackness were set aside in favour of a reading that symbolically placed him within the boundaries of Haiti’s former colonial power and of Rio Grande do Sul simultaneously, suggesting that a French *gaúcho* is preferable to an *Haitiúcho*.

While not wishing to diminish The Fagundes’ posture of friendliness towards Alix, one must consider the considerable limitation in what Bielsa would call ‘the degree of cosmopolitan openness’ demonstrated by them. On the one hand, although Alix was able to include the song on his CD without copyright charges, he never received an actual invitation to sing it on Galpão Crioulo with The Fagundes, a lack of engagement which was further substantiated by The Fagundes’ gradual distancing from, and eventual neglect of him.

On the other hand, as the news about ‘Canto Alegretense’ disseminated, his purported love for the song – and the city, which from then onwards he would adopt as a ‘second hometown’ – was received with enthusiasm by Alegrete’s denizens. In November, Alix was officially invited to visit the city by local congresswoman Firmina Soares (Democratic Labour Party – PDT) and attend the official celebration of Brazil’s Black Consciousness Day on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November. In a solemn ceremony, Alegrete’s municipal chamber honoured him with the award of ‘Black Star of Alegrete’ and the official title of ‘Citizen of Alegrete’ (see Figure 7).



ESTADO DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL  
CÂMARA MUNICIPAL DE ALEGRETE  
PALÁCIO LAURO DORNELLES

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**PROJETO DE DECRETO LEGISLATIVO**

“Concede o título de Cidadão Alegretense ao senhor Alix Georges em virtude de sua destacada atuação no meio cultural, sendo uma personalidade que dá visibilidade à causa dos direitos dos imigrantes, utilizando o Canto Alegretense para promover o respeito entre etnias, e prestando, assim, relevante serviço a este município”.

Art. 1º. É concedido o título de Cidadão Alegretense ao senhor Alix Georges em virtude de sua destacada atuação no meio cultural, sendo uma personalidade que dá visibilidade à causa dos direitos dos imigrantes, e ao respeito entre etnias, prestando, assim, relevante serviço ao Alegrete.

Art. 2º. Este Decreto Legislativo entra em vigor na data de sua publicação.

Alegrete, Plenário Ver. Gaspar Cardoso Paines, 17 de outubro de 2017.

  
Verª. Firmina C. Martins Soares  
Bancada do PDT

*Figure 7 - Cover of the legislative decree project by congresswoman Firmina Soares conferring the title of Citizen of Alegrete to Alix Georges (screenshot by the author)*

The chamber's official reasoning for the awards centred on the omnipresence of migration in human history, its connections with the search for better lives, and the myriad forms of prejudice that besiege migrants in their new homes. Defining Brazil as a country 'built by immigrants and formed by the mixing of ethnicities', it called for an end to the predicament of migrants and acknowledged Alix as a symbol of 'integration between cultures', who earned 'the admiration of *gaúcho* people' and promulgated 'respect between different ethnicities'.<sup>32</sup> To Alix's satisfaction, the visit to Alegrete climaxed with a performance of the song that same night at a local nightclub. A video recorded by a member of the audience shows Alix elegantly dressed in front of a local band, in a smoky and noisy nightclub environment filled with teenagers and neon lights. As Alix sings the first verses of 'Chant Alegretense' in the song's 'birthplace', inebriated members of the crowd loudly singing along, not in French, but in Portuguese. Alix strains his voice to outshine the crowd, but eventually, the song becomes unintelligible, its words lost in between the two languages. The lack of attunement between him and the band (it was, after all, an improvised performance) becomes increasingly noticeable. Yet, as the chorus approaches, the band builds momentum with the rhythm of chamamé, the neon lights move faster, and the excitement in the audience increases as they anticipate the song's climax. Amidst such noisy turbulence, Alix tries switching to Portuguese, but soon has to cease singing as the crowd's volume overwhelms him, dominating the sonic environment. Alix opens his arms in salutation, and with a loud final chord, the song ends. He leaves the stage, cheered by the public.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Available at: <<https://alegrete.rs.leg.br/proposicoes/Projetos-de-Decreto-Legislativo/2017/1/0/5080>> (Accessed 26 March 2023)

<sup>33</sup> A video of the performance is available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fulh31yuZc4>> (Accessed 24 January 2024)

## From racialized misreading to belonging? Translating migrant experiences between Brazil and Haiti

*Video clip recording with Widler and Kaleb, Canoas – 27 June 2021*

*Sunday dawned cold and grey, yet dry, lacking the torrential rain of the day before. I left home at 1 PM, heading towards ‘Continuum Studio’ in the nearby town of Sapucaia. Walking downtown towards the train station with my guitar case in hand, I felt the cold gusts of wind coming from Lake Guaíba. Still amidst the pandemic and it being a Sunday, the sight of Porto Alegre’s downtown was desolate: wherever you looked you could see homeless people, almost the only inhabitants of a now grey and lifeless city. I took the train towards Sapucaia station, glancing through the windows at the docks and the river, and suddenly London and the Thames jumped to my mind, an unlikely parallel were it not for my lonely, grey days in London a few months before. The train wasn’t that empty, and as expected (masked) vendors went up and down the wagons selling earphones, candy, and masks. I passed by Niterói station, where I used to get off going to BTAG Studio PSWARK, and Fátima station, where I got off a couple of times to attend the Haitian Sunday service at the Igreja Batista Central de Canoas. Those memories seemed like a different lifetime. I met Widler and his brother Kaleb at the station, and we walked to the studio. We talked about the cold, the difficulties brought about by the pandemic, and about migrating. Widler asked me how England was. As I talked about my own dilemmas living through the pandemic abroad, I mentioned homesickness. Kaleb intervened: ‘Muita saudade, né?’ (A lot of saudade, right?).<sup>34</sup>*

My second case study concerns Widler Oris’s translation, from Portuguese to Kreyòl, of the song ‘Lamento de um nordestino’ (A northeasterner’s lament), by Brazilian singer and songwriter Francis Lopes.<sup>35</sup> Widler is a Haitian migrant in his late twenties who lived in different cities in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre between 2016 and 2022, having worked during most of this time in a plastic packaging company. In mid-2022, he decided to leave Brazil and went back

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<sup>34</sup> Though it undoubtedly indexes an affective condition which is universal, *saudade* is often thought of as a prime example of an untranslatable within the Portuguese language (Santoro 2017). The use of *saudade* by Kaleb evinces a significant moment of intercultural communication through translation.

<sup>35</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=ZvIdWnlWR8k>> (Accessed 27 March 2023)

to Haiti to see his family in Archaïe (the city of the Haitian flag and of bananas, as he likes to say) for the first time in six years. His plan, however, was to continue travelling up north: after a few months he reached the Mexico-US border and, after successfully entering the US, he now lives in Florida. A choir singer in Haitian evangelical churches since early childhood, Widler affords great importance to music in his personal and spiritual life: ‘Music is something which is deep inside me, that I can’t, I can’t... something that I can’t give up, understand?’ (interview with the author, April 2021). In Brazil, Widler continued to sing in gospel music groups, frequenting different Haitian churches that have sprung up in the Porto Alegre metropolitan area. He eventually became the main singer with a Haitian church music group, the ‘Igreja Batista Central de Canoas (Canoas Central Baptist Church) Music Band’, in which he played alongside Extenson. During his time in Brazil, he also nurtured dreams of developing an artistic career, frequently investing a considerable part of his earnings in the production of recordings and video clips of his own compositions or cover versions of gospel songs.

Lopes, also known as the *Garotinho quente do forró* (Forró’s hot boy), is a native of the northeastern state of Piauí who, during his youth, migrated to São Paulo, Brazil’s largest metropole and wealthiest city, in search of a better life. After working in a bakery and the clothing industry, he eventually embarked on what would turn out to be a successful artistic career as a singer and songwriter. Lopes’ musical output stylistically consists in popular dance music genres associated with the northeast and north of Brazil, sometimes referred to as ‘*música nordestina*’ (northeastern music), and his song lyrics and personal style draw inspiration from his origins and identity as a *nordestino*. He has become a popular singer, especially amongst

*nordestinos*, and has amassed hundreds of thousands of followers on social media.<sup>36</sup> ‘Lamento de um nordestino’ tells an autobiographical story of his migration from Piauí to São Paulo, an emotionally charged account of departure, resettlement, and longing for home that Lopes recognizes is not unique to him but shared by millions of other *nordestinos*. Since its release, the song has enjoyed tremendous popularity, having been recorded by high-profile artists in Brazilian popular music such as Zé Ramalho and Frank Aguiar.<sup>37</sup> While in Alix’s case, the cultural ‘frame’ of translation was one that closely matched his actual place of settlement, Rio Grande do Sul, Widler’s translation extends to the opposite end of the country, bringing into play regional contrasts of race, culture, and music which call for a digression through the construction of *nordestino* identity and its place in debates about race and regional stereotypes in Brazil.

The idea of the northeast as a distinct region of Brazil and the *nordestino* as its ideal type became a topic of national debate in the 1920s through the work of the political, economic, and intellectual elites of the region, who sought to construct a sense of local identity to oppose negative stereotypes increasingly projected towards the northeast by the country’s modernizing southern regions since the late nineteenth century (Blake 2001; Albuquerque Júnior 2004). If in these discursive representations *nordestinos* and the northeast were depicted as socially, culturally, and *racially* inferior to the increasingly Eurocentric and Europeanized south, prominent intellectuals from regional elites (such as anthropologist Gilberto Freyre) responded with an idealized affirmation of intrinsic northeastern values. These drew on the landscape, culture, and identity of the region’s inhabitants, cutting across class lines that separated these

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<sup>36</sup> Lopes’s official website is available at: <<https://francislopes.com.br/>> (Accessed 2 April 2023)

<sup>37</sup> Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Z6S5XHR680>> (Accessed 31 January 2024)

intellectuals from lower-class (and darker) countrymen to posit the main tenets of the ‘*nordestino-sertanejo*’: the traditional and virile male gifted with ‘attributes of courage and resistance to face the dozens of adversities of the *sertão* [...] the cruel nature, labour exploitation, drought, poverty, hunger, violence’ (Trotta 2012: 156).<sup>38</sup>

As this ideological construct took hold in the subsequent decades, music became an integral part of this identity, and northeastern music styles such as baião and forró – and the instrumental ensemble formed by accordion, triangle, and zabumba (a large frame drum) – came to stand in metonymical relation to *nordestino* identity on a national scale (Crook 2009: 11; Vianna 2011: 244). The central figure in this development, consolidating the association between the *sertão*, ‘northeasterness’, and music, was the renowned accordionist, singer, and composer Luiz Gonzaga (1912–1989). After settling in the southeastern city of Rio de Janeiro during the early 1940s, Gonzaga was responsible for ‘codifying the baião as a genre, creating a northeastern performance style, [...] (and defining) northeastern music for the second half of the twentieth century’ with great popular success’ (Crook 2016: 50). According to Felipe Trotta, Gonzaga’s music articulates ‘the construction of the northeast as a “space of nostalgia”, facing the past, the rural, and, in this case, *the migrant situation*’ (Trotta 2012: 157, my emphasis). Like Gonzaga, millions of *nordestinos/as* migrated to the southeast in the 1940s and 1950s in what constitutes one of the most significant mass mobility phenomena within recent Brazilian history. Their southward movement imprinted an indelible mark on Brazilian society and culture and changed

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<sup>38</sup> According to the *Michaelis Brazilian Dictionary of Portuguese*, the word *sertão* encompasses both a reference to the sparsely populated countryside, separated from urban centres and the maritime coast, and a more specific reference to its biome and climate, characterized by sandy soil, periodic drought, and scant vegetation. Available at: <<https://michaelis.uol.com.br/moderno-portugues/busca/portugues-brasileiro/sertao/>> (Accessed 28 March 2023; translation mine).

the social and cultural landscape of cardinal cities such as São Paulo, but also in places further south such as Rio Grande do Sul. The tight interweaving of music and migration in Luiz Gonzaga's oeuvre stands in dialogic relation to such a process, as highlighted by Trotta:

In a series of crossing correspondences, the migrant is the main theme of Gonzaga's repertoire simultaneously an autobiographic character and, complementarily, the artist's primordial public. De-territorialized, the migrant reaffirms northeastern identity in the sharing of habits, songs, and celebrations with other migrants, creating affective cohesion and strengthening the bonds of solidarity and nostalgia with an imagined northeast. (Trotta 2012: 157)

The lyrics to Lopes' ballad skilfully capture and convey those essential affective and identity tropes connected to the lived experience of northeastern migrants seeking better lives in the whiter and more affluent Brazilian south. They depict the longing for family, nostalgia for the homeland, and the struggle to earn a living in the new places of settlement in which *nordestinos* were subject to racial othering, all fused with abundant references to religion.<sup>39</sup> Lopes' success in condensing such profound cultural intimacy in the song owes much to his heartfelt vocal performance and to the sentimental, yet catchy accompaniment of piano and strings, ingredients that add up to a particularly emotional tone (though departing from the typically northeastern soundscape as evoked by baião and forró, for instance). All these elements account for the song's wide impact within large segments of the Brazilian population (especially 'diasporic' *nordestinos/as*), attested by the million-plus view counts of its two main video clips on YouTube.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> A popular, 'folk' Catholicism is also considered a strong component of the northeast's cultural landscape even though Lopes's religiousness may be temporally and socially distant from such context and more likely to be in tune with the expansion of evangelical Protestantism in Brazil (see Blake 2001).

<sup>40</sup> The most accessed video clip of 'Lamento de um nordestino' is that of a duo with singer and instrumentalist Frank Aguiar, one of the main contemporary popular music celebrities connected to the Brazilian northeast. Available at: <[https://youtube.com/watch?v=4hv\\_bMREKak](https://youtube.com/watch?v=4hv_bMREKak)> (Accessed 28 March 2023)

The official video is accompanied by Lopes's description of the song and its relationship to migration:

Twenty years ago, I was forced to leave Piauí towards São Paulo, leaving my parents, six brothers, two sisters, relatives, friends, countrymen, and my city behind. GOD blessed me with a beautiful song. I told my own story, yet I didn't know that it was the same reality of millions of Brazilians who seek better days in the big city, to provide a better life for their families. [...] GOD, GOD, GOD, thank you for lifting me out of anonymity and rescuing me straight into the history of Brazilian music through this song, 'Lamento de um nordestino'. (emphasis in the original)

But how did a song that epitomizes an important chapter in the history of internal migration of *nordestinos* become a fundamental part of Widler's experience as a Haitian migrant in southern Brazil? Knowing that I worked with Haitian artists in the Porto Alegre area, Widler introduced himself to me via Facebook in 2018, and during the following years, I collaborated with him, recording guitar on some of his productions. During the early months of the pandemic in 2020, while I was still in Oxford under lockdown, he contacted me via WhatsApp asking for help with the translation of the song, telling me that he wished to translate it to Kreyòl. In response to his request, I presented him with a literal translation of the song, with the help of Targète and Urciolo's *Haitian creole – English dictionary* (1993). Yet the outcome didn't correspond to Widler's intentions regarding translation, which were ultimately aimed at representing the Haitian migratory experience and recognizing some of the universal facets of migration. The maintenance of a 'structure of feeling' (to draw on Raymond Williams's notion) demanded deeper transformations, beyond merely accurately transmitting information across linguistic barriers. Achieving this meant that my literal, 'bad translator's' work was mostly discarded by Widler, who, seeking the best possible prosody and choice of words in his native language, carried out a translation of the song across cultures in a way that was perfectly evocative of Benjamin's 'good translator': beyond literalness, beyond the derivative, beyond the ideational, 'finding that intended effect [Intention]

upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original’ (Benjamin 1970: 76).

Much like in Alix’s case, Widler’s motivation for translating the song also stemmed from quotidian intercultural encounters and racial othering within *gaúcho* society. It was a ‘long story’, he told me, one that grew out of a series of disconnected dialogues with locals in his daily life, and of how his Blackness was misread in unexpected and consequential ways (interview with the author, 2021). The first of these happened in the downtown area of Porto Alegre, in a casual conversation with a mixed group of *baianos* (natives to the northeastern state of Bahia, and, in general, also considered *nordestinos*) and *gaúchos*.<sup>41</sup> As they talked, Widler was interrupted by a Haitian migrant who was passing by. He had identified Widler as Haitian due to the Haitian flag T-shirt he wore and consequently spoke to him in Kreyòl. His response in the Haitian language surprised Widler’s Brazilian interlocutors: ‘What’s that? What language are you speaking?’, they exclaimed. As he revealed his Haitian origin, Widler’s interlocutors confessed to having thought he was ‘a *baiano*, someone from the northeast’. The second episode mentioned by Widler reveals a change in posture, as he started to ‘assume’ a *baiano* identity. While he waited for the train home after work on a regular weekday, a girl selling candy approached him. After successfully selling him some, she asked if he was *baiano*. Widler responded ‘Yes, I’m *baiano*’, to which she replied ‘Nice, I can see that’. Finally, the last episode Widler told me about occurred at a grocery shop, when he was asked the exact same question by the cashier, and, once again answered affirmatively: ‘Yes, I’m from the northeast.’

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<sup>41</sup> Bahia is widely recognized as the country’s cradle of Afro-Brazilian culture and heritage. Salvador, its capital, is not only considered Brazil ‘most African’ city, but also the ‘Blackest’ city outside of Africa, a view which is backed by statistics indicating the higher percentages of non-white population in both capital and state. Available at: <<https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv40544.pdf>> (Accessed 28 March 2023)

In a state whose hegemonic narratives of cultural identity have historically imbued the *gaúcho* with a standardized whiteness, marginalized the significant Afro-Brazilian population, and frequently framed Brazilians from different states as outsiders, such intercultural dialogues are remarkably symbolic in revealing how Widler's Blackness was likened to that of a *baiano* and/or *nordestino*, a perhaps more familiar Blackness, but still one that was slightly out-of-place in Brazil's southernmost state. Yet, as Widler's responses to his interlocutors demonstrate, within the margins of such racialized othering and normative schemes of intelligibility (Butler 2005), he took advantage of an in-between position and was still able to creatively (mis)represent his identity, strategically embracing a Brazilian Blackness which presented the possibility of affirming his belonging, however precariously.

Then incognizant of the complex mosaic of Brazilian regional identities and the important intersections of race, culture, and geography within these ideological and demographic constructs, Widler began to wonder what words like *baiano* and *nordestino* exactly meant. Sometime afterwards, while scrolling through social media, he stumbled upon a video clip of 'Lamento de um nordestino' advertised with the following caption: '[o]nly those from the northeast can feel this sensation'. The video immediately struck a deep emotional chord with Widler, moving him to tears. That night, he watched the clip countless times, downloaded the song, and searched for information about Lopes. In just a few days he knew the song by heart and was practising it at home with his brother, Kaleb, on the keyboard. Taken aback by the discovery of the mutual dilemmas and hardships faced by both *nordestinos* and Haitian migrants in Brazil, Widler could not help but identify in the song his own lived experience. 'It's the same thing', he summed up. He then decided to translate it, motivated by a desire that its final message of hope and deliverance could reach and become comprehensible for Haitian audiences, in the

hope that they could also appreciate the structural resemblances between the two migrant experiences and draw strength from the song's message. Calling forth to diasporic Haitians all over the world, he sets forth such desire and resentment with the predicament of having to 'chache lavi' (search for life) abroad in the description of the video clip on YouTube:

Despite this story being so sad I've come to know it's 100% reality for many Haitians who live in a foreign country. Mean life that makes us leave our family, our friends, to go live far away and search for a better life. I sing this song in the name of all Haitians who live abroad. And I wish someday life will give us a chance to live in our home with a lot of pride.<sup>42</sup>

This was Widler's first attempt at translating a song in Portuguese. The title chosen by Widler removes the specific reference to *nordestinos*, maintaining the core signifier of lamentation in the Kreyòl language: 'Lamantasyon'. More than the title, the whole process of translation carried out by Widler may be seen as constituting a consummate example of Benjamin's concept of the 'good translator's' work. Racialized othering and the leaving of home and family become the main tangential points between different processes of migration, preserving the echo of the original in a new lyric which foregrounds a Haitian sociocultural framework.<sup>43</sup> A comparison of the choruses of the original and Widler's translation follows:

Kont volontem, map kite peyim  
Avèk regrè nan  
peyi blan al chache travay  
Bondye tanpri banm fòs ak kouraj

Against my will, I'm leaving my country  
With regret, I'm bound to a  
white/foreign country to seek work  
God, please give me strength and courage

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<sup>42</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=i7rZCaydNdw>> (Accessed 30 March 2023)

<sup>43</sup> *Peyi blan* is a popular notion amongst Haitians which binds together race, class, and nation. It is usually used to refer to developed countries with a predominantly white population and strong currencies (USA, Canada, and France), where Haitian migrants have been frequently subjected to racial prejudice (Handerson 2015a). As Handerson explains, before coming to Brazil many Haitians conceived of it as a 'new' *peyi blan*, frustrating experiences related to the value of Brazilian currency and the low salaries of the occupations to which Haitians are usually hired led many to change their opinion regarding the country's status (2015a: 80)

Avèk lespwa yon jou map retounen nan  
patrim

With hope one day I'll return to my  
country

Eu sei que vou, vou pra São Paulo  
Mas vou deixando a minha fonte de  
alegria  
Deus por favor, me dê trabalho  
E a esperança de poder voltar um dia

I know I'll go, I'll go to São Paulo  
But I'm leaving my source of  
happiness  
God, please give me work  
And the hope to one day return

Both choruses resonate with the reluctance to leave home, driven by the need to make a living. They acknowledge the search for work in a faraway land while also expressing the desire to return. In the song's verses, while Widler carefully maintains many of the references in Lopes's lyrics (such as the phone calls to family, and the religious zeal represented by repeated invocations of God), he continues the work of translation by converting that which is specific to *nordestino* migration to the particularities of his own lived experience as a Haitian migrant, one that he knows is shared by his diasporic compatriots and presents additional challenges. For, if Lopes may sing of his seasonal return during vacations (*No mês de junho, eu de férias vou sair / Me aguarde por aí / Porque vou lhe visitar*; In the month of June, I'll leave on vacation / Wait for me / I'm coming to visit you), Widler's return was a more arduous and expensive journey, its undertaking remaining uncertain. The full lyrics of 'Lamantasyon' follow:

Sèl Bondye ki konnen  
Destinasyon chak Ayisyen  
Ki oblije al kay vwazen  
Pou ka prepare yon demen  
Soufrans la di  
Nan moman peyi wap kite  
Tout fanmiw yo la yap kriye

Only God knows  
The fate of each Haitian  
Who must go to neighbouring countries  
To prepare a better future  
It's a lot of suffering  
When you're leaving your country  
All your family crying

Men ou oblije ale

Rive aryopò santi tout  
kèw ap dechire  
Nan lè avyon pral dekole,  
ak dlo nan zye ou prale  
Priye Bondye mandel poul gid tout  
chimenw  
Fèw rankontre ak vrè destenw  
Met laviw nan de plamenw

Ou rive nan peyia wap gade  
Jan bagay yo ap dewoule  
Ou kòmanse ap reflechi  
Sonje manmanw  
Ak papaw dèyèw kite  
Tout fanmiw yo ki rete  
Yap ret tann ou retounen

Alo Manman Alo Papa  
Sa poko fin byen anndan kèman chaje ak  
chagren  
M'pa konn kilè map tounen  
Mwen gen volonte  
Men poko gen posibilite  
Lè jou a rive poum tounen  
Nan peyim poum vin rete

Erezman pou chak grenn Ayisyen kap  
degaje  
Antre nan sòl pou ka sanble  
Lakay pou voye ale  
Tris pou lòt yo tou lavi pa sispann  
maltrete  
Ki chache chache yo chache  
Men pa janm jwenn yon degaje

But you have to go

Arriving at the airport, feels like your  
heart is being torn apart  
When the plane takes off,  
tears fall from your eyes  
Pray God to guide you on your  
journey  
To make you meet your true destiny  
Put your life in the right path

You arrive in the country and observe  
The way things work  
You start thinking  
Remember your mother  
And father you left behind  
All the family that stayed  
They remain, waiting for your return

Hi Mom, hi Dad  
It's not over my heart is still full of  
grief  
I don't know when I'll be back  
I want to  
But there's no way yet  
The day will come when I return  
To stay in my country

Fortunately, every Haitian worker is  
managing  
To save some money  
To send home  
Sad for the others too, which life keeps  
hurting  
Who keep searching and searching  
But never find a way

Widler's translation of the lyrics brings to the fore a clear resemblance of themes and images with the urtext of 'leaving Haiti' songs, Othello Bayard's poem 'Souvenir d'Haïti' (frequently known as 'Ayiti Cheri/Haïti Cherie') (G. Averill, personal communication, August 8, 2024). Written in the early twentieth century, probably while the author was studying in Germany, it was later set to music by Haitian composer Robert Durand. The song/poem, one of the best-known and loved pieces of Haitian popular music, has remained especially relevant for Haitians in the diaspora throughout the century due to its encapsulation of nostalgia for the homeland (Glover et al. 2020: 243–4).

Yet, to achieve his objective of spreading the song's message to a Haitian audience, Widler first needed Lopes's authorization to record it and upload it to streaming platforms. Through Facebook, Widler managed to contact the song's original producer, who wished to charge him five thousand *reais* (a sum beyond Widler's capabilities) to mediate copyright exemption with Lopes and provide him with a backing track for the song. Widler was adamant about recording his version, and after much effort, he was able to find and contact one of Lopes's brothers through social media. He proposed a more favourable arrangement, whereby they would waive copyright charges if they were the first ones to post Widler's video clip of the song on Lopes' social media profiles. Widler then hired a random producer in São Paulo, who came up with a nearly identical backing track for a reasonable price. Later, he recorded his own vocals (and backing vocals by Darline Louis, a Haitian acquaintance from his church also living in the Porto Alegre metropolitan area) at a Brazilian-owned studio near his home. Therefore, in Widler's case, the translation process did not involve changes in musical parameters – instrumentation and style, as was the case for Alix – but instead was focused on the translation of the message, or intention, as Benjamin would say, of the original song.

The video clip of Widler's version provides us with a visual illustration of the lyrics, depicting some of the key moments and experiences of Haitian migration to *peyi blan* and using different locations in the city of Porto Alegre to represent Haiti and the diaspora. We see Widler saying farewell to family in the setting of a humble house on the outskirts of Porto Alegre, the almost rural ambience and Widler's 'parents' costumes (notably the father's *abitan* straw hat) seeking to portray a Haitian environment (see Figure 8). His journey to and challenging routine in the diaspora is visually represented both with scenes shot in and around more affluent and touristic landmarks of the city (such as the Casa de Cultura Mário Quintana, where Alix's piece with The Fagundes was also shot) which reference the difficulty in finding jobs, the type of jobs available to Haitians (in the scene, Widler cleans a table at a working-class restaurant), and the sending of economic remittances through Western Union.



Figure 8 - The scene of departure in Lamantasyon's videoclip (screenshot by the author)

Francis Lopes demonstrated an openness and engagement with Widler that went beyond his expectations, as he later contacted Widler personally to congratulate him on the version, commenting that it produced a significant and positive reaction amongst his fans. Lopes' post with Widler's video clip on his Facebook page, on December 7, 2021, captioned '*Ultrapassando barreiras*' (surpassing barriers), reached four thousand views and received many favourable comments.<sup>44</sup> The positive welcome of 'Lamantasyon' among Lopes' fan base was also an achievement beyond Widler's initial intentions and expectations, as the lyrics in Kreyòl were incomprehensible to a Portuguese-speaking audience. However, it offers significant evidence of the intercultural recognition of mutual feelings and experiences beyond barriers of nation, race, culture, and language. As a fan's comment on Lopes's post sharing Widler's video clip attests: 'Beautiful! In any language. The feelings of departure, struggle, victory, love, [as told by] this story is universal'. The favourable outcome of Widler's translation amongst compatriots – which is closely entwined with its evocation of the theme of migrating/leaving Haiti that runs through Haitian popular music since the early twentieth century – was substantiated in the many comments posted by Haitians on the video clip's YouTube page, as the following exemplify: '[t]hat's the reality of our lives, yes'; 'It's the first time I find a young artist that explains my life in a song'.

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<sup>44</sup> Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/profile/100044575113266/search/?q=ultrapassando%20barreiras>>

## **Concluding remarks**

Through the above case studies, I have attempted to argue for the significance and pervasiveness of translation in the lives and aesthetic endeavours of Haitian migrant artists in Brazil. Adhering to a view of translation as a multidimensional intercultural process (corporeal, dialogic, sonic, and textual) which follows the deconstructionist tradition inaugurated by Benjamin (1970 [1923]) and further developed by scholars such as Bhabha (1994) through the idea of cultural translation, I have applied a broader perspective on the phenomenon of translation by affording critical attention to ethnographic context, the translator's agency and intentions, and the power differentials involved in the semantic movement between languages and cultures, translators and audiences.

'Foreigners', writes Richard Sennett in an eponymous essay, 'are forced to seek conditions for living with others who do not understand them, thus incorporating incompleteness and doubt instead of seeking self-assertion through a mirror image of sameness' (2011: 69). In dealing creatively with displacement, prejudice, and othering, they 'deal with the materials of identity the way an artist has to deal with the dumb facts which are things to be painted' (2011: 69). For Haitian migrants 'living in translation' such as Alix and Widler, music has offered resources to 'deal with the materials of identity' in contexts marked by precarious 'attempts of mutual recognition' (Inghilleri 2016: 3) and racialized othering, and in that process made 'something new of the cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them' (Hall 2017: 218). Through their identification with musical materials encountered in new diasporic contexts, Alix and Widler have opened 'crucial discursive spaces where alternative modes of perception are negotiated, challenged, and configured' (2016: 34).

The initial impulse of both Alix's and Widler's acts of song translation pertains to the experience of racialized othering prompted by the visibility of colour. If in Alix's case, it was a matter of a confrontation with normative schemes of intelligibility (Butler 2005) which sought to position him as a non-belonging foreigner/migrant, in Widler's it was a case of (mis)recognition which framed him in a more familiar, though still different, regional category of otherness to which Blackness is intimately connected. Having grown familiar with local *gaúcho* culture and music, Alix was able to respond to racialized othering through a creative engagement with local culture – both musical and dialogic – which appealed to expectations of translational assimilation within the host society and evinced how '[t]he act of situating the self into a new space, regardless of the degree of assimilation permitted or desired, inevitably involves some degree of surrender to stereotypical representations' (Inghilleri 2006: 140). Widler, on the other hand, was still largely unfamiliar with the specifics of Brazilian regional diversity and its cultural, ethnic/racial, and identity implications. Being framed (or framing himself) as a *baiano* or someone from the northeast represented a form of partial, skewed recognition which was felt as mostly positive by Widler. In seeking to understand what those terms meant, Widler accidentally discovered a common ground of experience related to migration and underwent a profound moment of identification when seeing the video clip of 'Lamento de um nordestino', henceforth deciding to translate the song.

Lastly, their actual processes of translating the songs and their aftermaths also portray significant contrasts. Firstly, the choice of language reveals different intended audiences, though by no means does it bear evidence of a simple correspondence between the chosen idiom and the audiences reached. Alix's choice of French bears evidence to several factors: the possession of educational and cultural capital unevenly distributed in Haiti and its diaspora, his eclectic

musical taste, and his acute knowledge about the Europhile tendencies of his intended audience, *gaúchos*. Avoiding both Portuguese and Kreyòl, it is neither a move of translational assimilation or accommodation, instead representing a kind of third space which is connected both to Haiti's colonial legacies and to a disseminated and time-honoured Francophilia which remains relevant as a form of cultural capital in Brazilian society. For Widler, however, it was a matter of translating and sending out a message of hope to Haitian migrants all over the world, which logically substantiates his choice for Kreyòl and may be seen as a move of translational accommodation (Cronin 2006).

While 'Canto Alegretense' presented many untranslatables which referenced a very particular sociocultural environment of southern Brazil, Alix's approach to textual translation was primarily a literal one which preserved the original text almost intact in the target language. Sonic and musical elements, on the other hand, provide more interesting dimensions of translation in 'Chant Alegretense'. Alix's version promotes changes in rhythm, texture, performance style, and instrumentation which emerge as telling manifestations of the dissonances, lack of cohesion, and a type of 'de-territorialization' which characterize hybrid texts (Simon 2011). 'Lamantasyon', on the other hand, followed a more 'literal' approach concerning the musical and sonic elements of the original song, with Widler ordering the production of an identical instrumental track over which to record his translated lyrics. Regarding the latter, however, Widler's translation constitutes an optimal example of Benjamin's take on translation as derivative and ideational, carrying across the affect and ideas of the original language into a new linguistic and cultural framework.

A first look at the reaction to the translated versions by Brazilian audiences and the composers of the songs can be thought of as eminently positive, even if the vast majority of

listeners were not able to understand either French or Kreyòl. In Widler's case, Francis Lopes may be seen as demonstrating considerable empathy and openness to Widler's intentions of translating his song (as exemplified by his exemption of copyright charges and the sharing of Widler's video clip), an attitude which opened space for greater intercultural understanding and sympathy based on shared feelings pertaining to migration. The reception of Alix's version, on the other hand, bears evidence of contrasting positions within local society. While the cultural work represented by his 'Chant Alegretense' enjoyed distinguished demonstrations of recognition and inclusion in Alegrete, it was also tellingly misread by The Fagundes, who favoured a direct correlation between language and nation which symbolically bypassed both his Haitianness and Blackness. In a demonstration of the limits of cosmopolitan openness (Bielsa 2016) and Europhile tendencies present in local society, not only was Alix's national origin and identity as Haitian misread (or avoided), but his attempt at positing the hybrid identity of *Haitiúcho* was also neglected, with The Fagundes preferring to welcome Alix to the family as a French *gaúcho*, which represents a more familiar, valued form of (presumably white) otherness.

As Apter has argued regarding the case of Algeria and Algerianness, I argue that such a decisive and highly symbolic moment of intercultural encounter between a Haitian migrant and native members of the host society must be seen as representative of the challenges and quandaries Haitian migrants in Brazil face when attempting to translate themselves – hence their own Haitianness – to Brazilians. It renders visible how, despite the ingenuity of the artistic and translational agency of Haitians such as Alix, Haiti and Haitianness remain, to a large degree, untranslatable within the Brazilian context. Yet such untranslatability is not pervasive, and Widler's case brings further ambivalence to the translational endeavours of Haitian migrants in

Brazil, as it brings to the fore the power of music and translation in evoking a common ground of migrant experiences and emotions – one which, as Lopes himself expressed, surpasses barriers.

## CHAPTER 2: PRODUCTION

*Unlimited Music Studio, Canoas – 26 June 2022*

*I took the train to Canoas on a chilly and grey afternoon to meet Asid Adult Man and BaadBadu. Asid wanted me to record guitar for a new composition of his, a konpa love song whose chorus (and perhaps future title) was ‘Amor da minha vida’ (Love of my life). After waiting for a while with Asid outside, BaadBadu arrived and opened the studio. As Badu turned on his computer, Asid explained to me that the song was supposed to be a melanje (a mixture) between konpa and some still undecided popular Brazilian rhythm. The beatmaker gave him an intrigued look and opened one of his finished beat projects, a mix between reggaeton, trap, and konpa, saying he thought the combinations worked well on that track. I mentioned having played konpanejo with BigUp#1 in São Paulo and asked if he considered mixing konpa with sertanejo universitário. Asid didn’t seem convinced by the alternatives we presented him and asked if we were familiar with ‘piseiro’. He was surprised none of us had heard about it, and immediately opened YouTube on Badu’s computer. Piseiro, he said, was a style of popular dance music from northern Brazil, showing us a couple of famous songs and artists, all with millions of followers and views. Badu didn’t seem convinced of the musical potential of piseiro (or the artists shown by Asid) and suggested working on a mixture of reggaeton and konpa, with which he was more familiar. He opened a new FL Studio project and then a plug-in called Scaler and probed some of the many 4-chord sequences offered by the plug-in. Asid sang his new chorus over these sequences until he found the one he wanted. While he worked on the track, I asked Asid what was new. He told me he was taking dance classes and going to the gym. He planned to start singing classes and release a new EP in the coming months, but he didn’t know if he would have the money to do all that. Badu interrupted our conversation and asked me to record some guitar riffs over the beat. As always, he had a few ideas in mind, which he scat-sang to me, but he was also keen on hearing my own inventions. While I was recording, Jean Pierre, a friend of Badu’s, arrived. Soon, Asid and Jean were dancing to the sound of konpa while the maestro and I built layers of guitar tracks for Asid’s song. Jean was thrilled and asked me if I knew how to dance konpa – no, I said. Speaking in Portuguese, he said that with a konpa as good as that one, dancers only needed the tiny space of a floor tile, and then he gently swayed holding an imaginary dance partner. Badu agreed and added that there shouldn’t be space for a thread of hair between dancers. Facing the mirror, Asid sang and danced to his own, half-finished new love song. I had fun playing guitar and watching them as they enjoyed themselves.*

## **Introduction**

The present chapter aims to consider Haitian migrants' endeavours in producing music in Brazil. In what follows, I present and discuss my experiences as an ethnographer and musical collaborator in two different forms of music production: the production of live music by a Haitian band and the digital production of recorded music in Haitian-owned (home) studios by Haitian beatmakers/producers. While I do not entirely bypass aspects which might be thought of as 'strictly' musical or sonic inherent to the cases analysed, my main interests and conceptual framework regarding the term 'production' are wider in its scope. Foregrounding the importance of considering the cultural production of migrants and diaspora communities in relation to the everyday life and challenges encountered in their new places of settlement (Stokes 2004: 62), I seek to contextualize the music production of my research collaborators within the larger situation of the Haitian diaspora in Brazil, giving prominence to how issues of precarity, urban marginalization, and (im)mobility relate to their music production enterprises and livelihoods.

The accounts of music production offered in this chapter provide relevant insight into how the production of music is an important resource for Haitians' own entertainment and livelihood in Brazil, one that is also mobilized by them to strengthen their connections with Brazilian society. The study of cultural production in migrant settings furthermore deepens our understanding of 'the way migrants view their own migration, their host society and the place they have left, as well as how they are viewed by the host society' (Baily and Collyer 2006: 167), thereby shedding light on issues such as the re-enactment of cultural practices as 'a source of comfort' or 'a partial antidote to the hostility experienced' and the increased transnational organization of migrant and diasporic cultural production (2006: 171). Yúdice's analysis of the expediency of culture is particularly relevant to the case at hand as it accounts for inequalities

linked to race and migration. Drawing on Manuel Castells, he highlights racialized immigrants' 'underrecognized contribution in the international division of cultural labor': they "give life" to a city, as Castells argues, not only through their labor in the service industries but also in their cultural impact through music, dance, food, and festivals' (Yúdice 2003: 7–8). Nonetheless, in the context of various forms of anti-migrant prejudice, lack of recognition, and public policy that fails to acknowledge them, migrants and diasporic communities have had to learn to handle culture 'as a resource for both sociopolitical and economic amelioration' and as a way of 'increasing [their own] participation in this era of waning political involvement, [and] conflicts over citizenship' (2003: 9).

Throughout this chapter, one of my objectives is to demonstrate how, beneath the surface, Haitian efforts towards producing music evince an understanding and use of culture as 'expedient' (2003: 38). This expediency is achieved through different forms of music making and the creation of spaces for their own culture (and its presentation to the host society), spaces which often – if not always – are also indispensable to the fulfilment of their musical ambitions. As discussed below, despite the fact that migrants have emerged as 'fundamental player[s] in the sonic constitution of the city', the important question remains 'who makes their mark in the city through sound', what are the ways in which such processes happen, and how do structural forces shape the contexts (with both limitations and affordances) in which it happens (Pardue 2023: 2).

By exploring the manifold structural and conjunctural challenges faced by my interlocutors as newly arrived Black Caribbean migrants in Brazil, I hence seek to scrutinize how context affects the expediency of culture, and how 'different receptions of cultural work respond to different groundings of expectations in differing fields of performative force' (Yúdice 2003: 41). As previously discussed in the introduction, the lives of Haitians (and other non-white

migrants) in Brazil are marked by a multidimensional vulnerability arising from a ‘complex entanglement of mechanisms’ (Fernandes and Pachi 202: 144). Their racialization as Black migrants conditions their insertion in the lower echelons of the labour market, which in turn often results in class and spatial segregation (Pachi 2020), approximating their reality to that of Afro-Brazilians as one of disenfranchisement and social invisibility (Santos and Pardue 2023: 55). Amidst such precarity, ‘ordinary temporariness’ becomes a widespread way of being for migrants, revealing their marginal and transient insertion into Brazilian society (Fernandes and Pachi 2021: 146–7).

For those wishing to produce music, such situations create additional complications. As if the scarce time and funds connected to demanding work routines, low wages, and the sending of economic remittances home weren’t enough, Haitian artists must navigate a new linguistic and cultural environment in which ‘audiences, circuits, and scenes are not immediately obvious’, making the finding of a ‘musical home’ as hard as the finding of a decent place to live in the city (Chalcraft and Hikiji 2018: 479–80). The musical challenges faced by Haitians parallel those described by the authors for African migrant musicians in making sense of a predominantly Eurocentric dominant cultural industry significantly disconnected from African and Caribbean musical cultures:

there is no real ‘world music’ scene in Brazil. This matters not just in terms of potential audiences and marketing categories but more significantly in the way that migrant identities are articulated through music. For the newly arrived African musician, Brazil is a dilemma: a rich musical world of its own where the musician may encounter musically sophisticated audiences (open ears) but also stereotypes and myths about the musics and peoples that come from the African continent (closed eyes). (2018: 479)

Such a precarity is (indirectly) produced by statecraft in Brazil through the absolute dearth of migrant-oriented public policies at local levels, with only 5.5% of Brazilian

municipalities offering some kind of assistance to such populations (Fernandes and Pachi 2021: 135–6). Even in cities such as São Paulo where a considerable state apparatus of migrant assistance has been developed, the policies implemented devote little attention to the realm of cultural production (and consumption). Despite launching a progressive immigrant policy planning for the 2021-24 period, as of 2023, the city’s municipal culture secretariat has not achieved even the most basic of its objectives within that time frame, specifically the creation of an Immigrant Stage at the yearly Virada Cultural festival.<sup>45</sup> Summing up the case for African migrants in São Paulo, Jasper Chalcraft and Rose Satiko argue that

[a] crucial part of negotiating one’s identity in a new country is its spatialities, yet policies of social inclusion generally pay little attention to the importance of the places of artistic practice, performance, and consumption – such as, for example, access to a range of spaces, institutional, private, and collective – and the role they play in helping migrants settle in. (2018: 479)

The forms of music production by Haitian migrants in Brazil analysed in this chapter represent the two main manifestations of Haitian musicking: the formation of musical ensembles devoted to live dance music and the assembling of studios by Haitian beatmakers/producers, which are the favoured sites of music production amongst Haitian migrant artists.<sup>46</sup> The expediency of such forms for Haitian migrants producing culture varies greatly: I witnessed very few Haitian bands that managed to break into local professional music scenes and/or sustain their live performance activities for a significant period. However, the intense activity of a handful of

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<sup>45</sup> Available at:

<[https://prefeitura.sp.gov.br/cidade/secretarias/upload/direitos\\_humanos/MIGRANTES/PUBLICACOES/Plano Municipal Produto Final Atualizado\\_02.pdf](https://prefeitura.sp.gov.br/cidade/secretarias/upload/direitos_humanos/MIGRANTES/PUBLICACOES/Plano_Municipal_Produto_Final_Atualizado_02.pdf)> (Accessed 30 September)

<sup>46</sup> Another important manifestation of Haitian live music production in Brazil that was not covered during fieldwork are the many ensembles associated to protestant churches (both Haitian and Brazilian) playing what is usually described as ‘worship’ or gospel music, and covers various musical styles and languages.

Haitian beatmakers/producers in their studios certainly warrant considering Haitian studios as the most important site of music production within the Haitian diaspora in Brazil.

The production of live music entails a wide range of events (such as rehearsals, meetings, and shows) and actors, weaving together musicians, sound technicians, managers, venue owners, and personnel, and audiences in a process of which performances are but the final link in a long chain of events. As will be discussed through the case study of BigUp#1, Haitian migrants attempting to produce live music face not only the difficulties normally inherent in maintaining a band, but also considerable obstacles related to their positionalities and living conditions in Brazil. At the same time, the live performance of popular music styles (both Haitian and Brazilian, along with attempts at new hybrid styles) has been conceived as an important form of stimulating intercultural contact between Brazilians and Haitians, in ways that evidence the active role Haitians have had in seeking greater integration to Brazilian society.

On the other hand, Haitian studios constitute the focal point of Haitian music production in Brazil. The digital nature of such work has allowed Haitian studios to cater not only to a local Haitian (and, to a lesser extent, Brazilian) clientele but also to artists dispersed throughout the transnational Haitian diaspora in many countries. The translocal reach of the work of Haitian beatmakers/producers with whom I worked has, in some cases, enabled them to earn a considerable revenue from their musical work, especially for those who have been able to make a name for themselves among customers in countries such as the US and are paid in dollars. Their significant reputation and role within Haitian musicking in Brazil, however, is also frequently subject to some of the same predicaments of live music making, as is revealed by their location and spatial configuration. This follows the patterns of Haitian settlement in peripheral lower-

class neighbourhoods and generalized social invisibility in the face of Brazilian professional music contexts.

Consequently, I aim to probe how music production by Haitian migrants in Brazil relates to the production of social and cultural ‘space’ for Haitians in the country and how these new bodies and their music production are incorporated (or not) into local contexts, illustrating how challenging it is for Haitians in Brazil to earn their livelihoods and careers as artists in the country. This concern also attempts to heed Stokes’ (2013) remark on the importance of critically considering the financial aspects of our interlocutors’ music making, which in the present case highlights the different economic potentials of live music production and recorded music production, an imbalance intimately connected to issues of (im)mobility, technology, and the transnational communication networks of the Haitian diaspora.

If in the mid-1990s Averill already remarked how both Haitian lives and commercial music appeared ‘increasingly suspended in the new transnational space between the nation state and diaspora’ (1994: 253), within a more thoroughly digitally connected global mediascape (Appadurai 1996) and given the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, such transnational ‘suspension’ assumed new intensity, character, and configurations, affecting the fledgling Haitian music scene in Brazil in different ways for musicians and artists wishing to produce live music and those wishing to produce music in studios. Throughout this chapter, the repercussions of the pandemic provide the background to a plot of destabilization that has added another layer to the precarity that shapes Haitian musicking in Brazil. In the following subsections, I delve into my twinned experiences playing live music with Haitian konpa group BigUp#1 in the historic centre of São Paulo and producing music with different Haitian beatmakers/producers in their (home) studios

in the country's southern states as gateways to the unveiling and understanding of the realities and forms in which music production by Haitian migrants in Brazil happens.

### **BigUp#1: producing live Haitian dance music in São Paulo**

As I arrived in São Paulo for fieldwork in late 2021, the (much delayed) Covid-19 vaccination campaign was producing its first noticeable effects, with a downward turn in cases and deaths and a feeling of 'life-back-to-normal' slowly taking hold. In activating my Haitian contacts in the city that Brazilian singer/songwriter Caetano Veloso, in the song 'Sampa' (1978), famously described as the 'Pan-Americas of utopian Africas' (*Pan-Américas de Áfricas utópicas*), their busy work regimen, the magnitude of the city, and Haitians' escalating exodus from Brazil entwined to form a challenging conjuncture for research. The swiftest answer came from Princeneer Love de Neerwender Joseph, a mid-thirties Haitian entrepreneur and singer living in the city since 2014. Prince (as friends call him) is the lead singer and *prezidan* (president) of BigUp#1, an all-Haitian *djazz* (band) and music school based in the Mooca neighbourhood.<sup>47</sup> In Brazil, Prince has experienced an upward social mobility unparalleled amongst Haitian migrants. His financial success proceeded with the creation of a travel agency (Princeneer Tour Travel Agency) focused on attending to a Haitian clientele, mainly those wanting to visit the home country or seeking to make their way to Brazil. When I consulted him about BigUp's rehearsals, he answered – with the cunning discernment of a 'self-made' entrepreneur – by asking if I knew how to play konpa. After I replied that I had tried my hand at konpa occasionally, he invited me

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<sup>47</sup> Available at: <<https://facebook.com/bigupone.escolademusica/>> (Accessed 1 June 2023)

to bring my guitar to the band's next rehearsal and sent me a repertoire of songs by famous groups such as Zenglen, Nu-Look, and Disip.

A few days later, at sundown, I made my way to Rua Barão de Jaguará, 76, in Mooca, in the eastern section of São Paulo's downtown area. Its identity as a neighbourhood is marked by the history of immigrant labour: between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, thousands of immigrants from different countries (mostly Italy) settled there and gave birth to a burgeoning industrial activity. Suitably, at its border with the Brás neighbourhood is the state's Immigration Museum, an institution that praises and memorializes the legacies of both historical and contemporary migration to São Paulo and Brazil, though with a far greater focus on the former. BigUp's 'home' was *Comunidade Tijolinho da Mooca* (Mooca's Little Brick Community), an immense urban occupation set in a deteriorated 1913 factory building (see Figure 9).<sup>48</sup> Since 2018, it has been the abode of nearly ten thousand people of different provenances: Brazilians, Haitians, Bolivians, Venezuelans, and others besides. Princeneer had described it to me as a 'Haitian-Brazilian community centre', but while his depiction was undoubtedly correct (as I would come to see during the band's rehearsals) and signalled the intercultural congregation taking place at Little Brick, it was more than that: it felt like a small, indoor 'global' village of destitute people (with shops, churches, small businesses) living precariously under the leaky roof of a century-old factory built by Italian immigrants, a

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<sup>48</sup> Available at: <<https://g1.globo.com/fantastico/noticia/2022/12/06/fiacao-exposta-esgoto-a-ceu-aberto-e-perigo-iminente-fantastico-mostra-realidade-de-dez-mil-pessoas-que-vivem-em-ocupacao-em-sao-paulo.ghtml>> (Accessed 7 September 2023)

substantiation of complex and seemingly improbable layering of different immigration waves to Brazil and globalization ‘from below’.<sup>49</sup>



*Figure 9 - Little Brick Community's entrance (exterior and interior, photo by the author)*

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<sup>49</sup> The recent and new migration patterns of Africans and Haitians to the city and the accompanying transformation of São Paulo's urban space have been described as the city's increasing Africanization and 'Blackening', a 'Black migrant presence' which 'is politically, discursively and culturally hyper visible' and prompts 'Brazilians, as well as the migrants themselves [...] to make sense out of the new Black presence' (Pardue 2023: 55–6)

Less than a mile away is Glicério Street in the Baixa Liberdade neighbourhood, where the Our Lady of Peace Catholic parish and its accompanying migrant/refugee assistance service, Missão Paz, are located. The presence of the foremost institution for migrant support and the real estate devaluation of São Paulo's historical centre have coalesced to transform the ethnoscape of the area (Appadurai 1996), which now concentrates a considerable population of Haitian (and other) migrants due to the offer of cheap accommodation and its strategic location for informal street commerce and other economic activities (Pachi 2020; Pardue 2023; Machado and Pardue 2020). These trends constitute new derivatives of the escalating social segregation patterns that have developed in São Paulo since the latter decades of the twentieth century, the maps of which provide important prisms for understanding how urban forms, class (and ethnic) interactions, and artistic expression can relate contemporarily in the city, promoting 'separateness and the idea that social groups should live in homogeneous enclaves, isolated from those who are perceived as different' (Caldeira 2020: 214).

The intensity of the Haitian presence in central neighbourhoods such as Liberdade, Mooca, and Brás, has been regarded as imbuing it with a 'Haitian identity' which contributes to enriching the city's multicultural mosaic (Pachi 2020: 25–6). Their reshaping of the atmosphere of São Paulo's centre takes multiple forms: bilingual services in some of the area's Catholic and Evangelical churches, small shops and businesses (barbershops, restaurants, clothes shops), the sounds of spoken Kreyòl, and, of course, music, a prominent presence within community events (2020: 22–3; 26). As I will attempt to demonstrate through the case of BigUp, however, despite the considerable efforts of Haitian migrants in carving out spaces to produce, present, and live their own culture in one of Brazil's most cosmopolitan cities, in the context of political instability, economic recession, and pandemic which characterized the second half of the 2010

decade, precarity and ‘ordinary temporariness’ have merged to negatively affect not only the production of their livelihoods but also the production of music by Haitian migrants.

As I arrived at Little Brick’s entrance that first night, the muffled sound of konpa guided me straight into the rehearsal room, located just beyond the sole entrance to the community. In the vicinity, there were groceries and liquor stores with television sets were broadcasting European football matches, with makeshift constructions grafted onto the factory’s century-old structures. The traffic of people in and out of the community was intense, with most of them disappearing into its long indoor alleys which separated rows of hovels that went almost as far as the eye could see. Following the sound of music, I entered a large room with a high ceiling, the walls painted light green. At the back, the Haitian and Brazilian flags decorated a stage filled with instruments: a drum kit, two congas, a tom-tom/cowbell kit, bass and guitar amplifiers, a keyboard, three mics with stands, monitors, a mixing console, and worn-out PA system. Three musicians were playing a konpa groove on drums, electric bass, and keyboard, stopping as I entered. This was BigUp’s rehearsal room at Little Brick, where I would spend most of my time with them as we prepared for two concerts at Kay Moline, a Haitian-owned bar and restaurant on Glicério Street.

Nico Charles was the first to greet me, speaking Portuguese with somewhat of a local, *paulistano* accent. He was a stalwart of the band, directly responsible for its formation and its day-to-day functioning: besides playing the tom-tom/cowbell kit, he was the band’s sound technician and ‘hosted’ its rehearsals, since he lived at Little Brick. Through BigUp, he was also the one responsible for the perpetuation of a previous Haitian musical project in São Paulo, Satellite Musique, an eleven-strong konpa group founded by keyboardist Louides Charles in 2014 at Missão Paz after meeting other compatriot musicians while working in civil

construction.<sup>50</sup> During its four-year existence, Satellite gradually managed to open some space for Haitian music in São Paulo by performing in different institutional spaces such as SESC Pompeia (2018), at the Refugee and Migrant stage of the Virada Cultural (2017), and the local Goethe-Institut for their ‘New Diasporas’ project. As discussed by Satiko and Chalcraft (2018: 481) about African musicking in São Paulo, while such institutional spaces acquire importance for migrant musicians wishing to gain visibility, the spaces also ‘perform diversity inconsistently’ through particular ‘framings of value’, ascribing the label of ‘international artists’ to artists on tour while grouping migrant groups such as Satellite under collective national or ethnic identities. Hence, despite being highly valued, these opportunities also present a challenge for musicians whose conception of self goes beyond the label of ‘migrant’ or ‘refugee’ artist.

A music lover with no previous playing experience, Nico began following Satellite as a fan early on. He initially involved himself as a volunteer with the band’s production activities, organizing rehearsals and shows, and caring for its equipment. When one of Satellite’s percussionists quit the band for financial reasons (wishing to be paid for rehearsal time and transportation), Nico assumed his position, pro-actively learning to play the tom-tom/cowbell kit (which in Kreyòl he respectively called *floton* and *klòch*). In 2018, Louides Charles (who owned the band’s equipment) decided to leave Brazil, taking the intercontinental terrestrial route towards the US as many Haitian and other migrants had done since 2016 (Montinard 2020). He offered to sell Nico the band’s equipment, to ‘pass the band’ on (*pase djazz la*), but Nico couldn’t afford it alone. He called Princeneer, who occasionally performed with Satellite as a

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<sup>50</sup> Available at: <<https://facebook.com/satellitemusique/>> (Accessed 7 September 2023). A news piece on Satellite is also available at: <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2014/09/1511002-imigrantes-fundam-bandas-e-constroem-cena-cultural-haitiana.shtml?fbclid=IwAR3Seeuy3y2oOuuCxj-HiYLVVYZUkToqSMhGsL-X1z22lm9mbJEbn7UB7z4>> (Accessed 7 September 2023)

singer, inviting him to embark on a new band project by helping with the purchase of the equipment. The gradual departure of other members and Nico and Prince's view that Satellite lacked 'professionalism' led them to search for a new name for the band – and more importantly, new players.

*Gisele, Little Brick's 'president', Comunidade Tijolinho da Mooca – 22 September 2021*

*Last rehearsal before our first gig at Kay Moline. I arrived half an hour early this time. At the entrance, people talked, ate, and reviewed the proceedings of their street-collecting activities. No familiar faces were to be found, and the rehearsal room was locked. I waited in Little Brick's 'hall' as the sound of broadcast football and multilingual conversation filled the air. Suddenly, my strange presence with a Fender guitar case was noted by a middle-aged Brazilian woman. Was I looking for someone, she asked. 'I came to play with BigUp'. She looked surprised. 'Ah! So, you play konpa?'. Her name was Gisele, the community's leader, and she was married to a Haitian man. Someone dropped several large black plastic bags full of clothes next to us, and immediately people gathered to rummage through the piles. Gisele commented on how many Haitians who lived in the community had left Brazil, adding how the recent news about the US-Mexico border situation and the US's deportation of Haitians had left her really sad. She couldn't understand why they left Brazil with such dire prospects. She talked about it with her husband, who boiled it down to 'cultural difference'. He said Haitians need 'to see things with their own eyes', 'to go there and see it', reading the news is not enough. Suddenly, Nico arrived, always so pleasant! Smiling, he praised Gisele, his 'favourite president' even if 'no president can please everyone' (later, on the band's WhatsApp group, he and most of BigUp's members would celebrate Lula's victory over Bolsonaro in the 2022 presidential elections). He introduced me to her as a Brazilian who spoke Kreyòl. Startled, Gisele asked me to speak a bit. I said a few words and Nico patted me on my back with approval. Gisele said she just knows a couple of words and would like to learn it one day.*

Hence, BigUp#1 was born and duly registered as a legal entity with the name 'BigUp#1 Music School and Cultural Events Production LTD'. Due to their initiative and official legal responsibility, Princeneer and Nico are respectively President and Vice-President of the band – titles commonly used by other members during rehearsals. They still needed a musical leader, though, as both considered themselves 'amateurs' without the necessary musical skills. Finding

such a person was also fundamental because their plans included setting up a music school that would offer music education for the residents of the community and Haitians in São Paulo (including Nico himself, who wanted to learn how to play other instruments). It took them months to find Maestro Tony, a talented multi-instrumentalist musician with professional playing experience in Haiti and the Dominican Republic (see Figure 10).



*Figure 10 - BigUp#1 preparing to rehearse at Little Brick Community (from left to right): Zykòs, Nico, Jojo, Tony, Ti Grimo, and Jo Bass (photo by the author)*

After a meeting in which Nico and Prince confirmed their intention of elevating the group to a professional, money-making level, Tony joined BigUp. He assumed the functions of keyboardist/music director of the band and music teacher at BigUp's School (also located at the rehearsal room), henceforward teaching various instruments mostly to members of the Haitian community in São Paulo. Since then, the band has been structured around Nico, Princeneer, and Tony, who besides performing are also responsible for the managerial, technical, organizational,

and promotional labour associated with leading the band. During my period with BigUp, the usual formation was ‘El Papo’ on the drums, Nico on the *floton/klòch* kit, Francely ‘Ti Grimo’ on the congas, Patrick, ‘T-Bass’ or DJ Jobass on the electric bass, Jojo and myself on electric guitars, Maestro Tony on the keyboard, and a trio of vocalists composed by Princeneer, Melinda, and either Kifny or Zykòs.

### **‘You must love music with all your heart’: the production of BigUp during the Haitian exodus from Brazil**

Prince’s initial vision for BigUp was one of full professionalism, which included registering its musicians as employees of the company to offer them full support, so that ‘people playing in the group could be able to make a good living out of music’ (Princeneer, interview with the author, 2023). From the outset, however, the group and its members have been trapped in the same webs of precarity and ‘ordinary temporariness’ which Haitians have experienced in Brazilian society. In a quest to elevate the band’s material and performance standards to a professional level, the first challenge was the lack of time to ‘invest’ in the band (organizing rehearsals, producing shows, selecting repertoire).

Using polite terms which nonetheless evince how their work schedules render the simple task of organizing rehearsals a major difficulty, Maestro Tony summed up the difficulties encountered: ‘Brazil has many *small inconveniences* [my emphasis] that impede musicians from evolving properly. For example, I work from Monday to Friday. There are people that work from Monday to Monday.’ This was the reality for all members of the band, who mostly worked and lived in remote areas of São Paulo’s peripheries, or even in different cities, travelling long distances within São Paulo’s time-consuming public transport system just to attend rehearsals.

Melinda used the notion of sacrifice to make clear how devoted she was to the group, a point that was rendered painstakingly clear when she mentioned being based in a city approximately 400km from São Paulo: ‘I sacrifice a lot for the group, ok? Because I’m not based in São Paulo, I’m based in Curitiba. [...] [But] I always loved singing, and no matter where the music is, I’ll always want to be there, you understand?’ Indeed, throughout my time with BigUp, I witnessed how their desire and commitment to making music could only be explained by love, as a notably downcast Jojo wrote on BigUp’s WhatsApp group in 2022, as the band’s activities declined: ‘There’s a lot of misery in music affairs... You must love music with all your heart, the same way you would love your wife or husband. Same way Jojo does it, so you don’t get discouraged along the way.’

When talking about the challenges of producing the band, Prince (the group’s main financial sponsor) stressed the lack of funds and the provisional state of the band’s formation, something that constantly interrupted their work rhythm:

You know, we needed funds, investment. That’s one of BigUp’s problems, we lack investment, so far, we’ve got nothing. You can’t produce music without investment. We need equipment. We almost don’t have decent instruments to rehearse. The drums need replacing, we need a new keyboard. Guitar, bass, got it? Proper sound equipment, top sound equipment, we don’t have that yet, a system fit for rehearsing, we always suffer for that. There’s so much to do that there’s nothing left to invest. [...] You got to work with persistence, perseverance, to get results. You must keep going. If you start, then stop, you won’t reap the rewards. The musicians’ instability has also made us suffer, because we’re always short of musicians. The musician may show up and suddenly, he’s gone, he’s in the US.

From the Satellite days to the present, the search for a better life outside Brazil has affected the group’s activities due to constant changes in the band’s lineup. I was a direct witness to the growth of such a predicament: our second rehearsal was cancelled because no one could contact Rubenson, the drummer from the first rehearsal I attended. Without any warning to his

fellow band members, he had left Brazil and taken the route north. Such ordinary temporariness became especially acute for BigUp during the pandemic, as Princeneer's telling characterization of the band summarizes: 'people go, people come, people join, people return, the band is like that'. The ongoing exodus of Haitians from Brazil and its decisive impact on the production of BigUp as a musical act was also potently summed up by Tony: 'the route issue has kind of "crashed" us'. Whereas he once had a busy weekly teaching schedule with circa twenty students now only seven remained. He had considered leaving Brazil but changed his mind due to the lack of financial resources and frightful stories of suffering and violence circulating on Haitian diasporic communication networks. Nico's consideration of the route was paradoxically telling regarding Haitian migrants' simultaneous precarious position as 'second-class citizens' in the country and the sense of commitment owed to the country:

I always fear travelling illegally...because misery is bitter,<sup>51</sup> I don't like it (laughter). How can you want [to take the route]? We live here, we are like citizens, *almost* [my emphasis], like citizens. I must tell you, when everyone has respect for you, for us, so we must respect you, too, because if I respect you, you must respect me. [...] I've been in Brazil for eight years, and now I've made a little money. [...] I've earned some money and will now spend it taking an illegal route? I'm legal in Brazil, I'm legal here. I've got residence, I've got my papers [documents], and in the other countries I've been to I always travelled legally, with a visa, with residence. For example, I've lived in the Dominican Republic, always legally, my passport always had a visa. Ok, when I was coming to Brazil I was coming illegally because I didn't have a visa. But Brazil had opened its doors, so people entered.

While Brazil did 'open its doors' in ways that Haitian migrants have seldom seen elsewhere, the situation for Haitians seeking to live and practice their own culture is still one of lack of space and opportunities, as Prince summed up to me: 'Haitians [in Brazil] almost don't

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<sup>51</sup> Spoken in Kreyòl ('*paske mizè pa dous*'), Nico's words evoke the common Haitian saying '*lamizè pa dous*', the popularity of which amongst Haitians is a telling testament of the harsh living conditions they experience at home and abroad. It is also the title of a popular song recorded by female Haitian singer Toto Bissainthe in the album 'Chante Haïti' (1977).

have entertainment from their own culture'. In that sense, the production of BigUp assumes, in the minds and desires of its members, the important task of offering a musical home to the local Haitian community, or, as McAlister has poignantly written regarding her own *dyaspora* Haitian husband: 'music makes a place where my husband can live in his body' (2011: 207).

In a setting in which '[a]udiences, circuits, and scenes are not immediately obvious' and 'musicians have to negotiate this for themselves' (Satiko and Chalcraft 2016: 480), the actual opening of physical spaces becomes an important corollary to the production of live music. Partly motivated by the desire to offer the Haitian community in São Paulo a space with Haitian entertainment, Prince and two Haitian associates opened the Caribbean Bar and Restaurant during the same year BigUp was formed. Located at Baixa Liberdade, it offered traditional mainstays of Haitian gastronomy such as *fritay* (fried plantain), *piklis* (pickles), *griot* (fried pork), the *joumou* soup, in addition to Brazilian items such as *caipirinha* and *macarronada* (pasta with tomato sauce).<sup>52</sup> Music was a central component of the Caribbean, envisaged as a possible venue of encounter between Brazilians and Haitians by Princeneer and his associates: during weekends, it frequently offered live performances by local Haitian DJs and groups such as Twoubanego, a smaller version of BigUp devoted to the performance of twoubadou music.<sup>53</sup>

The Caribbean Bar and Restaurant, however, was also ensnared within the webs of precariousness connected to Haitian endeavours in Brazil. According to Prince, attendance by the local Haitian community was modest, and even famous Haitian bands coming to play didn't pay off as an investment, facts unmistakably connected to Haitians' low wages and scarce funds for

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<sup>52</sup> A vegetable soup associated with the Haitian Independence Day/New Year's Eve celebration.

<sup>53</sup> Twoubadou is a moderately slow style of Haitian dance music derived from the hybridization of Haitian mereng and Cuban son associated with the seasonal migration of Haitian sugar-cane workers to Cuba in the late nineteenth century (Manuel and Largey 2016; Averill 1997).

entertainment in the country. In late 2018, he teamed up with Haitian partners in other cities in Brazil to bring Disip, one of the foremost exponents of Haitian konpa within the transnational Haitian diaspora. Usually playing for thousand-strong audiences in top musical venues from Montreal to Port-au-Prince, their performance at the Caribbean was described by Prince as a disappointment: less than two hundred people attended. The final blow came with the pandemic, and in 2020 the Caribbean closed its doors after less than two years of existence.

### **‘The Brazilian who plays konpa’ and konpanejo: enabling intercultural contact through musical hybridity and dance**

As is the case for many Haitian artists living in the diaspora, for BigUp’s members their investment in the production of Haitian music in Brazil is also a form of responding to widely disseminated stereotypes about Haiti and Haitians, or, in Princeneer’s words, of ‘projecting’ and ‘elevating’ the status of Haitian culture amongst Brazilians (see Averill 1994; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1990; Mason 2012). During my experience with BigUp, I noticed how, in a strongly Eurocentric society characterized by ignorance and stereotypical views towards Haiti and its people, their first step towards projecting Haitian culture was likening it to Brazilian popular music genres and perceived common cultural traits between Haitians and Brazilians. Likewise, my engagement as a musician and researcher with the group was the theme of interesting conversations and remarks that seemed to advance the possibility of intercultural dialogue and proximity between Haiti and Brazil, signalling how intercultural (and interracial) musical engagement offered an opportunity of cutting across such barriers.

At my very first rehearsal with BigUp, issues of race and intercultural conviviality emerged as I was prompted by Tony to plug in my guitar and follow his lead into Zenglen’s

‘Sincerely yours’ four-chord sequence. It felt like a kind of test. When we stopped, instead of commenting on my (rather ordinary) performance, he remarked on how he identified with and admired those who had an interest in musical cultures other than their own. Plus, he added, he thought people who did so were usually ‘not racists’. After the end of the rehearsal, Tony solicitously asked whether I ‘felt good’ playing with them, and, upon receiving my affirmative response, said he felt the same. Later, in a peculiar moment during my collective interview with BigUp, Tony inverted positions with me, inquiring about my connection to and interest in Haitian music and culture. In so doing, he seemed keen on levelling our positionalities as musicians interested in ‘musical difference’, highlighting his proficiency in several music genres (mostly Caribbean), and minimizing national ‘borders’ in music:

Myself too, I have studied many other rhythms from other nations, such as reggae, yes...I play jazz, I play merengue, I play bachata, I play salsa, so I play a lot of rhythms. Here too, I play a lot of Brazilian rhythms. So, I’m very happy that [you] as a Brazilian, from a different nation [plays konpa] ...even if music has no nationality. Music is called music. It’s just that we, each one, play it our own way. So, I really appreciate it, you have made an effort to be able to play konpa, because a lot of people from other nations say konpa is difficult, they don’t want to play it. Can you tell us a little bit of the story of how you started playing it and why you do it?

Tony wanted to know more about my engagement with Haitian culture. He was astonished (*mwen etonen*), he said, not only about the fact that I could play konpa, but that I was able to communicate in Kreyòl. The capacity to speak and understand Kreyòl had been a hard-won and very welcome asset during my years working with Haitian artists, even though their praise customarily exaggerated my command of the language. Such exaggeration, however, is itself worthy of attention, as it points to the generalized lack of (bodily and sonic) engagement with Haiti, its people, and culture in Brazilian society. My limited but well-above-average competence in Haitian language and music was a singularly welcomed attribute which frequently

culminated in jests about me being a ‘white Haitian’, or, as Princeneer started introducing me in our shows and rehearsals, the ‘Brazilian who plays konpa’.

BigUp’s presence in the multicultural space of Little Brick was also a source of musically mediated encounters between Haitians and Brazilians, already a conspicuous feature of Little Brick. As the door of the rehearsal room was invariably left open during rehearsals, the swaying groove of konpa would inevitably seep out towards the entrance corridor of the community.<sup>54</sup> In the same way it had guided me there on my first visit, so it would also always attract residents (mostly, though not exclusively, Haitians) of the community to enter the space and enjoy the live music to dance, chill out, and sing along, especially if the rehearsal was during the weekend. The constant movement of people in and out of the room never seemed to bother the band’s members, who occasionally saluted a familiar face or took some time to chat between songs. On the contrary, the presence of an ‘audience’ would often enliven the rehearsal itself, heating up the atmosphere and turning it into an informal performance. Besides such impromptu performances, these moments evidenced how BigUp was also committed to the community and keen to entertain a multinational audience, as it also performed for free on certain occasions such as birthdays or commemorative dates.

Being a couple’s dance-music par excellence, konpa was seen by Princeneer as a perfect medium with which to foster intercultural contact: he saw dance as an important, bodily, common denominator between Haitian and Brazilian cultures. In an interview, he commented on how he ‘always liked the approximation, the integration of Haitians with Brazilians’, ‘especially

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<sup>54</sup> A video of BigUp playing ‘Koupab’, by Haitian artists Kai and Bedjine on my very first rehearsal with the band is available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=ArYgg4Fi3xs>> (Accessed 13 September 2023)

at the shows there's always Haitians with Brazilian wives and girlfriends that come, wonderful, wonderful [...] Brazilian men too...well, I suppose there aren't many Brazilian men with Haitian girlfriends. You'll see more Haitian men with Brazilian girlfriends. But I always liked that, so nice, a beautiful *mix*' (my emphasis). In a live debate about migrant musicians in Brazil on the Facebook page 'Haitian culture, history and language' in 2022, Princeneer gave his view about the reception of BigUp's work by Brazilians, providing insight (even if perhaps in a slightly exaggerated way) into how music, especially konpa, had consequential participation in the (bodily and cultural) rapprochement between the two peoples, something which he saw as one of BigUp's 'tasks':<sup>55</sup>

The Brazilian people really like Haiti's konpa, Brazilian women dance it very well, because they have a similar style called lambada, close to konpa, [and] the people are good dancers. I know a lot of Brazilian women who like Haiti's konpa, who dance it very well, because many amongst them are the wives and girlfriends of Haitian men. And they teach them to dance the Caribbean konpa, Haitian konpa. [...] It always gave me much pleasure to see the Brazilian people dancing to Haitian konpa. It's so pleasant.

Resonating with my experience working with and talking to other Haitians living in Brazil, BigUp's musicians were especially familiarized with sertanejo universitário, samba, lambada, Brazilian hip-hop, and forró, Brazilian popular music genres widely disseminated and favoured amongst Brazil's lower classes and intimately associated with dancing. As Princeneer's statement shows, Haitians' familiarity with these styles is important evidence of the social context they inhabit, sharing the same spaces, occupations, and music consumption habits of Brazil's popular classes. Little Brick and other similar locations represent important 'nodal points of convergence among immigrants from different countries and the Brazilian urban poor,

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<sup>55</sup> Available at: <<https://facebook.com/culturahistorialinguahaitiana/videos/661416924923264>> (Accessed 14 September 2023)

working classes' which have proliferated during the 2010s and constitute significant settings of intercultural coexistence between Brazilians and Black migrants (Machado and Pardue 2020: 120). In becoming familiar with such music genres, BigUp's musicians have come to find and construct a sense of musical proximity, envisioning musical resemblances and creatively seeking musical connections between the two nations and their peoples. Despite previously stressing that he is someone interested in musical differences, Tony also expressed his view about musical similarities and the effect of physical proximity with Brazilian music styles in facilitating their learning, making a parallel – as a professional musician himself – with my engagement with konpa:

But when I came to see it's like you in choosing to play konpa. You said you don't see anything difficult in the style, to play it. It has become the same for me, Brazilian music styles, if one is a musician, if you want to interpret them, you're capable of doing it! Because there are many amongst them which have connections with our rhythm in Haiti, our konpa, which we play... Like forró, forró and sertanejo. These two styles are especially similar to konpa. ('Samba', Zykos adds). Samba, exactly. If one plays well konpa, then, when you hear those rhythms, you'll see you have no difficulty playing them.

To further integrate Haitian and Brazilian culture (and people), Princeneer has also come up with the 'concept' of a hybrid musical style, konpanejo, routinely performed by BigUp in its shows. That was how my attention was drawn to Princeneer in the first place, in early 2018, when he posted on HAB a video of himself singing a sertanejo universitário song over a konpa beat, advancing what he saw as a fruitful union between Haiti and Brazil through a novel, hybrid musical genre. As he would later explain, konpanejo is a *mistura* (mixture) between konpa and sertanejo universitário based on a simple rhythmic substitution: 'I came up with the new concept of konpanejo. Konpa mixed with sertanejo, it's playing konpa in sertanejo style and playing sertanejo in konpa style'. In my time playing with BigUp, it was usually the case that sertanejo

songs in Portuguese were played along to a konpa rhythmic pattern, sometimes after starting with the former's rhythmic patterns. More significant than the seeming simplicity of konpanejo, with its conservation of lyrical, melodic, and harmonic material over a different rhythmic base, is the fact that it evidences the affordances of popular dance music as mobilized by migrants in search of an intercultural connection with their host societies. Intercultural music making, dance, and musical mixture, hence, appear intimately linked with Haitian migrants' struggle to present their culture and foster opportunities for greater contact and exchanges within Brazilian society.

### **Money talks: two different experiences playing at Kay Moline with BigUp**

On Saturday, 25 September 2021, I made my debut performing with BigUp at Kay Moline (Moline's house), a Haitian-owned restaurant and bar located at the crossing of Barão de Iguape and Glicério streets, just a block away from the extinct Caribbean Bar and Restaurant. Upon entering the bar, my senses were immediately impacted as I crossed multiple sensory and social thresholds into a low-class venue of popular entertainment in São Paulo's historical centre. Red, pink, and blue neon lamps provided dim lighting to the bar's blood-red walls, the gloomy atmosphere feeling darker than the night outside. The air was thick and heavy with the stagnant odour of fried food.

My hearing was soon flooded by the high-volume sound of DJ Jo Bass' DJing, with an extra layer of reverb added by the reflexive surface of the white floor tiles and the bar's empty premises (see Figure 11). Standing next to the entrance with his laptop, he set the sonic mood for the night by playing a mixture of Haitian and Brazilian popular music styles, the soundscape punctuated with the clashing of pool balls as two Haitian women played. At one point, he sampled a raboday song's rhythmic clave and used it as a transition to a lambada, a popular

couple-dance style associated with the north/northeast of Brazil whose own existence is owed to musical encounters between Brazil and the Caribbean (see Moehn 2013), that same genre which Prince had referenced as possible a point of encounter between Brazilian and Caribbean popular culture.<sup>56</sup>

That night's gig was a 'test' in that no entrance would be charged. It would be followed by a second gig with entrance fees the next month. In his opening speech, Princeneer affirmed that the show was a farewell gig for those who might soon be leaving Brazil, perhaps a last chance to dance to live konpa, given that the risks of the route were widely known by his audience.<sup>57</sup> Significantly, in his initial address, he made a point of marking the presence of Brazilians in both the audience and the band, in a clear attempt to compel his fellow compatriots into making a good impression, into performing an acceptable and commendable Haitianness to those who had 'welcomed' them into their home country (had they indeed?). Kay Moline's small venue was packed with about sixty people, mostly Haitians. A few Brazilians (white, or at least considerably lighter, 'dots' in the crowd) were distinctively greeted by Princeneer as if to make clear that their presence was appreciated. He had hired a Brazilian video maker to record the performance, believing that this material would help the band find future sponsors for a trip to Mexico, where he hoped BigUp could perform for the large number of Haitians intending to

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<sup>56</sup> Dirksen notes the existence of two different forms of rabòday in Haiti: a traditional one linked to the practice of *rara* bands and a newer, fast-paced electronic dance music style in 4/4 which dominates the Haitian Carnival scenario, whose modern form is much owed to Haitian producer and beatmaker G-Dolph (Dirksen 2020: 201; 294, Note 6).

<sup>57</sup> The advertisement video for the show, shared on the band's social media and WhatsApp groups, is also hosted on the group's YouTube channel with the title '*Etazini mande pou djaz BigUp#1 jwe pou Ayisyen l depote yo*' (The US asks that BigUp#1 play for the Haitians it deports). The narrator presents the show as a last opportunity to dance with the group for those who are about to leave Brazil. Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=tRetw6l7q2E>> (Accessed 30 September 2023)

enter the US – perhaps even with the participation of former BigUp members who temporarily resided there. Such a tour never came to pass.



*Figure 11 - DJ Jo Bass setting the mood for BigUp's first concert at Kay Moline (photo by the author)*

BigUp had prepared a setlist of twelve songs for the night, all of them covers of songs by famous Haitian bands and artists such as Zenglen, Disip, Tropicana, Zafèm, Nu-Look, Klass, Kadilak, Bedjine. Once the sound of konpa started filling Moline's packed dance floor, one could feel the atmosphere heating up, and I wondered if I could just as well be in a nightclub in Port-au-Prince. Bodies began to elegantly sway to the groove of popular konpa hits, greeted with intense enthusiasm by members of the crowd. Couples, both Haitian-Haitian and Haitian-Brazilian (always Haitian man/Brazilian woman), danced tightly, in a slow and sensual way, sharing the space with single male dancers who also playfully danced with one another. It was difficult to hear oneself playing in the crowded and reverberant atmosphere, and many sound

adjustments had to be made in between songs by Nico; we even had to find a temporary replacement for his percussion kit, as feedback continually disrupted the sound.

But the audience paid little concern to technical issues; it was hungry for music, and people kept shouting things like ‘*lage Maestro, lage!*’ (Kick-off, Maestro, kick-off!) or ‘*Jwe, jwe!*’ (Play, play!). Many in the audience constantly sang along and danced side-by-side with the singers, who, closer to the end, also ventured into the crowd, dancing and sharing their mics with fellow Haitians and friends. Unconstrained by Prince’s requests, Haitians were clearly *alèz* (at ease), enjoying themselves immersed in a familiar soundtrack, a musical ‘home’ away from home. I couldn’t help thinking how BigUp’s music was indeed providing a space for Haitians to live with and through their bodies. As Turino has remarked regarding collective music experience in diasporic communities, the sonic and kinesthetic synchrony between the band and public I was then witnessing revealed ‘subtle signs of similarity below the level of focal awareness’, and a pulsating sense of Haitianness which emanated from the ‘powerful somatic and emotional affects’ of the physical bonding prompted by music and dance (2004: 18). Playing with BigUp that night was like a musical marathon, as every song was stretched to between ten and fifteen minutes, a manoeuvre pulled off through long guitar solos by Jojo (and some shorter ones by me), verse repetition, and plenty of interaction with the audience by the singers. Despite the fatigue, all were visibly happy as we toasted after the show ended. Even if no one had got any money out of it, BigUp was just happy to get back on the stages.

The next show was a completely different experience, which once more disclosed the material precarity affecting Haitian music production in Brazil.<sup>58</sup> We were primed for a great night: our repertoire was longer, the band ‘tighter’ and better prepared. Everyone looked sharp, especially Melinda, who wore a shiny, light-coloured dress. After unloading my gear, I bought a beer and helped Nico set up the equipment (see Figure 12). T-Bass approached me, accompanied by another Haitian, and asked me in Kreyòl where the keyboard would be placed. As I answered in Kreyòl, his friend (in truth his brother) gawked in surprise: T-Bass was actually trying to impress his brother with a Kreyòl-speaking Brazilian. Nico, who was nearby, laughed and explained to me what I had already figured out.



*Figure 12 - El Papo setting up the drums on Kay Moline’s stage (photo by the author)*

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<sup>58</sup> A short video of the show is available at: <<https://youtube.com/shorts/1I3OGGk1la0>> (Accessed 13 September 2023)

As I continued to help him, I eavesdropped on the conversation of three dark-skinned Brazilian women, who sporadically looked at me with some surprise (as if wondering: ‘What’s that white “playboy” doing here?’).<sup>59</sup> The one who stared the most said: ‘White, only me and that one over there, the rest is all Black’. Jokingly, the darkest one in the group replied: ‘I’m blond!’. They all laughed.

This time around, an entrance fee of twenty *reais* was charged by a bouncer at one of the doors. Perhaps there would be some money for the musicians at the end of the night. In hindsight, however, it was obvious that the fee had a profound effect, as that night’s audience was but a small fraction of our first, free concert at Moline’s the previous month. A few minutes past 9:30 PM, we started the show by playing Disip’s ‘San manti’, a powerful song that urges Haitians to have a candid and serious conversation about the country’s dilemmas, addressing Haitian youth’s growing lack of opportunities, which pushes Haitians to seek better opportunities in places such as Brazil and Chile. Halfway through the song, an electrical overload killed our sound. Nico and Moline’s husband rushed to rearrange the power cables (all plugged into one outlet), but after we resumed playing another electrical failure stopped the show once again. While the second time around Nico solved the problem definitively, that night’s performance was a complicated one: after a couple of songs, one of the strings on the bass broke and the performance was interrupted again. While T-Bass changed the string, Jojo led the band in an improvised version of ‘Istwa’ (2005), a slow song by Haitian singer/songwriter Belo, to keep the

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<sup>59</sup> In Brazilian popular parlance, the term ‘playboy’ is a synonym for the member of the country’s bourgeoisie (usually male). Its use is closely related with hip-hop culture, whose social context is eminently that of the Afro-Brazilian youth living in urban peripheries of cities such as São Paulo. Gatti describes it as representing a collective image of the people ‘belonging to the economic elite, with privileges, access to consumption, power, and public services, especially police protection’ (2018: 271).

audience entertained. The band seemed anxious and disappointed, a bit like the five young men stranded on a boat leaving Haiti depicted in the lyrics of Belo's touching song. But more than the unforeseen interruptions, it was the poor turnout that night which greatly discouraged the group after having invested so much time, effort, and money on the preparations.

We had been on stage for more than two hours when we finished the last song of the first set. I felt relieved, as my shoulders, feet, and hands felt extremely sore and tired, and I longed for the interval. Princeneer, perhaps wanting to compensate for the shaky start, announced a last song, a Brazilian 'hit' to please the audience: 'Fala comigo (alô)' (2014), by Léo Magalhães 'in *konpanejo* style'. He led the band in singing the chorus/introduction, after which the rhythm section changed to a *konpa* groove, in substitution of the bolero-inflected rhythm of the original song. It was met with enthusiasm by the audience, and soon couples came together and danced with renewed intensity. The song was stretched to the limit with many solos: ten minutes in, and with still no sign of an end, people kept dancing. Suddenly, Princeneer started singing 'Ai, se eu te pego' (2011), by Michel Teló. Sharing the same four-chord sequence, the songs formed a *konpanejo* medley which would last almost twenty minutes (to my personal disappointment, exhausted as I was at that point).

When the first set ended past 1:00 AM, I was completely drained, and decided to ask the band's permission to go home – I simply felt I could not endure another set. I sought Prince and Tony, explained myself and apologized for the fact that I wouldn't be there for the second set. Generously, they said they understood and told me not to worry. As I was about to head home, Princeneer, who wearing a black cap with the words *Os escuros* (The dark ones), rushed to give me a takeaway of Moline's *fritay* to replenish my energies on the way home. The next day, Maestro Tony contacted me through WhatsApp to get my bank details. When I said I'd only

accept half the fee, he refused: in BigUp, everyone gets paid the same. He then deposited one-hundred-fifty *reais* into my account.

BigUp's last concert in 2021 was a Christmas celebration gig at Little Brick Community, and the band has not performed since then. Ever since 2022, the band has tried to find a substitute for Maestro Tony, who has been living in Chile, where he has joined another music group. As for Twoubanego, it has performed only once, in May 2022, at a private event sponsored by Bakara Rhum, a Haitian liquor company.<sup>60</sup> In early 2023, Princeneer's comment about the band's situation continued to evince the strong effect of the Haitian exodus on BigUp:

(Sigh) Ah, BigUp has stopped, virtually. Stopped, really stopped. Maestro Tony is in Chile, other people have travelled, *yo pran wout lan* [they took the route]: Zykòs, Oba, Lucko, 'Cabelo', he's in Mexico. Who's here: myself, Ti Grimo, Nico, Jovial. El Papo *se fué* [is gone, spoken in Spanish], he's in France. Kifny is here. We don't have a drummer now. Jo Bass is here, bass player. We're missing two things: a pianist and a drummer. If we'd have a show now, we'd have a problem.

My stint with BigUp coincided with its (until now) last expressive attempt as a professional music group in Brazil. As Prince summed up, *djazz la kanpe*: the band has stopped. In one of the richest and most cosmopolitan cities of the world, the music production efforts of BigUp remain caught up in the webs of precarity and 'ordinary temporariness' that structure the Haitian migrant experience in Brazil. Their agency in carving spaces for Haitian music and culture shows how they have gradually learned, as Princeneer did selling cosmetics on São Paulo's public transport network, 'the dynamics of the country': 'one has to make do, right?'

Despite the sacrifice and investment of its members, BigUp has had difficulty in 'making do' on its own. Princeneer's telling phrase in our interview foregrounded not only their specific

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<sup>60</sup> A short video of Twoubanego's last show is available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=XLmzkqihx5o>> (Accessed 28 June 2023)

case but also a frequent situation (and complaint) I heard from many other Haitian artists, the wishes of greater openness and opportunities for Haitian migrants producing culture and music in Brazil: ‘We’re seeking people that can help us move forward. [...] We’re seeking openness [*ouvèti*].’ BigUp’s search for musical alliances and opportunities in São Paulo hasn’t resulted in a significant opening of cultural ‘space’ or the building of lasting and growing connections within the local professional music scene. The fact remains that my short-term engagement with them, though much welcomed as a rare experience of Haitian-Brazilian intercultural contact through music, inevitably reproduced the logic of ‘ordinary temporariness’ against which they battled. As Princeneer continued:

And everyone who wishes to join efforts with us, be welcome, be welcome. And you, we consider you part of the band, it gives us much pleasure. We wouldn’t like [...] if you just went away and quit us for good.

Yet the hope remains for some of them such as Nico, who has now opened ‘Nico’s Bar’ at BigUp’s rehearsal room. There he serves beverages for Little Brick’s residents to the soundtrack of *konpa* and different Brazilian popular music styles. Now and then, on Sundays he and a few Haitian friends gather to play, just to amuse themselves and, perhaps, provide a bit of dancing entertainment for whoever comes in. Hidden inside Little Brick, *konpa* discreetly walks on.

### **Haitian studios and beatmakers/producers in Brazil**

In *Cultural production in and beyond the recording studio* (2014), Allan Watson begins by highlighting the widespread popular fascination regarding music studios, mentioning the iconic fame of Abbey Road and Sun Studios along with the curiosity regarding the ‘enigmatic’ procedures that take place in such musical ‘black boxes’ (2014: xiii). Recent developments in

music production, recording technology, and communication networks, however, have contributed to gradual but sweeping changes in the configuration, location, and character of recording studios. By lowering entry barriers both financially and knowledge-wise, they have democratised the production of music (2014: 150), enabling people interested in music (whether professionally or not) to set up their own recording facilities, and prompting what Louise Meintjes has called the ‘global explosion’ of small and home recording studios (2017: 209). As her study of studios in post-apartheid South Africa exemplifies, such studios frequently operate below the radar of local, national, or global mainstream music industries, constituting invisible and provisional sites where multifarious artists, musicians, and producers struggle to live, earn, and create music from ‘positions of political and economic precarity’ (2017: 207–8). The importance of recording studios far exceeds their role in the creation of musical commodities, as Watson (2015: 1) appropriately notes:

Recording studios also play a central role in the creating the ‘sound’ of particular music scenes, and act as a *focal point for networks of musicians and musical creativity* [my emphasis]. As such, recording studios and the skilled engineers and producers who work within them have played a central role in shaping the production of music as both an economic and cultural commodity, and as such, in shaping both local cultural production and global popular culture.

Such focal points offer a space in which particular music-centred sociabilities are promoted, and in which the activity of certain networks of musicians, artists, and producers may coalesce into a recognized ‘sound’ or music scene. Such intertwining of musical labour and the social is also noted by Chris Gibson (2003) as a particular tendency in ‘cultural sectors’: the blurring of boundaries between work and socio-cultural interaction unleashes processes through which infrastructures of cultural production become spaces where ‘scenes’ are established and maintained (2003: 205). This collision substantiates how ‘the “work” of music cannot be

divorced from the social networks of people who make and promote it, and the sites they occupy in order to do so' (2003: 205).

Since 2017, most of my lived experience with Haitian artists in Brazil has taken place in Haitian-owned studios (also a telling fact in itself given how it points to the scarcity of live performance opportunities). They are the fundamental focal points of the diasporic Haitian musical community in Brazil, the powerhouses which give sonic form to the musical creativity of nearly all Haitians living in the country and also those North American diasporic locations. Since the small differences between them (and their central figures, Haitian beatmakers/producers) are outweighed by meaningful structural and ontological similarities, I suggest they can be thought of as 'versions' of the same archetypal structure of digital and translocal diasporic music production, the Haitian (home) studio.

In clear accordance with general spatial patterns of Haitian presence in the country, the majority of Haitian studios and producers in Brazil (and also the most prominent) are (or were) located in urban centres of the country's southern states, usually in lower-class peripheral zones. Even though some of them define themselves (and perhaps, in some respects attempt to act) as labels, Andrew Eisenberg's category of 'production house' offers a more appropriate and synthetic definition of the kind of cultural work developed within them: differently of labels, encumbered by the 'need to maintain a particular aesthetic identity or organisational configuration', production houses constitute a more simple, individual-centred, and casual format of music production, aiming to provide clients with 'facilities and the skilled labour of a creative producer capable of composing and arranging on the DAW' (2023: 20).

The cultural work performed by beatmakers/producers in the Haitian home studio is 'an artefact of the digital age' (Eisenberg 2023: 53) afforded by the democratizing impulse of

technological developments in digital music production and the growing availability of resource and knowledge concerning music recording. Such process has created the conditions for the multiplication of professional and amateur ‘bedroom producers’ and converted the home space into a space of music production (Watson 2015; 2016). As Eisenberg (2023) remarks concerning producers in Nairobi’s new recording industry, for Haitian beatmakers/producers the ‘cognitive offloading’ (Magnusson 2009 as cited in Eisenberg 2023: 54) afforded by DAWs has also been central in allowing the ‘confluence of aesthetic and entrepreneurial practices’ which characterize their work by ‘concentrating creative agency in individual actors while diminishing the need for specialized musical competences’ (2023: 54).<sup>61</sup>

Despite working within a varied number of music genres, Haitian beatmakers/producers in Brazil and their trajectories nurture a close relationship with the dissemination of hip-hop in Haiti, and the style remains central to their musical work concerning both the share of beats they produce and the techniques and procedures used. Beyond the important dimension of the producer’s proficiency and creativity in the use of digital music production technology, communication technology has also been instrumental in enabling new modes of creative collaboration (such as distanced music production) and in configuring new translocal patterns of music production through the increased mobility potential of its resources and processes (such as the laptop, file exchange protocols, and messaging apps), all of which have had considerable importance to the work of Haitian beatmakers/producers in Brazil as they facilitate working with clients abroad.

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<sup>61</sup> Such developments in the linkages between music production and technology, it must be noted, are also closely connected to hip-hop’s unfolding as a music genre/culture (Tabron 2015) and the centrality of the role of the producer within it, which was condensed by Virgil Moorefield (2010) in the idea of ‘the producer as composer’ as a dominant feature of hip-hop music.

In the following, I aim to offer a view into the functioning of Haitian home studios in Brazil and the musical work developed by Haitian beatmakers/producers within them. In wider terms, I intend to locate the Haitian home studio as a hidden space of music production connected to the precarity of Haitian cultural endeavours in Brazil and also highlight its importance as a place of Haitian diasporic sociability and encounter. I also account for its increasingly transnational operation and provide an account of its ebbs and flows against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing exodus of Haitians from Brazil. As I intend to show, such a macro-scale state of affairs has also modulated (in different ways) the working lives of beatmakers/producers and the existence of some of the studios in which I conducted research. To do so, I draw variously on interviews and fieldwork experience as a musical collaborator with some of the main Haitian beatmakers/producers in Brazil: BaadBadu Beats (BTAG Studio PSWARK and Unlimited Music), Dongad Beats and Rhythm Beats (DFJ Studio), and Very Larose (Inna the place).

### **The Haitian (home) studio**

*Meeting BTAG STUDIO PSWARK, Canoas – 15 April 2017*

*On Easter weekend, I paid my first visit to a Haitian-owned home studio, BTAG Studio PSWARK in Canoas, a city within the Greater Porto Alegre metropolitan area.<sup>62</sup> I went with Alix, who had organized a two-day recording session to produce a couple of his compositions. The studio itself was a recent initiative of two young Haitian cousins, Jocelyn Preval and Akim Merissaint Dorvilus (respectively known by the aliases of Poony Btag and Prince Amki), both of whom had dreamt, since their adolescence in Haiti, of producing music professionally and building their*

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<sup>62</sup> The name of the studio unites both cousins' (nick)names, linking a desired future (Poony) and a cherished past (Prince) involving music: BTAG stands for 'big things a ground' (according to Poony meaning 'big things are coming') while PSWARK is the acronym of the names of Prince and five friends with whom he would do freestyle rapping as a teenager in Haiti.

*artistic careers in search of success and fame. They lived in a shared accommodation with other Haitians, part of a humble two-story white house owned by an old (and deaf) Brazilian man on the periphery of Canoas (see Figure 13). We were greeted by Poony at the entrance gate, who took us inside their section of the house, on the rear part of the property. The studio was a sixteen-square-foot room between Poony's room and the kitchen; equipment included two video monitors, two small audio interfaces, two speakers, and a microphone with a stand, and there was a small sofa in the room as well. At that point, everything (beatmaking, recording, editing, mixing) occurred in the same room, so small that we barely fit. As we worked on Alix's songs the next day, a handful of Haitian friends and acquaintances living nearby arrived to help with the installation of makeshift soundproofing foam panels in the (future) recording room (they had already opened a 'window' into a neighbouring chamber). 'Is that a konbit?', I asked Poony.<sup>63</sup> He laughed and politely agreed. It was my first time playing Caribbean rhythms such as zouk, and likewise the first time playing Caribbean rhythms with Black, Caribbean people. Despite my rather modest results, Poony made a big issue out of it, posting on Facebook a video of me playing with the subtitle 'This guy managed to play Haitian music!'*

As this short ethnographic interlude hints at, Haitian (home) studios in Brazil are hard to find: there aren't many of them, and they are usually imperceptible to the outside world. Their condition of apparent invisibility is revealing of the socio-economic dimensions that shape Haitians' spatial distribution in Brazilian urban spaces (usually in low-class peripheral zones) and the economic challenge of setting up such spaces of music production, as even the basic home studio configuration of laptop, interface, and microphone represents a considerable expense for Haitians and are especially expensive in Brazil. Due to the convergence of such circumstances, most of the studios I frequented either started or were still located in the intimate and compact space of beatmakers/producers' own bedrooms, sometimes in collective accommodations shared with other Haitian migrants.

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<sup>63</sup> 'A collective labor society, and a gathering of such a society. These groups, when large enough, typically employ musicians to accompany the work' (Averill 1997: 240).



*Figure 13 - BTAG Studio PSWARK original location in Canoas, September 2022 (photo by the author)*

The paradox between the social invisibility of the Haitian studio (and Haitian producers) and their relevance as transnational spaces of music production for Haitian migrants in Brazil became strikingly evident during my experience at DFJ Studio. On the outskirts of the Sítio Cercado neighbourhood in Curitiba, the capital of Paraná state, it is run by Manno Charles (a.k.a. Dongad Beats), a 38-years-old Haitian beatmaker/producer who was frequently described (even by other Haitian beatmakers) as ‘the number one’ in Brazil. As a matter of fact, Dongad’s clientele includes premier Haitian artists based in Haiti and North America such as K-Dilak, Frere Gabe, Kenny Haiti, and Wanito, amongst scores of others lesser-known aspiring artists both abroad and in Brazil. Despite his reputation and the significance of such achievements, he

produces music from a small, dark, and stuffy studio below his rented flat in a humble three-story building and has almost no connection to the local professional music scene.

For my first visit, it took me two buses and almost two hours to get there from Curitiba's city centre. The building had no intercom and hosted a small liquor store on the ground floor. When I asked its owner where I could find Dongad's studio, he wasn't sure what I meant. Explaining that I was looking for a Haitian man who worked with music did the trick: 'Ah, 'Dongabits' [sic]! Through that door'. Pushing a dark, gridded door next to the store, I entered a dark small corridor, in which the pulsing sound of synthesized kick drums reverberated. On the other end, a second door led to the studio: the number one Haitian producer/studio in Brazil worked in a six-square-meter room with no windows, divided into two sections: a control room with Dongad's workstation (including laptop, monitor, speakers, drum machine, two MIDI keyboards, mixing console, and electric guitar) and a tiny recording booth for voice recording (see Figure 14). Previously, he had worked for three years from his own accommodation, saving money to invest in his business. From this hidden and compact space, Dongad's work spans the transnational space between countries such as Brazil, Haiti, the US, Canada, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico, with top-of-the-game and unknown Haitian customers engaging him continuously through messaging and video calls on WhatsApp. Through digital communication technology, Dongad and his customers exchange audio files and ideas about their respective projects, and, of course, negotiate payment through methods such as Western Union, PayPal, the Brazilian Pix system, etc. In late 2022, he changed his studio to another location in the same area from where he continues to work with local and distant customers. He does not envision leaving Brazil.



*Figure 14 - Rhythm Beats checks his phone while Dongad and Mister One F.L. produce a new track (photo by the author).*

BSP's trajectory also followed a similar pattern of ascent, but one which was perhaps prematurely interrupted by the pandemic. After setting up the studio in the room between the kitchen and Poony's bedroom, he and Prince worked diligently to find someone to fill the studio's fundamental position, that of the beatmaker/producer, since they did not know how to do it and wished to remain only as its owners and artists that made use of it (see Figure 15). They had worked intermittently with a Haitian beatmaker living in a relatively nearby city, but due to the difficulties in scheduling sessions and high transportation costs, things weren't going as they had planned. After more than six months of inactivity between 2017–18, they decided to 'import' a new Haitian beatmaker who was living in Santiago, Chile: Prince's school friend Valery Meme (BaadBadu), a 25-year-old producer with whom they were already working from a distance on an occasional basis. Poony and Prince's invitation and insistence eventually led him to move to

Brazil in July 2018 to assume the position of beatmaker/producer at BSP, in a deal which included covering travel and immigration costs and giving him a share of the studio's future profits.



*Figure 15 - BaadBadu, me, and Alix Georges producing at BSP in 2019 (photo by Poony BTAG)*

BaadBadu's arrival inaugurated what may be described as a 'golden age' for BSP, albeit a short one. Between mid-2018 and March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated the end of the studio's activities and Poony and Prince's departure from Brazil, BSP would become the best-known Haitian studio in Brazil alongside DFJ. Such a rise also had important implications for the studio's spatial configuration and location. When BaadBadu arrived, his

sleeping quarters were BSP's recording room, and most of his daily life would be spent indoors between there and his workstation in the control room. However, with the studio's expanding activity and reputation amongst Haitians in Brazil between 2018 and 2019 (when it averaged a monthly profit of about four thousand *reais*), they decided to move it to a better location. In January 2020, weeks before the arrival of SarS-Cov2 in Brazil, BSP re-opened after months of preparation in a central neighbourhood of Porto Alegre, unquestionably a more thriving setting in terms of cultural production in the region. In a more spacious environment and with better equipment, it seemed prepared to maintain its trajectory of ascent as a key Haitian space of music production. Its centripetal force amongst Haitians (carefully cultivated through an intense labour of propaganda across social media and communication networks) was such that many Haitian artists would cover great distances within Brazil to produce their songs there, travelling for week or weekend-long production sprints from faraway places such as Rio de Janeiro and Cuiabá or other nearby cities. Some, like Asid Adult Man and Mal-Adi (more information about them is provided in Chapter 4, Pandemics), had even decided to move and live in the Porto Alegre metropolitan area partly on account of the studio, seeing its effervescent moment of music production as an opportunity to give impetus to their musical projects.

At the time, the studio was also involved (along with other investors such as Princeneer) in bringing top Haitian artists to Brazil, such as Kenny, Baky Popilè, MR Zomò, Wanito, and DJ Nal, who performed in cities with sizable Haitian communities in different regions of Brazil. When in Rio Grande do Sul, all of these artists would visit BSP, and some, like DJ Nal and Zomò (the last ones to visit the studio in early 2020), also recorded songs in collaboration with local Haitian artists such as King Kong, B-Wade, and Poony Btag (more information about King

Kong and B-Wade is also given in Chapter 4, Pandemics).<sup>64</sup> BaadBadu described the studio's dynamism and growing importance as a Haitian hub of music production in Brazil, along with the detrimental effects of the pandemic on the studio and his own professional and educational development as a music producer in the following way:

Bro, that period, like, things were going really well, we even had some productions, producers bringing famous Haitian artists here, bro. [...] Almost all of them [visited BSP]. Kenny, Baky [Popilè], Wanito, we worked together, Zomo too. Zomo and DJ Nal [were the first]. The last one was Wanito, in March [2020]. Kenny too, *bah*,<sup>65</sup> really famous artists. Really, really famous. And it was a really good experience, bro. The pandemic really broke everything, it broke it all. Because they would bring more artists here. [...] And it would be even nicer. At that time, I had more financial resources and I was hoping to enter the university here to study music, art, that kind of stuff. Bro, you never know what could have happened.

Despite the significance of the positive outcomes of music production work exemplified by DFJ and BSP (in this case prematurely cut short by the pandemic), the fact is that most Haitian producers/beatmakers in Brazil are still – just like Dongad and BaadBadu in their first years in Brazil – working as ‘bedroom producers’ from the intimacy of their own living quarters in a perpetual blurring of daily life and professional activity. During production sessions, these bedroom studios can become tight spaces with clients and guests (such as me, but mostly Haitian clients and friends) accompanying the beatmaker's work while sitting on their beds or watching the recording of vocals in improvised ‘recording booths’ in the corner of the room, moments during which bystanders do their best to ‘freeze’ in silence. Their confined dimensions and

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<sup>64</sup> Short footage of a production session with Wanito is available at: <<https://youtu.be/OeorE1yA4yI>>. The videoclip for ‘M pa nan madan zanmi’ (Not interested in my friend's girl), a song by Zomò with the participation of local Haitian artists is available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=FdXOq8XtYO0&pp=ygUWem9tbyBwb29ueSBidGFnIGltd2FkZQ%3D%3D>> (Accessed 23 September 2023)

<sup>65</sup> According to the *Michaelis Dictionary of the Portuguese Language*, the regional expression ‘bah’, common amongst the inhabitants of Rio Grande do Sul, constitutes a display of surprise, admiration, or astonishment. Available at: <<https://michaelis.uol.com.br/busca?r=0&f=0&t=0&palavra=bah>> (Accessed 21 January 2024)

homely character always seemed to confer upon them an informal atmosphere, fostering or allowing the occasional participation of bystanders in artistic decisions, and also prompting collective moments of enjoyment while listening to, singing along, or dancing as the production of the beat unfolded.

For a month in July 2021, I collaborated with Very Larose, an artist and beatmaker/producer then living in the capital of Santa Catarina state, Florianópolis. Very is a 33-year-old singer/songwriter who took an interest in beatmaking/producing after coming to Brazil in 2016. After producing his songs with Haitian and Brazilian beatmakers (amongst them Dongad and BaadBadu), he decided to begin learning the craft, availing himself of the free resources available on sites such as YouTube but also through an informal paid apprenticeship with a local Brazilian beatmaker. About six months before the pandemic, he began producing the beats for his own songs and offering beatmaking/production services in his own studio: Inna the place.

The studio was located in Very's bedroom in *Conexão 48 Hostel*, an affordable guesthouse in the Carvoeira neighbourhood in central Florianópolis. Set in high terrain in a relatively affluent part of the city, *Conexão 48* was a low-cost working-class accommodation adapted to the premises of what once was certainly the spacious house of upper-class residents, equipped with a pool, barbecue, and a beautiful view of the lower parts of the city. In a telling coincidence that conflates the racially-inflected precarious working conditions and social invisibility of Haitian migrants and Afro-Brazilians, Very's narrow lodgings were at the junction of what in the configuration of middle and upper-class Brazilian houses (predominantly white households) is known as the *dependência de empregada*, the (predominantly Black) maid's quarters, and the *área de serviço*, the service area with a laundry tub right behind the kitchen. In

the service area, Very had set up his laptop, a TV monitor, an audio interface, two speakers, two MIDI controllers, two guitars, a mic with a stand, and a ring light for recording social media videos with his smartphone. To reduce reverberation and maximize his space, Very covered the tile walls with blankets and the laundry tub with a wooden board; behind the door, a chalkboard was placed to organize his producing agenda to-do list (see Figure 16).



*Figure 16 - Very watches local rapper Hooligyn record his verses on a collective hip-hop track (photo by the author).*

Through Inna the place, Very managed, in a short period of time, to build important social and musical production connections with members of the local hip-hop scene, producing songs for other Haitian artists living in the city, along with his own debut album, ‘Imigrante’ (Immigrant), released in 2022 on the studio’s YouTube channel (which I discuss in Chapter 3, Songwriting).<sup>66</sup> While I worked with Very one afternoon, he used Instagram to introduce me to another Haitian beatmaker/producer based in Florianópolis, whom he deemed especially talented: Rhythm Beats. Subsequently, I contacted him through his Instagram account and set up a meeting at his rented accommodation in the Estreitos neighbourhood, a less central and predominantly lower-class neighbourhood. We met at a bus stop in front of a wasteland, at the far end of which there were many small hovels, one of which his was own residence. Rhythm Beats is the artistic name of Etzer Vilaire Vivaldy Toussaint (a.k.a. Skinny), born in 1998 in Port-au-Prince and living in Brazil since 2018.

Skinny’s place felt like the many Haitian households I had been in before: small, back-end flats, poorly lit and ventilated, located in impoverished and peripheral areas. As exemplified by Skinny and BSP, they bring to view a new, informal subletting industry run mainly by lower-class Brazilians and considerably directed toward new immigrants such as Haitians in different locations of the country (for more detail, see Langa 2020). Living in Florianópolis since his arrival in Brazil, Skinny’s first savings were spent on the purchase of a MacBook so he could continue making beats, something he had learned by himself as a teenager in Haiti mostly through videogame beatmaking platforms. During his three years in the city, his conception of

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<sup>66</sup> A playlist of the album is available at: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=4xGvD7IE4B8&list=PLNeAqh4qhL0Nfg92h7ex7-nyeDFr4sA1U&pp=iAQB> (Accessed 26 September 2023)

the spatial organization of his home reveals the centrality of music production in his life: ‘I set up a studio, not a bedroom. I set up a studio and put a bed in it. That was it’ (see Figure 17).



*Figure 17 – At his home studio in Estreitos, Rhythm Beats produces a new trap beat which featured my collaboration (photo by the author)*

Despite Skinny’s continuing commitment to music production, things were more complicated in terms of making a living. On the day we met, he had just been sacked. Nevertheless, he still had enough enthusiasm to welcome me into his home and record my participation on two of his beats. In late 2021, he moved to São Paulo’s eastern neighbourhood of Itaquaquecetuba in search of a job, and once again installed his studio equipment in his sleeping quarters, producing a few local Brazilian artists in addition to several African migrant artists who lived in the area. But things were hard in far-away Itaquaquecetuba, and in mid-2022, once again Skinny moved within Brazil in search of a better life, this time to Curitiba, where he

soon befriended Dongad. Still living in the city as of 2023, he now collaborates with Dongad at DFJ (when he's not working in successive odd jobs such as delivery boy or shipper). Yet even without knowing when or where, he already prophesizes about a new studio in a different place, someday: 'I'll say it to you, I'll set up another studio again'.

### **The maestros: Haitian beatmakers/producers in Brazil**

No specific actor within the 'assembly line' of the Haitian musical community in Brazil plays a more important role than the beatmaker/producer. He (the role is always occupied by a man) is the first port of call for Haitians seeking to give musical form to their compositions, the mediator who transforms the smallest bits of musical ideas or lyrics into a track onto which the artist's voice will be recorded, and later into the finished form of digital audio files that will be shared and uploaded to communication networks, social media, and streaming platforms. Their entrance into the world of digital, computer-based music production is highly indebted to the history of hip-hop as a 'producer's genre' (Moorefield 2010) and its close relationship with the evolution of music production technology, along with the expansion of hip-hop music and culture amongst Haitian youth around the turn of the millennium (Lizaire 2018; Larose and Exantus 2021). As was the case with their studios, their trajectories, characteristics, and work methods/routines present many relevant similarities, all the while cultivating a strong sense of individual style and artistic identity as beatmakers/producers. Their general line of work corresponds to the figure of the producer identified by Eisenberg in Nairobi's new recording industry, 'a recording engineer who also serves as a composer and/or arranger by virtue of digitally programming accompanying instrumental parts' (2023: 53), usually working on a 'project-based model' where clients pay 'per song or album, rather than by the hour or day' (2023: 79).

In what is usually a clear line separating them from most of their customers, all of the beatmakers/producers I interviewed had some level of proficiency on one or more musical instruments, even if most of them did not usually think of themselves as musicians (*mizisyen*), since, for them, this is a category for them closely related to the technical mastery of instruments and/or knowledge of Western music theory. BaadBadu learned to play the drums as a youngster, Very and Dongad learned to play guitar through musical education at protestant churches in Haiti, the same setting where Skinny learned to play the drums as a child (presently, none of them continues to participate in religious contexts of music making later in their lives). With the obvious exception of the drum set (due to the dimensions of their studios), producers such as Dongad and Very owned and occasionally made use of guitars in music production sessions.

Given its obvious centrality to DAW-based music production, they all made frequent use of MIDI keyboard controllers, frequently in an intuitive way (they usually claimed not ‘knowing’ how to play it). I often saw Dongad and BaadBadu search for the right keys on their controllers to record a piece of melody or additional drum parts, in what an observer imbued only with traditional Western music musicianship criteria would dismissively regard as an amateur gesture. Yet they had little difficulty in giving musical form to what were usually interesting and captivating musical ideas previously conceived only in their inner ears. Even the absence of MIDI keyboards was no impediment to creating a beat: when I met Skinny, he didn’t own a keyboard controller. Nevertheless, this didn’t stop him from recording rhythmic parts on the beats we produced together, hitting the keys on his laptop with groove, precision, and style – values usually associated with instrumental performance. Contrary to limited conceptions regarding the relationship of musicianship and technology in digital music productions, such situations evinced the creative affordances of music technology and how they ‘can have different

effects in different social situations’ (Watson 2014: 37), or, as Watson continues, drawing on Rodgers (2003), how digital music machines are ‘instruments that are learned, played and which involve performance gestures as with any other instrument’ (2014: 37).

Of similar character to their use of music technology production, their process of becoming beatmakers is one deeply marked by informality and a DIY approach, a grassroots mode of learning which generates ‘a type of knowledge that can only be gained through observation, demonstration, practice and experience’ (Watson 2014: 39). Through such a DIY ethos, they exemplify what Walzer has grouped in general terms under the epithet of the ‘new recording class’: ‘an intelligent, confident, media-literate and self-directed community of producers who take it upon themselves to learn how to create their ideas’ and that demonstrates ‘confidence and technical proficiency in all aspects of their creative work’ (2017: 23–4).

Dongad, then in his early twenties, began making beats in 2006, learning mostly by himself but sometimes getting tips from another beatmaker friend. According to his account, he progressed rapidly and one year later was starting to make money selling his beats, a professional ascent concurrent to that of Haitian hip-hop groups such as Barikad Crew in the late 2000s, in what many of my research collaborators characterised as the ‘golden age’ of rap kreyòl. For BaadBadu, his introduction to beatmaking began at his own house with his older brother, known by the alias of Sousbeat, who already worked as a beatmaker in Cap Ayisyen: ‘He had his computer, in the same room as I [lived]. Sometimes he’d start a project and leave, leaving it open, then I’d go and mess with it, I’d mess saying “this is not good”, I’d even erase his things to do something of mine, I was testing. That’s how I started’. Skinny, on the other hand, started playing around with beatmaking through the FL Studio software on his church’s old IBM desktop computer, and later its portable version for PlayStation (PSP), where he and a friend

would make beatmaking challenges. Very was effectively the only producer who started to learn beatmaking after migrating to Brazil.

The work routines of Haitian beatmakers can be quite intense, with many hours spent in front of laptops and monitors (even if for those who also had day jobs such time was also a cherished moment of creative musical pleasure). BaadBadu's routine was especially severe between 2018 and 2020, frequently spending more than eight hours a day working on numerous projects. In late 2019, he had to stop producing for a couple of months due to severe headaches and a temporary loss of eyesight. At that time, the usual price for a beat produced by BaadBadu was between one and two hundred *reais*, approximately half of what he charges his Brazil-based customers now. The exodus of Haitians from both Brazil and Chile (where he was also working as beatmaker at another Haitian studio) to the USA, despite significantly destabilizing his life and career as BSP's beatmaker/producer, ultimately transpired to be a considerable financial advantage, as most of his clientele now earns in dollars and he earns more for each beat (usually between one hundred and one hundred fifty dollars). Converting to *reais*, that value represents three or four times what he usually charges his Brazil-based customers (two to three hundred *reais*). As for Dongad, he usually works on at least three beats per day, either starting from scratch (with recorded vocals he received from geographically distant customers, or which were presented to him in the studio by local clients) or continuing his work on previously started tracks. His workload is so sizeable that he said he did not keep track of how many beats he works on per month.

Dongad's migration to Brazil happened in 2015, following encouragement from his brother who said he would be able to work in better conditions in Brazil; differently of the other beatmakers here discussed, he travelled to Curitiba with all his music-producing equipment. He

worked briefly at a pizza parlour to earn some money and acquaint himself with Brazilians (while also learning Portuguese), yet soon realized he would be making more money producing music from home. While he sometimes charges fees as low as one-hundred fifty *reais* from Brazil-based customers, when working with Haitians abroad he earns between one and six hundred dollars per beat, sums which converted to *reais* represent considerable earnings. According to him, coming to Brazil was essential for his career, as Haiti presented many challenges to his work, such as *pwoblèm kouran* (electricity shortages). His migration, hence, represented in his view a move to a more structured and organized country where he could find the basic conditions for earning his living as a beatmaker/producer:

I'll tell you; Haiti is an odd country. It's odd. You may be a great musician, you may be a great beatmaker, and all the while it's not easy to succeed. [...] Because if you're in a country that's really organized you may say 'Well, I'm a beatmaker in my country, I'll stay here', do you understand? But sometimes things work against you, and you're looking for a way to be at ease.

Since most of his customers are based abroad, Dongad claims that the Covid-19 pandemic has not affected his work in a meaningful way. For all the others beatmakers portrayed here, though, it had very important repercussions. In 2022, Very went back to working in the service industry. After his sister managed to enter the US, he decided to follow her, taking the route in 2023. For Skinny, who had never tried to work full-time as a beatmaker/producer, it was a matter of finding a way to survive from job to job, as illustrated by his constant change of domicile in Brazil. In this regard, BaadBadu's statements constitute the most moving, as the coming of the Covid-19 pandemic represented the complete destabilization of his professional career and the postponement of his dreams to further distinguish himself as a music producer:

At that moment [before the pandemic] I had more financial means and wanted to study at the university here, like, music, art, that kind of thing. Man, you never know what could have happened. It broke everything. So, when the pandemic came, I couldn't go out to

work, so all the savings I had I used to survive, to survive because in those times, *bah*, it was so difficult. And to see a thousand people die in your town just like that, you get really scared, so you only stay home. Difficult.

He soon had to find a job to provide for himself and his family. He moved further into the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul due to lower rental costs and started working in a leather and furniture company in a small countryside town. Between 2021 and 2023, he had a heavy work routine at a food supply company that left him little time to produce music: ‘Now when I get home, I can make a beat, or mix something, but sometimes I can’t, I just bathe and...because often you leave work and get home at 8 PM and have to go to work at 7 AM. It’s heavy’. It did not stop him from renting a small room in Canoas in early 2022 (only a few minutes away from where BSP had once stood) to house his own studio/label, Unlimited Music, where he started receiving customers again. However, that only lasted for a few months, as when his six-month lease ended the Brazilian landlord refused to renew it, and consequently he was forced to return to working from home in his spare time. Though he does not dwell much on regret, he misses the good (pre-pandemic) times when BSP was thriving, and his best friends were still around:

It’s sad. It’s sad. Because when I arrived in Brazil they were like, like a family to me. Then they all left, and I was alone, just me and Asid [Adult Man]. So, it’s sad too, not seeing your friends in person, because we’re still talking, producing. But it’s life. You got to know how to move, like know where you’re at such a position, [or] that position, and you got to make the effort of searching for a way to live. Yeah, that’s life.

As much as Badu fosters the idea of travelling and visiting other countries around the world (he once asked me about migrating to the UK), he refuses to risk his and his family’s lives by taking the route. He bides his time, trying to qualify for Brazilian citizenship, and keeps working from wherever he can:

I don’t want to go that way (taking the route). Now I’m thinking about naturalizing, to have the Brazilian citizenship, to become a Brazilian citizen, so it’ll be easier to leave the country, to pass [get] visas, it’ll be easier. Because if you’re Brazilian and are working,

when you apply for visas, oh, it'll be much easier. Very fast, actually. Easy. But to do it that way, I'm not going to say it can't have a happy end, but it also can have a sad one too, sometimes. I don't want to run that risk. I want to study a better path for me.

## **Beatmaking**

After so many years doing it, BaadBadu finds beatmaking difficult to explain:

I can't explain it to you, because it's automatic now, now it's automatic. Like whenever I'm hearing something a lot of things are coming up in my mind, don't know where they come from, but they start coming to me. And I just put them in the computer, just reproduce them; it's like you want to start a project and all I need from you is the chorus. You give me it and I immediately identify the notes and think of the chord, then it's all about creating a melody. The melody just comes to me, and I start working. To begin with I usually choose a keyboard (sample) to create the chords, so I know where I'm at. And then the melodies just come to me, they come. Then to create the beat, the rhythm, it depends on the tempo in which one sings. So that tempo if one sings slowly, it'll be a slow song, something really slow. If it's fast, you'll have to see if it's a trap, a drill, a konpa song, and so on. That's how I do it.

Perhaps one can understand how a beatmaker who produced nearly two thousand beats can describe beatmaking as an 'automatic', 'natural' creative process. It is, however, a deceptively simple way to depict the richness of the music-making process and the collective creativity enmeshed in the social interactions that I witnessed as a collaborator in Haitian home studios. As a musical partner in the different studios mentioned above, I was a witness to beatmakers/producers' tremendous speed and agility, creating music out of as little as a few verses sent by WhatsApp or working from a reference track or beat brought by customers. Yet such swiftness was never equal to recklessness, as they were always attentive to the smallest of details when crafting the rhythms, melodies, and harmonies, considerate of their customers' intentions but also creatively adding elements of their own through knowledgeable and efficient use of digital music production tools and resources, effectively producing as composing (Moorefield 2010). While not wishing to downplay the importance of the music-specific part of

the work of beatmakers/producers, as I draw this subsection to an end, I wish to highlight the musical work done in Haitian home studios, their importance as a key space of Haitian cultural production, a fundamental space of sociability, pleasure, and enjoyment for Haitian artists. In offering this ethnographic description, I also aim to offer a portrait of how my role as a musical collaborator sometimes interfered with the musicking of my interlocutors, along with providing an example of the apparently random hybridizing cultural and musical work that goes on inside such hidden spaces of music production.

On 16 February 2022, I went to DFJ with my guitar, having set up a production session with Dongad and two Haitian artists, Tito Calle and Mister One FL. Tito was a long-time acquaintance of mine, having been part of the São Paulo-based Haitian-Brazilian group Surprise69 (see Chapter 4, Pandemics) before moving to Curitiba; I had met Mister One a few days before in DFJ. For some time, they had been close friends and collaborated on each other's work as solo artists, along with advancing a duo project connected to their label, Familia Leal M.T (Loyal family M.T). Their friendship and musical work have strong ties with their identification with *cultura latina* (Latino/a culture), as despite having been born in Haiti, they lived for long periods in the Dominican Republic. Their Portuguese pronunciation carried a heavy Caribbean Spanish accent, and while in the studio they would effortlessly change between Kreyòl, Spanish, and Portuguese, depending on whom they were speaking to. Besides being an important part of their own identity, *Latinidad* had also implications for the rationale and planning of their artistic careers. Making occasional reference to Brazilian pop music stars such as Anitta and others, Tito and Mr. One saw Latin music's rise in the Brazilian and international music industry as an opportunity to mobilize their own personal taste and cultural capital as

Latinos and gear their careers towards this rising ethnic ‘niche’ of the global music industry, working from Brazil outwards while singing in Spanish and using Caribbean music styles.

I arrived before them and worked with Dongad recording guitar on two other tracks, one for popular Haitian artist Kenny Haiti, and other for a US-based Haitian rapper called Phenomen. When going to Haitian studios, I rarely knew exactly what I would be working on. There was frequently an element of surprise, as beatmakers/producers would often take advantage of my presence to record for many of their ongoing projects, and I often did not know where the sounds of my guitar playing would end up. As we finished working on Phenomen’s song, Mister and Tito arrived, sat down, and took some time to talk about life, love, and two of their own compositions; they asked each other for advice on lyrics and explained to each other their motivations and intentions with each song.

When Dongad was done, he asked Mister, ‘What are we doing now?’. Mister said that we would work on a new composition, this time one directed towards the ‘Brazilian market’.<sup>67</sup> It would be a simple, short track featuring Tito’s participation as a guest artist. Mister said he envisioned it as ‘afro-carioca funk’, a mixture of afrobeat and funk carioca ‘with a touch of Dominican dembow’.<sup>68</sup> He sought out two dembow YouTube videos on his smartphone and showed them to Dongad who listened attentively. As a funk track began playing at the liquor store outside, the dampened but clearly audible sound of its rhythmic pattern leaked into the studio, and Mister pointed it out to Dongad, as if saying ‘plus that’. He began singing the song to

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<sup>67</sup> A compilation of short videos of the session showing some of the key moments described is available at: <[https://youtu.be/5OGhx\\_BXs-s](https://youtu.be/5OGhx_BXs-s)> (Accessed 29 September 2023)

<sup>68</sup> According to Marshall, dembow was one of the names of the Spanish-language mix of hip hop and reggae produced in Puerto Rico in the 1990s, after ‘Dem Bow’, a recording by Shabba Ranks frequently sampled by producers. It was later to be commonly replaced by reggaeton, around the turn of the millennium, in a moment marked by producers attempt to market the style to broader audiences (Marshall 2020).

Dongad so that the latter could have an idea of the melody, tempo, and general feel of the song. As the rhythm of one of the verses seemed slightly off and adding a syllable would render it symmetrical to the previous verse, I took the opportunity to suggest that Mister change a word from Portuguese to Spanish (*mas* to *pero*), which, after testing, he duly accepted.

What was already a clear venture of on-the-spot musical hybridizing and pan-Latin songwriting was further elaborated with another layer of *Latinidad* when Mister said he wanted a Mexican-styled intro to the song. As he struggled to explain to us exactly what he envisioned, I asked if he meant something like mariachi music. He agreed and asked me to do something along those lines on the guitar, as he wanted to mimic a type of verbal duel with Tito over it. I asked him to sing and sought out the key, F minor, then brainstormed a few quick phrases over the agreed-upon four-bar chord sequence: Fm | Eb | Fm | Cm. Once I had recorded the chord sequence, I composed a repeating two-bar lick for the intro, which I then harmonized in thirds. I recorded the guitar, as always on such occasions, straight into the interface. The result sounded sufficiently ‘mariachi’ enough for everyone. As Dongad created the beat’s rhythmic patterns in multiple layers and different styles (the verses over a funk carioca clave and the chorus over an afrobeat/dembow one), he asked me for a few other riffs to add to the song’s texture and checked the chord sequence with me. He worked in four or eight-bar sections, looping to extend them according to the song’s lyrics and adding multiple variations.

As the song became more and more audibly tangible to our ears and bodies, Mister and Tito did not refrain in their enthusiasm, singing along, dancing, and gesturing in clear amusement with the moment of social and musical (re)creation. Dongad felt like giving it a Haitian vibe and said he would add some Rara to it. He then chose a French horn sample from one of the samplers in his FL Studio library and began emulating the *vaksin*’s hocketing

technique in a pentatonic scale, testing it over a loop of the song's rhythm. It was getting late in the afternoon, and Dongad had to drive to his daughter's school to pick her up.<sup>69</sup> Production had to be halted, with more work to be done in later sessions, which took place after I left Curitiba. Before leaving, Mister asked him to play the song one more time, half-finished yet already with clear structure and groove, so that he could sing over and dance to it, enjoying the coming into being of his creation. It felt good as we revelled to the sound of 'Ela gosta do pai' (She likes daddy).<sup>70</sup>

As I worked with one of the most requested Haitian beatmakers in his small stuffy studio hidden in the lower-class fringes of Curitiba, we talked about Haitian musical ventures in Brazil, and whether the efforts of Haitian artists in Brazil to be seen and heard would ever bear fruit. Dongad initially put it very bluntly: most Haitian artists in Brazil are *ti atis* (little artists), adding that many lack the necessary musical talent (compared to his top customers from Haiti and the North America-based diaspora), being just ordinary people (as opposed to professional artists) who produce their songs as a sort of hobby or maybe pursue unrealistic dreams of success and making a living as artists. Plus, he added, the Haitian presence in Brazil was still very recent, and there was much work to be done to 'reach Brazilian ears'. Tito Calle, who was there as we engaged in this discussion, added his view, remarking on how such challenges are not exclusive to Haitians and form a common part of the experience of migrant artists in Brazil, one characterized by the lack of opportunities and Brazilians' lack of openness to foreign cultures:

What's lacking here in Brazil for music – not just Haitian music – [for migrants] of so many nations, it's lacking: the majority, ninety-nine percent immigrants of living in

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<sup>69</sup> According to Averill, the *vaksin* is a '[t]raditional bamboo trumpet that is also struck on its side with a stick. It is commonly used in hocketed three-to-five-piece ensembles in rara bands' (1997: 243).

<sup>70</sup> The finished song, sent to me by Mister but still not officially released, is available at: <<https://youtu.be/6Yr8rsRiFLY>> (Accessed 1 October 2023)

Brazil, we work, we must provide for our families, and after we must find some money to make music. So, when you sacrifice – I mean, I don't go through this because I come here, and Dongad Beats makes me a song if I don't have money [...] – but I've been through that. So, we're lacking opportunity, media. Getting media opportunities, radio, television. It doesn't need to be a big radio, because even Brazilians [artists] don't 'get' there. But small radios with ten, twenty thousand people [listeners], so we're missing that connection. So that Brazilians [may] begin to know foreign culture here in Brazil.

Dongad immediately agreed, saying in Portuguese: '*É isso!*' (That's it!). His ensuing statement underlined Tito's main arguments regarding Haitian artists' financial obstacles in producing music in Brazil, given their low salaries and the pervasive need to help families in Haiti with economic remittances. Perhaps tellingly for a beatmaker/producer for whom there is never a shortage of work and who has produced songs with YouTube view counts of over a million for top Haitian artists abroad, Dongad saw the making of a big 'national hit' song by a Haitian artist in Brazil as the best way to open Brazilian eyes and ears to Haitian culture, music, and artists in the country:

There are many things to be done. But it's difficult to do them. Because I'll tell you, in my country, there are a lot of musically talented people. But they're forced to quit it. Because most of them work here, they just...I'll tell you, they have families to help, [and] the salary is low. I myself am working here, I'm working, I'm making money here, I'm making small money here. But [...] the place I make more money is outside Brazil. [...] But that's the only problem in Brazil. But in general Brazil is huge, Brazil is huge. [...] For people to know us here, we got to make a good hit. Because once you make a hit here, you're making a hit in the whole country.

### **Concluding remarks**

In the introduction to *Sonic signatures: Music, migration and the city at night*, Derek Pardue highlights migrants' growing relevance as 'fundamental player[s] in the sonic constitution of the city', and how their sonic agencies and creations bear witness to the 'complex process of creating a presence in the city' (Pardue 2023: 2). As advanced by Chalcraft and Hikiji (2018) regarding

African migrant musicians in São Paulo, Haitian artists' efforts of music production also assume great relevance as a 'way of producing localities' (2018: 473), of carving out spaces in which they can live with their bodies (McAlister 2011). Yet, despite its importance for 'community building events' and 'rituals of return' (Averill 1994: 262) of the Haitian diaspora in Brazil, such concealed spaces of music production remain invisible to Brazilian society, a situation which prompts one to examine how context can condition culture's expediency in particularly negative ways (Yúdice 2003). Frequently, such a context also negatively conditions Haitian artists' capacity to make a living out of music due to long their work routines, paltry financial means, and little connection with more affluent segments of the local professional music scenes.

BigUp provides a striking insight into how difficult it can be for a group made up of Haitian migrants to maintain continuity in Brazil, even when working and living in Brazil's richest and most culturally diverse city. In that sense, my experience performing with BigUp nuances Pachi's positive view of how a Haitian presence in the city adds to its multicultural mosaic, as such a presence is rarely acknowledged or afforded relevant opportunities to reveal itself. Juggling their musical labour in between draining work routines and across large distances, BigUp's musicians made gigantic efforts to keep the project alive during the particularly challenging context of a growing exodus of Haitians from Brazil and the Covid-19 pandemic. While participating in that last stint, I was able to witness Princeneer and others' intense dedication to the group, a lot of which had to do with supplying the Haitian community with entertainment opportunities 'from their own culture', as he said. In that quest, my presence as a (white) Brazilian and the meaningful, hybridizing musical proposition of konpanejo bore evidence of BigUp's desire to captivate Brazilian audiences based on views of musical and cultural proximity, a shared passion for dance, and attempts at musical hybridization.

While the same webs of precarity and ordinary temporariness are present, significant differences also emerge concerning the results and relevance of the music production work carried out in Haitian home studios in Brazil. If not for all, at least for some beatmakers/producers such as Dongad and BaadBadu, migrating to Brazil has offered the possibility of making a living out of their artistic endeavours. Their success, however, is intimately connected to their professional insertion into the transnational networks of the Haitian diaspora (especially in North America) or connection to major Haitian artists, which allows them to earn in foreign currency, a very favourable circumstance given the *Real's* marked devaluation over the last decade. The growing exodus of Haitians from Brazil has also worked to beatmakers/producers' advantage, as many of their customers previously based in Brazil are now able to pay them better rates in dollars. Even such well-connected music producers, however, operate 'below the radar' and from positions of political and economic precarity (Meintjes 2017: 207–8), from the hidden and confined spaces of small home (or bedroom) studios, and are mostly unsuccessful in breaking out into the wider Brazilian public, remaining unknown in their local contexts except for their Haitian customer base.

'(Ethno)musicological scholarship tends to tacitly assume that the music we analyse is intentional and complete', writes Eliot Bates in *Digital tradition: Arrangement and labor in Istanbul's recording studio culture* (2016: 280). A 'messier analytical framework', on the other hand, can 'provide a more realistic assessment of the challenges and limitations that artists face during cultural production' (2016: 280). Though perhaps intentional, the examples of musical hybridity represented by konpanejo and afro/funk carioca/dembow provide glimpses into the hybridizing cosmopolitanism of the relatively powerlessness (Stokes 2004: 61) pursued in Haitian migrants' efforts in producing culture in Brazil. Such work in progress, which may never

coalesce into an actual new musical ‘fashion’, happens in the secluded and hidden spaces of Haitian music production, whereby musicians, artists, and producers actively engage local and national culture, seeking to open routes in attempts to carve out space for themselves as producers of culture while also maintaining and mobilizing their Haitian, Caribbean, and Afro-diasporic roots and cultural capital. In wielding culture as a resource, Haitian migrants remain underrecognized contributors within Brazil’s division of cultural labour (Yúdice 2003: 8), seeking openness from a society whose ears, if not eyes, remain closed to them.

## CHAPTER 3: SONGWRITING

*Visiting New Love Monex, Areal da Baronesa, Porto Alegre – 14 April 2021*

*My first encounter with a research interlocutor during doctoral fieldwork happened at the height of the pandemic in Brazil, when deaths were at a peak. I delayed it as much as I could, but New Love Monex, with whom I occasionally worked, insisted. He said he wanted my help to change the strings of his guitar. I bought a set of strings and scheduled to visit his place later that week. He was then living in a tiny container flat in a low-cost 'condo'/car garage in the Areal da Baronesa neighbourhood, area which still today is home to the descendants of an urban maroon community. On a very hot afternoon, I picked up my best surgical mask and went to see him. I rang the intercom at the gate twice, but Monex didn't answer. When I called him on the phone, he said he'd be there in a minute, after he finished bathing. After he opened the gate, I asked him to put on his mask for our safety, and we walked to his flat. His diminutive accommodation was meticulously clean and tidy; close to a small window was an all-in-one speaker system; his pink, Stratocaster copy lay on his bed. Monex immediately began to talk about his personal life: how the pandemic had caused him to lose many gigs, how money was short, how he thought about moving to Goiânia (the 'epicentre' of the sertanejo universitário scene), how he dreamed of one day achieving international fame and fortune. He also talked about his love affairs, the many girlfriends he'd been involved with, while showing pictures of them on his cell phone. Stories of jealousy, betrayal, and deception, which his telling endowed with a larger-than-life aura. Then he decided to show me his latest composition, a reggaeton song about love entitled 'Te peço mil desculpas' (Sorry, a thousand times). He plugged his pen drive into the speaker and put the track on. The intro emulated a phone call in which Monex, speaking in French, pleaded with his girlfriend for a pardon. While the song loudly played on, Monex explained to me he'd written it after his latest girlfriend dumped him. It was always like that, he said, with the end of every love affair came a new song.*

### **Introduction**

Since the beginning of Haitian migration to Brazil, songs have been written by Haitian migrants in their new diasporic location. The creative effort of songwriting represented by my research interlocutors' individual oeuvres bears testimony to a broad and cosmopolitan variety of themes, music genres, and contexts of performance and circulation. Yet, as a researcher interested in the intersections of music and migration and an active participant within such a context, my attention was constantly drawn to the noteworthy percentage of songs which treated the themes of

migration and settling in a new environment. Such songs tell stories about the plights, challenges, and joys experienced by Haitian migrants, and articulate ideas and feelings regarding their positionalities as diasporic Haitians and Black migrants living in Brazil. In this chapter, I focus on songwriting – and the resulting songs – through case studies of three Haitian artists with whom I worked as an ethnographer and musical collaborator: Alix Georges, Very Larose, and David Lover. Aware of Laguerre’s comment on the importance of considering the ‘cultural content’ produced by migrants ‘as a response or adaptation to an external reality’, and ‘the linkages and structural constraints in which the ethnic culture develops’ (1984: 155), I aim to highlight the manifold powerful relations between songwriting and their lived experiences as Black migrants in Brazil and members of the transnational Haitian diaspora, thus unravelling how a significant number of their songs materializes in musical form emic reflections and stories that both elucidate and construct meaning around their experiences of migration.

With relevance to the main objectives of the present chapter, scholarship which addresses songs written in Haitian diasporic contexts has discussed, amongst other things, music’s role in articulating a dual sense of belonging between Haiti and host countries; forming an emic discourse on migration, ‘bringing’ a community into being (Averill 1994); sharing visions and aspirations of a better future for Haiti and Haitians (Cela et al 2022); countering negative stereotypes about Haitians (Mason 2012); and (re)constructing or performing Haitian identity (Averill 1994; Cela et al 2022; Mason 2012; McAlister 2002, 2011). While frequently drawing on the Haitian and Black Atlantic musical styles and cultures with which they were already familiar prior to their migration and composing in Kreyòl, Haitian migrant artists in Brazil have also responded and adapted to new, unfamiliar musical, linguistic, and cultural contexts,

gradually mastering ‘multiple musical codes to pitch musical products at diverse audiences, especially to other African diasporic communities’ (Averill 1994: 268).

To frame my research interlocutors’ songwriting as a form of storytelling, I draw on anthropologist Michael Jackson’s *The politics of storytelling: Variations on a theme by Hannah Arendt* (2013). Departing from Hannah Arendt’s view of storytelling as ‘a quintessentially intersubjective activity that brings the social into being’ (Jackson 2013: 16), Jackson’s take on storytelling brings together two main theses. The first concerns its dynamic character as a form of action with the power to transform private into public meanings (and vice-versa): ‘[w]hen one tells stories, therefore, one is never simply giving voice to what is on one’s own mind or in one’s own interests; one is realizing, or objectifying, one’s own experience in ways that others can relate to through experiences of their own’ (2013: 15). The author’s second thesis is existential, positing storytelling as an important way of recovering a sense of agency and freedom, of being/acting in the world. Hence, storytelling is also

a way of transforming our sense of who we are, recovering a sense of ourselves as actors and agents in the face of experiences that make us feel insignificant, unrecognized or powerless. This covers the connection between storytelling and freedom – the way we recapture, through telling stories, a sense of being acting subjects in a world that often reduces us to the status of mere objects, acted upon by others or moved by forces beyond our control. (2013: 17)

I contend that Jackson’s use of the terms storytelling and stories can be aptly substituted for songwriting and songs, a possibility Jackson seems to acknowledge by recognizing the widespread proximity between stories, music, and dance in many societies (2013: 35). Inspired by Jackson’s theorization of storytelling, I posit the diasporic Haitian songwriting addressed here as a musical practice springing from ‘a direct, lived relationship between personal and social bodies’ (2013: 46). I will attempt to demonstrate that my interlocutors’ songwriting frequently

manifests itself as a ‘coping strategy’ or a ‘supplement’ to action, making ‘words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one’s experience of the world’ (2013: 37; 46).

Besides indicating the appreciable proximity of music and dance with storytelling, Jackson’s approach to it also importantly suggests an intimate, almost ontological relationship between stories and journeys – hence, migration. Stories, he writes,

are not only like journeys because of the effects they have upon us; stories are so commonly and conspicuously *about* journeys – between such disparate realms as town/bush, heaven/earth, the land of the living/the land of the dead – that one may see in journeying one of the preconditions of the possibility of narrative itself. (2013: 48, emphasis in original)

I take Jackson’s cue about journeying as a precondition of (musical) narrative to further ground this chapter’s theoretical frame by venturing into a less abstract consideration of Haitian songwriting in Brazil as also representative of the ‘special mood of restlessness’ of the expressive cultures of the Black Atlantic world (Gilroy 1993: 111). This theoretical move is grounded in the fact that the sonic vehicles for Haitian migrant stories are almost without exceptions musical genres of the Black Atlantic and that both literal and metaphorical journeying are central to Paul Gilroy’s notion of the Black Atlantic and its musical manifestations. The ‘unusual perspective’ presented by songs of the Black Atlantic, he affirms, is a response to racial subordination and to ‘the successive displacements, migrations, and journeys (forced and otherwise) which have come to constitute these black cultures’ special conditions of existence’ (1993: 111). As a discourse, such songs are emblematic of a semantic and representational ‘journeying’ which ‘evoke[s] and affirm[s] a condition in which the negative meanings given to the enforced movement of blacks are somehow transposed’, reconstructing the curse of exile and homelessness ‘as the basis of a privileged standpoint from which certain useful and critical perceptions about the modern world become more likely’ (1993: 111).

Gilroy also developed his theoretical framework about Black Atlantic songs as a philosophical discourse and an ethics connected to Black diasporas in ‘It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at: The dialectics of diasporic identification’ (2022/1991). With the intent of rethinking this tradition of cultural expression ‘as a philosophical discourse which refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics’ (2022/1991: 718), Gilroy presents a reading of the internal moral dynamics of Black Atlantic songs which emphasizes ‘the connection between its normative character and utopian aspirations’ (2022/1991: 716). He respectively labels these as the *politics of fulfilment* and the *politics of transfiguration*, ‘sibling dimensions of black sensibility’ which bear significant tensions between them but are also closely entwined within vernacular cultures of the Black diaspora (2022/1991: 717). Simultaneously immanent to modernity and an oppositional discourse within it, the politics of fulfilment is primarily a discursive mode of communication that expresses ‘the notion that a future society will be able to realize the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished’ and that, through a demand for justice ‘bourgeois civil society lives up to the promises of its own rhetoric’ (2022/1991: 716; 717). It plays ‘occidental rationality at its own game’ and demands a hermeneutic which assimilates the semiotic, verbal, and textual (2022/1991: 717). On the other hand, the utopian part which is condensed in the notion of the politics of transfiguration appears to Gilroy as ‘more complex not least because it strives continually to move beyond the grasp of the merely linguistic, textual or discursive’ (2022/1991: 716). Demanding a hermeneutic focus on ‘the mimetic, dramatic and performative’, the politics of transfiguration emphasizes

the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance and between that group and its erstwhile oppressors. It points specifically to the formation of a community of needs

and solidarity which is magically made audible in the music itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural consumption and reproduction. (2022/1991: 716–7)

The examination of such songwriting traditions and their bearing as a philosophical discourse, as Gilroy suggests, is a complex endeavour which ‘requires us to link together analysis of the lyrical content and the forms of musical expression as well as the often-hidden social relations in which these deeply encoded oppositional practices are created and consumed’ (2022/1991: 716). I wish to claim that Jackson and Gilroy’s respective notions regarding storytelling and the moral/philosophical basis of Black Atlantic expressive cultures possess interesting linkages. Akin to how stories transform private into public meanings, afford a sense of being/acting in the world against oppressive realities, and change notions of self, Gilroy recognizes how the songs of the Black Atlantic constitute a form of discourse which advances their makers’ ‘struggles by communicating information, organizing and testing out, deploying or amplifying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency – individual and collective, defensive and transformational’ (2022/1991: 716).

Relating to key moments and circumstances of the lived experience of my collaborators, the stories told in the songs I present below are eminently autobiographical ones. Roger Rosenblatt’s (1980/1976) and Katarzyna Williams’ (2017) works, concerning respectively Black and migrant autobiography, have produced reflections which interact productively with the theories of Jackson and Gilroy. Autobiography, Williams and Rosenblatt respectively argue, constitutes ‘a highly ambiguous genre that drifts between truth and fiction in the recapitulation of lived experiences’ (Williams 2017: 180), a variety of writing in which authors are ‘not merely getting at the self but at reality as well, the one not existing outside its relation to the other’ (Rosenblatt 1980/1976: 176). Interestingly, such ideas resemble Jackson’s comments on how

‘[a]ll stories are, in a sense, untrue’ and storytelling is ‘a mode of purposeful action (praxis) that simultaneously discloses our subjective uniqueness and our intersubjective connectedness to others, as well as the environmental forces to which we are all subject’ (2013: 14; 13). Moreover, they also resonate with Gilroy’s comment on how the artistic expression of the descendants of slaves becomes a ‘means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation’ in which ‘[p]oiesis and poetics begin to coexist in novel forms – *autobiographical writing*, special and uniquely creative ways of manipulating spoken language and, above all, *music*’ (2022/1991: 719, my emphasis).

Examining a range of Afro-American autobiographies, Rosenblatt (1980/1976) observes that, despite significant contrasts, they also reveal two important constant elements, the ‘arguments’ of the genre: ‘the *expressed desire to live as one would choose*, as far as possible; and *the tacit or explicit criticism of external national conditions* that, also as far as possible, work to ensure that one’s freedom of choice is delimited or nonexistent’ (1980/1976: 170, my emphasis). Rosenblatt argues that such supposedly omnipresent arguments also represent ‘the two points where black autobiography and black fiction become inseparable and explain each other’ (1980/1976: 170), hence highlighting the particular place and relevance of utopia and social critique in Black autobiography and literature in general. Similarly, in her reflection on migrant autobiographies, Williams suggests that ‘autobiography and utopia do not necessarily present binary opposites but may supplement each other’, as ‘utopian thinking is closer to reality than is often expected’ (2017: 192; 193). According to the author, this is intimately connected to the fact that migrant autobiographical narratives are frequently ‘born out of particular circumstances of displacement and oriented towards the past as well as the future’ and therefore

constitute ‘not only explanatory, but also exploratory processes, not only mechanisms for recovering identity, but also for creating it’ (2017: 192; 193). Hence, Williams suggests that

[t]he concept of utopia, implying radical instability with its double meaning of ‘no place’ and ‘good place’, provides a potent framework for understanding this critical space that migrants inhabit, not in the sense of an ideal place, but of being between worlds, neither here nor there (Marin 1984/1973), ‘between the actual and the possible’ (Tally 2010, 135), in flux’. (2017: 178)

Transcending a mere literary definition of utopia, Williams foregrounds a holistic view of utopia as social dreaming connected to lived experience, arguing that its place and use in migrant autobiographies discloses how, in their search for better lives, migrants can be ‘instigators of social change’ through their ‘criticism of sociopolitical reality’ (2017: 180). The importance of utopian imagination and its relation to social critique as discussed above concerning Black and migrant autobiographies also presents important correspondences with Jackson’s and Gilroy’s ideas. The energy of storytelling, Jackson affirms, ‘arises from an existential imperative that compels human beings to transform the world as it is felt to bear upon them into a world in which they, both as individual subjects and as members of collectivities, feel they play a vital part’ (2013: 48). Likewise, utopia is central to Gilroy’s second sibling dimension of Black sensibility, the politics of transfiguration, in its ‘pursuit of the sublime’ as exemplified by ‘emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations and modes of association’ (2022/1991: 717).

When considering songwriting as storytelling in a Haitian context, it is important to note the importance of the time-honoured and potent tradition of storytelling in Haitian popular music as represented by Haitian *twoubadou*. The figure of the *twoubadou* singer/songwriter in Haiti is one filled with great semiotic potency, possessing a special place in the history of the country’s popular culture and music. Generally, the concept of *twoubadou* refers to those male singers and

accompanying ensembles that, using a mixture of Haitian mereng and Cuban son, perform ‘populist songs of lighthearted social critique as well as tongue-in-cheek treatments of male-female relations’ (Grenier and Averill 2001; Averill 1997). Throughout the twentieth century, however, iconic artists such as Kandjo de Pradines (1879–1947), Manno Charlemagne (1948–2017), and Coupé Cloué (1925–1998) have contributed to its gradually increasing importance in Haitian popular culture, as troubadours came to develop a reputation ‘as the consciences of the nation’ (Averill 1997: 15). Most significantly, this tradition has been described as one of ‘storytelling’ (Dirksen and Vèrilus 2021: 205), as these ‘singer-composers are required to comment perceptively and often harshly on important people, current community events or scandals, and struggles of local (e.g., land tenure) or national significance’ (Averill 1997: 15). Considering the role of the *troubadou* within the intersection of music and politics, Dirksen underlines that the famed early twentieth century singer Kandjo de Pradines represents ‘Haiti’s most iconic troubadour and the *angaje* [engaged] artist who created the twentieth-century model for musical engagement with politics’ (2020: 365), one that would be continuously remodelled by Haitian musicians in later periods.

While neither the style of their musical output or the artistic identities of the Haitian artists considered here perform explicit linkages with the *troubadou* style/figure, I suggest that their production of songs continues this important tradition of social commentary through music, an undertaking which is closely related to the notions of *mizik angaje* (engaged music) and *mizik sosyal* (social music). Despite the considerable nuances in their conceptualizations in different times and contexts, there is little dispute that such tendencies have ‘been core to Haitian musical thought and performance over centuries’ (Dirksen and Vèrilus 2021: 206). The idea of *mizik angaje* dates back to the 1960s and 70s during the Duvalier dictatorship, originating in the

context of left-wing activist and artistic groups in Haiti and the diaspora known by the name of *kilti libetè* (freedom culture). Such groups crafted ‘a rhetoric linking traditional peasant culture to antidictatorial, egalitarian, nonsexist, progressive cultural forms’ and wrote songs characterizing ‘Haiti as suffering from multiple oppressions: external (imperialist and neocolonialist), internal (totalitarian oppression and racial *klass* prejudice), and diasporic (minority marginalization in the United States, Canada, the Bahamas, etc.)’ (Averill 1997: 117; 153). While such groups rarely survived the end of the 1970s decade, they helped further define and advance an important tradition of political commentary and activism through music, one which became infused with ‘radical activist energy’ (Dirksen 2020: 369). Considering a younger generation of Haitian artists in the early twenty-first century, however, Dirksen has noted how ‘the musical scene in Haiti is undergoing a process of re-sounding *mizik angaje* and *mizik sosyal* as vital forms of expression’ (2020: 379). Current perceptions consider that:

*mizik angaje* is about pointing attacks toward specific individuals deemed to be in error or in abuse of authority. Another interpretation is that *mizik angaje* is explicitly used to seek political advantage. *Mizik sosyal*, in contrast, tends to express concern over anonymous, generalized actors, causes, events, or situations, while taking a collectivist approach to bettering society. Where the distinctions lie between the two artistic forms would seem to have little to do with any actual engagement or participation in civic and social life, however, and more to do with ideology and interpretations of what counts as being political. (2020: 376)

The emergence of (and preference for) the term *mizik sosyal*, according to her, may constitute a political statement in itself, as it points to an unwillingness to align and participate in formal politics, a distancing technique which ‘rebrands’ musical activism and allows ‘artists to express their critiques while preserving their commitment to (or the appearance of) nonpartisanship’ (2020: 376). However, the fact that such debates continue is itself an argument that counters ‘pervasive claims of youth apathy’, indicating that ‘[m]usical activism continues,

with modified performance values, as a dynamic articulation of citizenship from below' (2020: 379). As may be seen in the following case studies, such time-honoured Haitian traditions of social commentary and critique through music have found new expressions in the novel geographical and social context of Brazilian society, where the songwriting of Haitian migrants has frequently substantiated a form of taking on 'the world critically from the point of view of its emancipatory transformation' (2022/1991: 718), rearranging and reflecting their lived experiences to perform a critique of reality, recover a sense of agency over their lives, and articulate personal and collective notions of self.

### **Alix Georges**

*Haitian party at OCulto Bar, Porto Alegre – 14 January 2017*

*I arrived at the bar close to 10 PM. As I walked inwards through its corridors, I heard Kreyòl and noticed a sizeable number of Haitian migrants, almost all of them young and male. They were elegantly dressed, in a kind of hip-hop-fashion style, and were constantly taking selfies, especially in front of a wall adorned by a Haitian flag. A few Brazilians, mostly women, were present, conspicuous by either speaking Portuguese or by their whiteness. Sitting on a stool on the ground floor, I could see Alix through a window DJing on the floor above. He was playing konpa dirèk, the most famous of Haiti's popular music genres. Widescreen TVs all around the bar played Brazilian and international hip-hop video clips. I thought about the peculiar coincidence that my very first fieldwork experience with Haitian music and migrants in Brazil happened at a venue whose name – Oculito Bar – played on the words cult and occult, given the widespread stereotypical view of Haitians and Haitian Vodou. Suddenly, Alix left another Haitian migrant in charge of his laptop and came downstairs to socialize. When he passed by, he greeted me and I introduced myself, reminding him that I had sent him a message on Facebook. Suddenly, the music stopped; Alix apologized and hurried back up. My lonely (white) figure was certainly drawing the attention of many Haitians, and two of them came to talk to me. I explained my interest in Haitian music, mentioning konpa, and two of Haiti's most famous bands, Boukman Eksperyans and Tabou Combo. Such a small sample of my limited knowledge of Haitian music was enough to surprise them and I received positive feedback. Suddenly, I heard Alix's voice through the loudspeakers summoning everyone to the top floor: the live performances by Haitian artists would soon begin. As a few Haitians prepared to sing, he played Haitian konpa and encouraged Haitian men to invite*

*Brazilian women to dance. Acting as MC, Alix spoke about the need to integrate Haitians and Brazilians, the contributions made by Haitian workers to Brazilian society, and the richness of Haitian culture and music. Presentations by three Haitian migrants followed: Mechandou, Komandan Kobòy, and Atis Billy. Performing over reggae and hip-hop backing tracks played by Alix, they sang mostly in Kreyòl. In the middle of the first performance, a Haitian man took the Haitian flag to Mechandou, who draped it around his back. According to an explanation by Alix after the song ended, Mechandou sang about the plight of their migration to Brazil. After the performances, Alix once again sought to emphasize the importance of that night for Haitian migrants and himself in countering media narratives about Haitian migrants and Haiti. They all wanted to show they came to ‘contribute’ to Brazilian society, not only as a workforce, but also as bearers of a rich culture.*

Alix Georges’ significance within the Haitian diasporic musical community in Brazil (and the Haitian community living in Rio Grande do Sul) can hardly be exaggerated. Likewise, for my own research and coming into being as an ethnomusicologist, no other person has played a more significant part. Like *Papa Legba*, the trickster and messenger *lwa* (deity, spirit) of the crossroads who is responsible for mediating communications and opening the gate between the spiritual world of *Ginen* (Africa) and this world in the *Rada Vodou* rite (Richman 2005; McAlister 2002; Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 2006; Lipsitz 1994), he was responsible for opening the (then) invisible musical pathways (Finnegan 1989) to Haitian musicking in Brazil and introducing me to many of my future research interlocutors. For the past six years, he has become my main interlocutor and also a friend with whom I frequently talk about Haitian matters in encounters where music would often be present, and I became a regular musical collaborator on many of his songs, recording and performing with him on several occasions.

In what spiritually feels much more than coincidence, it was in the very domain of *Papa Legba* that we first met to talk about my interest in Haitian diasporic musicking. In January 2017, after the brief encounter at the Haitian party at OCulto Bar, we met to discuss my research

interest and possible collaborative strategies at the crossroads of Porto Alegre's central market, where on special dates, ceremonies celebrating the related Afro-Brazilian religious deity of *Elegbará/Elegbá/Bará* (also a keeper of gates) in Candomblé and Umbanda take place. At this powerful and symbolic crossroads, our paths crossed for the first time, and we set out the terms of a collaborative musical and research partnership whereby I would act as an accompanying musician to him, and he would introduce me to Haitian music, culture, and artists living nearby. Alix was then working daytime as a French teacher by day, and occasionally as a DJ/party promoter with 'Festa Latina', a Latin-themed party featuring mostly Caribbean and African music genres in different nightclubs in the city's bohemian Cidade Baixa district. Yet he felt a desire to make a more serious attempt at developing his career as a singer-songwriter and giving finished musical form to the dozens of songs he composed on an almost daily basis by producing and releasing a solo album (his first) in Brazil.

Alix's personal story with music in Haiti began within the religious space of the church, 'the source' of his music, as he explained: 'everything I learned about music I learned at the church because I was raised at the church' (interview with the author, 2017). Born in 1981 in Marchand Dessalines, a small town near Gonaïves in the Artibonite department of northern Haiti, he later moved as a child to Port-au-Prince, where he attended a Free Methodist Church. There he began to learn the keyboard and sing in the choir, playing, singing, and listening to Afro-American religious gospel music. His involvement with religious musicking in church settings developed significantly as he matured, participating in religious *Kwazad* (Cruzade)

festivals, directing choirs, and creating his own gospel group, LaDoMiSol, with whom he released a CD shortly before coming to Brazil.<sup>71</sup>

As with many young Haitians, Alix dreamed of travelling to study or live abroad. In 2006, he earned a scholarship to study Computer Engineering at Instituto Porto Alegre, a Methodist private university in the city of Porto Alegre, alongside eleven other young Haitians. When first telling me this story, Alix mentioned that he was also given the option of a scholarship to study medicine in Russia, which he quickly declined after learning about the country's severe winters and colder average annual temperatures. While Brazil's hotter climate, (and its perceived cultural proximity on account of its African heritage) had a significant bearing on his choice, he would soon discover a different, colder, and 'whiter' Brazil as he settled in the capital of Brazil's southernmost state. Making his way as a young Black and Haitian student living in Brazil almost half a decade before the onset of mass Haitian migration to Brazil, Alix soon began to feel the effects of diasporic displacement in a context in which his 'out-of-placeness' prompted curiosity, exoticizing reactions, racialized othering, and explicit acts of racism. The confrontation with Brazilians' ignorance about Haiti led him to realize his detachment from Afro-Haitian popular culture, religion, and music. As a devout Christian growing up in Haiti, he

didn't listen a lot to properly Haitian music. Because it was all 'the devil's work', hideous devil's work, disgusting. But when I came to Brazil, I started to...search myself, search...because many times I wanted to introduce something about Haitian culture and something American would show up, rather than something Haitian. Because the music I [listened to], the clothes [I wore, they were 'Americanized']. I started searching for my inner self: 'OK, who am I'? I said to myself: 'No, I have to know more about Haiti.' In Haiti, I'd never want to know about Vodou, when I was in the church, because it's the

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<sup>71</sup> Four of the CD's songs can be found in one of Alix's YouTube channels. Available at: <<https://youtube.com/@lyxolove09/videos>> (Accessed 31 October 2023)

worst thing you can think of. [...] Then I began to listen to people singing roots [music], and when I analysed the lyrics of the songs, what do they do? They worship the nation.

Alix's post-migration discovery and personal identification with Afro-Haitian culture emerged at a turning point in his life and resulted from a questioning of his own identity, and exemplify the emergence of a 'diasporic consciousness' as a Black, Haitian migrant in Brazil (Hall 2017). The first immediate result of such critical self-questioning and reflection was his estrangement and withdrawal from the church-based institutional dimension of Christianity. He began to see Christian churches in Haiti as responsible for 'destroying' Haitian culture and performing 'the cult of whiteness' (interview with the author, 2017), a phenomenon which coalesced into what he saw as central problem for Haitians: a psychological impetus for 'self-destruction'.

Haiti's poverty, he contends, is partly the result of Haitians' own self-destructive tendencies, a condition in which Western colonialism and imperialism are profoundly implicated. To Alix, this tendency toward self-destruction is connected to the impact of (mainly US-based) Protestant churches and missions in Haiti and their imposition of Eurocentric, Western, and white cultural patterns through education, which he saw as distancing Haitians from African-derived values, religions, and cultures, denounced as devilish and unholy. According to Alix, the church directly contributes to making the young Haitian individual feel 'ashamed of being Haitian, ashamed of his culture, of his skin, of his roots, his religions' (interview with the author, 2017). From then onwards, Alix developed a deep interest and admiration for *mizik rasin* (roots music), *mizik angaje*, and Afro-Haitian culture in general.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> The *mizik rasin* movement in Haitian popular music has its earliest roots in the late 1960s and was characterized by the incorporation of 'traditional and peasant musics into popular music' (Grenier and Averill 1991) as well as by

Alix's radical change in perspective regarding his own culture, society, and nation didn't remain limited to Haitian matters. Years later, his song 'Mental Decolonization' would consolidate in musical form his critical awakening regarding the legacies of colonialism and imperialism in Haiti but also expand a critique of colonialism as a Western enterprise which alienated and silenced Black and other non-white populations. Written in Portuguese, the reggae-inflected song references the Black cultures of Africa and religious schisms in Haiti, and recalls Bob Marley's famous quote in Redemption Song ('Emancipate yourself from mental slavery') through its explicit reference to mental colonization and chains respectively in the song's title and chorus:<sup>73</sup>

É igreja, é escola, é família	Church, school, family
Fizeram a minha educação	They've educated me
Me ensinaram o Bem me ensinaram o Mal	Taught me Good, taught me Bad
Me ensinaram tudo da visão ocidental	Taught it all from a Western perspective
Tudo que é da Europa é positividade	All that's European is good
Tudo da África é negatividade	All that's African is bad
Não me falaram que era berço da humanidade	They didn't say it [Africa] was the cradle of mankind
Que Haiti é mãe da liberdade	That Haiti is the mother of freedom
Me ensinaram a ter medo do vodou	They taught me to fear Vodou
Me ensinaram a amar o cristianismo	They taught me to love Christianity
O Vodou nunca colonizou	Vodou never colonized
O Cristianismo já escravizou	Christianism has enslaved

*Chorus*

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the incorporation of elements Vodou ritual, in an effort to highlight and visibilize 'the African ancestry of all Haitians' (Manuel and Largey 2016: 170).

<sup>73</sup> An unfinished version of song produced by Alix in his home studio can be listened to at: <<https://youtu.be/IQZvQd-LMBE>> (Accessed 31 October 2023)

Quebre essa corrente, abra a sua mente  
Descolonização mental

Break that chain, open your mind  
Mental decolonization

The lyrics of ‘Mental decolonization’ express Alix’s view of Haitians’ tendency towards self-destruction and highlights the historical impact Western colonialism has had in the Haitian educational system, frequently through churches, a fact also denounced by Haitian scholars such as DeGraff (2019). In this regard, the lyrics also bear a striking similarity to Fanon’s critique of colonialism, racism, and their psychological effects upon Black people in *Black skin, white masks* (2021/1952). As with Alix’s psychological ‘diagnosis’ of Haitian ‘self-destruction’, Fanon also argues that the cause of an inferiority complex amongst Blacks is ‘sociogenic’, only later subject to ‘internalization’ and ‘epidermalization’ (2021/1952: 8). By the same token, just as Alix denounces the Eurocentric and colonial legacy of Haitian education, Fanon describes the predicament of having to deal with ‘two systems of reference’:

From one day to the next, the Blacks have had to deal with two systems of reference. Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own. [...] And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended on us. The real world robbed us of our share. In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. (2021/1952: 72)

Self-destruction also has a specific connection with emigration from Haiti, with brain drain deeply affecting its development. According to Alix, one of the main effects of such a process is Haitian youth’s obsession with leaving Haiti and finding a way to obtain a visa to the USA (usually the preferred destination), Canada, or France. He would soon come to witness the formation of a new diasporic context for Haitians in Brazil, a phenomenon which would have considerable implications for Alix’s life, both musical and otherwise. As he put it, ‘no one was

prepared for it', not even himself: at that point in time, the idea of Haitians arriving in Porto Alegre seemed to him 'surreal'. Yet, the opportunity of meeting fellow countrymen had an immediate impact: 'Since I lived in isolation, I didn't see Haitians. After seven years abroad, away from everything, away from Haitian life, when you see Haitians somewhere, wow, it's a feeling, wow...You *want* to find them!'

After seeing a photo of Haitians arriving at the bus station on the cover of a local newspaper, Alix did all he could to get in touch with them.<sup>74</sup> Soon, he began to assist them in registering with the Federal Police, preparing documents, and translating their interactions with State institutions, an individual voluntary effort motivated by the desire to help his compatriots. Through his activist engagement, Alix soon became a point of reference not only for the growing local Haitian community but also for government departments such as the state's Public Defendant's Office, City Hall, and local media. As his influence in mediating between Haitian migrants and Brazilian authorities, media, and society grew, he confronted both government inaction and the media's stereotypical representation of Haitians, and began a 'fight' both to build a welcoming infrastructure for migrants and to 'preserve the image of Haitians' (interview with the author, 2022). He began to show up at the bus station whenever he knew another bus filled with Haitian migrants would arrive from northern Brazil, as well as confronting newspaper photographers and journalists to educate them about the impact of negative representations of Haitian and other Black migrants, such as the Senegalese, in the media:

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<sup>74</sup> Alix did not keep a copy of the edition nor remembers its exact date, but similar pieces containing photos of Haitian and African immigrants in Porto Alegre's bus station by the same newspaper can be found at: <<https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/geral/noticia/2015/05/onibus-com-senegaleses-e-haitianos-chegam-a-porto-alegre-4768548.html>> and <<https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/geral/noticia/2015/06/onibus-com-28-imigrantes-haitianos-chega-a-porto-alegre-4790770.html>> (Accessed 16 January 2024).

When Haitians arrived, the Brazilian press didn't like it. Especially the press in Rio Grande do Sul. They'd say, 'Five Haitians arrived in search of work'. And on the same page you read the headline 'Unemployment rate has risen'. What happened? 'Oh, Haitians are coming, and unemployment is rising'; Brazilians say 'So these guys are coming to steal our jobs'. My fight started right there. I sought to show that no, the jobs Haitians are getting are the ones Brazilians aren't interested in. (interview with the author, 2022)

As the following story told by Alix illustrates, his fight was one to 'sensitize' journalists on the negative repercussions of their portrayal of Haitian migrants:

Then I began to sensitize journalists. Once, I remember, there was a photographer who took a picture of a one-eyed African. [...] And I saw he made an effort to take that picture. I was sure it would show up on the cover of the newspaper, because that's what draws people's attention. I called him and said 'Man, let's talk. OK, that's your work. You think this picture might help your career, and give you visibility, but have you considered how harmful it can be to that person's life? [...] You can do good work without destroying people's lives'. That was always my posture: we can welcome Haitians without destroying them. I was lucky to find a journalist from *Zero Hora* [the main local newspaper] who was sensitized by my speech and invited me to an interview. [...] 'The path of refuge' [the name of the piece]. Then the press' stance began to change, to see that people come from a certain reality, from a country with many plights, and looking for work, just work, they don't come to fight, to steal someone's job. (interview with the author, 2022)

The difficulties faced by Haitian migrants arriving in an unfamiliar place where they cannot communicate became an intimate, daily reality for Alix. Haitian migrants and Brazilians working within government departments and NGOs would often call him at every possible time of day with requests for help. Such situations would have a profound emotional impact on Alix:

A Haitian calls you at 2AM saying his wife is giving birth. I have to go there, pick them up, take them to the hospital, and from the hospital take them home. A Haitian is almost dying at the hospital, in a coma. That load, that emotional energy. 'Ah, someone stabbed a guy in the city centre', me and Mor have to go there to see if he's Haitian or Senegalese. 'Ah, they've found a body at the morgue', they want us to see if it's Senegalese or Haitian.<sup>75</sup> (interview with the author, 2022)

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<sup>75</sup> Mor is the first name of the then president of the Senegalese Association of Rio Grande do Sul.

Within such a process, songwriting became his ‘therapy’, as he once put it to me. When discussing his activism in helping Haitians, he referred to a specific story which left an indelible mark and was almost immediately transformed into song:

A Haitian woman arrived, she was supposed to go to Bento Gonçalves and didn’t speak Portuguese. She took a cab at the airport and said she needed to go to Bento. The cab driver took her to Bento Gonçalves Avenue. ‘No, it’s not here’, she said. She tried to call her contacts but didn’t manage to reach them. The driver took her belongings, leaving her only with her passport. Where did she end up? At *Voluntários da Pátria* Avenue, the driver left her at a homeless shelter. She spent three days at the shelter, crying, with no shower, in panic, then someone saw it and said, ‘I’m calling Alix’. When I got there, she said ‘For God’s sake, please get me out of here!’ I got her in touch with a Brazilian acquaintance who gave her shelter and found her a job. [...] That’s when I wrote [singing] ‘Never stop fighting, that’s how life is’. Because when I picked her up I took her to eat, calmed her down, then the song came to me [singing] ‘That’s how life is, you must go ‘til the end, never stop fighting, your victory is gonna come. Trust God, trust yourself, your strength, be humble. Put your chin up and let’s fight, look forward...’

‘Lutar sem parar’ (Never stop fighting) is a reggae song, with lyrics in Portuguese (sung by Alix) and Kreyòl (sung by Casimir Jean, another Haitian artist who lived in Porto Alegre at the time). Through it, Alix transformed an intimate, private story of suffering into a public, intercultural, and bilingual message of resilience and hope in the face of life’s adversities. This poignant moment exemplifies how songwriting, as a form of storytelling, acts as a ‘coping strategy’ that makes words stand for the world and, in their manipulation, re-signifies personal experiences, transforming them into public meanings that others can relate to (Jackson 2013).

### *Chorus*

Lutar sem parar, não desista nunca  
A vida é assim, trabalhar até o fim

Never stop fighting, never give up  
That’s life, work until the end

Travay san rete, pa janm dekouraje  
La vi a se sa li ye, fòw travay pouw ka  
rive

Never stop working, never give up  
That’s life, you must work to succeed

(Alix)

A vida é assim, tem que ir até o fim  
Não para de lutar, tua vitória vai  
chegar  
Apesar da dor, do sofrimento  
Da dificuldade, yeah,  
Olha pra cima, confia em Deus, confia em  
ti  
Na tua força, com humildade  
Levanta a cabeça e vamos pra luta  
Olha pra frente, não olha pra trás  
Disciplina, foco, fé e dedicação  
É o caminho do sucesso e  
realização

That's life, one must go till the end  
Don't stop fighting, your victory will  
come  
Despite the pain, the suffering  
And the hardship, yeah,  
Look up, trust God, trust  
yourself  
Your strength, with humbleness  
Put your chin up and let's fight  
Look ahead, don't look behind  
Discipline, focus, faith, and dedication  
That's the path of success and  
accomplishment

(Casimir)

Lavi a di se vre frèm  
Fòw pa dekouraje  
Menm lèw pa ka manje  
Pa janm dezespere.  
Jou paw la gen pou rive, wi li gen poul  
rive  
Travay se sal ye  
Pa genyen so metye  
Menm siw mal abiye  
Rèv ou vle reyalize  
Pa okipe moun kap pale  
Yo mèt di tout sa yo vle

Life is hard brother  
You cannot give up  
Even When there's nothing to eat  
Don't ever despair  
Your day is gonna come, yes it will  
come  
Work is work  
There's no such thing as degrading work  
Even if you aren't properly dressed  
The dreams you want to fulfil  
Nevermind what people say  
They can say whatever they want

The sudden substantial arrival of Haitians in the country had a two-fold effect on Alix. On the one hand, he was extremely concerned with Brazilian society's view and reception of Haitians, which prompted him to defend their rights and aid their adaptation to life in Brazil. On the other, Alix became even more worried about the situation and future of his home country,

which he knew from his own experience faced continuous brain (and muscle) drain since at least the late 1950s. He was also especially concerned with the fate of Haitian youth in Haiti and in the diaspora, and the wasting of Haitian talent, as a witness to the interconnected processes of Haitian underemployment in Brazil and the lack of appreciation shown by Brazilians for the complexity of Haitian individualities and the extent of their potential.

Perhaps Alix's most significant and telling song connected to the experience of migration is 'Ayisyen kite lakay (Fuga de cérebro)' (Haitians leave their homes [Brain drain]). During the height of the pandemic, in 2021, Alix recorded a special video for the Haitian Flag Day in Porto Alegre alongside other Haitian artists living in Porto Alegre. A telling moment evinced the profound emotional significance the song had for Alix, and how its writing arose from the lived experiences and stories of Haitian migrants, 'transforming private into public meanings' (Jackson 2013: 34). With his eyes closed, Alix sang the song's coda (which references geographic locations in Haiti from where migrants left for Brazil). His singing suddenly faltered, and he emotionally collapsed, tears falling from his eyes. He apologized and said that he didn't consider the song his individual composition, but rather a collective work of Haitian migrants, as each new migrant whom he met told him their personal life story, difficulties, and dreams. He had simply put it all together in musical form. Condensing his experiences as a voluntary activist in the reception of Haitian migrants and a mediator between them and Brazilian society, the song narrates Haitians' dilemma arising from the combination of the lack of opportunities in Haiti and the many predicaments encountered abroad as Black labour migrants, as Alix explained:

I know Haitians are very proud, so there are some jobs they'd never take [in Haiti], such as cleaning. To me, it's inconceivable that Haitians would do that, yet they arrive here and do it. [...] They're the easiest jobs to get here, civil construction...but when they're in Haiti they don't want to do it, what do they do? Go to church, sit on a wall, and wait. It's a youth that's frozen, static. So that's why I wrote 'Brain Drain'. Many of them have

degrees, they've studied. Instead of staying in Haiti and creating something, what do they do? They come to Brazil or Chile, to do what? To clean...it's a waste of intelligence and an escape from Haiti. And it's a waste because when they get here, they're not valued. Look at how many musicians, Haitian musicians come here. They're good. Someone like Extension, for instance. If you get him playing Haitian music, you can take him to any international music festival to represent Haiti. [...] What happens to these young people when they get to Brazil? They're all lost and frustrated. (interview with the author, 2017)

Written in Kreyòl, it was initially recorded by Alix as a guitar ballad and released with a DIY-style video clip containing scenes of Alix greeting Haitian migrants living on a slum-like occupation in the outskirts of Porto Alegre.<sup>76</sup> Yet as we developed our musical partnership, Alix decided to record a new version of the song to include on his upcoming CD. Recorded in early 2017 at BSP studio, the definitive reggae version contains several guitar tracks recorded by me and features the singing of Dadysemalè, another Haitian singer-songwriter then living in Porto Alegre. Alix describes the song as a 'portrayal of the profile of Haitian migrants' in one of the song's many iterations on his YouTube channel, and it is, in many ways, a musical narration of contemporary Haitian migration to Brazil (and elsewhere) powered by the pulsating rhythmic and poetic force of reggae. Its lyrics condense powerful imagery and comments about the plights of Haitian migrants, the diversity of Haitian migrants' dreams, their characteristics and qualifications, and the various outcomes they experience living abroad. Most tellingly, the conclusion of every verse symbolically announces Haiti's death, a destiny-in-the-making which for Alix is inextricably tied to the brain drain of Haitian talent, which frequently gets 'wasted' in the diaspora. In this sense, its narrative describes not only a literal journey of migration from Haiti to Brazil but also a 'semantic and representational' one that transposes negative meanings

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<sup>76</sup> Available at:

<<https://youtube.com/watch?v=GfrNSqDvDKI&pp=ygUfYWxpeCBnZW9yZ2VzIGF5aXN5ZW4ga2l0ZSBsYWth eQ==>> (Accessed 31 October 2023)

(Gilroy 1993: 111) by recognizing the virtues of Haitian migrants and their potential contributions to Brazil.

Within the context of Rio Grande do Sul, the song also helped bring a community into being. Not only was the song was a constant feature of Alix’s performances for Haitian community events where I accompanied him as a guitarist but the video clips of both versions of the song also feature the participation of many Haitian migrants from Porto Alegre and its surroundings, in addition to portraying some of the key geographic areas of Haitian settlement and commercial activity, such as the city’s urban centre (where many work as informal street vendors) and an informal and precarious occupation in the outskirts of town, where many Haitian families first settled (see Figure 18).<sup>77</sup>

Ayisyen kite Lakay	Haitians leave home
Pou yal chache travay	To seek work
Yo ale au Chili	They go to Chile
Pou yal chache lavi	To search for life
Ayisyen kite lakay	Haitians leave home
Pou yal chache travay	To seek work
Yo ale au Brezil	They go to Brazil
Pou yal chache lavi	To search for life
Se gason ak fanm vanyan	They’re brave men and women
De 15 a 60 tan	Aged 15 to 60
Ki chaje konesans	Loaded with knowledge
Ki chaje ak talan	Loaded with talent
Genyen ki enjenyè	There are engineers
Gen nan yo ki doktè	Some among them are doctors

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<sup>77</sup> Available at:

<<https://youtube.com/watch?v=0wxoM1j7FTc&pp=ygUfYfWxpeCBnZW9yZ2VzIGF5aXN5ZW4ga2l0ZSBsYWtheQ%3D%3D>> (Accessed 31 October 2023)

Genyen ki enfimyè  
Genyen analfabèt

There are nurses  
There are illiterates

Oh, peyi a fin ale (sèvo peyi a fin ale)

Oh, the country is gone (the country's  
brain is gone)

Genyen ki vin etidye  
Epi yo tou rete  
Paske sa yap chache  
Se yon avni asire  
Gen nan yo, menm jan avèm  
Ta vle tounen pou chanje lakay  
Genyen pa ka tounen paske  
Lakay pa ofri anyen

Some come to study  
And end up staying  
Because what they seek  
Is an assured future  
Some, like me  
Would like to return to change the country  
Some can't return because  
The country offers them nothing

Oh, peyi a fin ale (sèvo peyi a fin ale)

Oh, the country is gone (the country's  
brain is gone)

Gen nan yo ki fristre  
Yo desepsyone  
Yo di yo pat konnen  
Se konsa Brezil te ye  
Gen nan yo ki santi  
Rèv yo reyalize  
Paske rèv yo se te  
Viv nan peyi etranje

Some are frustrated  
They're disappointed  
They say they didn't know  
Brazil was like this  
Some amongst them feel  
Their dreams have come true  
Because their dream was  
To live in a foreign country

Alix's work did not pass unnoticed by local government authorities, and in 2014 he was invited to continue and expand his work within the city's Department of Human Rights. Despite having a university-level education, however, he was not hired to a highly paid, commissioned post. Instead, he was given two options: to be formally hired as a watchman, or to receive a minimum-wage 'subsistence allowance'; Alix chose the latter, as he deemed the first represented exactly the kind of opportunities his employers thought suitable for Haitian migrants. Working

with the institutional support of the City Hall, Alix was able to implement important projects for the welcoming of migrants and refugees to the city, such as a Kreyòl language course for public health personnel.<sup>78</sup> Yet, according to him, he received little recognition for his work, the credit for which was usually taken by his superiors.



*Figure 18 – Alix Georges (far right) and three young Haitians in an urban occupation in the outskirts of Porto Alegre, a scene from ‘Ayisyen kite lakay’s first video clip (screenshot by the author)*

Still, his communication skills, ideas, and teamwork capacities led him to be recognized as an important local political actor, and due to his social projects for migrants, he was awarded the City of Porto Alegre medal in 2015. At about the same time, he claims to have been courted

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<sup>78</sup> Available at: <<https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/porto-alegre/noticia/2015/12/servidores-da-saude-aprendem-crioulo-para-atender-imigrantes-haitianos-4934264.html>> (Accessed 17 January 2024)

by members of political parties, who saw in him a potential candidate for the city council due to his connections with the migrant and refugee cause for full human rights. He politely refused, as he confessed to having no political ambitions in those days. The next four years were marked by his gradual distancing from activism and politics, a result of a growing disillusionment with the obstacles facing activists, a lack of professional recognition, and a high level of stress. According to him, much of this had to do with racial prejudice and the fact that he was a Black Haitian migrant: 'In Brazil, you may be perfectly qualified for something. But if you're getting good money for it, and you're Haitian, you won't get it. They'd rather give it to a Brazilian, who does ten percent of what you can do. Like trying to hire me as a watchman. [But] I'm proud, I value myself'. His decision changed, however, when on 25 May 2020, Afro-American George Floyd (who worked as a watchman before losing his job during the Covid-19 pandemic) was murdered by white police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, USA: 'From that moment on, I said: I must run for office. Enough, I won't sit still and not want to do anything. I'm running. I said: fuck it. I must fight, this is my fight, I'm an activist'.

Alix launched his candidacy for the city council through the Solidariedade (Solidarity) party, which defines itself as centre-left, and decided to focus his campaign on promoting his image not only as a human rights defendant and migrant activist but also as someone concerned with the educational and professional advancement of Black youth in general (see Figure 19). Regarding his position as a representative and member of the local Haitian community, his intent in running for office was also to send out a message of awareness to Brazilian society:

My message was 'We're here'. Whether you see us or not, we've dug some space here. So, if you wish to have an equitable society you must see every citizen in it, no matter where he comes from. [...] These people [migrants] are living here, so let's work so they can live with dignity. That was my message. If I lose, if I win, doesn't matter. My

mission was to say we're here and send this message to the people. (interview with the author, 2022)

Alix classed the response of the Haitian community in Porto Alegre as highly enthusiastic: from the moment they saw a Haitian running for office he had their full support. 'They all said: "Alix, we've got your back. No matter what comes, whatever happens, we'll fight for you"'. Haitian support went a long way for Alix, as his campaign was effectively self-funded, with little financial backing from his party. Haitians accounted for the majority of and the most fervent of Alix's supporters, contributing in different ways according to their capabilities: those who worked as Uber or delivery drivers put bumper stickers on their vehicles, others distributed leaflets or joined motorcades and marches waving banners and flags with Alix's picture. However, unlike Alix (who is a Brazilian citizen), most Haitians living in Brazil cannot vote as this political right is restricted to Brazilian nationals. Consequently, despite their desire to achieve political representation within the local sphere, their passionate support could not help Alix with what he needed most: votes.<sup>79</sup>

A few days after the election and one day before Brazil's Black Consciousness Day (20 November 2020), João Alberto Freitas, an Afro-Brazilian man, was beaten and asphyxiated by two watchmen in a Carrefour supermarket in Porto Alegre. Alix recalled having been a victim of racism in that same supermarket years before. He was called an 'animal' by a cashier who happened to be a Black woman. When he told me this story, he made a point of raising the thorny issue of prejudice against Haitian migrants by Afro-Brazilians: 'This needs to be said and written. The Brazilian Black doesn't like the Haitian Black. [...] These "Black activists" don't

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<sup>79</sup> Alix received 238 votes and qualified for a substitute position within the city council, but never took office. Available at: <<https://resultados.tre-rs.jus.br/eleicoes/2020/426/RS88013.html>> (Accessed 20 November 2023)

like the real Haitian. They want to use Haiti's image, Haiti's history, but if you're Haitian and you're on the rise to shine, they say "don't forget, he's Haitian"! That's what debilitates fighting racism in Brazil'. Alix didn't respond to that particular racist offence, a fact which he regrets.



*Figure 19 - Alix's city council campaign flyer. The subtitle reads 'Porto Alegre for all!' (source: Alix's Facebook profile)*

But if he could not act in politics against racism, he was still adamant about acting politically through songwriting as he had done many times before. Motivated by an intense feeling of indignation with the murder, on that same day Alix downloaded a vocal-free backing track of the song 'Mourir mille fois' (To die a thousand times), by diasporic Congolese hip-hop

artist Youssoupha, and, in a partly improvised fashion, recorded his own verses over it. The intensity of his feelings sparked a creative impulse that dispensed with a more formal structure or songwriting process: ‘sometimes there are things you don’t need to write [beforehand]’ (interview with the author, 2022). He titled his freestyle performance ‘Racism kills’, and immediately uploaded it to YouTube, using his main campaign ad as background. Alix’s song departed from his empathic suffering connected to Freitas’ murder to expose a critique of racism’s effects on the lives of Blacks in Brazil.<sup>80</sup> Despite clearly centring its message on the linkage between racism and the killing of Black people, its lyrics go further, denouncing other manifestations of racism as equally harmful and equivalent to different kinds of deaths: social death, professional death, spiritual death, and others.

*Chorus*

Existe morte cerebral, morte  
 corporal, morte natural,  
 morte social  
 Morte financeira, profissional,  
 (espiritual e sentimental) (2x)

There’s cerebral death, corporal  
 death, natural death,  
 social death  
 Financial death, professional death  
 (spiritual and sentimental) (2x)

Não tô sendo vitimista, meu irmão,  
 Só to sendo realista  
 Eu venho aqui para te lembrar, o  
 racismo mata (2x)

I’m not being victimist, brother,  
 I’m just being realist  
 I’m here to remind you, [that]  
 racism kills (2x)

Quantas famílias destruídas  
 Quantas famílias pretas  
 abandonadas.

How many families destroyed  
 How many Black families  
 abandoned

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<sup>80</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=1yCa5p8-zjk>> (Accessed 20 November 2023)

Quantas crianças pretas  
abandonadas foram obrigadas  
A abandonar seus sonhos de  
crianças por serem pretas  
Matar a autoestima da criança é  
matar a vida, destruir a vida  
Adolescente afrodescendente ser  
tratado como diferente  
No seu próprio país não pode ir  
tomar sorvete para ser feliz  
Matar a adolescência é a  
morte social

How many Black children,  
abandoned, were forced  
To abandon their childhood  
dreams because they're Black  
To kill a child's self-esteem is to  
kill life, destroy life  
Afro-descendant adolescent being  
treated differently  
In their own country can't go out  
for an ice cream and be happy  
To kill adolescence is  
social death

Alix's view on the many dimensions and manifestations of death caused by racism powerfully recalls the social death inherent to slavery as discussed by Orlando Patterson, the stripping of all legal rights and aspects of personhood which were taken to extreme levels in Caribbean colonies (cited in Becket 2020: 45). The song also articulates private meanings experienced by Alix as a Black migrant man with a university degree working in different settings in Brazil. 'In most places I worked, not to say all, I was the only Black person. [Pause] Always'. A ruling hypocrisy reigns in Brazil regarding racism, Alix contends, which causes Brazilian society to fail to see that it is a deeper problem than it imagines:

It's something that was planned and built like one builds a house, it has a *social engineering*. It's right there, at the social engineering of Brazilian society, that the place of the Black is conceived; you have to be that. And if you're a Black person who doesn't want to be where they put you as a Black subject you will be hated and persecuted, you'll have few friends'. (my emphasis)

The following verses of 'Racism kills' expand on Alix's thoughts about the racialized social engineering of Brazilian society, and tellingly expose the pain Alix himself suffered in going through such experiences, evidencing once again how songwriting emerged as storytelling and as a coping strategy:

Pra construir uma carreira em  
qualquer área  
A cor da pele é uma barreira  
Conhecimento não tem cor,  
O professor te dá nota pela  
sua cor  
A meritocracia tem a sua cor  
O trabalho de contrata pela tua cor  
Pois a contratação tem a sua cor  
No mercado do trabalho  
O estudante preto não consegue  
estágio  
Mais de 300 currículos enviados,  
nunca é chamado  
Quando é chamado é o mais  
cobrado, o mais criticado  
Se reclamar, vai ser boicotado,  
perseguido  
E depois vai ser demitido, sem  
nenhum motivo  
Mais um preto fracassado  
A promoção tem a sua cor  
A demissão tem a sua cor  
Só quem passa por  
isso sabe essa dor

To build a career in  
any field  
Skin colour is a barrier  
Knowledge has no colour  
[Yet] the teacher grades you for  
your colour  
Meritocracy has its colour  
Work hires you because of colour  
For hiring has its colour  
In the job market  
The Black student cannot find an  
internship  
More than 300 CVs sent, but he's  
never called  
When he's hired, he's the one who  
gets more complaints and critics  
If he protests, he'll be boycotted,  
persecuted,  
And then later fired without  
any reason  
Another Black failure  
Promotion has its colour  
Dismissal has its colour  
Only those who have been through  
this know this pain

The message contained in the lyrics of 'Racism skills' also bears significant similarity to potent remarks made by Fanon in his famous chapter 'The fact of Blackness' (2021/1952) regarding how the white gaze, obsessed with skin colour, 'overdetermines' Black fates and possibilities 'from the outside': 'I am a slave not to the "idea" others have of me, but to my appearance' (2021/1952: 76). The differential distribution of critique, complaint, boycott, and persecution upon Blacks in work environments experienced by Alix and denounced in his song

also echoes Fanon's remarks on how Blackness affects professional reputations: 'I knew for instance that if the physician made one false move, it was over for him and for all those who came after him. [...] The black physician will never know how close he is to being discredited' (2021/1952: 77).

Alix ends the song with an uttered political message directed at listeners. Questioning how many times 'you killed someone with a mere look, a decision', he affirms once again the killing power of racism and concludes 'I'm not here to judge you, I'm here to raise your awareness. Difference makes us stronger; difference enriches us. Alix, another educating rap'. 'Racism kills' is part of an album which will consist entirely of hip-hop tracks sung in Portuguese entitled 'Rap for education', a project which Alix is keeping on the backburner.<sup>81</sup> Featuring other rap songs focused on issues such as the critique of male chauvinism, Haitian history, and the stereotyping of Haitian migrants, the unreleased 'Rap for education' epitomizes that which Alix considers his main artistic strength, a purpose which strongly resonates with the Haitian concept of *mizik sosyal* in expressing 'concern over anonymous, generalized actors, causes, events, or situations while taking a collectivist approach to bettering society' (Dirksen 2020: 376). As he once put it: 'I think music for raising awareness is my strongest artistic feature'.

Alix once had hopes that Brazil would be able to overcome racism, but after his political campaign, Bolsonaro's government, and the Covid-19 pandemic, such expectations gradually faded. This had its own musical repercussions, as Alix's continuous struggle to maintain an

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<sup>81</sup> One of the strongest features of the Brazilian hip-hop movement has been its close association with issues of social and racial awareness and a critique of dominant discourses, bourgeois society, and marginalization, elements which were frequently mobilized in connection with social and educational projects and goals (see Andrade 1999).

artistic career had led to constant disappointment and the feeling of wasted effort. His difficulty in being recognized as an artist was also related to the social engineering of racism in Brazil, and how it conditions a particular view of Black people as being solely responsible for combatting racism. It was related to how his legacy of migrant activism in Rio Grande do Sul overshadowed his artistic career and other facets of his personality. According to him, during the campaign, he asked a reporter whom he knew from the main local newspaper if they could write a piece on him, but never heard back. Yet when Moïse Kagambe was brutally murdered in Rio de Janeiro, that same reporter contacted him asking for a statement on racism and xenophobia in Brazil. As Alix stated, ‘you’re connected to your disgrace. Someone killed a Haitian migrant, let’s call Alix to help us. But I also need help. [...] If you search for news pieces about me on the web, only a few of them talk about my success. Or do anything that really helps me achieve something. [...] [If] you’re Haitian, you can only talk about disgrace or the earthquake’.

In our most recent conversations, Alix reminisced about his career and mused on the fates of Haitian artists living in (and leaving) Brazil during the pandemic. ‘I never earned a living just from music. That was my dream’. ‘Brazil lost many Haitian talents’, he added. Alix didn’t stop writing songs, though; as he said more than once, he makes music because he enjoys it, it is a form of therapy. In fact, he continues to write, produce, and store dozens of songs on his laptop, which range from love-themed konpa songs in Kreyòl to engaged hip-hop tracks in Portuguese, saving them for future opportunities and as a legacy for his offspring. Even if during the last few years his priority has been working to secure a good standard of living for his wife and two daughters, he would never leave music behind for the mere pursuit of money, as the time may come when you ‘regret it and have neither the money nor the music’. To explain what that would mean in an extreme case, he went back to his musings on the many kinds of deaths articulated in

‘Racism kills’. In a comment which also alluded to how many of his Haitian artist friends were forced to abandon their musical dreams, in Brazil and elsewhere, he said:

There are many kinds of deaths, as I say. Cerebral death, bodily death, spiritual death, sentimental, intellectual, professional, cultural...when someone destroys the music that lives inside, that’s a kind of death too, it’s like a sacrifice, right? When you stop doing music to search for work elsewhere, the artist inside is dying; that’s death.

## Very Larose

*Busking with Very at the Beira-Mar Shopping promenade, Florianópolis – 18 July 2021*

*Sunday afternoon, I head off in the direction of Beira-Mar Shopping Mall to meet Very and do some busking. The promenade in front of the mall is a beautiful setting, even if a clearly gentrified one: a long promenade by the sea with a splendid view of the sunset on one side and middle- and upper-class residential buildings on the other. As I roamed in search of Very, a mainly white and middle-class public jogged, rode bikes, and walked their pets; others sold crafts, homemade products, and cold drinks. I finally found Very at a gazebo, and we set up his equipment: a small amplifier with a USB connection, a mic and its stand. The amp’s guitar input was malfunctioning, so we decided to play acoustic while he used the amp for his voice mic. Very said it wasn’t a good day for busking, too windy and cold. Still, we jumped at it with Bob Marley’s ‘Stir It Up’. As we slowly synced up our groove and mood, people began to stop to see us, or just leave a few coins and bills in our instrument cases as they passed by. I admired Very’s resourcefulness in communicating with the mobile public, giving thanks, asking for contributions, and introducing himself. We played many Marley songs, during which I frequently mentally registered Very’s appealing Caribbean-English accent, and the good vibes he was able to summon with his performance. We played songs from Raul Seixas, Natiruts, Leonard Cohen, Pink Floyd, Alpha Blondie, and others. Two young men on bikes carrying a Bluetooth speaker stopped by to listen to us, and once we finished a song began to talk to Very. They complimented our ‘sound’, said they ‘dug the vibe’, and sent money to Very via bank transfer. One of them asked to play a song on Very’s guitar; Very accepted. In a break in between verses, Very began to freestyle over the chord progression, driving the youngsters crazy with excitement. Very said he was a beatmaker, and they exchanged social media contacts. Sometime after we began playing again, one of them pulled a joint from his pocket and they started smoking. Very felt uncomfortable since many children and families were passing by, and he feared being associated with drugs. He politely asked them to move somewhere else and we continued. It was a nice, music-making afternoon, despite the cold wind. We mustered forty reais, and I insisted Very take it all after his initial attempt at sharing it with me.*

As with many other Haitian artists in Brazil, I first became aware of Very Larose and his music after entering the HAB WhatsApp group in late 2017. From then onwards, I followed his work through social media, envisioning the possibility of someday meeting him in his city of residence, Florianópolis, the coastal, beach-filled capital of Santa Catarina state in southern Brazil. In early 2020, prior to the beginning of my doctoral fieldwork, however, Very contacted me while I was in Oxford, asking me to record guitar on one of his songs (a collaboration with Poony Btag, never released). In July 2021, after receiving my first shot of the Covid-19 vaccine, I commenced doctoral fieldwork spending a month in Florianópolis playing music, talking, and working with Very (and some of his customers and friends) at his home studio, 'Inna the place'.

Very Larose was born in 1990 in Duclos, a small town near Gonaïves. He was initially raised by one of his grandmothers and later moved to Port-au-Prince for a short period to live with his mom. Similarly to Alix, he was also 'raised at the church', a Baptist church, where from childhood he began to learn guitar, drums, and keyboard, and sing with the choir. As he grew up, he became a member of the church's band and served as a monitor at the church's Sunday school, where he taught music to younger children. Working as a tailor in Duclos in his mid-twenties, Very was having a hard time making ends meet. In 2015, Very's family decided it was time he joined his brother in the small countryside town of Pomerode, Santa Catarina, to seek a better life in Brazil. With the financial help of an uncle who lived in the USA, he arrived in Florianópolis in mid-2015 after a month-long journey through the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Peru, entering Brazil through the state of Acre and then travelling southwards by bus thousands of kilometres to Santa Catarina. Finding Pomerode too small and parochial, he decided to try his luck in Florianópolis. Known in the local tourist jargon as 'The Island of

Magic', Floripa (as it is also known) is a busy, coastal urban centre, highly coveted during summertime by both Brazilian and international tourists due to its beautiful beaches, natural environment, and landscapes, a setting which Very would begin to cherish dearly and that would serve as an omnipresent background to his video clips.

He soon found a job washing dishes at the restaurant of a guesthouse in the high-profile, resort beach of Jurerê Internacional, an opportunity he greatly appreciated since he needed to 'do anything to send some money home' (interview with the author, 2021). As he acquainted himself with the new setting, he noticed a significant number of people busking on the streets and beaches, along with performing in a variety of local bars and restaurants. Based on these observations, Very progressively built a notion that Brazil could offer him the conditions to pursue a musical career, to seek what he felt was his 'true path'. After three months of work, he saved enough money to buy himself a cheap acoustic guitar, with which he planned to start busking. Working in a place which hosted live music performances in the evening, Very also began to acquaint himself with a new, varied repertoire of popular songs by Brazilian artists and music groups unknown to him, relying heavily on the help of his Brazilian workmates to discover the names of songs and artists which gained his favour. In his own words, the contact with such contexts of professional music activity 'opened his eyes' to the possibility of being a professional musician, which as a church musician in Haiti he never felt was a possibility due to the prevailing prejudice against music as a professional activity:<sup>82</sup>

At the place I worked, bro [*mano*] [...] there was live music, get it? That shit opened my eyes to live music, [they] played Djavan. And I liked music since Haiti, but the church, you know, doesn't mix things. You know how it is, it doesn't mix [secular and religious music]. It must be [music] for the church. But bro, I always saw music as work, get it?

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<sup>82</sup> Regarding social prejudice against commercial and popular musicians in Haiti, see Averill (1997: 14).

Not like you should only sing to God, get it, it was always a type of work. But they don't see music as work bro, they don't see music, unfortunately, we must be aware of that: society doesn't see music as work, why bro? [...] At church, bro, unfortunately people think that someone who's not playing for God is playing for the Devil, goes to hell, they've got this idea bro. But when I got here bro, I saw live music at bars, my eyes opened, I dug deeper...Because I always had [the dream] since Haiti, of being a musician, being a church musician or playing guitar in any context, get it?<sup>83</sup>

Unyielding in his decision to hone his skills as a singer and guitarist, Very began to ask his workmates for recommendations of songs by Brazilian artists, which progressively coalesced into an eclectic repertoire ranging from songs by Bob Marley to Leonard Cohen, from Djavan to Pink Floyd, the chords and lyrics for which Very carefully kept in a plastic folder he used when performing. Washing dishes during the day and rehearsing after work, Very found real contentment in his routine: 'They'd hand me [songs] by Skank, Djavan, everything, then I studied some Bob Marley, and it was, like, work, go home [with] instrument, get it, instrument! Work, home, instrument, all afternoon. Then I learned a bit of Djavan, something else, mispronounced everything, but I was really happy, you know?'

If being in Brazil had opened Very's eyes to the possibility of pursuing his dream of being a professional musician, the cultural capital represented by his musical (and linguistic) skills also had a similar effect on his Brazilian workmates, boss, and audiences in general. As with most Haitian migrants in Brazil, he soon discovered the widespread, unidimensional and narrow view held by many Brazilians that Haitians are nothing but unqualified labourers (as he said, the feeling of being seen as 'nothing more than a Haitian washing dishes'). A few months

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<sup>83</sup> Very's recurrent use of the expression '*mano*' is an important indicator of Very's significant entrance and identification with the sociocultural realm of local Brazilian hip-hoppers, one very much defined by notions of Blackness. As Pardue (2004) has discussed, in the jargon and ideology of Brazilian hip-hoppers '*mano*' has come to represent an alternative to traditional notions of Blackness (2004: 257) and an important way to forge commonality and collectivity: '[t]he word *mano* (brother) is an ubiquitous term among hip-hoppers. It is the essence of hip-hop collectivity, a delicate and often misunderstood process of recuperating marginality into positivity' (2004: 258).

later, Very received an invitation which resulted in a turning point in his life: the guesthouse's owner personally asked Very to bring his guitar to a confraternization party for his employees. Following a request from his workmates, Very picked up his guitar and played a John Legend song and a Bob Marley song, both in English. The audience's reaction made him see an 'other side' to himself:

Bro, I sang [John Legend's 'All of Me'], and that shit was amazing for me, to be singing in front of everyone, *bah*, you get it? They dug it, everyone dug it. [...] Since they saw everyone had liked it, the boss had liked it, the other guy liked it, [me] singing in English, [his kitchen workmates], started singing 'He's from the kitchen! He's ours!' Bro, they hugged me...Right there I saw my potential because they had always seen me as, bro, people working in the kitchen, it's sad man, the way they look at you, they don't see [what] you [do] as work, they force you to do tasks...Besides, they treat you badly in front of you and behind your back too; the things you hear them say about you. [...] Then, when I played, I saw this other side of me, bro, it changed my potential, get it? Because singing in English, and playing guitar, I'm not just anyone, get it?

Very's performance had immediate practical effects on his working life too, prompting an invitation to feature regularly playing on Sunday nights at the restaurant. In describing that moment, it was clear how Very cherished the memories of that unprecedented moment of his life, when every Sunday he would sing covers of Brazilian and international popular music at a restaurant set in one of Florianópolis trendiest beach areas, with a view to the sea (see Figure 20). Suddenly, 'the Haitian' was not just a dishwasher, but an artist with whom customers would ask to take selfies. To be in such place of distinction gave further impetus to change how he was seen by workmates in more prestigious positions, leaving an enduring impression on people:

People would take pictures [of me], get it? Like, *burguesinha* [a young bourgeois woman], another girl that works in the guesthouse's administration comes to see you singing, damn, that made them see me in a very different way, you dig, because of my potential, get it, they still have that respect for me. One of these days I was in the city centre [busking] and a woman who's still working there saw me, hugged me, gave me money, and said, 'Very, we always talk about you, we talk a lot about you, you're a guy that, this, and that, etc. congratulations, keep it up'! You get it? They saw it.



*Figure 20 - Very Larose sits with his guitar on the dunes of Florianópolis. (source: Very's Facebook profile)*

Through his musical performance at the guesthouse's internal confraternization party, Very opened his own eyes to the possibility of pursuing his artistic dreams and his Brazilian acquaintances' eyes to the fact that he was much more than a dishwasher. After eighteen months working in the kitchen, Very left his job and decided to invest his time and money in music. Taking inspiration from another Haitian artist he had seen busking in downtown Florianópolis, he bought the necessary gear and started to busk daily, an activity which brought him new

acquaintances and invitations to play at small, low-profile venues in the city. At first, Very's approach as an artist was restricted to that of 'interpreting': he wanted to sing other people's songs. It was a former kitchen workmate, an amateur rapper from the local hip-hop scene, who opened his mind to writing his own songs and took Very to a local studio for the first time. From that moment onwards, Very began to write his own songs, occasionally producing them at local studios. Consequently, this would also prompt an interest in music production later developed through his studio. Despite occasionally taking up other jobs when money was short, music occupied an increasingly significant portion of his life, and Very spent most of his free time writing songs, learning about beatmaking, production, performing, and the music business. Around that time, he began to understand music as 'the door through which I can tell my story to the world, spread my vision to the world', an expressive vehicle through which he could 'speak about everything that comes to my mind' (interview with the author, 2021).

Many of Very's songs are of a decidedly autobiographical nature, featuring in their lyrics a complex entanglement of his life story, personal dreams, and views about the different topics which impacted him, both in explicit and indirect ways. In December 2020, Very released his first EP, 'Meu caminho' (My Path), a thoroughly DIY production for which he wrote the songs, produced the beats, and recorded himself, in addition to mixing and mastering the songs.<sup>84</sup> The eponymous title track is a trap song in which he narrates the story of his life and migration to Brazil, and distils a personal philosophy about music, life's challenges and ambushes, and the need to work hard in pursuit of one's dreams.

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<sup>84</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=V5Qli-2leDk>> (Accessed 9 November 2023)

1990, Deus me apresentou o mundo  
Minha mãe falou ‘Filho cuidado  
Não é tudo que olho vê que é *vrê*’  
Sempre carreguei porque eu gostei  
De toca uma viola lá na  
igreja  
Música é vida, muita coisa pra fala  
Frequentei escola, fui pra igreja  
Aquela época nunca tinha ideia de vim  
pro Brasil  
Mas quando tempo passa, idade aumenta  
Sonho não realiza, mano é foda

Trinta anos na casa da mãe,  
não queria ter  
Trinta anos na casa da mãe

Não queria ser, mas queria ter  
Você tem que ser, pra depois de ter (2x)

Passei Equador, passei pro Peru pra  
chegar Brasil  
Mas cada um do meu dia é um filme  
Dormi na rua, dormi no ‘busão’  
Vida difícil, mas isso me traga a vida que  
eu assumi  
A vida não é sentar atrás do Instagram,  
tira boomerang, boomerang  
A vida não é sentar atrás do Instagram,  
tira boomerang, boomerang  
Nunca tive medo de desafio, assim que  
aprendi a falar  
Procurei trampo, consegui fácil  
Mas não conseguiria trampa (2x)  
As vezes busco o caminho fácil, aí caí  
na armadilha  
Mano assim que eu fui parar aqui

1990, God introduced me to the world  
My mother said, ‘Son, beware,  
It’s not because you see it that it’s real’  
I’ve always taken that with me  
Cause I always liked to play guitar in the  
church  
Music is life, too many things to say  
Went to school, went to church  
At the time I never thought about coming  
to Brazil  
But time goes by, age goes up  
Dreams don’t come true, bro, it’s fucked  
up  
Thirty years old, living with my mom,  
didn’t wanna have [that]  
Thirty years old at my mom’s

Didn’t want to be, but wanted to own  
But you must be, so you can own (2x)

Crossed Ecuador, crossed Peru to  
get to Brazil  
But every day seemed like a movie  
I slept on the street, on the bus  
Tough life, but that’s the life  
I chose  
Life is not sitting behind Instagram and  
using Boomerang  
Life is not sitting behind a camera and  
using Boomerang  
Never feared challenges, ever since I  
learned to speak  
Looked for a job, found it easily  
But I just couldn’t work (2x)  
Sometimes I seek the easy way, but fall  
into a trap  
Bro, that’s how I ended up here

Não é todo apoio que  
ajuda minha vida  
Depender de mim  
Se eu quero material  
É só conquistar

Just because it's help doesn't mean it  
helps my life  
Relying on me  
If I want material [things]  
I just have to conquer

As in the song, in an interview Very confessed that he never liked depending on anyone. He sees success as an individual responsibility resulting from hard work and making the right choices, even though he frequently acknowledged how different people contributed to the pursuit of his dreams or how different contexts either hindered or helped his journey. Since 2018, as Very progressively strove to build and consolidate his artistic career locally in Florianópolis and virtually through social media and diasporic networks, he encountered various obstacles but also many possibilities he did not anticipate. As he said, Brazil changed his way of seeing things: ‘when I arrived in Brazil I [began to] see differently, my mind opened. I saw that travelling is really good, you’ve got to travel. When someone travels, the mind opens.’ Nonetheless, the changes that come with travelling/migrating to a new context, as Very reasoned, require ‘adaptation’. When describing this philosophy of ‘adaptation’, the significance of his experiences of othering was made clear by Very:

the sentence I always carry with me is ‘you got to adapt’, get it bro? When I got to Brazil I said ‘Man, I’m in Brazil, I got to speak Portuguese’. To talk to people. That’s the first thing, I got to speak it to get a job. People’s look towards me wasn’t nice because when they don’t understand you, they comment about you, and see you in a certain [negative] way, and you can’t talk back.

While his statement clearly exemplified his predicaments as a newly arrived Black migrant with no command of Portuguese, his mindset towards the reality he experienced remained a stubbornly positive one, one that evinces how the critical space inhabited by migrants is one of negotiations ‘between the actual and the possible’ (Tally as cited in Williams 2017:

178): 'I've got this vibe of getting along with things, getting along with people, being grateful, always be grateful with everything and live with happiness, got it?'. In trying to 'get along' with what he experienced in Brazil, music (and songwriting) began to offer him a coping and life-making strategy, the possibility of 'singing reality how he feels it' and denouncing and criticizing aspects of that which he condemns: 'I adapt myself to reality, to my experiences, that's my mindset, [since] we can't change the world, too [laughter]. [...] But *everyone sings reality how they feel it*, and [can] use that to their advantage, *to make life*' (my emphasis). I asked Very if he thought his songs presented his interpretation of 'reality', and he answered the following:

Yes, I have that, yeah, in many of the songs I write, it's the way I think, right? Music is like that, surely the guy sends what he's feeling outwards, that's why I don't judge anyone making music, the guy from the *favela*, who makes funk, I don't judge, get it? [...] I saw a girl singing in the street [and she said], 'Ah, we don't like funk' [...]. But I understand these people, who make funk, they grow up in a very different reality...it's a culture, a culture, it's a reality. *Favela* people, or people who grow up listening to funk, when they sing, dance funk, since childhood, their mother applauds and sees it as something good. I used to date a girl, she has a daughter, and she said 'my daughter is dancing funk! Did you see?' Such happiness, get it, with her daughter dancing funk. [...] The daughter will never see funk as a bad thing, she'll think of it as something joyful, dancing funk, an expression of liberty, being loose. Like the guy singing it too, get it? The person growing up in the *favela*, his father has grown up listening to funk and he will grow up listening to funk also, to him it's a reality. He'll grow with the thought of becoming a *funkeiro*. If he doesn't want to be a doctor, or being an engineer isn't their dream, if it's being a musician, bro, he'll be a *funkeiro*. Because that's how they grew up, that to him is reality.

In such telling remarks, Very sets forth a democratic and inclusive understanding of reality and culture which, like the use of the term 'reality' in Brazilian hip-hop parlance, 'indicates a complex set of conditions, including race, class, gender and geography' (Pardue 2004: 253). As Pardue has also remarked regarding hip-hop music and culture amongst Afro-Brazilian youth from shantytown suburbs in the last decades of the twentieth century, however,

Blackness and the *periferia* have acted as ‘influential forces and inspirational palettes, with which participants tell their “reality” stories and sound out their “reality”-scapes’ (2004: 278). Very chose to exemplify his conceptions about reality through the musical style of funk carioca, a genre intimately associated with notions of Blackness and the peripheral urban spaces of *favelas* in Brazil. Funk carioca is generally despised by the upper echelons of Brazilian society in the form of a musical prejudice which conflates race and class. Yet the acting principle of ‘singing reality’ remains remarkably similar to that performed by Brazilian hip-hoppers, as it foregrounds ‘music not simply as a conduit for expression but also as a mode of representation through which performers can potentially change their sense of self and suggest alternative models of social stratification and value’ (2004: 253).

Released in March 2021, Very’s song ‘Aqui’ (Here) also epitomizes an autobiographic story set to song. According to Very, it symbolizes a moment in which he was finding personal fulfilment honing his skills as an artist and producer in Brazil, advancing his own artistic career, making ends meet and also collaborating with other people (mostly other Haitian acquaintances) by producing their songs free of charge.<sup>85</sup> Interestingly, he ‘framed’ the song’s mood by including two WhatsApp audio messages: at both ends of the track, he includes parts of a conversation with one of his closest childhood friends from Duclos, audio messages extracted from WhatsApp which act as intro and outro for the song. The song starts with Very’s friend speaking over the smooth phrases of an electric guitar, to which later is added a layer of bird chirping sounds and sparse synthesizer lines, before the introduction of the beat and Very’s voice

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<sup>85</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=1EO-epxhnRU&pp=ygUQdmVyeSBsYXJvc2UgYXF1aQ%3D%3D>> (Accessed 9 November 2023)

with the main lyrics. Both Very and his friend are diasporic Haitians with experience of living in Brazil, and they keep in touch often to talk about their lives, dreams, and plans for the future, supporting each other and exchanging advice. His friend's message, focused on the struggle for personal fulfilment, making your own path, and 'keeping focus' on your dreams, exemplifies the meanings behind the Haitian motto of *chache lavi*. Before Very's friend's voice comes back in the end, Very includes a message with a similar motivational undertone from a former Brazilian workmate from his time working as a waiter in a restaurant named Varanda. After discovering Very was a musician, that workmate was one of the people responsible for negotiating a weekly performance for Very with the restaurant's owner, later becoming an active follower on social networks and a supporter of his musical dreams. The workmate's message is one of encouragement and praise which places success not in the future but in the present:

(Haitian friend)

An nou pa mele bagay yo men.  
 Nap toujou pale men, nap toujou  
 pale.  
 Fè wout pou ou menm.  
 Travay, fokis sou rèv ou menm.  
 Yow, pa gen manti nan sa, man.  
 Siw fokis sou rèv ou, ou paka  
 ere chimen. [twice]  
 Se yon bagay ki natirel.  
 Depiw kwè nan rèv ou paka  
 ere chimen.  
 Kwè nan rèv ou, nap pale.

Let's not mix things up.  
 We'll keep talking man, we'll keep  
 talking.  
 Make your own path.  
 Work, focus on your dreams.  
 Yow, there's no lie in that, man.  
 If you focus on your dream, you can't go  
 the wrong way [twice].  
 It's just natural.  
 If you believe in your dream, you cannot  
 go the wrong way.  
 Believe in your dream, we'll keep talking.

(Brazilian workmate)

E fico feliz aí, com seu desenvolvimento  
 aí na música aí, show de bola!  
 Compartilho seus vídeos, aí, que é da  
 hora.

And I'm happy to see your progress  
 in music, way to go!  
 I share your videos, they're the bomb.

Eu tenho aquele primeiro vídeo lá, você  
tocando lá, lá no Varanda, lá  
Então é da hora ver o progresso de  
parceiro assim.  
Sucesso mesmo, cê vai arrebenta filho, já  
tá arrebentando!

I have that first video of you  
playing at Varanda,  
So, it's great to see a partner's progress  
like this.  
Success, you'll rock man, you already  
rock!

As Very acknowledged, the support for his artistic work that he received from his former work colleague (and other followers and friends) generated an enjoyable feeling of accomplishment and happiness. The emotional impact of his former workmate's message had a direct consequence on writing the song, as he observed: 'I dug it and said, "I'm making a song about that", like "I'm happy", this is what I wanted for my life. I always wanted to be a musician, and obviously, I'm not a big shot, but I'm a musician and I play the guitar, and people see me like this and thank me, they feel good about the things I do, wow, that's great!' (interview with the author, 2023). Resonating the encouragement received from his friends and Black music's commitment to ideas about a better future (Gilroy 2022/1991: 716), Very's thoughts about the song demonstrate how it articulates a personal 'politics of fulfilment'. By 'here',

I really meant here on Earth, everything man wants man can achieve. [...] You got to help yourself to make whatever you want to happen, happen, to be happy. And, to know where you are on the way to get it. In that part I sing 'I believe I'll achieve everything I want here', I want to say that on Earth, everything I wish I'm already achieving, and the things I still wish for, I'm going to work to get them because everything is a matter of achieving. [...] And I've also written this song in the sense that the person is happy, joy, and everything that I don't get, I continue to pursue because life is a conquering from beginning to end. And if we're alive we'll keep fighting. (interview with the author, 2023).

In the song, Very affirms his destiny of achieving all his dreams in an earthly dimension through his own effort and struggle despite life's hardships, positioning himself as an artist and a

man with a mission who is also concerned with helping his brothers. He also importantly alludes to the lack of opportunities experienced by those who were ‘born with little’ and must create them themselves:

Cada dia um milhão pra matar,  
tem bala na frente eu puxo mando  
pá!  
Mais fácil mano, sim a vida não  
fica, mais forte se pá trate de ficar  
O que provoca inveja mano é seu  
brilho  
O que você tem ele não tem, *for  
real*  
Me posicionar no caminho da luz  
Brilhando o caminho pra quem tá  
chegando

*Chorus*

*I've got it on me* (4x)  
Mano eu tenho em mim (3x)  
Acredito que eu vou conseguir  
tudo que eu quero aqui (4x)

Aonde que eu passo carrego minha  
arte  
No dia escuro ou dia de luz  
Faço tudo pra apoiar meus irmãos  
Mano muito foco que eu tô na  
missão

Mas o que falta? Oportunidade  
Eu nasci com pouco, mas tem que  
criar  
Cavando buraco por onde não tem

Everyday a million to kill, bullets  
ahead, I draw and  
bang!  
Life doesn't get easier bro,  
perhaps you should get stronger  
What causes envy is your  
light  
What you've got, he doesn't, for  
real  
I position myself in light's path  
Shining the path to those  
coming along

*I've got it on me* (4x)  
Bro, *I've got it on me* (3x)  
I believe I'll achieve  
everything I want here (4x)

Wherever I go, I take my  
art  
On dark or bright days  
I do all I can to help my brothers  
Bro, focus, I'm on a  
mission

But what's lacking? Opportunity  
I was born with little, so I must  
create  
Digging holes where it's  
impossible

Criando caminho sem esperar  
ninguém

Creating a way without waiting for  
anyone

Very frequently described himself as someone disconnected from the world of politics, claiming to opt to stay away from newspapers and headlines mostly due to his disillusionment with corruption and political partisanship, and their close connection with conflicts, war, and hatred in a generalized way. Yet political events and processes happening in Haiti, Brazil, and elsewhere inevitably cut across his life, sometimes affecting him deeply, especially when they involve some form of violence or injustice to social groups with whom he identifies with. When he finds himself troubled by hatred, he claims that songwriting acts as an antidote to pain: ‘Sometimes when I feel a lot of hatred, I write songs. Like, I write the words [and later] feel that I’m free of that pain I was feeling’.

As with Alix Georges, the brutal murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the wave of protests against racialized police violence in the US and the world also had a profound emotional impact on Very. His thinking on the repercussions of the crime and its impact on him discloses a notion of contagion by hatred, which affected him, Black people, and anti-racist allies, albeit in different ways. Very read the situation as one in which white police violence against Blacks was a reprehensible act of racist hatred that also reproduced violence by resonating hatred in other bodies: ‘they managed to instil that hatred in us, and sometimes you feel hatred and it’s not that you want to do evil, but evil comes to your heart instantly. To remove that hatred, I use music, right?’ To get rid of such hatred, Very wrote ‘Ação’ (Action), a trap song whose lyrics shift from mourning the unnecessary spilling of innocent Black blood and condemning racial violence to themes of love, union, and the rejection of further violence as a response (see Figure 21). Very’s explanation about the message he wished to send with the song drew on negative images of

conflict as a form of destruction and on a critique of practices of depredation common in Haitian political protest: ‘I also wanted to talk about it in a positive way: “damn, that [violence in protests] isn’t solving anything. [...] More war doesn’t solve war. [...] That ends up being a form of destruction’. For Very, what is needed is the opposite of destruction, which he conceptualized in the notion of ‘action’ as something constructive. He offered a musical example: ‘Action is something that is very strong, like saying “I want to learn to play keyboard”. There’s only one way you’ll manage to do it, by getting hold of one and starting to practice. [...] That is action’.

The song’s video clip starts with scenes of the protests against Floyd’s killing in the USA and the sound of protesters’ voices chanting ‘I can’t breathe’ over the backing track. It mixes scenes of protests with original material shot on Florianópolis’ beaches and images of iconic Black musicians, political leaders, and intellectuals of past and present, such as Bob Marley, Tupac Shakur, Marielle Franco, Malcolm X, and Henri Christophe. Wearing the Haitian flag as a bandanna, Very appears with other participants holding signs with Portuguese and English renditions of common anti-racism slogans such as ‘Black Lives Matter’, ‘We are equal’, and ‘Justice for Floyd’. In the song, Very sings:

A cada momento que passa a terra  
que quer falar com nós  
E nós não quer ouvir  
Porque todo mundo tá correndo  
atrás  
O destino é morrer

As every moment goes by moment  
the Earth wants to speak to us  
But we won’t listen  
Because everyone is busy, running  
after [things]  
The destiny is dying

A cada gota de sangue preto  
que cai na terra

With every drop of Black blood  
which falls on the ground

Nós temos que nos unir, nós temos  
que reunir  
Compreender que juntos somos  
mais fortes  
George Floyd, brother, R.I.P

We must unite, we must  
gather  
Understand that together we're  
stronger  
George Floyd, brother, R.I.P.

A vida é missão, luta com  
ação  
Namorar não é prisão eu te amei  
de coração  
Nega, segue seu coração  
Esquece sua mente (3x)

Life is a mission, it's a fight with  
action  
Dating is no prison, I loved you  
with all my heart  
*Nega*, follow your heart<sup>86</sup>  
Forget your mind (3x)

Agora é hora de para e pensar  
como atacar  
Não sai batendo se alguém  
desrespeitar  
Aquela frase que todos [são]  
iguais  
Nosso ego quer tomar conta da  
nossa vida

Now's the time to stop and think  
how to react  
Don't act violently over  
disrespect  
That sentence 'We're all the  
same'  
Our ego wants to take control of  
our lives

Brother segue seu coração,  
esquece sua mente (3x)  
Eu vou seguir meu coração,  
esquecer minha mente

Brother follow your heart, forget  
your mind (3x)  
I'm following my heart, and  
forgetting my mind

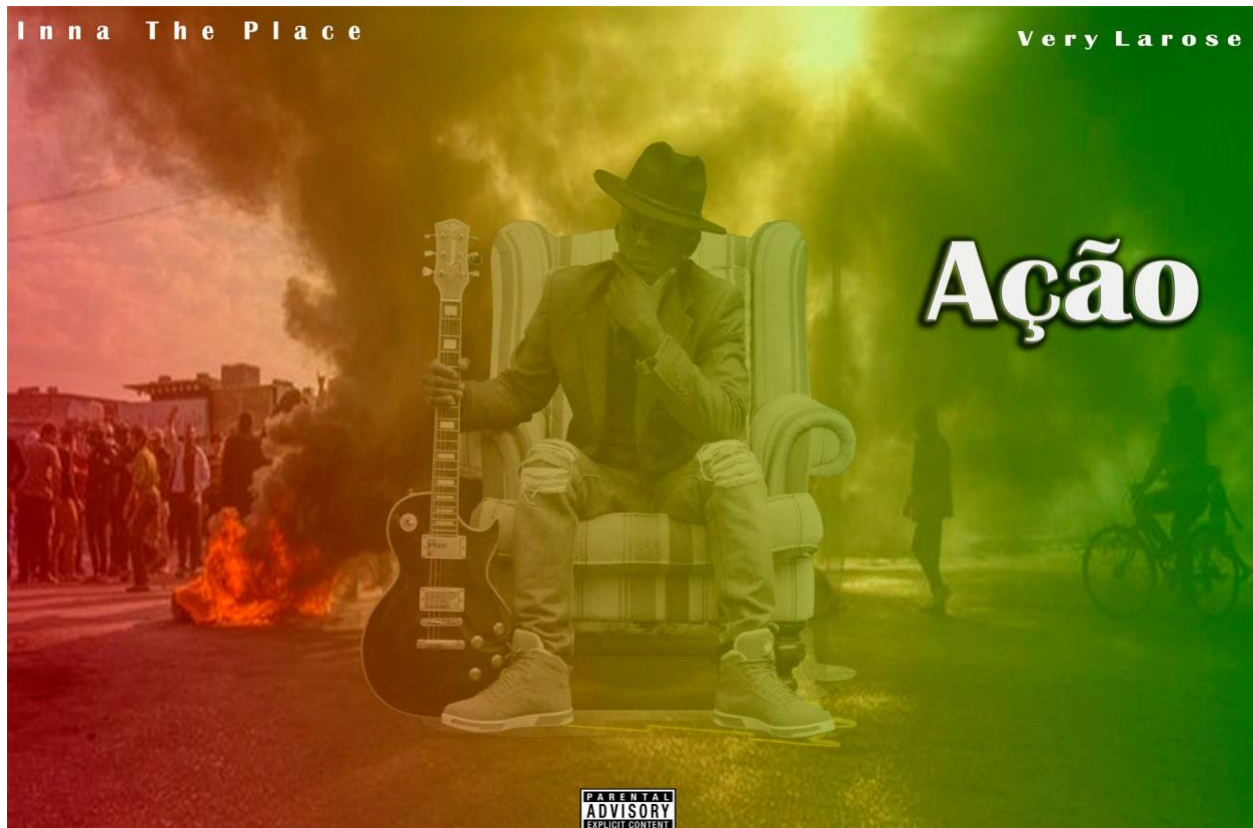
Como você se sente [em] tirar a  
vida da outra por uma moeda,  
[um] pai de filha  
Dá vontade de xingar,  
brigar, matar  
Não vai resolver nada  
Deixa tudo na mão de Deus, ele  
que é luz

How do you feel about taking  
someone else's life, for a dime, the  
father of a girl  
Makes you feel like swearing,  
fighting, killing  
That won't solve anything  
Leave it to God, for he  
is light

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<sup>86</sup> An informal rendering of the word *negra* (Black woman), which can have both affective and offensive tones, depending on the context, the former being the case here.

Further stressing a message of love and union as a form of overcoming the hatred entangled in racism and racial violence, Very chose to end the clip with a famous Nelson Mandela quote: ‘No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite’. Harkening back to the French revolutionary principles which not only influenced and reached their pinnacle during the Haitian Revolution, Very believes that the solution to racial violence lies in the basic credo of the equality of all human beings and fraternity, love, and union, as found in the Haitian national motto ‘*L’Union fait la force*’ and also articulated in Kreyòl through the popular saying ‘*Ansanm nou fò*’. Written in a moment of significantly charged racial tensions, ‘Ação’ epitomizes the utopian dimension of Black music condensed in Gilroy’s notion of the politics of transfiguration, evincing the emergence of desires for new modes of association and social relations ‘within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors’, pointing to ‘a community of needs and solidarity which is magically made audible in the music itself’ (2022/1991: 717, emphasis on the original). It also evinces how songwriting, as storytelling, represents a coping strategy and a ‘complement to action’, an attempt to change the experience of the world by manipulating the words that stand for it (Jackson 2013: 37; 46).



*Figure 21 - Holding his Strinberg Les Paul, Very sits on an armchair with a reflexive look. In the background, a photo of a street protest against the killing of George Floyd in the US (source: Very's Facebook profile)*

Such a search for an interracial community of solidarity also made itself palpable in songwriting and music making during my time with Very. Following ideas mentioned by Very in our first meeting, we set ourselves the tasks of writing a song together in Kreyòl and busking on the streets of Florianópolis (see the opening vignette). The crafting of our song sprang as if out of nowhere one afternoon at Inna the Place when Very began assembling a beat in FL Studio. Working with samples from an original drum kit, he said he wanted to do something 'old school' akin to the 1980s/90s East Coast boom bap sound, featuring me on the guitar over his beatmaking. Very began writing the hi-hat and kick drum patterns on the DAW's piano roll,

working in four-bar structures which he multiplied into larger portions divided into intro, verses, and chorus. When my turn to record arrived, Very's references and ideas brought to my mind the possibility of developing bluesy, R&B-style guitar riffs and licks over an eight-bar loop which was loosely based on traditional blues harmony, with the following harmonic progression: | E7#9 | % | % | % | A7 | G7 | A7 | B7 |. With Very's black Strinberg Les Paul guitar plugged straight into his audio interface, I tried out a few basic ideas which pleased Very, gradually creating layers of guitars through overdubbing to which he later added an 808 bass line to 'ground' the harmonic progression. Following my invitation, Brazilian pianist Luciano Leães recorded a Hammond B3 organ track from his home studio in Porto Alegre, filling in the layers between beat and guitars with colourful comping and a solo at the end of the song.

Very mentioned that it would be interesting if I could also sing on the project, in Kreyòl if I felt comfortable enough to do it, an invitation to which I consented with some hesitation, as I was interested in the unprecedented challenge. When talking about the song's lyrics, both of us confessed to having a *mizik sosyal* approach in mind. A few days before, Haitian president Jovenel Moïse had been brutally assassinated in his home, an unsolved crime which was then impacting Very and provoking endless discussion within Haitian communication networks. We decided that each of us would have two eight-bar structures to create our own verses with no direct interference. Very was solely responsible for the song's chorus. At a moment in which Brazil's situation was characterized by utter governmental disregard for the Covid-19 pandemic and the silent but increasing exodus of Haitians from Brazil, I came to see our song as an opportunity to send out a message of solidarity and awareness to Haitian audiences, as a white Brazilian researcher concerned with their situation of precarity and social invisibility in the country. Moreover, in like manner to many of my research interlocutors, I decided that it was an

opportunity to assume an artistic identity, one that referred to Haitian culture and folklore using the Kreyòl language. Inspired by the lyrics of Afro-American rapper Coolio's 1995 song 'Gangsta's Paradise', I eventually chose to translate the expression 'educated fool' to Kreyòl, wishing to position myself in a long-standing tradition of double entendre, metaphors, humour, and puns connected to the Haitian notion of *chan pwen* and to relativize my position as a representative of one of the most prestigious universities of the Global North who was learning from the aesthetic agency, experiences, and thinking of marginalized migrant subjects of/in the Global South.<sup>87</sup> With the aid of Targète and Urciolo's *Haitian Creole – English Dictionary* (1993), I chose to translate 'educated fool' as 'Bouki Lespri'. The antithetic connotation of my alias combines Bouki, the name of the 'the dim-witted country peasant' of the Haitian version of pan-African trickster tales (the tales of Bouki and Ti-Malis) and *lespri*, a polysemic word which signals an educated, wise person. After many hours of careful experimentation and inward reflections on what to rap, I came up with the following verses:

Eskizem mesye dam lasosyete  
kouman ou ye?  
Sak pase? Nap kenbe?  
Wap boule?  
Nou pa bezwen reponn paske  
mwenn konn ki li pa bon  
Pèp anraje  
yo gen rezon  
Bouki Lespri rantre  
lakay nou ak edikasyon

Excuse me ladies and gentlemen,  
how do you do?  
What's going on? Are you alright?  
Are you burning?  
No need to answer because  
I know things aren't good  
The people are angry and  
they're right  
The Educated Fool enters your  
house with politeness

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<sup>87</sup> On the rich meanings and dimensions of *pwen* (point) and *chan pwen* (singing points) in Haitian popular culture and music, see Averill (1997: 15-6)

Ayibobo, respekte, pou fè  
yon refleksyon  
Li gen konsyans, nou genyen  
sans, Bay li konfyans  
Paske ansanm nou ka rezoud  
nou diferans

Mwen se pa yon ayisyen, Kreyòl  
mwen manke pawòl  
Malgre sa nou alye (*Haiti, Brasil -  
teledyòl*)<sup>88</sup>  
Realite nou pa fasil  
Lavi trè chè, pa gen bonè  
E prezidan nou enbesil  
Cowona kraze brize  
fòk tout moun vaksine  
Poukisa map diw pap janm  
dekouraje  
Kenbe je klè, met tèt ansamn (tèt  
chaje)  
Kreyòl pale, Kreyòl konprann

*Ayibobo*, respect,  
to ponder  
He's conscious, you've got  
sense, trust him  
Because together we can work out  
our differences

I'm not Haitian, my Creole  
lacks words  
Despite that we're allies (*Haiti,  
Brazil - teledyòl*)  
Your reality is hard  
Life's expensive, no happiness  
And our president is an imbecile  
Corona has crashed everything, we  
must all vaccinate,  
That's why I say never lose hope  
lose hope  
Keep your eyes open, unite,  
(craziness)  
Creole spoken, Creole understood

When we met to record vocals, Very had an idea for the chorus, but hadn't yet finished his verses. After I recorded my verses, he commented that they suited his idea well, and began experimenting with words and phrases as the beat kept playing in a loop. During the next hour or so, Very progressively crafted his lyrics, at least partly in an improvised manner, achieving the following final form:

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<sup>88</sup> About the concept of *teledyòl*, Handerson (2015a: 175) writes: 'In the Haitian universe, *teledyòl* is a sort of wireless phone made of the passing of information between people. In a mobility context, it is a very efficient technique. It's not just information, which is passed from one person to the other, there are also traces of moral framings'.

Avek l'union fè la fòs nou ka pote  
la viktwa  
Nèg lan ginen nou gen  
fòs nou ka leve  
defi a  
Soley leve, nou souri  
kontinye avek la fwa  
Ayity bel ti cherie jou nou a  
pa lween *chega*

Mache ti pa pa ti pa  
*Um passo cada dia (2x)*

*Chorus*

Pèp ayisyen kale zye nou  
Se nan betiz yap pase nou  
Pèp ayisyen reveye nou  
Pa kite yo divide nou

Pa blyie kote nou soti  
Pa blyie kote nou prale  
Nom nou site nan tout  
peyi  
Premye pèp nwa jwenn libete

Se tankou yon tip de bwa kap  
grandi ki bezwen lapli, fòs li se  
nan espwa li  
Nou se pitit Desalyn, an travay san  
patipri, an  
batay san patipri  
Lè yo mete youn anba tè gen  
lòt rasin anba tè  
Se lapolis tounen raketè  
nap mete tout anba tè

With union we're strong, we can  
bring victory  
People from *Ginen* (Africa), we're  
strong, we can manage the  
challenge  
The sun comes up, we smile and  
continue with faith  
Beautiful Haiti, my dear, our day  
will soon come

Walk step by step  
A step every day (2x)

Haitian people open your eyes  
They're fooling us  
Haitian people let's wake up  
Don't let them separate us

Don't forget where we came from  
Don't forget where we're going  
Our name is talked bout in every  
country  
First Black people to be free

Like a tree that needs the rain to  
grow, its force is  
in its hope  
We're the children of Dessalines,  
let's work without prejudice, let's  
fight without prejudice  
When they bury one, there are  
other roots beneath the earth  
If the police become smugglers,  
we'll bury them all

‘Kale zye nou’ (Open our eyes) exemplifies the relevance of music in articulating diasporic commentary on Haitian politics and society, materializing in musical form an idealized (re)construction of the Haitian nation that resounds the spirit of *mizik sosyal* by invoking the powerful legacy of the Haitian Revolution as the victorious struggle of enslaved Africans and their descendants. It calls for the union of Haitians (wherever they may be) to overcome political divisions and corruption, and to work together towards a better Haiti (Dirksen 2020: 376).<sup>89</sup> Yet despite the confident and assertive tone of his verses, Very himself is not so hopeful about his country and wonders if there ever will be a way out of Haiti’s seemingly everlasting crisis. Explaining his verses’ message, he said the song ‘is really about that union thing, which I always talk about’, a message directed at the Haitian government and elites ‘which always works on the principle of division’:

Politics is fucked up, it’s a fucked-up scene. They’re always looking for a way to improve their financial situation. [...] They only see themselves and not others. That is the path of division: money closes peoples’ eyes. [...] That happened from the start of Haiti’s independence, with those in power playing against those not in power. They play against one another, destroying things. It’s so bad, so bad, so sad, so fucking sad, bro (nervous laughter). But it comes from outside too. It’s complicated, Haiti is in a position that’s not easily left behind. There would have to be a new Haiti, really.

For Very, Haitians have been fighting political and social division since ‘the times of slavery’ when they expelled the French ‘to live our life’, a division which, after independence, installed itself within the country mainly through the opposition between the economic and political elite and the people. When talking about the song’s message he remembered the negative geopolitical weight of external colonial and neo-colonial agents, and he chose to

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<sup>89</sup> Available at:

<<https://youtube.com/watch?v=bYEsXmhwqpg&pp=ygUYdmVyeSBsYXJvc2Uga2FsZSB6eWUgbm91>> (Accessed 21 November 2023)

underline Haitians' own responsibility towards the country, claiming that if all efforts, albeit small, were honestly directed to (re)constructing Haiti, things might be different:

No one wants to make things happen, seems like no one has responsibility over it [the country]. I, as a Haitian, [think] 'what can I do?' Each and every one of us should be there to contribute in whatever way we can, not to destroy. [...] You don't have to be in a place of power to contribute [...] All of that is in the song.

Reminiscing about the song from his new home in New Jersey as we talked via WhatsApp on January 2024, Very regretted that we didn't have time to record a video clip for the song, which is featured on his album 'Imigrante' (Immigrant), wholly available on YouTube.<sup>90</sup> He still envisions the possibility of doing it, and of returning to Brazil: 'Caetano, Brazil is amazing, I really like Brazil. A lot of people will say this to you. Guys I meet that used to live there, [people] I met on the way here, or that I find here: everyone says "Brazil, Brazil, Brazil, [it's] the bomb!", or "I'm going back there!", Haitians say. [...] If Brazil was stable, it would be Brazil to live'.

## David Lover

*Valentine's Day at Yohendri Bar, Joinville/SC – 12 February 2022*

*I travelled by bus from Curitiba, in the state of Paraná, to Joinville, in Santa Catarina – a 130km trip – to attend an event organized by David Lover. He was promoting a Valentine's Day party with live performances by Haitian and Brazilian artists from the locality. Charging an entrance fee of R\$ 30, it would take place at Yohendri Bar, a Haitian-owned establishment in the neighbourhood of Comasa, on the outer edges of Joinville. Due to the large population of Haitian migrants in Comasa, it has also become known as 'Haitizinho' (Little Haiti), similar to the Miami neighbourhood which also houses a significant contingent of Haitians and Haitian Americans. In the bar's external area, the crowd was almost exclusively made up of young Haitian men, chatting while grouped in small circles. At a table, two middle-aged white*

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<sup>90</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=bYEsXmhwqpg>> (Accessed 13 November 2023)

*Brazilians talking loudly seemed almost like a strange oddity to me, at that point the other white 'native' at the bar. Introducing myself as a friend of David, I entered the bar's internal area, designed for parties and performances. David seemed busy scrolling on his smartphone; Lobodja slept on a plastic chair, head and arms laid on a plastic table. After they noticed me, we began chatting about our acquaintances and exchanging news about other Haitian artists, in those days mostly about whether they were still in Brazil or had taken the transcontinental terrestrial route to the USA. In the background, Haitian DJ Kinymix played music to an empty ballroom. I went outside as it seemed it would take a long time for presentations to begin. There I introduced myself and spoke with Dracky EB, one of David's friends from Haiti, who alongside Lobodja and others created the EnergyBoyz hip-hop crew while still in Haiti. Our conversation in Kreyòl soon drew the attention of two Haitian women who sat next to us. Surprised by a white Brazilian speaking their language, they sat for a quick chat, during which the older one commented how she (and other Haitians) suffered from difficulties in communicating with Brazilians. At midnight, the performances started: first Lobodja, then Dracky, Micha (a local white Brazilian rapper), and, closing the night, David. The artists seemed to be giving their best, but reactions amongst the small crowd of about fifteen people scattered around the room were varied: some danced rather enthusiastically at some points, others just kept talking and drinking. It just wasn't the best of nights, David said.*

'Who God bless, no one curse'. In all songs by Haitian artist David Lover, one hears him utter his personal motto, a faith in divine providence which also foregrounds one of his central characteristics: a categorical self-reliance on his own talent and capability as providing the path to fulfil his dreams of an artistic career. Coming either before or after the motto, the listener is also informed of the name of the collective project which encapsulates David's musical dreams, the music label which he progressively set up alongside some of his best friends: 'Olala Nation'.

David Dorlus was born in the small village of Fond-des-Nègres, in the southern department of Nippes in Haiti and is now a 29-year-old Haitian migrant and artist who has been living in the city of Joinville, Santa Catarina, since he arrived in Brazil in 2016. After finishing high school, David felt his ambitions for his future could not be met by what Haiti had to offer, and decided to join his mother, who had been living in Brazil since 2013. 'Everything felt

strange' when he arrived: 'because it was a different country, like, foreign, I didn't know, didn't speak [Portuguese]. That's the biggest problem, not knowing how to speak. [...] Even the smell, everything was different' (interview with the author, 2021). Yet his mentality towards making a living in a foreign country was one of remarkable self-reliance and focus. To learn the new language, he became a regular in a neighbouring square where every day he would approach Brazilians to converse; in about six months, he felt comfortable speaking Portuguese. After getting a job at a local metallurgical factory, he immediately began to save money to invest in his dream: 'I started working and making my dreams come true, dreams like having a home studio, a dream I had since Haiti'.

'Music', David claims, 'has always been close to me, in everything, really'. In contrast with the previous artists discussed, despite his family's proximity to it (his late father was a choral *maestro*), the environment of Protestant churches did not have a significant impact on his musical education as a child. From early on a fan of konpa supergroups and artists such as Zenglen and Maestro Ritchie, David took an interest in making music around 2005, influenced by his discovery of 'international artists' such as Sean Paul, Little Bow Wow, Ciara, and by the enormous success of Haitian hip-hop group Barikad Crew. Around that time, he started 'playing around with music' with friends and cousins, usually in the form of rapping freestyle. One of his closest friends and musical partners since that time has been MC Lobodja, who came to Brazil before David and lived for many years in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. During the pandemic, Lobodja moved to Joinville to live in the same house as David and advance the 'Olala Nation' label. Once, as David rapped, an older friend said he had inherited the musical talent of his father. According to David, that moment left a profound mark on him, since he did not know his father, who passed away before he was born. He realized music was the only thing his father had

left him, the means through which he could stay connected to him. Such awareness was fundamental in making David feel, from a young age, that music was somehow his destiny, and pursuing an artistic career meant the realization of both his and his father's dream.

In 2013, David wrote and produced his first song, an R&B love song entitled 'Diktati Lanmou' (The Dictatorship of Love).<sup>91</sup> According to him, the track played frequently on local radio stations and achieved an unexpected degree of success in Fond-des-Nègres. People around town wondered who that artist was, he said, wondering if the song was a translated version of some famous American song and refusing to believe it was his own composition. Though David was already adamant about dedicating himself to a solo career, around that time he also participated in juvenile amateur rap kreyòl groups, the most significant of which was EnergyBoyz, formed in 2013. Following an invitation from an acquaintance, known by the alias of Dracky, EnergyBoyz was active in Fond-des-Nègres between 2013 and 2016, a time during which David, Dracky, Lobodja, and former members Wilkens and Marco got to record songs for Carnival celebrations ('Rap is also played in Carnival', David explained to me) and achieved a considerable degree of local success. With Lobodja's relocation to Joinville, EnergyBoyz has regrouped in the diaspora and is once again producing music, as Dracky EB, as he is now known (EB standing for EnergyBoyz), also lives in Joinville.

David describes himself as a curious and restless person. He also sees in Haitians a type of musical curiosity, a posture of openness to different cultures, which he finds unique, and, in general, has not found in Brazil. Commenting on how such curiosity manifested in his musical

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<sup>91</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=ZEcHI4vPC4s>> (Accessed 14 November 2023)

development, he referred to Haiti's cultural wealth and demonstrated his awareness of Brazilian sertanejo universitário artists of international renown even before his migration:

Haiti has many cultures. We listen to music from all over the world. I think we're the only ones that do it. When I lived there and started doing music, there was a website in which I researched music, and I found Gustavo Lima and Michel Teló. For some songs like 'Balada Boa', I looked up the lyrics and sang, even without knowing how to speak Portuguese. I even researched Chinese music, to have an idea. Haitians are very curious, musically speaking. So, we end up knowing a lot about other countries' rhythms and sometimes liking them. (interview with the author, 2021)

Besides curiosity, two other words are essential in David's self-conception: dream and passion. Such attributes are addressed in his (auto)biographical note on his Spotify profile: 'From a young age David Lover found himself torn between two passions (football and music), but chose music because in his country football didn't offer great chances of success'; his dream is 'to be able to have a real music career in Brazil despite being a foreigner'; 'David Lover's music speaks about love, respect, motivation, and overcoming', and he 'sings various styles such as: R&B, trap, rap, funk, afrobeat, and a lot of reggaeton too'.<sup>92</sup> The story of the choice of his artistic alias reveals his rationale regarding how perceived personal traits are mobilized in his artistic identity. As he developed a rigorous songwriting self-discipline while still in Haiti, he realized ideas gravitating around the theme of love would always come up. Wondering about adding 'Lover' to his name, he decided to consult the dictionary: 'I saw "loving, passionate". [...] Passionate, I'm passionate about what I do, when I do something, I do it with passion. I think 'lover' has that side of love [between], a man, a woman, but also has that side of passion, when I do something, I do it for real. [...] Since then, I am David Lover'.

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<sup>92</sup> Translation from Portuguese is mine. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/artist/629LnkHbYm6J07sVqG7UJO> (Accessed 14 November 2023)

Throughout his eight years in Brazil, David has consistently strived to advance, at a professional level, his career as a Haitian artist by writing songs mainly in Portuguese, steadfastly believing in the possibility of attaining success in Brazil. Toiling intensely in an independent manner, he has managed to make a significant impact on the local music scene and forge connections with local institutions, building musical momentum around the Olala Nation label with Haitian and Brazilian artists based in the locality (see Figure 22). Besides the individual dimension, his search for prosperity also has an extremely important collective purpose connected to his positionality as a Haitian migrant in Brazil. To David, his success as an artist would also mean the chance to introduce what he sees as the richness and diversity of Haitian culture to Brazilian audiences, countering one-dimensional views of Haitians as Black migrant workers. When I asked him about the importance of such goal, he answered:

Damn, it's huge! That's great [the question] (laughter). That's great, great. I want to get there so badly, SBT, Globo [important national TV stations], introduce Haiti, show that Haitians are doing cool things. Why? [...] I know what people have in their heads, because when they see Haitians on the street it's like 'Congratulations, workers'! Always that comment. We made a show in Cascavel, and people were saying 'Oh, workers, workers'!<sup>93</sup> *They see Haitians as workers, heavy workers!* And that's right, but I know Haitians are not just that. And that's what I want to show, that Haitians are other things, are plenty, are everything! Not just bricklayers, handymen, factory workers, we're everything. And it's so important. I really want to make it, to show that Haitians, bro, can do anything really. (My emphasis)

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<sup>93</sup> A city in the countryside of Santa Catarina which also is home to a Haitian community.



*Figure 22 - David Lover and MC Lobodja (holding Haiti's flag) performing in Joinville (source: David Lover's Facebook profile)*

As with other first-time Haitian migrants, David's arrival in Brazil presented him with many unprecedented challenges, new realities to which he had to somehow adapt himself: a new language, a new social and cultural milieu, a new climate, and racial prejudice. Amongst such important adaptations, when describing the beginning of his musical endeavours in Brazil, David emphasized a change of mindset, or, in his own words, a change of dreams. When he left Haiti, he carried with him 'the American dream':

I was in Brazil, but I came with the American dream. I wanted to do something international, because I always dreamed big, to do something big. So, I came with a

dream, now that I was not in Haiti I was going to sing in English; because in Haiti we don't speak English but listen to a lot of music in English, so I thought that here it'd be the same. So, if I write music in English, it shouldn't be a problem, there'll be a public for that, like in Haiti.

After releasing a remix of 'Wild thoughts' by DJ Khaled, Rihanna and Bryson Tiller on social media, he began to realize that most of his Brazilian acquaintances were not as intimately familiar with American pop music as he was: 'I saw there were people here who knew nothing about what was going on there. So, I said, "Bro, I'm in Brazil and I speak Portuguese, why don't I try that?" That's also international'. David set himself the task of writing his first song in Portuguese a little over one year after his arrival in Brazil and made songwriting a daily exercise: 'I forced myself to write, so it became easier with time'. In practising songwriting and searching for inspiration, two specific moments were crucial: listening, at home, to vocal-free backing tracks of various music genres on YouTube in search of melodies and ideas, and 'writing' the lyrics in his head while he worked at the factory: 'As I work, I sing. That's usually how I write'. As he was going to work on a regular day in 2018, an entire chorus with melody and lyrics suddenly 'came' to him:

One day I was listening to a beat on YouTube and a melody came to me. [...] I was leaving for work, and then I started [singing]: 'I don't know what you want'. Wow, I messaged Lobodja saying 'Lobodja, I'm getting rich, bro! Just found a melody, I'm getting rich!' And I was running to work. So, I recorded it on my cell phone lest I forget.

David then hired the beatmaking services of Dongad Beats and, after learning vocal recording basics on YouTube, recorded his vocals with his home studio equipment. He kept the song to himself until 2019 when he decided to release it with a video clip on YouTube. 'O que você quer' (What you want) achieved considerable success in Joinville, reaching two thousand views on YouTube in two weeks, and prompting several invitations for interviews and participation in institutional and community events through David's social media profiles. David

was surprised: '[m]y first song in Portuguese and it's thriving like no other before. I should focus on this. Then I saw there was a future to it and decided to invest more in it'. The result David achieved as an unknown independent, foreign artist made him think that he could 'make it' in Brazil. He would progressively develop such insight and an accompanying attitude about living and thriving in Brazil through the notion of 'the Brazilian dream':

If I work harder, it can work out. Especially because no one has done it before, it's greater than fulfilling the American dream. There's a lot of people doing that. Doing something unprecedented is better than doing something big that everyone does. So, I said: 'That's it'. [...] I don't know if it exists, [but] I'm inventing the Brazilian dream. I'm going to show everyone that Brazil can also offer opportunities to foreigners and allow great things to happen, Brazil is big and has opportunities too.

In 2020, David released his first solo album, 'O Sonho Brasileiro' (The Brazilian Dream) containing ten tracks including several collaborations with both Haitian and Brazilian artists (see Figure 23). The eponymous title track is described by David as a funk carioca song, inspired by 'Cavalo de Tróia' (Trojan horse), a funk song by Brazilian artist MC Kevin. David's song epitomizes the gradual process of converting his own mentality from an American Dream (the prevalent migrant dream amongst Haitian youth) to a Brazilian one. Eminently autobiographical, it recounts David's story of migration to Brazil, signalling how it impacted his life by turning dreams into reality and allowing him to continue his search for success and recognition as an artist.

Atravessar o oceano com nada no  
bolso  
Tudo na cabeça, coração cheio de  
esperança  
Não procuro o paraíso, sei que  
não existe na terra

Crossing the ocean with nothing in my  
pocket  
Everything in my mind, heart filled with  
hope  
I'm not looking for paradise, I know it  
doesn't exist on Earth

Lutar não me assusta, de onde eu  
venho é um estilo de vida  
Não tenho medo de nenhuma batalha, eu  
fui treinado pra guerra  
Eu sou apenas um grande sonhador, mas  
que não sonha em mover montanhas  
Acredito que eu não sou um acaso, eu não  
faço isso por medalhas

Difícil vai ser eu já sei, é o adjetivo da  
minha vida  
Eu me considero um Racional, porque eu  
tenho uma Vida Loka  
Tantas vezes me tropecei, agora eu não  
dou mais bola  
Quer dizer, eu já me preparei pro pior vou  
voltar melhor do que nunca

#### *Chorus*

É ver o favelado crescer, esse é o meu  
sonho brasileiro<sup>94</sup>  
Trocar o lixo pro luxo, esse é o meu  
sonho brasileiro  
É ver o trabalho sendo pago, esse é o meu  
sonho brasileiro  
Não ser julgado pelo que não escolheu,  
esse é o meu sonho brasileiro

Oô oô  
Esse é o meu sonho brasileiro (4x)

Nascido na América central, eu sempre  
tinha um sonho americano

Fighting doesn't scare me, from where I  
come it's a lifestyle  
I'm not afraid of any battle, I  
was trained for war  
I'm just a big dreamer, who  
doesn't dream about moving mountains  
I believe it's not by accident, I'm not  
doing it for medals

It's going to be hard, I know, that's my  
life's adjective  
I think of myself as a *Racional* because I  
lead a *Vida Loka* (crazy life)  
I've stumbled so many times, I no  
longer care  
I'm prepared for the worst, and I'll  
come back even better

It's seeing the *favelado* rise, that's my  
Brazilian dream  
Changing from trash to luxury, that's my  
Brazilian dream  
It's seeing my work getting paid, that's  
my Brazilian dream  
Not being judged by what I didn't choose,  
that's my Brazilian dream

Ooh ooh  
That's my Brazilian dream (4x)

Born in Central America, I always  
had an American dream

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<sup>94</sup> In Brazilian popular parlance, *favelado* references the inhabitant of the *favela* (shanty town), a member of the poorest (and usually darker) segments of Brazilian society.

Mas o Brasil provou que era meu amigo,  
eu tive que fazer o mesmo  
Troquei de americano para brasileiro, se  
mudou uma coisa acredita foi positivo  
Passei da fase sonhar para fase realizar,  
antes de mais nada obrigado  
Eu aprendi a acreditar em mim, que eu  
posso ter tudo que eu nunca tive  
Que o meu sonho não vai ser só no meu  
sonho, que um dia pros muleque eu vou  
ser um exemplo  
De tanto ficar no chão acredita que um dia  
vai querer voar  
De tanto ficar no escuro um dia vai querer  
se iluminar  
De tanto ficar no mesmo acredita que o  
jogo vai querer virar  
De tanto receber na vida um dia vai ser  
com muito prazer doar

Capricha, capricha, capricha no seu  
sonho  
Capricha, capricha, ninguém vai fazer isso  
pra você

But Brazil proved to be my friend,  
I had to do the same  
I changed from American to Brazilian,  
and the change was totally positive  
I went from dreaming to making,  
thank you, first of all  
I learned to believe in myself, that I  
can have what I never had  
That my dream is not just my own, and  
someday, to kids, I'll  
be an example  
So much time on the ground, one day I'll  
want to fly  
So much time in the dark that one day I'll  
need the light  
Being stuck for so much time that one day  
things needed to change  
Since I received so much in life, one day,  
I'll have the pleasure to give

Take care, take care, take care of your  
dream  
Take care, take care, no one is doing that  
for you

'The Brazilian Dream' substantiates, in its lyrics and in how it relates to David's lived experience, a form of 'giving meaning' to his dreams, evidencing the intimate relationship of utopia and autobiography in migrant narratives, and how they constitute 'not only explanatory, but also exploratory processes, not only mechanisms for recovering identity, but also for creating it' (Williams 2017: 192; 193). Stemming from David's own musical endeavours towards building a connection with the Brazilian public and his thoughts about his personal story and experience as a Haitian migrant in Brazil, the song also advances a politics of fulfilment through

its adherence to playing a Western capitalist rationality at its own game, symbolised by the evocation of social mobility and success through individual hard work. It also sets forth a politics of transfiguration by pursuing the sublime and the utopian through its desire for new social relations and modes of association, the overcoming of barriers of race and nation between migrants and host society. Such is perhaps the central message David wishes to advance with the song. As put forward in the song's chorus, David wishes he (and fellow Haitians) would not be judged by what they did not choose: their colour, and their nationality. He explains in further detail the meaning of the sentence 'Not being judged by what I didn't choose, that's my Brazilian dream' in a video about the song's lyrics:<sup>95</sup>

When I arrive somewhere, it's that [I wish that] people don't judge me because I'm Haitian, or because I'm *negro*, or Black. For me, that's the Brazilian dream. It's being accepted as I am, not needing to change...I didn't choose to be Haitian, I didn't choose to be Black, but when I arrive somewhere you ignore me because of that? But I didn't even choose that. Got it? It's not that I don't like it, but I didn't choose it, I was born like that. And you were born different, and you like it, we're different and we'll remain so.

His reasoning about his intended public for the song referenced such post-national and post-racial dimensions, in addition to signalling how the Brazilian marginalized position of *favelados* resonates with Haitians' experience of racialized precarity and marginalization in the country. In that sense, David also links the message of his song to the strong tradition of social awareness and engagement in Brazilian hip-hop represented by groups such as Racionais MC's. The Brazilian hip-hop group itself is referenced in the song's lyrics through the reference to *vida loka* (crazy life), the title of two songs from the album, 'Nada como um dia após o outro dia' (Nothing like a day after the other) (2002), a passage which David explains as a homage to the

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<sup>95</sup> Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uKUi8z3pVM>> (Accessed 18 March 2024)

group and an ‘insertion’ of Brazilian culture into the song. Nonetheless, David recognized the barriers and challenges of reaching such objectives (especially regarding overcoming racism), and realistically believed that the best result meant achieving non-violent coexistence:

I wrote the song being Haitian, but I didn’t intend it only for Haitians. That’s why I said *favelado* and not Haitian. Because here there are also Brazilians with a Brazilian dream; the Brazilian dream is leaving a certain state for a better one, right? We’ve got enough problems, it’s a daily struggle, you may be alright, and suddenly you hear about a case of racism. That’s something that we’ll have to fight hard to eradicate. But if we try, try, try I think one day we’ll be able to live together [...]. If we reach this point, it’ll be good enough, because eradicating racism, I don’t think that’s going to happen.



Figure 23 - The cover of David’s ‘O Sonho Brasileiro’ album (source: David Lover’s Facebook profile)

As we talked about his songs and life story in his house in Joinville in 2022, David's conceptual pairing of American and Brazilian dreams also offered him a chance to explain the exodus of Haitians from Brazil in ways that offer important insights about the ways in which many Haitian migrants experienced the country. While he acknowledged the relevance of the disparity in economic prospects between Brazil and the USA, he also envisioned those who left as people 'whose feet were in Brazil, but whose minds were not':

Haitians' leaving Brazil and Chile, I think is connected to 'the American dream'. There are people who have been here for ages, but never spoke Portuguese and never felt comfortable in the country. They're here, but just because they haven't got an option. They didn't try the country, its food, so there's no way they'll like it, see the good side of it. I think that's why they didn't open themselves to Brazil, and Chile. To see the opportunities, to dream about what they're holding in their hands. [...] So, what you got is what matters, I think. They didn't do that, didn't open themselves to Brazil, some hate speaking Portuguese, think it's too hard, get it? I think it's fear, shyness, and a lot of things that mix up and they don't open themselves. They didn't see too much future either, that's no surprise right, that money here is too low compared to the dollar, so who has people to help in Haiti won't be able to help a lot. [...] To them, the Brazilian dream doesn't work.

In 2022, David's mother successfully entered the US, after being deported to Haiti during a previous attempt. David's feet and mind remain in Joinville in search of the Brazilian dream. Despite having produced songs which cover a variety of themes and the subliminal or literal social nature of some of his lyrics, David sees himself now as mainly working with themes of love and motivation. The first has accompanied his songwriting since Haiti; the second one began to interest him after he migrated to Brazil, and, as he puts it, is his favourite one:

My other side besides singing [about] love is motivation. [...] That started in Brazil, I didn't do that in Haiti, singing motivational stuff, didn't do it in Haiti. But here it's just what comes to me. If I want to make a trap, motivation ideas come, unless someone comes with a song title to me it will usually end up being a song about a dream, focus, or struggling, it's a different side of me that I like to write about. [...] I believe deeply in 'dream' because I believe deeply in my own dream, and I think there's no other way, I must be like that. I may be stubborn because I've invested so much time, a lot of money too (laughs). I've been spending money since Haiti, a lot of money, and a lot of sacrifice,

so it must work out, it must compensate for all I've done. I've lost many chances of being other things: lawyer, doctor, whatever. So now, where I'm at, whatever I must do, I will study to do it. That's why I always say, 'focus on success', 'believe in your dream', it can come true. And I've achieved a lot, things I didn't even dream of, that I've already done. So, I believe that if I focus more, more achievements will come.

Notwithstanding the pandemic's detrimental impact on David's efforts to produce live music events in Joinville, he still felt there had been a positive side to it, as it gave him time to reflect and learn about himself and his artistic career. And whilst live music wasn't an option for him, David made sure to keep active, writing and releasing new songs and producing their video clips. Our first online interview happened five days after David's birthday and the release of 'Foco no sucesso' (Focus on success), a motivational trap song later featured on an EP entitled 'Prosperidade' (Prosperity) (see Figure 24).<sup>96</sup>

As I reaffirmed the collaborative intention of my research to David at the end of our interview, he also asked me to help him produce an acoustic version of the track. I subsequently developed and recorded an accompaniment for the song using a nylon-string guitar and 10-string mandolin, which I later sent him. David held on to it until I visited him in Joinville in early 2022, when David, MC Lobodja (who shot the video), and I recorded the acoustic version's video clip at a skate lane near their house.<sup>97</sup> Conveying a clear individualistic, manly, and self-confident tone, the song's lyrics comprise strong elements of self-praise, sexual innuendo, and flamboyance, elements which are reinforced in the original version's video clip through a visual performance of ostentation (featuring luxury cars, a mansion, bodyguards, and the presence of a

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<sup>96</sup> Available at: <[https://youtube.com/watch?v=ksQIQD5de\\_I](https://youtube.com/watch?v=ksQIQD5de_I)> (Accessed 20 November 2023)

<sup>97</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=0n0Dmhk1VQA>> (Accessed 20 November 2023)

provocatively dressed woman).<sup>98</sup> Yet it also narrates a journey of success and social ascension through references to a humble past, with success a consequence of hard (individual) work, notions which are also manifest in scenes where David is seen in more ‘rootsy’ hip-hop clothing, rapping and gesturing in the company of his ‘homies’ in a parking lot.

O negócio é bem simples  
Ou não tem bom gosto ou gosta de mim  
A receita era boa, mas eu sou o pickles que faltava  
Parece fácil, né? Como que pode, né?

Here’s the deal  
Either you like me, or your taste is poor  
The recipe was good, but I’m the pickles that was missing  
Seems easy, right? How is it possible, right?

Esse é o resultado de muito trabalho  
Agora não dá pra errar nem querendo não, não

That’s the result of a lot of work  
Now I can’t fail even if I want to, no, no

Quando eu tava na lama  
Em mim tu não botava fé  
Agora cê virou fiscal  
Pra me dizer como minha arte devia ser

When I was in the mud  
You didn’t believe in me  
Now you’re an overseer  
Telling me how my art should be

#### *Chorus*

Agora é só foco no sucesso  
Pra hater eu não ligo mais  
Sempre acreditei no processo  
Feliz com um pouco, mas trampa pra mais

Now it’s just focus on success  
I’m done with haters  
I always believed in the process  
Happy with little, but working for more

Felicidade não tem preço  
Humildade desde o berço

Happiness is priceless  
Humbleness from the cradle

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<sup>98</sup> ‘Funk ostentação’ (ostentation) is a popular substyle within the Brazilian Funk particularly associated with São Paulo’s funk scene. To its practitioners, usually part of a destitute youth from the city’s urban peripheries, the display of luxury and wealth in songs and video clips assumes great importance as a way to ‘create a world of luxury in which they could partake and show-off as protagonists’ (Pereira 2014: 8).

Me trai, eu não julgo eu esqueço  
Tanto que nunca mais vou andar contigo

Cheat on me, I won't judge, just forget  
I won't hang around you no more



*Figure 24 - The virtual flyer/cover for 'Foco no sucesso' (source: David Lover's Facebook profile)*

In December 2021, David released 'Prosperidade' (Prosperity), the title track for the eponymous EP and another key example of the motivational motif which has become the preferred feature of his songwriting. Once again drawing on trap as a musical genre, 'Prosperidade' develops in an even more literal manner David's life philosophy of hard work in search of success and prosperity. Yet this time the framing of his narrative is not one which leans

so heavily towards ostentation and flamboyance but one with a significant emphasis on faith and perseverance, as may be evinced by lyrical elements such as David's singing of 'Aleluia' in the intro, his request for blessings and grace in the chorus, and the references to work, dedication, and suffering in the pursuit of one's objectives:

Ale eh! Aleluia  
Ale yeah! aleluia (2x)

Halle eh! Hallelujah  
Halle yeah! Hallelujah (2x)

Quem trabalha tem que comer  
Quem quer ganhar tem que correr  
A vitória tem que merecer  
A caminhada sempre vai doer  
Nunca esquece de onde que tu veio  
Vê se não se perde no meio do caminho

Those who work must eat  
Those who want to win must run  
Victory must be earned  
The journey will always be painful  
Don't forget where you come from  
Try not to get lost along the way

Já sonhei com muita coisa  
Mas eu não fiquei ali sonhando  
Meti a mão na massa  
E olha tudo acontecendo  
Hoje sou iluminado  
Porque não perdi o foco  
Eu só quero prosperar  
Só lágrima de alegria

I've dreamed so much  
But I didn't stick to just dreaming  
I got my hands dirty  
And look, things are happening  
Today I'm enlightened  
Because I didn't lose focus  
I just want to prosper  
No tears but those of joy

*Chorus*

Prosperidade pra minha vida (2x)  
Benção em mim (2x)  
Graças, graças, graças yeah

Prosperity to my life (2x)  
Blessings upon me (2x)  
Grace, grace, grace, yeah

Ter tudo que tu quer, que negócio  
prazeroso  
Com foco é muita fé tudo vou  
conquistando  
Férias em Cancun

Owning all you want, such a  
pleasure  
With focus and faith, I'll conquer  
everything  
Holidays in Cancun

Com foco é muita fé tudo vou  
conquistando  
Férias em Cancun  
A nave faz ‘vruuum’  
Me sinto na lua  
Como Anuel, uah uah

With focus and faith, everything I’ll  
conquer  
Holidays in Cancun  
The ship makes ‘vrooom’  
I feel [like I’m] on the Moon  
Like Anuel, wah wah

Um barraco pra mãe é o mínimo  
Baby girl eenie meenie minye mo  
Vem na piscina pra fazer Marco Polo  
Polo yeah, Polo yeah

A shack for mother that’s the least  
Baby girl eenie meenie minye minye mo  
Enter the pool, let’s do Marco Polo  
Polo yeah, Polo yeah

While the motivational motif and its main words and tenets (dream, work, success, ostentation, confidence, and faith) may be found throughout David’s songwriting in Portuguese, the above songs emerge as consequential examples of David’s autobiographical storytelling through songwriting. Demanding that bourgeoisie lives up to the promises of its own rhetoric and envisioning a better future marked by material welfare and success, they encapsulate Gilroy’s politics of fulfilment. Additionally, in recovering a sense of agency and purpose as a (song)writer of his own story, ‘Foco no Sucesso’ and ‘Prosperidade’ also mediate between the intimate subjective dimension of David’s life and experience as a Haitian artist in Brazil and the generalized social context of a contemporary low-class youth (both Haitian and Brazilian) that desires to make their dreams come true in hard and oppressive circumstances.

### **Concluding remarks**

In the present chapter, I have drawn on the songwriting and songs of three Haitian artists living in Brazil to portray how, in a way analogous to famous Haitian troubadours such as Auguste de Pradines and Manno Charlemagne for Haiti, they may be seen as *troubadours*

voicing 'the conscience' of the Haitian diasporic community in Brazil, continuing an important Haitian tradition of storytelling and social critique and commentary through music. Such a proposition derives from the fact that, as Haitian migrants living in the country, they share a common body of lived experiences of adapting to new settings (cultural, social, musical, and linguistic), experiencing racialized xenophobia and anti-Haitian prejudice, and of changing and adapting notions of self and identities, occurrences which have found an expeditious artistic expression through their songwriting. As Gilroy has argued regarding the 'special conditions of existence' of Black diasporas, many of the songs that arise from the Haitian migrant experience in Brazil can be analysed as responses to racial subordination, displacements, and migrations (both forced and voluntary) (1993: 111).

Within the scope of the three Haitian artists examined, such an aspect is undoubtedly more prominent in the songwriting of Alix Georges; as he put it, 'music for raising awareness is my strongest artistic feature'. Alix's story reveals the momentous shift in self conceptions prompted by the experiences of migration and racialized othering, lived experiences which also had a consequential impact on his musical inclinations and self-conception as an artist and migration activist. In the songs analysed, there emerges both a critical reading of reality and an emic discourse on migration through consequent commentary on important social issues such as the nature and expression of racism in Brazil, the impacts of colonialism in Haiti and upon Black people, the impacts of Haitian migration and brain drain upon the fate of the Haitian nation, and prejudice against Haitian migrants. Through Alix's statements, we witness how the writing of such songs has functioned as a sort of coping strategy, a 'therapy', in his own words, which helps to make sense of reality and seeks to transform it through song. Despite prolific productivity and years of struggle in trying to fulfil the dream of making a

living entirely from music in Porto Alegre, Alix progressively reduced his efforts. He came to see how this fate was connected to what he coined the ‘social engineering’ of racism in Brazil and how it impedes or hinders Black people from reaching certain positions, such as that of professional artist. Yet even if such circumstances may have been the cause of a ‘musical death’ – his and that of many Haitians artists in Brazil – he remains passionate about music, writing songs which he leaves as a ‘legacy’ to his children.

In Very’s story and statements, we see how migrating to Brazil also had powerful implications on notions of self. If initially confronted with the limiting and racialized othering of Brazilians regarding Haitians, in Brazil Very opened his eyes both to the possibility of attempting to make a living from music (a career he didn’t feel comfortable pursuing in Haiti) and to how making music could help him change people’s view of him. As he made his way into Florianópolis and its local hip-hop scene, Very progressively appropriated new musical styles and repertoires for himself and ventured (albeit temporarily and on an intermittent basis) into a career as a performer, songwriter, and producer. He discovered that writing songs allowed him to ‘sing reality’ as he felt it and express his views on matters which impacted him emotionally, matters frequently pertaining to his identity as a Haitian and Black migrant. Autobiography assumes a powerful dimension in songs like ‘Meu caminho’ and ‘Aqui’, where Very advances a narrative of his own life, his dreams, and the significant moment of happiness associated with his musical path in Brazil, all of which foregrounds Gilroy’s notion of the politics of fulfilment. In ‘Ação’ and ‘Kale Zye Nou’, we experience how significant events on a global scale affected Very in profound ways, and how he resorted to songwriting as a form of curing hatred and performing a kind of purposeful, constructive, action. In their lyrics, the songs also bear clear evidence of the utopian essence of the politics of

transfiguration and the obstinate commitment to ideas about a better future, not only for Haiti, but for the whole world.

Like Very and Alix, David Lover's coming to Brazil also had consequential impacts on his life, dreams, and notions of self. While it represented a continuation of his life-long 'closeness' with music, dreams of success as an artist, and even the continuation of his collective musical projects with partners from adolescence, his adaptation to new settings also weighted significantly in his songwriting and conception of himself as an artist, namely on his resolute posture to write songs in Portuguese after the success of 'O que você quer', his growing identification with motivational themes, and his conversion from an 'American Dream' to a Brazilian one. His passion and persistence in search of his musical dream in Brazil have also assumed an important collective dimension, as he sees his struggle for success as connected to a struggle to compel Brazilians to see Haitians as 'more than just workers', as people who may be anything they want to be. 'The Brazilian Dream' epitomizes an autobiographic and emic discourse on migration which chronicles a change of conscience connected to his diasporic experience and the possibilities afforded by the new setting; as he says, the chance of 'giving meaning' to his dreams. Its lyrics advance both a politics of fulfilment ('from garbage to luxury') and a politics of transfiguration in his recognition that the Brazilian dream is also the dream of many Brazilian *favelados*, that is of leaving a certain state for a better one. The path of fulfilment is also potently evoked in his 'motivational' and autobiographical trap songs 'Foco no Sucesso' and 'Prosperidade' both of which show David's categorical self-reliance and belief in hard work as a route to success and the materialization of his dreams.

The songs and stories analysed here account for only a small portion of their composers' oeuvres, which in their totality comprises a varied repertoire of lyrical topics and music genres. In this sense, my chosen framing for analysing Alix's, Very's, and David's songwriting presents in many ways an insufficient representation of them as artists and songwriters, reproducing power imbalances such as with the continual description of them as 'Haitian migrant artists', one that they accept only with ambivalence (why not just artists?). Nonetheless, all of them impart great importance to such dimension of their musical output and their role as Haitian artists in Brazil. In demonstrating consequential linkages with the lived experience of being a diasporic Haitian and Black migrant in Brazil, the songs here analysed open an important window into the importance of music as a form of autobiographical storytelling which rendering private meanings into public and thus shapes collective notions of Haitianness in Brazil.

## CHAPTER 4: PANDEMICS

*Recording session with Alix, Porto Alegre – 21 March 2022*

*I grabbed my guitar and drove up to Alix's place on the north side of Porto Alegre for another recording session, following his invitation. As usual, I didn't know exactly what we'd be working on, Alix had just mentioned he wanted me to record some guitars on new songs of his. We worked on three of them (there were many more, but we didn't have enough time): two konpa love songs (one in French, the other in Portuguese) and a patriotic song in twoubadou style sung in Kreyòl. In between them, we talked a lot about Haitian affairs in Brazil and abroad. He had just come back from visiting family in Orlando, Florida. It had been his first visit to the US. Ironically, though he spent most of his time with diasporic Haitians, he entered the country with his Brazilian passport, and – to the surprise of many of his Haitian friends in Brazil and in contrast to the thousands of them waiting at the Mexico-US border – he not just easily got in with his tourist visa, but he also returned to Brazil! While there, he met friends who had lived in Porto Alegre, and many other Haitians who had lived in Brazil and had taken the route through Darién. He said he was very sought after in social events as people were aware of his success as an artist and Haitian immigrant in Brazil, and that he was able to present a more complex image of the country, mentioning positive (ease of obtaining residence and documents, weekends off) and negative (racism) points. Talking to the friends he'd made in Brazil and were now in the US, he said many told him horrible things about the journey, declaring that had they known what they'd go through, they wouldn't have done it. According to Alix, many of them also said that, in hindsight, Brazil was not that bad, as their experience in the US was also filled with trials and tribulations.*

### **Introduction**

One need not elaborate a great deal on how the Covid-19 pandemic represents a watershed moment in history, impacting people throughout the world in unprecedented ways. The very content and shape of this thesis and the fieldwork experience that grounds its reflection were profoundly affected by it, initially imposing severe limitations on the kind of close human contact on which ethnography and music making are usually based and later changing in drastic ways the constitution and effervescence of the Haitian musical community in Brazil. While I was eventually able to get through it without major trauma or loss, its emotional impact on me

both personally and as a doctoral researcher was profound and unprecedented, burdening my heart and mind with anxiety about the well-being of family and friends and the uncertain, suspended future of my research and scholarship during lockdown.

Of course, relevant as they were to me and my doctoral studies, the worries and misfortunes I experienced during the pandemic were far less severe than those lived by most of my research collaborators. As acknowledged by the UN and the WHO, and as further detailed by scholarly research, however, the pandemic affected people around the globe in strikingly different ways, and considerably amplified pre-existing inequalities (UN 2021; WHO 2020; The Lancet 2021; Estrela et al. 2020). Among the groups most affected by its unequal weight were migrants and refugees such as my research collaborators, populations commonly living in conditions of severe vulnerability. The intertwining of social, economic, and political components with the new pathogen created a particularly acute syndemic scenario for such populations, who faced not only greater risk of contracting the disease but also difficulties in accessing appropriate health care, income loss, legal status insecurity, and mobility restrictions resulting from government policies purportedly designed to contain the virus (Klug et al. 2020; Bojorquez et al. 2021: 1243).

Far more than exclusively an epidemiological event, then, the Covid-19 pandemic must be critically examined in its complex interactions with the global and local sociocultural settings in which it developed, and how they bring to the fore its ‘palpable cultural materiality’ (Harsin 2020: 1060). Developing in ‘an environment of populism, resurgent ethnonationalism, and retreating internationalism’ in which racism and xenophobia against ethnic minorities, migrants, and refugees have flared up (Elias et al. 2021: 784), it has revealed how pandemics have ‘a propensity to unveil existing societal prejudices’ (Clissold et al. 2020: 421). Such a *zeitgeist*

transcended interpersonal dimensions, manifesting itself systemically in political, institutional, and societal levels that bore witness to ‘the current moment of race relations and the varied forms racism presently takes’ (Elias et al. 2021: 789–90). Such a situation may have come as no surprise for Haitians who remember or lived through the onset of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, when the Center for Disease Control (CDC) included Haitians in the ‘four H’s list of high risks of AIDS, adding the disease to a “folk model” of anti-Haitian prejudice which had formerly relied heavily on ‘voodoo’ imagery’ (Farmer 1992: 180). In that context, US-based Haitian singer-songwriter Ti-Manno was fundamental in denouncing through music the general rejections of Haitians by American society and the wider world (Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1990: 329–330). While the Covid-19 pandemic could hardly be connected (even by ill-intentioned commentators) to Haiti or Haitians, in an ideological and political context in which anti-minority and denialist tenets found fertile ground, Haitians in Brazil still suffered through neglect and repudiation in different ways, a conjuncture which perhaps acted as an additional motivation for choosing to leave the country and head towards the US.

This last chapter differs substantially from the preceding ones. Instead of focusing on a specific musical action as a prism to probe the wider sociocultural implications of the musical endeavours of my research collaborators, I propose a conjunctural analysis of how the pandemic shaped the lives of Haitian artists in Brazil and the Haitian musical community in decisive ways. Inspired by Deborah Wong’s critique of ethnomusicologists’ dependence on music and of the centrality we afford it in our own work, I expand my ethnographic attention to the wider realm of sound and its absence, silence, and how they also make ‘powerfully audible’ issues previously discussed within the thesis in the aforementioned context (Wong 2014: 352). Affording special attention to sound, music, and silence as embodied in the

everyday lives of migrants, I seek to portray how ‘the transnational political-economic contours of human mobility generate stories subsequently voiced through embodied music and poetics’ (Chávez 2016: 20). Examining how such larger structural forces and events shaped the lives and sounds of Haitians moving in and out of Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic, I seek to address how the political interacts and manifests in different manners with the sonic phenomena examined in the following subsections, exploring how music and politics ‘can come together in contingent, temporary alliances’, ‘rather than being locked into fixed modes of interaction’ (Garratt 2019: 5).

Though the threads connecting them are manifold, I divide the following conjunctural analysis into four sections. In the first, I analyse the dialogue between ex-president Jair Bolsonaro and an anonymous Haitian migrant at the beginning of the pandemic, considering the discursive representations present within it and how it acquired political agency through its (mis)interpretation by different social actors in Brazil, developing into sound-based forms of political protest and music containing political intentions which simultaneously ignored (hence in a way silenced) the opinions of other Haitians living in Brazil. In the second, I contrast the absent and denialist posture of the Brazilian government during the pandemic with the rapid, yet socially ‘inaudible’ musical responses by Haitian artists early in 2020. In the third moment, I consider the different forms of silence/silencing within the context of Haitians’ exodus from Brazil during the pandemic, when, one by one, the bulk of my fieldwork interlocutors left the country for the United States – hence producing a kind of ethnographic silence as the pre-pandemic vibrancy of the diasporic Haitian musical community in Brazil receded markedly. Finally, I consider how music composition also emerged as a response to experiences of leaving Brazil through the transcontinental route from

South America to the Mexico-US border, materializing a form of artistic resistance to the situation lived by Haitian migrants through the American continent during the pandemic.

### **The president and the Haitian giant: the transmutation of a migrant's voice into politically engaged noise and music**

Three days before the WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic, on 8 March 2020, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and a cohort of government executives travelled to the USA and met with President Donald Trump, in an official summit which reaffirmed the strategic bilateral alliance between the countries.<sup>99</sup> Upon their return to Brazil, several members of Bolsonaro's cohort tested positive for the disease. Having tested negative initially, on March 15<sup>th</sup> Bolsonaro decided to ignore recommendations and greet supporters at the *Alvorada* Palace, the presidential residence in Brasília. He took photos, shook hands, and talked to supporters, afterwards proceeding to an anti-democratic protest against the Brazilian Supreme Federal Court.<sup>100</sup>

Since 2019, Bolsonaro has nurtured public performances portraying himself as a man of the people and an outsider to the political system, both common populist tropes. Perhaps the most frequent of these is his interaction with supporters at the *cercadinho* (a small enclosure) at the entrance of the presidential residence. Its usual script included chatting and taking pictures, firing polemical declarations, spreading fake news, and attacking mainstream

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<sup>99</sup> Available at: <<https://br.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-from-president-donald-j-trump-and-president-jair-bolsonaro-2/>> (Accessed 15 April 2023)

<sup>100</sup> Available at: <<https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/03/15/mesmo-com-recomendacao-de-monitoramento-por-coronavirus-bolsonaro-participa-de-carro-de-ato-em-brasilia.ghtml>> (Accessed 15 April 2023)

media. It constitutes, in a sense, an echo chamber of his own views and beliefs devoid of oppositional voices, providing daily commentary for social networks and newspapers due to the polemical nature of most of his statements.

On the night of 16 March 2020, however, he met an unexpected interlocutor at the *cercadinho*. After the noisy hysteria of his supporters, he opened the floor for questions. A tall and slender Black man raised his hand and said, ‘Yes, I have a question...sir’. As cries of ‘Myth!’ from Bolsonaro’s supporters faded, he continued, asking ‘Don’t you receive the messages your sons send you?’ Bolsonaro replied: ‘What is your nationality?’ ‘I come from Haiti, but I am *blasileilo* [‘Blazilian’]’, the man replied, twice, in a courageous claim which, irrespective of actual legal basis or state sanction, evidences the double allegiance of Haitian transmigrants discussed by Glick-Schiller and Fouron in the US context, and how it manifests in a ‘substantive’ rather than legal status of citizenship (2001: 25).<sup>101</sup> When Bolsonaro claimed incomprehension, he replied: ‘You are understanding, I’m speaking *blasileilo*’. Refusing to concede, Bolsonaro limited himself to listening absently as his interlocutor continued: ‘Bolsonaro, it’s over. You’re receiving messages on your cell phone; every *blasileilo* is receiving messages on their cell phones. You’re receiving the messages your sons send you. You’re no longer president [twice]. You must give up!’, progressively raising his voice into an assertive and challenging tone. He was soon silenced by the noisy resentment of Bolsonaro’s supporters, cutting short a peculiar dialogue of exceptionally unbalanced power relations. After briefly talking to supporters, Bolsonaro returned to address the unknown

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<sup>101</sup> Machry (2017) has discussed some of the specificities of the challenges presented by certain phonemes of the Portuguese language for Haitian migrants, especially regarding the liquid consonants /r/ and /l/. Such difficulty accounts for the Haitian migrant’s mispronunciation of ‘*brasileiro*’ (Brazilian).

Haitian man and put an end to the conversation: ‘Go back to your country, man. Go back to that den’.

The next day, videos of the episode went viral on Brazilian social media (see Figure 25), and numerous newspapers and websites across the Internet reported the incident (Cavalcanti and Bizon 2020). Despite a considerable degree of uncertainty about the nature of the man’s intent and the exact meaning and even content of some of his phrases, two of his lines captured the attention of the significant part of the Brazilian population who opposed Bolsonaro and the media: ‘Bolsonaro, it’s over’ and ‘You’re no longer president’. That same day, they became hashtags (*#Bolsonaroacabou* and *#Vocênãopresidentemais*) and reached Brazilian Trending Topics on Twitter, along with a third one that riffed on intercultural identification: *#Somostodoshaitiano* (literally ‘we are all the Haitian’, as in expressing ‘we stand together’) (2020: 1977). On the spur of the moment, an anonymous Haitian migrant was forcibly converted into a political icon (the ‘Haitian giant’), achieving widespread popularity among those who opposed Bolsonaro and the first manifestations of his denialist attitude regarding the pandemic.

Foregrounding the sonic dimensions of translation, I wish to underscore the relevance of migrant voices and their appropriation to political ends by exploring in further detail the words, sonic developments, and political and cultural ramifications of this unique and symbolic dialogue. Additionally, I consider how the verbal exchange between Bolsonaro and the Haitian giant may be representative of relations between sectors of Brazilian society and Haitian migrants and time-honoured Brazilian conceptions of Haiti and Haitians which bear the markings of racial prejudice and power asymmetries, even when they may conspicuously be sympathetic towards Haitians.



*Figure 25 – The anonymous Haitian man talks to Bolsonaro (screenshot by the author)*

Bolsonaro's first reply ('What is your nationality?') substantiates Cronin's notion of translator audibility (2006), the role of listening in the identification of migrants and how it allows for the construction of boundaries between Self (national) and Other (foreign). Bolsonaro dwelled on the Haitian man's accent and his occasional mispronunciations to frame him as out of place, as non-belonging, through normative schemes of intelligibility (Butler 2005) based on legal and nationalist frameworks of citizenship. Besides ignoring the man's actual citizenship status (he could possess double citizenship), his attitude is even more relevant as it ignores and silences the Haitian's own affirmation of belonging. Thus, the Brazilian president structured the encounter through establishing a boundary which drew on a highly selective audibility, separating belonging from non-belonging, the comprehensible

from the incomprehensible, and the recognizable from the unrecognizable, in a prime example of the logics of Bolsonarism.

Bolsonarism has been defined as an authoritarian extreme right political movement and ideology which promotes divisions or cleavages (symbolic, economic, cultural, political) between forms of living whose value and meaning is defined through rigid hierarchic processes of evaluation, effectively working from the premise of distinctions ‘between lives that matter and value, those ones that matter a little less, and those which are considered meaningless and worthless, being thus disposable’ (Duarte and César 2020: 2). Regarding the predicament of non-white Global South migrants such as Haitians, Bolsonarism also advances a notion that ‘majorities should have the right to discriminate against minorities’, one of the forms through which it politically ‘aims to strengthen binary oppositions between us/them, friend/enemy’ (2020: 2). It does not come as a surprise, hence, that at the close of the encounter Bolsonaro dug deep into the framing of his interlocutor as an animalized ‘Other’ (Go back to your country man, go back to that *den*).

Perhaps unwittingly, he nonetheless echoed longstanding colonial stereotypes about Haiti and Haitians that have constructed representations of the country and its people as savages and sub-humans, the ‘reverse image of a world of normalcy’ (Trouillot 2020), and which have also shaped the encounters between Haitian migrants and receiving societies in contemporary contexts (Zacair 2010: 5). Among the definitions of ‘den’ in the Oxford English Dictionary one can distinguish two major semantic fields: 1) that of the nonhuman, animal, wild, or bestial; 2) that of secrecy, usually connected to the illicit and the unruly.<sup>102</sup> Since the

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<sup>102</sup> ‘Den, n.1.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press (Accessed 28 August 2022).

triumph of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), Western accounts of the event and representations of the country and its population have worked towards symbolically equating Haitianness with bestiality and savagery (Blackburn as cited in Cantir 2017; Hurbon 2018; Torres-Saillant 2012). Examining the construction of Haitian stereotypes in American literature, Michael Dash suggests that

Like the Orient, Haiti emerges as an inexhaustible symbol designed to satisfy material as well as psychological needs. Images of mystery, decadence, romance and adventure are not arbitrary in either case but constitute a special code, a system of antithetical values which establishes radical, ineradicable distinctions between the Subject and the Other, West and East, the United States and Haiti. (Dash 1997: 2)

Bolsonaro's association of Haiti with 'den' may be seen as bearing evidence to reverberations of Haitianism (Sá 2019), which as aforementioned in nineteenth-century Brazil constructed Haiti as antithetical to values such as order, civilization, and their implied skin shade – whiteness – in a clear demonstration of how its historical legacy still modulates Haitian lives in the country. Bolsonaro's ultimatum ('Go back to your country') recalls a favourite Bolsonarist slogan ('Brazil, love it or leave it'), whose strong anchoring in a nationalist ethos also echoes the nineteenth-century Haitianist mindset, in which the racialized image of 'rebellious' Haitians was used as a model for anti-national behaviour.

Unsurprisingly, such a standpoint was also widely evoked by Bolsonaro's supporters in their comments on the various iterations of the video on YouTube, as such examples attest: 'Go back to Africa, you shameless Haitian', 'If you're not happy go back to your country, or to Venezuela', 'Bolsonaro, what is this Haitian doing here, complaining? Send him back to his

country’, ‘Bolsonaro, close the border and don’t let anyone from outside in’, and ‘These incompetents in their own countries come to fill our streets with swag’.<sup>103</sup>

On the other side of the political spectrum, in a conjuncture where the growing awareness about (and fear of) the Covid-19 pandemic coexisted with early manifestations of the denialist politics which would characterize Bolsonaro’s management of the health crisis,<sup>104</sup> Brazilians who opposed the government welcomed such a courageous manifestation of dissent as tinged with prophetic tones of heroism: ‘Haitian prophet speaking the truth’, ‘This Haitian is braver than most Brazilians’, ‘This Haitian is the true “myth!”’, and ‘A visionary!’. In response to government inaction, such sectors of Brazilian society quickly manifested their outrage (in a socially distanced manner) through the time-honoured form of sonic protest known as *panelaço*. Derived from the Portuguese word for pan (*panela*), *panelaços* are the Brazilian ‘version’ of a widespread form of popular protest variously known as rough music, *charivari*, or *cacerolazo*: ‘a raucous, cacophonous form of street protest – produced by banging pots and pans, whistling, and screeching or whatever musical instruments are available – directed at authority figures or those who have offended against social mores’

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<sup>103</sup> The YouTube commentaries quoted hereby have all been collected from the following videos: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=c664gnwBqGI&pp=ygUSaGFpdGhbm8gYm9sc29uYXJv>>; <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=SGOBjH-WZyc&pp=ygUSaGFpdGhbm8gYm9sc29uYXJv>>; <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=B-UuYjRciGw&pp=ygUSaGFpdGhbm8gYm9sc29uYXJv>> (Accessed 03 May 2023)

<sup>104</sup> The absence of federal governmental policy or recommendation on social distancing meant that Brazilians were mostly left on their own in adapting to the new circumstances and protecting themselves. As Muniz et al. (2021) bear evidence, a major feature of the early days of the pandemic in Brazil were the manifold initiatives by civil society to tackle the crisis. Surveys on the voluntary observance of preventive measures by the Brazilian population in the early moments of the pandemic pointed to a positive scenario: a nationwide online survey conducted by Fundação Instituto Oswaldo Cruz (Fiocruz) in partnership with the Federal University of Minas Gerais and Campinas State University between April and May 2020 pointed to a significant adherence to physical contact restriction measures, with circa 75% adopting total (15%) or intense (60%) limitation (Szwarcwald et al. 2020).

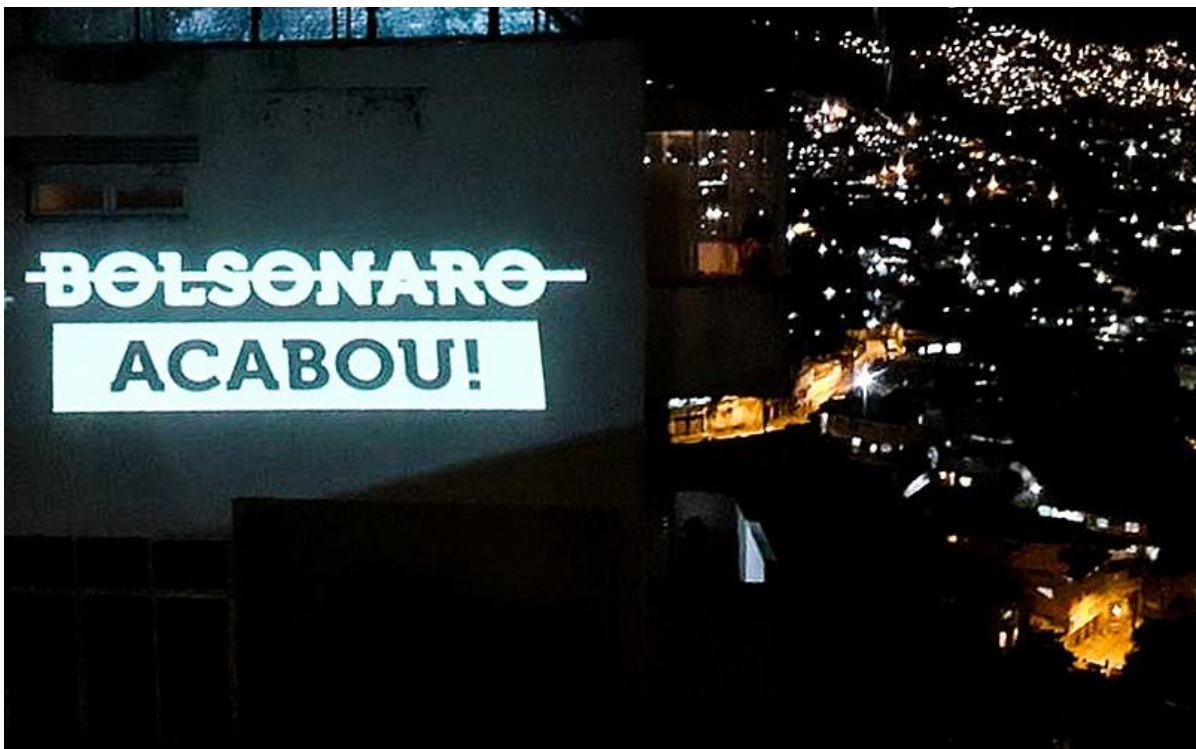
(Garratt 2019: 12).<sup>105</sup> In contemporary Brazil, *panelaços* have usually occurred during broadcasted presidential pronouncements, further attesting to their role as an individual and collective form of political protest, materializing refusal to listen and an attempt to silence political power through sonic superiority. Ironically, a few years earlier *panelaços* were ubiquitous in the protests organized by right-wing political and social forces in Brazil, a sonic sign anticipating Brazil's shift towards the right side of the political spectrum after years of rule by the Worker's Party (Tatagiba 2018: 118). In its usage by the right-wing opposition to PT in non-pandemic circumstances, it was usually seen as a comfortable, middle-class protest technique typical of the bourgeoisie, as one could demonstrate at ease from home. Within the pandemic, however, *panelaços* shifted to the opposite side of the political spectrum and were embraced by the opposition, as they appeared the only safe form by which to protest the government for those who feared the spread of SarS-CoV2.

17 March 2020 marked Brazil's first official Covid-19 death and the beginning of a 15-day-long series of anti-Bolsonaro protests (G1 2020), a popular reaction that owed significantly to the mediatic and social media repercussion of the dialogue between Bolsonaro and the Haitian giant, which was shared by major political figures of the left and entertainment celebrities (Cavalcanti and Bizon 2020). Federal congressman Guilherme Boulos, a member of Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (PSOL – Socialism and Freedom Party) reposted the video with the caption 'My soul is redeemed! A Haitian has said to Bolsonaro

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<sup>105</sup> In Haiti, such form of popular sonic protest is known as *tenèb* (or *bat tenèb*), a word which derives from the French word for shadow. According to Averill, '[t]enèb is predicated on the very simple and widespread correlation of sound with power. *Tenèbs* are not music per se, although musical instruments are often used. Rather they constitute a collective performance of sound-as-power and a demonstration of the ability of popular forces to coordinate large numbers of people successfully' (1997: 14).

what millions of Brazilians would like to have said’, and in the days following used the hashtag *#BolsonaroAcabou* (ItsoverBolsonaro) to summon Brazilians to participate in *panelaços* (2020: 1979–80). For the next two weeks in numerous cities throughout the country, the banging of pans and the shouting of anti-Bolsonaro slogans exerted what then seemed to be a significant shock to the government, representing an expression of dissent over its blatantly denialist posture. The nationwide wave of protest was potentialized visually through the use of walls of adjacent buildings as canvases to project various memes and slogans. Among these, one commonly found the lines of the Haitian migrant: ‘Bolsonaro, it’s over!’ and ‘You’re no longer president’ (see Figure 26).



*Figure 26 - A projection of one of the Haitian giant’s utterances to Bolsonaro (Bolsonaro it’s over!) during a panelaço in March 2020 (source: G1 2020)*

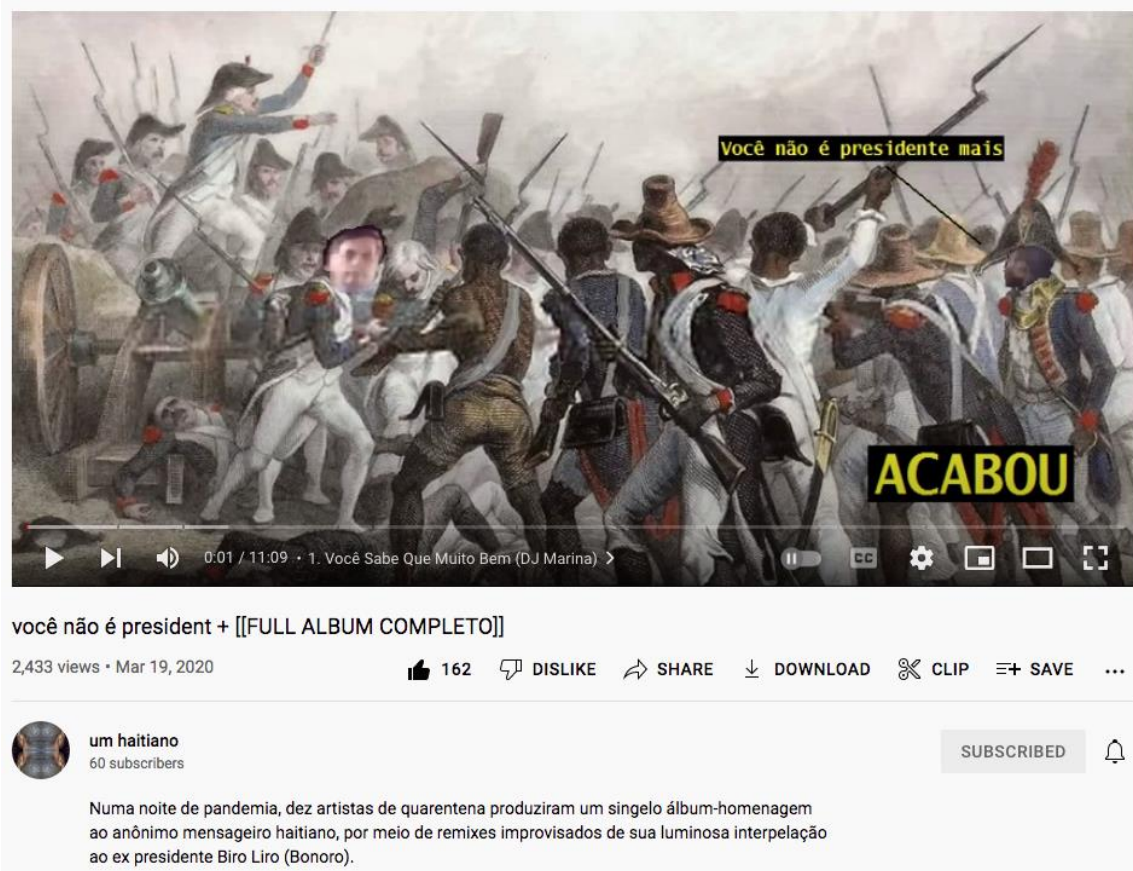
Through the *panelaços*, Brazilians appropriated, re-signified, and amplified the enigmatic utterances of a Haitian migrant, using sound-as-protest to ‘translate political ideals into vividly felt experience’ and generate ‘emotional solidarity through collective participation’ (Garrat 2019: 13). But this was not the only transformation of the Haitian’s phrases into politicized sonic phenomena. Lost amid hundreds of comments in different iterations of the video on YouTube, one drew my attention. It referred to an ‘album with remixes of the Haitian from the video’. It was posted by an anonymous profile named ‘Um haitiano’ (A Haitian), which used a screenshot of the Haitian giant as its avatar and hosted an album named ‘Você não é president +’ (You’re no longer president).<sup>106</sup>

The album’s iconography conflates historical time, superimposing the anticolonial struggle of Haitians against France with the resistance to Bolsonarism and denialist politics in Brazil during Covid-19 by using as ‘cover’ an interesting collage: over the inverted image of the 1839 painting entitled ‘Combat et prise de la Crête-à-Pierrot (4 – 24 mars 1802)’ by French painter Auguste Raffet, one finds Bolsonaro’s face placed over a French soldier’s and the back of the Haitian man’s head substituting one belonging to a Haitian army officer (see Figure 27). Its description introduces it as the collective work of ten Brazilian artists in quarantine, produced in one night as a tribute to the ‘anonymous Haitian messenger’ and having as its core elements the sounds of his ‘luminous interpellation’ to the ‘ex-president’. Divided into ten short, minute-long tracks, it creatively explores sounds extracted from the original video (the Haitian’s phases, anonymous vocalizations and phrases produced by the *cercadinho* crowd, and Bolsonaro’s laconic responses), mixing them with original musical

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<sup>106</sup>Available at: <[https://youtube.com/watch?v=\\_jamtxdqY8](https://youtube.com/watch?v=_jamtxdqY8)> (Accessed 23 January 2023)

material produced through DAWs by the artists, stylistically drawing on Afro-diasporic music genres such as hip-hop, funk carioca, rhythm & blues, and samba, in addition to EDM.



*Figure 27 - The Haitian man and Bolsonaro's head cut from the dialogue video are inserted into Raffet's painting on the cover of the 'You're no longer president' album (screenshot by the author).*

Via email, I interviewed the leader of the initiative, who provided answers elaborated collectively with the other artists involved ('Um haitiano' artists collective, interview with the author, 2021). They described themselves as a group of middle-class Brazilians from Rio de Janeiro aged 25–30, all of whom work with music and are long-time friends. When the video of the dialogue spread on social media, they were impressed by the event and the migrant's

choice of words, in addition to the ‘mysterious’ and ‘divine’ aspects they imputed to his anonymity. They decided that each should create an original piece of music using audio from the video until the following day, hoping to profit from the video’s momentous popularity but also wishing to protest the government’s denialism and enhance the impact of the Haitian’s phrases-turned-political slogans. To avoid any sort of real or virtual harassment from Bolsonaro supporters, they created original DJ/MC aliases which, in likeness to the artistic collage that accompanies the album, superimpose past and present through themes of the Haitian Revolution and the Covid-19 pandemic: MC Tussão (referencing Haitian Revolution leader Toussaint Louverture), MC Ovid-19, Jean-Jacques Dessaída (a pun with Haitian Revolution leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines and the term *saída* (exit) which alludes to a desired ousting of Bolsonaro), and DJ Crise (DJ Crisis). According to the collective, such historical overlap was intentional and represented their reading of the Haitian’s words as a ‘revolutionary’ act, bringing to the fore yet again parallels between Haitianism and Bolsonarism, even if without direct mention to such phenomena and from a different ideological position.

The track ‘Boca à Boca’ (‘Mouth to mouth’) offers some of the most interesting examples of their creative reinterpretation from the sonic material available in the video. In the introduction, the Haitian’s utterance of the Portuguese word for ‘it’s over’, *acabou*, is used in fast repetition, generating another possible interpretation due to an elision of the first and last syllables: ‘*acabô-acabô-acabô*’ becomes ‘*boca-(à)-boca-(à)-boca*’. In Brazilian Portuguese, *Boca à boca* is a common expression for the dialogic, interpersonal passing of news, gossip, or conversation, signalling a pre-digital form of spreading the news – of ‘going viral’. Later, two different audio editing interventions point to a politicized manipulation of

the migrant's utterances. Firstly, the same emphatic pronouncement (*Acabou!*) inverted the real-life silencing of the Haitian giant by Bolsonaro's supporters, instead silencing the *cercadinho* crowd's shouts of *Mito!* (myth). Secondly, through the juxtaposition of the Haitian's utterance of the president's surname and a word extracted from a biblical quotation by one of his supporters later in the video, *praga* (plague), listeners gain insight into the artists' judgment of the Brazilian president: Bolsonaro is (perhaps more than SarS-Cov2) Brazil's actual plague.

This intricate succession of events reveals the rather fortuitous but simultaneously heavily mediated political instrumentalization, amplification, and sonic transformation of migrant utterances by Brazilians in the context of official denialist politics during the Covid-19 pandemic. As Brazil registered its first Covid-related death, the voice and words of a Haitian migrant resonated loudly amidst the burbling of the *cercadinho*, grabbing the attention of those who opposed the president. Converting his utterances into text, sound, and music, Brazilians created the first mottos of anti-government protest in the *panelaços* and remixed them into politically charged, impromptu music. Such use obviously reflected previously held societal values and political opinions among the left-leaning sectors of the Brazilian population, who appropriated and repurposed somewhat enigmatic migrant utterances to political ends, not necessarily those of our migrant interlocutor or of Haitians in Brazil.

Though some Haitians may have had a positive view of the event, comments on social media and communication networks by Haitians in Brazil usually manifested fear of retaliation and embarrassment. On the YouTube iterations of the video, one of several Haitian commenters tried to disconnect the Haitian community in Brazil from the supposedly reckless behaviour of one of its members: 'My Brazilian friends, my companions, I'm Haitian and I

thank all of you for understanding, in the community there's always someone like that, someone crazy'. Through my own participation in the group (HAB), I was also able to enquire and witness varied reactions and comments regarding the dialogue by some of my research collaborators and other members. Impacted by such an unexpected event, on the day following the dialogue I posted a link to a news piece about it, asking if anyone had seen the video, and what they thought about it. Princeneer and Asid Adult Man (see more about Asid in the following section of this chapter) were quick to respond to my message, starting a debate with other group members which demonstrated the lack of consensus about this viral event amongst Haitians in Brazil.

As represented by the above-mentioned YouTube comment, one of the most common responses was that the anonymous Haitian migrant did not speak on behalf of the whole Haitian community in the country, itself a testament to how such a social formation is far from homogeneous. This view was frequently presented in tandem with a fear of xenophobic backlash against Haitians by Bolsonaro supporters, as can be evinced by the messages of two participants: '[w]e're already ill-considered by some Bolsonarist Brazilians and now a Haitian 'dog' comes and does this. You'll see what will happen!'; 'Everyone has the right to say anything, but they may suffer the consequences. That's why sometimes it's much better to say nothing' (WhatsApp messages, March 17, 2020). The Haitian man's lack of prowess in Portuguese was also criticized by his countrymen who had difficulty in understanding exactly what he meant, and considered the problems which might derive from misinterpretation by

Brazilians: 'It's bad that he can't even express himself well in Portuguese so he can be misinterpreted, even if the things he wanted to say may have had some sense'.<sup>107</sup>

Through a series of audio messages that same day, Asid and Princeneer set forth considerations about the dialogue and its two participants which differ considerably from their compatriots. Their comments point to a positive view of the Haitian's apparent challenge to Bolsonaro and a more carefree interpretation of the viral repercussion of the dialogue as a political 'meme', given that they deemed the Haitian giant's contestation of Bolsonaro an entertaining piece of 'viral' news. Mentioning that his repost of the video on Facebook had received negative comments by Haitians fearful of a backlash against the community, Asid said 'for me it's just a meme, nothing more' (Asid, WhatsApp message March 17, 2020). He later explained in more detail his view on the matter, countering the many criticisms that the Haitian man had received from fellow compatriots in the group's discussion:

Bro, I'm going to express myself. I don't do politics, I don't belong to any political party, but what that Haitian said, to me, there's nothing strange about it, and why is that: it's a pandemic, hovering in the air, all over the world, things are bad. But there's a way to prevent it. And, firstly, you cannot hug, cannot kiss, cannot shake anyone's hands. Then the president just goes and shakes everyone's hand! To me, what he meant, but couldn't express in a clear way, was: as a president, you should be an example. If the president just goes and shakes everyone's hand while he should be doing the opposite, see? He meant that the president should be an example, he shouldn't be doing what's wrong. To me everyone is saying 'Oh no, this guy is embarrassing us!', I disagree! You must analyse the context of what he wanted to say, but couldn't communicate in the best way...yet, what he said is right on, it's right on. The only thing I wouldn't say is 'You're no longer president', but apart from that he's 100% approved, in my opinion. Freedom of opinion still exists. [...] This is a democratic country so anyone can express the way they feel better. People are saying 'no, he shouldn't speak for Haitians', fuck that, fuck that, it's freedom of opinion. (Asid, WhatsApp audio message, March 17, 2020).

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<sup>107</sup> For the sake of practicing a responsible quotation ethics, I've chosen to keep such statements anonymous, as I wasn't able to obtain authorization to quote the three respective group participants.

Princeneer soon expressed agreement with Asid's interpretation, adding the caution of saying that the Haitian giant's words weren't exactly clear. Yet, in tune with the desires of Brazilians who opposed Bolsonaro, he wondered about the possibility of prophecy in the Haitian's most disseminated phrase (Bolsonaro, it's over!):

I think he may have meant 'how can you, the president, be shaking people's hands, taking pictures, blah, blah, blah'. And then he said: 'You're no longer president', 'it's over'. Can it be that he's prophesizing? 'You're no longer president!', 'It's over!' Well, let's see. He that shall live shall see. (Princeneer, WhatsApp audio message, March 17, 2020).

As advanced by Cronin (2006), the audibility of migrant utterances can have positive and negative consequences, whether the framing of migrants as non-belonging, attentive and careful listening to migrant voices, or misinterpretation. In the case considered here, reactions to the Haitian giant's rebuke of Bolsonaro followed the fault lines of the crescent political polarization characteristic of Brazilian society in the 2010s. On the right of the political spectrum, Bolsonaro's and his supporters' choice of words evidence contours of racism and xenophobia, echoing enduring stereotypes about Haitians forged on the crucible of colonial and postcolonial relations with Western powers. They lay bare a moralist and assimilationist view on immigration in which the 'good' immigrant is the silent, abiding one, not the one who (seemingly) expresses dissent and claims of belonging. On the Brazilian left, the confident interjections of an anonymous subject directed towards the commander-in-chief of the nation assumed contours of heroism and prophecy. They helped to light the spark of political dissent with a series of nationwide *panelaços* which converted the Haitian giant's words into political slogans and sparked a compositional impulse within the 'Um haitiano' artists collective, both significant transmutations of a migrant voice which nonetheless were negligent to the original

speaker's intentions and subjectivity and the manifold opinions and anxieties of Haitian migrants in Brazil.

Such framings reveal a polarized, dichotomic perspective towards Haitian migrants within Brazilian society, one which fails to consider the complexities and ambiguities of their position, as attested by the contrasting and more nuanced evaluation of the event put forward by Haitians themselves, which reveal a dominant trope of detachment from the Haitian Giant's posture, motivated by the fear of damage to their image in Brazil and the possibility of actual retaliation by followers of Bolsonaro. While such a stance was certainly dominant in the video's YouTube iterations, the internal discussions of the HAB group also presented important contrasting views that demonstrated that – despite opaqueness and uncertainty about the actual intentions of Bolsonaro's interlocutor – some Haitians also interpreted his message as a critique of Bolsonaro's careless attitudes on 15 March 2020 and his reckless posture towards the recently declared pandemic, one that would continue throughout the later years of his presidency. Moreover, they also expressed a good measure of agreement with such criticism and eschewed any attempt at scolding the Haitian man for his attitude or faltering abilities in the Portuguese language. As the pandemic worsened in Brazil, Haitian artists such as Asid would also engage the theme of the novel Coronavirus through musical composition, in what constituted an effort to both raise awareness and make 'viral' hits.

### **'Contaminated the whole world with the same song': Haitian artists' musical engagement with SarS-CoV2**

While the metallic sound of the *panelaços* was still a feature of Brazil's urban soundscape, different examples of Haitian musical engagement with the pandemic began to appear. From

late March 2020 onwards, Haitian artists and groups in different locations around Brazil sonically expressed their views on SarS-Cov2 and the pandemic, composing and rapping freestyle about the virus, its imagined consequences, and the need for prophylactic measures. In this section, I seek to foreground the stark contrast between grassroots migrant aesthetic agency and the haphazard, careless governmental stance by discussing songs and freestyle performances produced by Haitian artists in Brazil during the pandemic, and how they embody the socially aware spirit of the Haitian concept of *mizik sosyal* (Dirksen 2020).

Less than a month into the pandemic, the first example of Haitian musical engagement with it appeared on March 27, 2020. Entitled ‘Aba CORONAVirus’ (Down with Coronavirus), it is a freestyle rap performance composed and performed by Joanes Lens and recorded and filmed by Naldson Best, two young Haitian friends who then lived in São Paulo.<sup>108</sup> Naldson arrived in Brazil in 2014, at the tender age of twelve, settling with his uncle in the periphery of São Paulo. He first met Joanes when the latter was searching for someone to help him produce a promotional video, intending to start a career as a video maker. Joanes, who came to Brazil in 2015 and then worked as a sushi chef in the nearby city of Guarulhos, eventually became a sort of older brother for Naldson, and the two initiated a partnership on musical and videomaking ventures, usually with Naldson as hip-hop performer and Joanes as the video maker (Naldson Best, personal communication with the author). When the pandemic began, Joanes invited Naldson to film a video clip of a freestyle hip-hop about the new Coronavirus. Even though he did not consider himself a ‘singer’, at that moment he felt the need to send out a message to sensitize people to the seriousness of the pandemic and thought that a hip-hop

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<sup>108</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=NuKBzptVB54>> (Accessed 15 April 2023)

freestyle would be the best way to do it: ‘I just thought about sending a message, as a Haitian, to sensitize people, even though I’m not a singer...that was the only way that I had at the time to make thirty or forty people listen’ (personal communication with the author, 2021).

His idea stemmed from a social media campaign by top Haitian artists such as Richie Klass, Roody Roodboy, and Arly Larivière, named ‘*Mwen rete lakay mwen*’ (I stay home) whose intention was to raise awareness about the importance of social distancing for the Haitian population.<sup>109</sup> In fact, Joanes’ video clip begins with an excerpt of that video, in a bricolage that testifies to Joanes’ intention of associating his own diasporic awareness-raising musical intervention with the campaign promoted by top-of-the-league Haitian artists. A fast and cluttered trap beat filled with synthesizers and piano samples sets the tone for Joanes’ performance; in the intro, we hear coughing in the background, establishing a kind of sickly, pandemic soundscape much attuned to the moment. The song kicks in straight into the chorus, a clear-cut message sung in Kreyòl by Joanes wearing a Haitian flag as a mask (see Figure 28): ‘*Aba, aba, aba Korona! Pile, pile, pile Korona! Jete, jete, jete Korona! Pile Korona, pile nan Korona!*’ (Down, down, down with Corona! Step, step, step on Corona! Toss, toss, toss Corona! Step Corona, step on it!). As he raps on, he delivers a series of pieces of advice for the pandemic and his own readings about the virus:

Lave men nou souvan  
Mete kachnen plus gan  
Paske Kowonavirus  
Pa konn piti ni gran

Wash your hands regularly  
Wear a mask and gloves  
‘Coz Coronavirus doesn’t mind  
If it’s a child or an adult

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<sup>109</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=NuKBzptVB54>> (Accessed 15 April 2023)

Atansyon pa kapon  
Pye kout dwe pran devan  
Ou pa dwe inyore ijyèn  
Prekosyon nou dwe pran

Pa bay pyès moun akolad  
De mèt de distans  
Ou ka kontamine yon fanmi  
Jis pa neglijan

Ekskize m si w wèm egzijew  
Pwoteje sante w  
M avize w san fwa  
Jis bay lavi yon ti chans, *now*

Izole w pou yon ti tan  
Olye w pèdi tout vi w  
Bagay sa pa dous non non  
Konsèy kem ka ofri w

Evite foul ki gen plis ke diz moun  
Son viris ki envizib  
Ann evite sikile  
Ret lakay nou, pwòpte kay nou,  
Lave men nou, priye God  
Met lafwa nou, jete raj nou  
Lapriyè n ka kase kòd

Pa gen ni pòv ni rich  
Evite pran plis risk  
Kowona jwe tout tivis  
E pita nou ka pi tris

Mwen menm Lens  
M envite nou tout pran prekosyon kont  
Kowonavirus  
Pa bliye se neglijan nou ki  
transpòte l

Caution isn't a weakness  
There's no time to lose  
You shouldn't ignore your hygiene  
We must be cautious

Don't hug people  
Keep two meters apart  
You may contaminate a family  
Just by being careless

Excuse me if I'm bothering you  
To protect your health  
I'll warn you a hundred times  
Just give life a chance, *now*

Isolate for a while  
Instead of losing your life  
This isn't a mild flu  
I can give you some advice

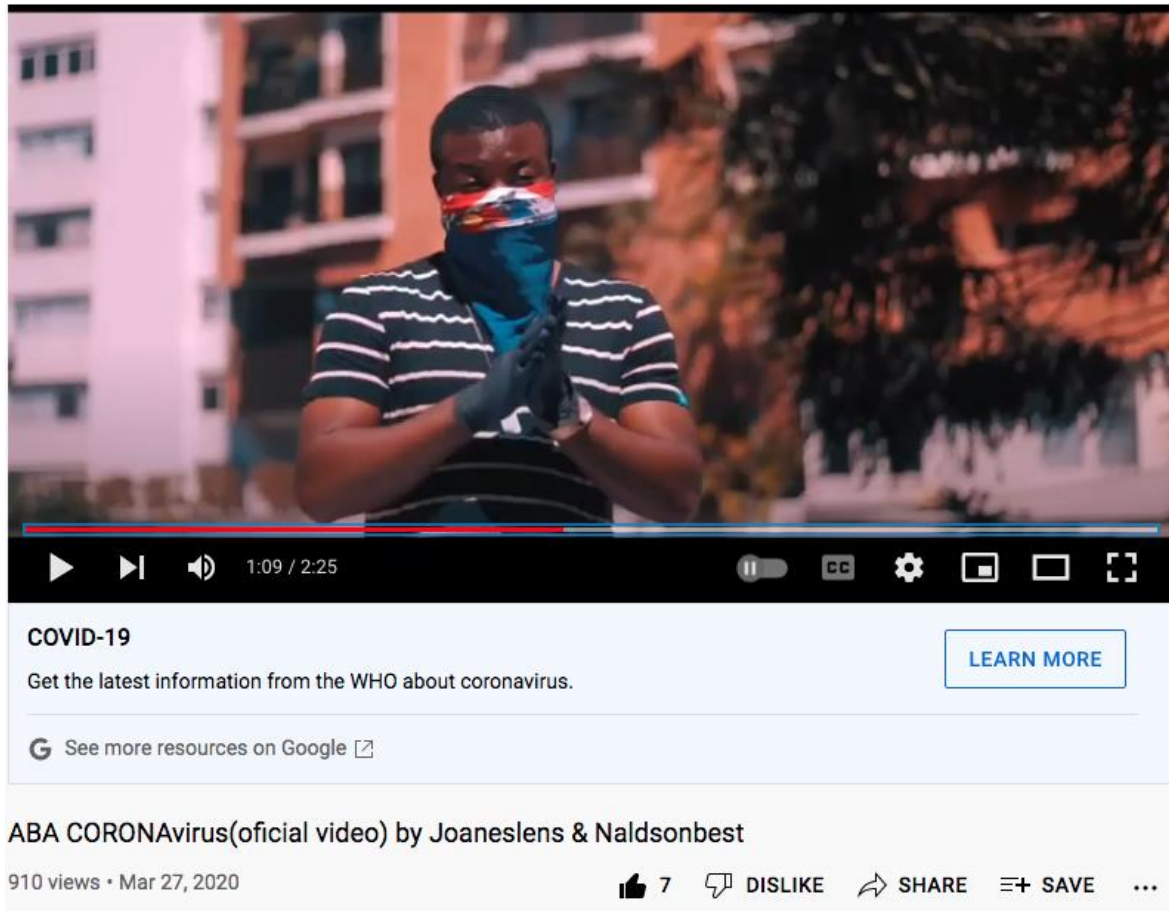
Avoid gatherings of over ten people  
It's an invisible virus  
Let's avoid going out  
Stay home, clean up your place  
Wash your hands, pray to God  
Use your faith, get rid of your anger  
Our prayers can be of great help

Doesn't matter if you're poor or rich  
Avoid risking yourself  
Corona is merciless  
We may regret it later

I'm Lens  
I invite everyone to be cautious against  
Coronavirus,  
Remember, it's our negligence that  
spreads it

Lave men w, pwòpte kò w  
E plus surtout restez chez vous

Wash your hands, clean your body  
And, above all, stay home



*Figure 28 - Joanes with a Haitian flag handkerchief as a mask and performing a handwashing gesture with gloved hands (screenshot by the author)*

Two days after AbaCORONA was uploaded to YouTube and shared on WhatsApp and social media, another freestyle performance was shared on the HAB group. MC Lobodja, David Lover's close friend and musical partner (see the previous chapter) shared with the group a minute-long, self-made cell phone video recording of him improvising verses about

the Coronavirus on a ready-made rap beat he selected from YouTube's vast repertoire of free beats.<sup>110</sup> The beat's atmosphere hinges on a sentimental and mournful feeling, with a simple three-chord progression ending on a minor chord and a kitschy accompanying piano melody. Lobodja interestingly justifies his genre choice to address the sad theme of the pandemic in the first verses, pointing to hip-hop's appropriateness for dealing with serious, social matters, setting it in opposition to funk carioca, one of his favourite music styles: 'Today I come with a very important issue, that's why I chose a rap beat, not a funk one'. Throughout the rest of the performance, in close similarity with Joanes' messages, Lobodja raises awareness regarding the perils of SarS-Cov2, urging people to take care, stay home, and avoid sharing glasses, cigarettes, and joints, as all those things help to spread this 'crazy disease'.

Hoje cheguei com um assunto  
muito importante  
Por isso escolhi uma base rap,  
não é funk  
Então se liga, família, em tudo  
que eu digo  
Vamos se prevenir se cuidar  
Falar pro amigo evitar sair  
Porque essa doença é muito  
louca  
Alguém pode transmitir para  
outra pessoa  
Não beber no mesmo copo, não  
fuma o mesmo cigarro  
Só pra evitar, não queima o  
mesmo baseado

Today I come with a very  
important issue  
That's why I chose a rap beat,  
not a funk one  
So, listen, family, to everything  
I say  
Let's be cautious, take care  
Tell our friend to avoid going out  
Because this disease is so damn  
crazy  
Someone may pass it to  
another person  
Don't share your glass, don't  
share your cigarette  
Just to avoid [it], don't share the  
same joint

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<sup>110</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/shorts/L9x6AExa-IY?feature=share>> (Accessed 04 May 2023)

Eu falei pra todo mundo, até falei  
pra minha coroa  
Toma cuidado pra não pegar até  
Corona  
Coronavírus é cruel, você não  
tem noção  
Por isso tem que lavar  
a mão, pegar precaução

I've said it to everyone, including  
my mamma  
Be careful so you don't catch  
Corona  
Coronavirus is cruel, you have  
no idea  
That's why you should wash  
your hands and take precaution

About a week later, in early April, a third song addressing the virus also appeared on the HAB WhatsApp group, advertised by its creators as an ‘awareness song’: ‘Maldita Corona’ (Damn Corona).<sup>111</sup> A collective work led by Asid Adult Man, it features three other Haitian artists who were living in or near the city of Porto Alegre at the time: Prince Amki, Clack Man, and BaadBadu, all of whom were closely related to the BSP studio. The studio itself and its burgeoning activity in the years before the pandemic had motivated Asid’s own internal mobility in Brazil, as in August 2019 he moved thousands of kilometres from the city of Cuiabá (capital of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul) to settle in Canoas, choosing it instead of larger and more affluent cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Asid Adult Man, personal communication with the author). With the onset of the pandemic, however, music production at BSP came to a halt, and the studio eventually closed its doors in March 2020 (see 3 Chapter, Production). Before closing, however, it would be the site where another socially aware song about the pandemic was produced by Haitian migrant artists.

As Asid told me in an interview, on a random day during the first weeks of the pandemic, Asid, Amki, and Clack Man were hanging around in the studio with

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<sup>111</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=-gfTnbChV7c>> (Accessed 13 April 2023)

beatmaker/producer BaadBadu while he worked on a new beat. As Asid listened to the looped beat, a short melody sprung to his mind (the one heard in the song’s intro and preceding the chorus):

Then I started ‘Eeh eh, uhum! Eeh eh!’, and Badu said ‘Man, that’s gonna catch’ – you know how he is – ‘That’ll work, that’s good!’. Then he recorded the melody and put it into the beat. And he said ‘Ok, but what’ll be the theme of the song?’. As the pandemic had just arrived, I said ‘Man, we must choose something trendy, what’s most trendy now is the pandemic, so let’s talk about it’. All the other guys were there and agreed, then we composed the verses and the chorus, ‘Damn Corona’, giving the advice right: ‘wash your hands’, and all that. It’s a song that could’ve been successful (interview with the author, August 2022).

Like the other examples, the track is also a grassroots production throughout:

BaadBadu produced the beat, recorded the voices, and did the mixing and mastering on his laptop, at home; Asid and Badu shot and edited the video, recorded in Prince and Asid’s shared flat in the Cidade Baixa district in Porto Alegre. BaadBadu set a rather dark and aseptic feel to the beat through his choice of samples, set against a heavier trap-style rhythm. The result is evocative of a barren, dark, and arid soundscape that one might find consistent with the song’s grim theme. In likeness to ‘Aba Corona(virus)’ and Lobodja’s freestyle, ‘Maldita Corona’ lyrics dwell on prevention measures and the predicaments to daily life brought about by the virus:

### *Chorus*

Maldita Corona, é  
Lave as mãos! (2x)  
Só Deus dá a causa  
Dessa pandemia de merda  
Lave as mãos!

Damn Corona, yeah  
Wash your hands! (2x)  
Only God can explain  
This shitty pandemic  
Wash your hands!

(Prince Amki)

*This motherfucking evil disease*  
Deixar o mundo parado  
Não fica tirando onda  
Que o negócio tá sério  
*The whole world is getting traumatized*  
*Nobody's safe even if in paradise*  
*Protect yourself if you wanna help the*  
*world*  
*Stop being foolish, let alone a rebel*  
*Two meters of distance, stay virtual*  
*Strengthening the quarantine now is a*  
*ritual*

This motherfucking evil disease  
Has stopped the world  
Don't fool around  
This is serious business  
The whole world is getting traumatized  
Nobody's safe even if in paradise  
Protect yourself if you wanna help the  
world  
Stop being foolish, let alone a rebel  
Two meters of distance, stay virtual  
Strengthening the quarantine now is a  
ritual

(Clack Man)

Tu chega em casa, é, lava a  
mão  
Mesmo com sua família evita apertar a  
mão  
Não conhece qual idade, quem que você  
seja  
Evita de abraçar, ninguém, só rejeita  
Então, lava as mãos (tá todos no  
mesmo barco)  
Tem que se cuidar contra o Corona  
O vírus só prova que ninguém é  
diferente  
Não precisa ser médico pra dar atenção  
pros doentes

When you get home, yeah, wash your  
hands  
Avoid shaking hands, even with Family  
It doesn't care what age or who you  
are  
Avoid hugging, no one, just reject  
So, wash your hands (we're all in the  
same boat)  
You gotta take care with Corona  
The virus just proves we're all the same  
You don't have to be a doctor to care for  
the sick

(BaadBadu)

Tem que ter cuidado nessa guerra pra  
vencer  
Só na baixa humildade que esse vírus  
pra vencer

You gotta be careful to win this war  
Only being humble can one defeat this  
virus

Antes de contar nota, lave as mãos  
O Covid-19 chega temporão  
Bota a máscara na cara antes de andar na  
rua  
Tem que ser forte, se segura, não deixa  
ele te arruinar  
*Pa fé pil street*  
*Si w konn lagè kòw fòw fè pi strik*  
  
*Se neglians ou kap bòw pil tit*  
  
*Evite les bitch pa nan pil strip*

(Asid Adult Man)

Deus pare pra pensar  
Os morador de rua quem vai ajudar?  
Saudade do meu 2019  
Enfia na bunda esse Covid-19!  
Lave as mãos com frequência  
Água, sabão, álcool gel  
Agora é tendência  
Alto! Se espirrar, cobra teu nariz,  
tua boca  
Não chupa mais, não beija mais

Before counting bills, wash your hands  
Covid-19 arrives early  
Put the mask on before going out  
  
You gotta be strong, contain yourself,  
don't let it ruin you  
Don't wander too much  
If you don't care for your body, you  
should be more strict  
It's your negligence that can give you  
more 'prizes'  
Avoid the bitches, don't go to strip  
[clubs]

God, stop and think  
Who will help the homeless?  
I miss my 2019  
Stick that Covid-19 up your ass!  
Wash your hands regularly  
Water, soap, alcohol gel  
Now it's the hype  
Stop! If you sneeze, cover your nose,  
your mouth  
Don't suck, don't kiss

Visual and scenic references also point to central items and actions of the pandemic such as masks and gloves, handwashing, and physician lab coats. Even the chorus choreography seems to perform a Covid-19 related gesture, as the four artists sweep their shoulders in sync, seemingly dusting off the invisible enemy (see Figure 29). The theme of Covid-19 as a leveller also appears in the song twice, as Clack Man (wearing a Haitian flag shirt) sings in Portuguese 'we're all in the same boat' and 'the virus just proves we're all the

same'. In contrast with 'AbaCORONA', however, 'Maldita Corona' is a multilingual song, with most of the lyrics in Portuguese and English, and only occasional use of Kreyòl. The songs' linguistic choices might evidence different intended audiences, as 'Aba Corona(virus)' is only intelligible to the Haitian public whereas 'Maldita Corona', despite the presence of foreign languages, can be grasped by a Brazilian audience. Such a choice is consistent with the different ambitions of its composers, as Asid and his partners had the genuine intention of making a hit in Brazil, while Joanes only had the intention of addressing his compatriots and raising their awareness.

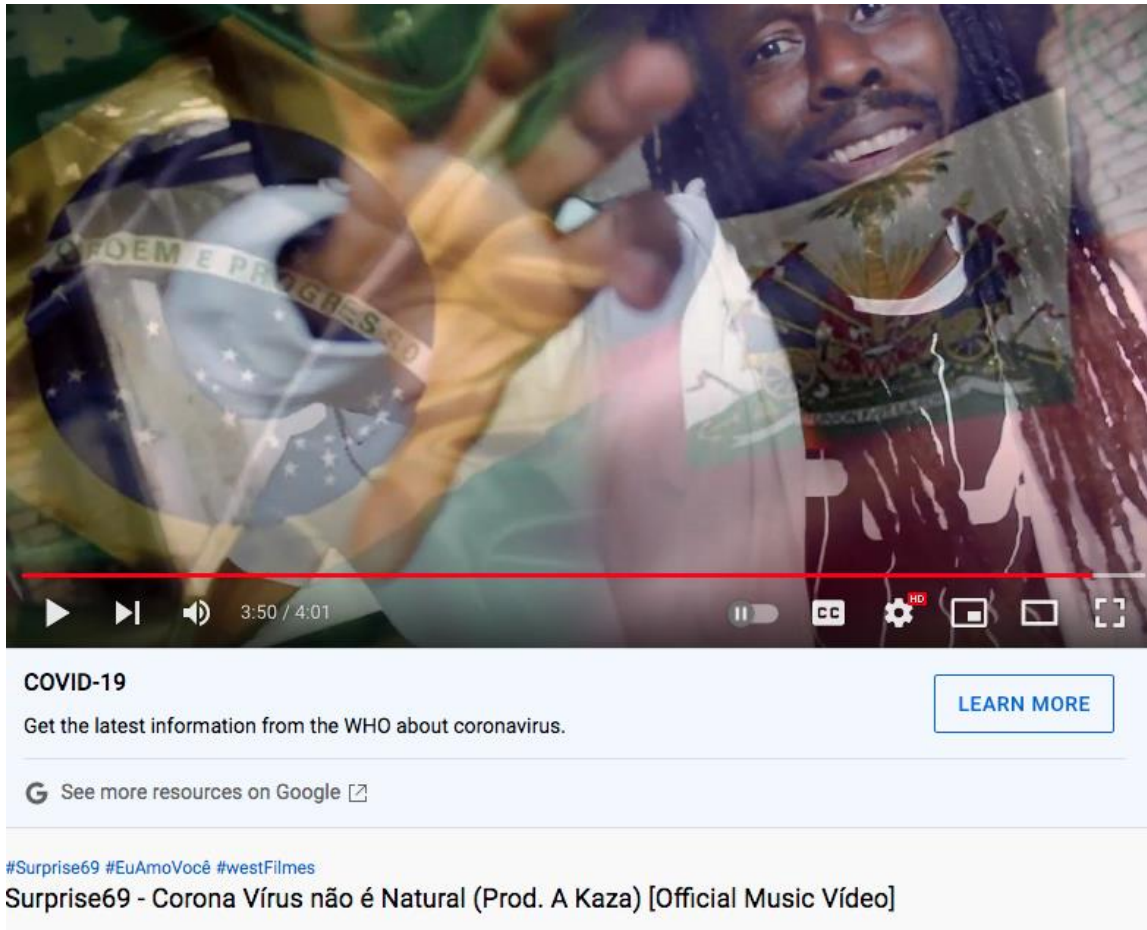


*Figure 29 - Amki, Asid, and Clack Man 'dusting off' the virus (screenshot by the author)*

The final example in this section, ‘Corona vírus não é natural’ (Coronavirus is not natural), is a song by Surprise 69, a Haitian-Brazilian group based in the city of São Paulo since 2015, but inactive since 2021.<sup>112</sup> The group’s mobile history bears testimony to musical alliances forged in the crucible of transnational migration, but also to their transience as individual projects of searching for life (*chache lavi*) affect the viability of collective musical efforts. The group was a personal project of Haitian artist MarioLove (the alias of Mario Casseus) before he left Haiti, and it began to take shape in Ecuador when he met compatriot ElNegroflow (the previous alias of Tito Calle, mentioned in the Production chapter), as both were on their way to Brazil (see Figure 30). The first rehearsals and performances happened in the city of Manaus, in the state of Amazonas, before the two eventually settled in São Paulo, where a third Haitian member, Black G, joined the group. The group progressively gained traction as a representative of the local Haitian community through participation in several relevant cultural and musical events such as the 2017 Virada Cultural, having even briefly crossed paths with Brazilian hip-hop stars Racionais MC’s. With great personal dedication, MarioLove (see Figure 30) kept the group running despite successive changes in its formation, a circumstance linked to the substantial internal and transnational mobility of Haitian migrants in their search for a better life. Now that Mario himself has migrated to Boston, the group’s future remains uncertain, even if he continues to hold on to its existence (and a future return to Brazil) with admirable confidence.

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<sup>112</sup> Available at: <<https://youtube.com/watch?v=o8PAeUctZiI>> (Accessed 15 April 2023)



*Figure 30 - MarioLove and the flags of Brazil and Haiti in the background (screenshot by the author)*

At the time of the song's debut, the group was composed of Mario, RoChizoe (another Haiti hip-hopper), and Brazilian Cauê Chimera, and the song also features a guest appearance by a Brazilian female singer called Mylla Pereira. Cauê is an underground Brazilian hip-hop artist (a *quebrada* artist, according to himself), music producer, and beatmaker based in the neighbourhood of Perus (a neighbourhood in São Paulo harbouring a significant number of Haitians) who nowadays earns most of his income rapping freestyle in São Paulo's

metropolitan train and underground system.<sup>113</sup> While working as an arts educator in Peru's Hip-Hop House a few years back he met RoChizoe, with whom he started developing a musical partnership. When Mario decided to resume Surprise69 after ElNegroflow left the group, he invited RoChizoe, his childhood friend, who in his turn suggested bringing Cauê along. During the brief period between 2021 and Mario and RoChizoe's leaving for the USA, the group produced three songs in the studio, but only 'Corona' was ultimately released on social media. The idea for the song came from Mario, who suggested they should record a song about the pandemic: similarly to Asid, he thought it was the 'talk of the moment'. He initially sent Cauê an idea for the chorus sung over the same reggae beat which features in the song's final version. Cauê, however, took the lead in the song's production and wrote a new chorus for the song, converting the original one into the verses sung by Mylla.

The video clip starts with candles burning in the dark and Cauê's voice, offering the song as a homage to the victims of Covid-19. In contrast to the previous examples, the song is not a hip-hop track, but remains within the domain of Afro-diasporic musical aesthetics: it is an upbeat reggae track marked by the characteristic one-drop drum rhythm and plentiful references to Rastafari culture. Sung in Portuguese (by Cauê, Mylla, and MarioLove) and Kreyòl (by RoChizoe and MarioLove), it depicts many of the same Covid-19-related messages and icons as the previous examples: masks, handwashing recommendations, urgings to respect quarantine and avoid spreading the virus, alerts regarding the virus' lethality, and a

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<sup>113</sup> The word '*quebradas*' (the lower-class neighbourhoods in the periphery of Brazilian cities) signals an urban geography of exclusion of which has profound connections with hip-hop culture in Brazil (see Pardue 2008).

commitment to ‘fight’ the virus. Sung by Cauê, the chorus’ lyrics highlight the global reach of the pandemic – likened to a song gone ‘viral’ – but also introduce an element of dissent:

*Chorus*

Contaminou o mundo todo em  
uma só canção  
Contrariou e trouxe de volta segregação

(Cauê Chimera)

É voz que ecoa  
Me sinto sozinho, mas tranquilo  
eu tô na boa  
É pelos meus filhos e também minha  
coroa  
Minha mãezinha, minha rainha  
Me botou no mundo, tá ligado não é  
à toa  
Então pessoas, cuidado  
Que o tempo passa e a vida voa  
Sou linha de frente e a camisa a gente  
sua  
É *nostra Kaza*, fica em casa  
Vai entender que a quarentena aqui  
não é à toa  
Não deixa o vírus espaia  
Vamos cuidar dos nossos familiares  
Por isso eu grito *fya*<sup>114</sup>  
Fogo nessas pragas que se encontram  
pelos ares  
*One love*, rasta  
Isso é o que Jah diz a todos rastafaris  
Da tribo Bing Naya

Contaminated the whole world with the  
same song  
Contradicted and brought back  
segregation

My voice echoes  
I feel alone, but it’s cool,  
I’m good  
For my sons and my  
mamma  
My mammy, my queen  
Put me in this world, get it, it ain’t for  
nothing  
So, people, watch out  
Time passes and life flies  
I’m at the front rank, our shirts are  
sweaty  
It’s *nostra Kaza*, stay home  
You’ll see the quarantine isn’t  
for nothing  
Don’t let the virus spread  
Let’s care for our family  
That’s why I scream *fya*  
Fire at that plague which hovers  
in the air  
One love, rasta  
That’s what Jah says to all Rastafaris  
Of the tribe Bing Naya

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<sup>114</sup> Cauê explained the spelling as the ‘Rastafari way’ of writing the word fire.

Vou mais adiante bem antes que me  
parem

I keep moving before they  
stop me

(RoChizoe)

Fò n'lave men nou, se pou  
byen nou  
Evite foul lè n'pran lari,  
mesye fòk nou met kach nan nen nou  
Si w pa bezwen m', pa tcheke m man,  
ret lakay ou, oh yeah  
Chita pa bay, men n'oblige ret  
lakay nou, yeah yeah  
Pou vale moun m wè kap mouri, son  
misyon kap akonpli  
Fò n'lave men nou, se pou  
byen nou  
Evite pou nou pa pran, Kowona  
Fò n'lave men nou, se pou  
byen nou  
Evite pou nou pa pran epidemi sa

We must wash our hands, it's for our  
own good  
Avoid crowds when you're on the street,  
people, we must put our masks on  
If you don't need me, don't look me up,  
stay home, oh yeah  
Sitting idle is no good, but we must stay  
home, yeah yeah  
The number of people dying shows  
we're fulfilling the mission  
We must wash our hands, it's for our  
own good  
Avoid, so we don't get Corona  
We must wash our hands, it's for our  
own good  
Avoid, so we don't get this epidemic

(Mylla Pereira)

Eu vou lutar (2x)  
Eu vou lutar contra o Coronavírus

I'm gonna fight (2x)  
I'm gonna fight against Coronavirus

(Mariolove)

Lafrans, Kanada, Etazini  
Corona não é natural, fala pra mim  
Alemanha, França e China  
Corona não é natural, fala pra mim

France, Canada, United States  
Corona isn't natural, come on, tell me  
Germany, France, and China  
Corona isn't natural, come on, tell me

Whilst the first verse points to the virus' infectious impartiality, departing from the  
previously addressed songs, Surprise 69's track brings to the fore an issue which numerous

scientific studies have later confirmed: the pandemic's differential impacts regarding race, class, and gender in several countries throughout the globe. In 2021, statistical analysis of Covid-19 related deaths in Brazil investigated the disease's differential impact regarding race, gender and occupation, with results unequivocally pointing to the heavier impact of the disease on Black women and men (irrespective of occupation) in comparison with white men and highlighting the importance of social determinants of health along with the pandemic's deepening of social disparities (Ribeiro et al. 2021; Prates et al. 2021). The choice to address such themes is not surprising considering that Cauê locates his own artistic practice in a lineage of politically engaged hip-hop, of rapping as a form of social protest and militancy against forms of state oppression. Cauê confirmed his intentions of criticizing Bolsonaro's management of the pandemic through the song in the following manner:

My part was really based on politics, on what was happening then, denialism. And also, to the fact that we depended on ourselves, if we didn't take care of ourselves, the State and the government wouldn't give a damn if we die. That was it. That was the speech of the president: 'I'm no gravedigger' and 'It's just a little flu'. My lyrics were based on that.' (Cauê Chimera, WhatsApp audio message, March 2023)

Simple as they might appear, MarioLove's verses bring up another recurring theme within the pandemic, a decidedly polemic one: the suspicion about SarS-Cov2 being a human creation. As the song draws to an end, in a mixture of Kreyòl and Portuguese, he sings: 'France, Canada, United States! Corona is not natural, come on, tell me! Germany, France, and China! Corona is not natural, come on, tell me!' MarioLove's intentions with the song were explained to me through two main arguments: firstly, his perception that people weren't taking the pandemic seriously, a behaviour that presented a veritable threat to their lives, and secondly, the suspicion that the virus was part of a Global North plot to further economic dominance over the poor (interview with the author, 11 November 2021). In conversations

with different Haitian collaborators during the pandemic, more than once I encountered a suspicion or accusation that SarS-Cov2 might be the creation of developed nations of the Global North to negatively affect underdeveloped nations and their populations.

While it would be an overstatement to suggest that this opinion is representative of all Haitians, as a participant of communication networks of the Haitian diaspora in Brazil I was able to witness the considerable grip that the worldwide infodemic of fake news regarding the pandemic and vaccines had on some Haitians. As an illustration of such uncertainty and its intersections with issues of race and inequality, on March 20, a video entitled ‘The science agenda to exterminate Blacks’ was shared on HAB, describing the probability of the use of RNA interference technology in the engineering of food crops to cause infertility in Black people exclusively. The video was produced by a website entitled ‘Natural News’, a far-right, anti-vaccination conspiracy theory and fake news website accused of spreading irresponsible health information (Kata 2012), and such a claim was accompanied by references to many other conspiracy theories, primarily those involving the US government.

In Brazil, Bolsonaro and his closest political associates played a decisive role in producing a misinformation campaign which included conspiracy theories against China as the deviser of Sars-Cov2 and generalized suspicion about vaccines.<sup>115</sup> However, a substantial distance separates the sceptical outlook voiced by a Haitian migrant like MarioLove from the denialist policy implemented in Brazil by top-ranking government officials. The government’s attempt at implicating China in causing the pandemic stands as but one xenophobic thread of a

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<sup>115</sup> Bolsonaro’s chancellor Ernesto Araújo knowingly accused China of being responsible for the creation of SarS-Cov2, referring to the virus as the ‘*comunavírus*’ (roughly translated as commie-virus). Available at: <<https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2021-05-18/ernesto-araujo-mente-sobre-ataques-a-china-e-transfere-fracasso-na-diplomacia-da-vacina-para-ministerio-da-saude.html>> (Accessed 14 April 2023)

coarse institutional misinformation campaign carried out by those elected to govern the country, whose irresponsible conduct affected the lives (and caused the deaths) of millions of people. On the other hand, the suspicion raised by MarioLove, even if lacking scientific proof, does not add up to a full denialist stance, and evidences the grip of anti-establishment suspicion amongst the powerless. After all, not only is Surprise 69's song evidently centred on raising awareness about the dangers of the virus but in our talks, Mario made a point of stressing he was fully vaccinated against Covid-19 (personal communication with the author, 2021). Mario's verses might be better grasped if seen as a form of grassroots social criticism against Western powers' role in the intensification of global disparities – a reality familiar to Haitians that only grew during the pandemic – and the traumatic and exploitative legacies of (neo)colonialism and imperialism. To understand it, one need only recall the recent conflation of global North 'humanitarian' intervention and disease in Haiti: in 2010, over ten thousand people died in the country's first cholera outbreak, caused by a sewage leak from a base used by Nepali UN peacekeepers (UN 2016).

*Centro Cultural Raul Seixas, José Bonifácio neighbourhood, São Paulo – 2 October 2021*

*Following a request from MarioLove, I took the train to São Paulo's East Zone on Sunday morning, as he wanted me to be present in a meeting with two Brazilian cultural producers concerning a film project of his. The journey from the city centre was long, and through the train's window, I could clearly witness the gradual but consistent downward movement along the lines of class and wealth ingrained in the city's urban landscape. I met MarioLove outside the station, where James, another Haitian invited by Mario, picked us up in a cab to meet the others at the nearby Raul Seixas Cultural Centre. There we met Taty, Surprise69's producer, Haitian filmmaker Patrick Akon, and the Brazilian producers Carlão and Marcão. Mario began to present his film project, centred on the perspective of a Haitian immigrant living in Brazil through four main themes: love, action, racism, and Vodou. Soon Patrick interrupted and began to talk about how he only became aware of what racism was after arriving in*

*Brazil. The conversation meandered from the film towards experiences of racism, not only by Haitians but also by Taty, a brown-skinned Brazilian woman. The producers, white lower-class men from the periphery involved in local hip-hop scenes, were sympathetic, yet seemed to have little time or attention for the movie, instead opting to talk about their own artistic endeavours and political connections. After what felt like a rather long and unfruitful meeting, Mario and James invited me, Carlão, and Patrick to lunch at a nearby roasted chicken joint. We sat outside at a table on the edge of the sidewalk and ordered beers, as it was getting really hot. Mario was thrilled about the idea of making the movie and wanted me to play a character in it: a journalist. He envisioned the film's success and told the waiter that once 'we' had won big prizes with it we would come back and have another chicken to celebrate. We talked about cultural differences between Haiti and Brazil (such as who should pay the bill on a romantic date) and eventually about the many Haitians who were at that time leaving Brazil. Mario was adamant 'I love Brazil, I never leave [sic] Brazil!'. The project was eventually abandoned, and a few months later Mario migrated to the US.*

Almost two years after their initial release, the three songs considered here remain the main examples of direct treatment of the theme of the new Coronavirus by Haitian artists in Brazil. Their release dates in the early months of the pandemic point to a sense of urgency and social responsibility shared by the artists, which places migrants' aesthetic agency in sharp contrast to the Brazilian government's inaction, slowness, and denialism. The main themes running through both lyrics and visual elements in the video clips emphasize awareness about the virus, recommend caution and the observing of scientifically grounded prevention measures, and riff on the virus' colour blindness as an affirmation of human equality. Significantly, they also point to the virus' unequal effects along social and racial lines and the many intersections between the disease and social determinants of health affecting vulnerable groups throughout the world.

Such a demonstration of concern with using music and their position and skills as artists to raise social awareness form a dialogue with the Haitian concept of *mizik sosyal* (social or socially engaged music). As previously discussed regarding Dirksen's (2020)

analyses of engaged music making in Haiti, *mizik sosyal* has emerged as a new signifier amongst young Haitian artists which seeks to establish a distinction from the older and widely disseminated idea of *mizik angaje* (engaged music) and its (perceived or real) direct connection to traditional politics. *Mizik sosyal* has been increasingly used to refer to music that expresses ‘concern over anonymous, generalized actors, causes, events, or situations, while taking a collectivist approach to bettering society’ (2020: 376–7). While it may not ‘explicitly state how things have come to be and who was the cause’, its topics tend to ‘reflect deep structural violence and historical conditioning’ (2020: 366). The aesthetic choices revealed by genre choice also demonstrate an alignment and identification with important traditions of socially engaged Afro-diasporic music making. As explicitly acknowledged by MC Lobodja regarding the choice of genre for his freestyle performance, the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) soundscapes evoked by the setting of such engaged musicking in the sonic realms of hip-hop and reggae – Afro-diasporic musical cultures invested of strong family ties – amplifies their significance as products of Black migrant aesthetic agency which performs a grassroots critical discourse. As ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall highlights, both hip-hop and reggae ‘have worked to mobilize the righteous, indignant rage of the oppressed and disenfranchised – and frequently, the black and poor – in the New World and [...] around the world, amplifying the repressed voices of global capitalism, bourgeois nationalism, and neo-colonialism’ (Marshall 2007: 5).

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, these artists’ attitude towards the spread of the virus and the sudden stop to their normal lives and musical activities evokes the political aesthetics of migration in ‘resisting silence as a means of creating space’ for their own voices (Bohlman 2011: 151), in a way which reveal an unselfish social concern aimed at

preventing further harm and deaths in Haiti, Brazil, and around the globe. The relevance of such aesthetic agency grows when placed against the reckless and inept posture of the Brazilian government during the pandemic, evidencing a stark contrast between those in power and a vulnerable minority population. All in all, despite sounding, rapping, and riffing their points of view on the new Coronavirus and its dangers to both Brazilian and global society, such songs remained in effect anonymous – as invisible and inaudible as Haitian music making in Brazil still is to most Brazilians.

### **Pandemic crossroads of silence and mobility: the necropolitics of the Haitian exodus from Brazil**

While I previously explored migrant utterances and music as sonic manifestations of politicized migrant aesthetic agency, I wish now to draw attention to the negative valence of sound's absence, silence, and how it relates in different but interrelated manners to the exodus of thousands of Haitians from Brazil during the pandemic. As stated by Bindeman (2017), silence is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which resists organization into a single coherent entity. Nonetheless, as Gautier asserts, it is a sonic and human phenomenon of significant cross-cultural intensity, being frequently associated with 'a haunting; the dangers and fear of the unknown; the insecurities produced by the ungraspable and the profound irreversibility of death' (2015: 183). Influenced by the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, post-structuralist reflection about silence has focused on highlighting its relations with power and politics, conceiving it as 'a form of oppression and a key element in the application of the discourse of power-relations whereby various groups and various behaviours of people are marginalized by society' (Bindeman 2017: 144), or 'as the opposite

of “having a voice”, where voice is rendered as a sign of identity and presence of the subject’ (Gautier 2015: 183).

Abandonment, the failure to hear, neglect, and dismissal can in such a perspective be understood as forms of silencing, as an active politics of domination which renders certain voices inaudible and certain bodies expendable (2015: 183) – or in the case of migrants living in translation, manifests as translator inaudibility (Cronin 2006), as discussed above regarding Bolsonaro’s (and his followers’) attitude towards the Haitian man. Expanding, Gautier suggests that while the dialectics between recognition and negation of the subject that manifest in a biopolitics of silence may sometimes be straightforward (such as silence resulting from death and disappearance in regimes of oppression), it may also express itself in less deliberate ways, as in silences triggered by the economic disenfranchisement of late neoliberalism, through which, she argues, ‘whole populations are deemed dispensable’ (2015: 187).

Haitians and other non-white Global South migrants and refugees in Brazil have come to face numerous challenges during the pandemic: besides feeling in acute ways the effects of the generalized economic recession and social distancing, they experienced further vulnerability deriving from the lack of specific health and social policies. Haitian testimonies concerning their experiences of the pandemic in Brazil have revealed concerns with ‘work and subsistence of the family in Brazil and Haiti; uncertainty of the future; risk of contamination and of dying in Brazil; cancellation of children’s classes; discouragement and loneliness’ in addition to experiences of racism and differential treatment within the *Sistema Único de Saúde* (SUS), the Brazilian public health-care system (Souza et al. 2020, 2020a; Branco 2020, 2020a). Patrick Akon, a Haitian filmmaker living in São Paulo I had previously met in 2018,

was able to resort to SUS after contracting Covid-19 in April 2020. His experience after a week in hospital, however, is revealing of how a ‘biopolitics of otherness’ – the body as ‘the site of inscription for the politics of immigration’ (Fassin 2001: 4) – compounded the precarious experience of Haitian migrants in Brazil during the pandemic:

I felt I was different, and that some doctors were afraid. Some were ‘cool’, they came and talked to me, and others just didn’t want to touch me. This issue of racism is really strong in Brazil. If I were a Frenchman or an American, it’d be different. The treatment was different between me and white people with Covid. And that hurts, it hurts a lot. (Branco 2020)

In a country whose government’s neglect of public health during the pandemic achieved international attention, it comes as no surprise that migrants and refugees have suffered with utter disregard on the part of the government. Despite the pressure of associations connected to the well-being of migrants and refugees, the government also failed to produce data on the impact of Covid-19 on such populations, as most healthcare forms used during the pandemic did not contain a field for nationality, therefore resulting in a *statistical* silence regarding the incidence and fatality rate amongst migrants and refugees. As researchers of the Network for the Healthcare of Immigrants and Refugees sum up in their critique of the government’s conduct, ‘to improve the condition of migrants and refugees during the pandemic, one needs to firstly actually see [or, perhaps, hear] them’ (Bersani, Pereira and Castelli 2020). Yet, as the pandemic unfolded, the health of such populations (much like that of native Brazilians) was scarcely of interest to Bolsonaro’s government.

Within a scenario of drastic economic recession and currency devaluations, not only did living costs in Brazil become unbearable for Haitians, but their capacity to send economic

remittances to Haiti was also severely impaired.<sup>116</sup> Caught in the crossings of disease, economic precarity, statistical silence, and social invisibility/inaudibility, one might suggest that Haitians and other migrants in Brazil increasingly found themselves stranded at a dangerous crossroads (in Kreyòl, *kalfou danjere*). Crossroads are places of crucial importance in African folklore and the Afro-Caribbean religion of *vodou*: '[c]ollisions occur at the crossroads; decisions must be made there. But the crossroads can also provide a unique perspective, a vantage point where one can see in more than one direction' (Lipsitz 1994: 7–8). Albeit perhaps only temporarily, crossroads are also places of stillness. Discussing relations between mobility and immobility in Haiti during the early moments of the pandemic (characterized by government restrictions in Haiti), Handerson and Neiburg elaborate on the meanings of being still within Haitian culture:

If we had to choose a motto from among those that modulate lives in Haiti it would be precisely this: don't stay quiet, keep moving to search for a life worth living (*chache lavi miyò*). In this social landscape, being stuck, prevented from moving, is synonymous with an absence of life, as in extreme cases of people enslaved on the plantation or death by magic, which impedes the soul of the deceased from continuing its journey to Ginen or paradise. (2021: 5–6)

Statements by Haitian migrants cited in Souza et al. (2020: 5, 2020a: 5) point to how the sense of stillness brought about by the pandemic also was deeply detrimental to Haitians' search for life in Brazil: 'I worry about the future and feel anxious'; 'I fear dying in Brazil'; 'it was difficult already, with the crisis it's worse'; 'how can we stay home, if we need to work?' At that moment, most Haitians' response to the need to search for a better life was to start moving. In February 2021, hundreds of Haitian migrants coming from the southern states of

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<sup>116</sup> According to data from the World Bank, economic remittances from the Haitian diaspora correspond to approximately 25% of the country's GDP. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=HT> (Accessed 12 October 2020)

Brazil reached a dead end at an actual, topographic, crossroads: the intersection of the Acre River and the ‘Integration Bridge’ at the triple border between Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia (Barbosa 2021). Due to the closing of the Peruvian border on account of halting the spread of Covid-19, segregation substituted for integration, and it became the site of an improvised encampment where Haitian families on the move north were detained, waiting and protesting for their right to move before being allowed to carry on. The incident, which made the headlines of some of the main Brazilian newspapers, provided the first discernible signs that a discreet, silent exodus of Haitians from Brazil had begun. Excited by Trump’s defeat in 2020 and Biden’s electoral promise of more humane treatment of migrants and refugees, lured by misinformation about facilitated asylum for Haitian families, and confronted with Brazil’s dire situation and prospects, thousands of Haitians decided it was time to *pran wout la* (take the route).

The word *wout* (route) and its verbal uses such as *pran wout la* are native categories which help to narrate both a pragmatics of mobility and a way of being and becoming among Haitian diasporic subjects (Montinard 2020: 4). More than describing particular fixed itineraries, points of departure or arrival, they centre on the pervasiveness of the constant movement of searching for life (*chache lavi*) and are the object of continuous reformulation according to the prospects of a good life (*byen viv*) presented by constantly changing conjunctures (2020: 4; 20). As a severe economic recession and political instability took hold in Brazil in 2015, the circulation of expressions such as *pran wout la* and *wout Miami* amongst Haitians in the country indicated the emergence of a new migratory project: to reach the US through an intercontinental migration corridor spanning South and Central America (2020: 3). Since 2016, an increasing number of Haitians (as well as migrants from nations all over the

world) have used this route to reach the US-Mexico border (Miraglia 2016); yet, the presidential election of Republican Donald Trump, an advocate of a zero-tolerance immigration policy, would discourage many of them: statistics provided by the Panamanian National Migration Service offer an insight into the impact of high-level political discourse and policy in the calculation of migration projects by Haitians before the pandemic, showing that in 2016, 16,742 Haitians entered Panama by land, but after Donald Trump's election numbers fell to a meagre forty<sup>117</sup>

According to Montinard (2020), Haitians spend thousands of dollars (up to \$7,500) and many months (between three and six) on a dangerous pathway by land through multiple countries. The most (in)famous part of the journey is the Darién Gap, a one-hundred-kilometre-long mountainous region of dense tropical rainforest between Colombia and Panama. To cross one of the world's most deadly stretches of land within a migratory route, migrants face an exhausting and life-threatening journey filled with perils such as poisonous fauna, floods, and frequent violent incursions of armed paramilitary groups and drug traffickers (Miraglia 2016; Montinard 2020). Official Panamanian statistics also bear strong evidence of the side effects of the pandemic and the 2020 US presidential elections concerning the numbers of Haitians leaving Brazil and Chile: while in 2019 approximately 10,500 Haitians entered Panama through the Darién Gap, in 2020 the numbers fell to 6,653, a year later rising again to a staggering 82,952.<sup>118</sup> The Darién Gap may also be conceived as intimately associated with silence in different ways. Not only are many migrants perpetually

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<sup>117</sup> Available at: <<https://migracion.gob.pa/images/img2021/pdf/IRREGULARES%202010-2019%20actualizado.pdf>> (Accessed 19 April 2023)

<sup>118</sup> When counted the children of Haitian parents born in Brazil and Chile, such number reaches circa 100,000.

silenced due to their deaths within its dense forests, but it is also a place of momentary silence as migrants lose their access to communication networks, causing many relatives and friends to wait apprehensively for signs of their arrival in Panama.

Such a substantial phenomenon of human mobility would produce another episode of ‘migration crisis’ with great significance for US politics, whose apex was the installation of circa fifteen thousand migrants (mostly Haitians) beneath a bridge in the border town of Del Río, Texas. Mediatic repercussions of the bridge and the attempted crossings of the Rio Grande river highlighted the squalid conditions of the campsite and myriad images of Haitians crossing the Rio Grande and being assaulted with truculence by border patrol agents, shocking the world with the clear reverberations of the predicaments of slavery.<sup>119</sup> As a joint report by NGOs Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights and Haitian Bridge Alliance on the encampment summarized,

[t]he Del Rio encampment began as a site of hope. [...] But as more families gathered and the processing lines became longer, the truth emerged: the U.S. government had trapped Haitian migrants in an encampment. The ‘processing’ most of them were awaiting was for summary mass expulsion to Haiti. (Decker 2022: 7)

Demonstrating that, regardless of significant ideological and political differences, racial criteria and anti-Haitian prejudice in immigration policy represented a common ground between them, President Joe Biden took advantage of a legal framework initiated by the Trump administration to deal with the political pressure generated by the Del Rio situation. While adhering to a medical-populist stance of downplaying Covid-19 (Lasco 2020), the Trump administration also made discriminatory use of the Covid-19 sanitary crisis to

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<sup>119</sup> Available at: <<https://twitter.com/naacp/status/1440433080477519872>> (Accessed 13 October 2022)

implement racist immigration policy by resurrecting Title 42 (a clause from the 1944 Public Health Services Law) to deport Haitians and other Black migrants (Hinojosa et al. 2021).<sup>120</sup> The continued use of Title 42 until its expiration with the lifting of the Covid-19 public health emergency on 11 May 2023 allowed the US government to evade legal obligations and internationally guaranteed migrant rights to people in conditions of extreme vulnerability, deporting thousands of Haitians and other migrants in a political manipulation of an epidemiological event. As the Del Rio report underscores, the historical record of US immigration policies shows that such a posture has characterized the discriminatory treatment dispensed to Haitians by US authorities for centuries, as the deportations of Haitian migrants during the pandemic

is a continuation of a long, bipartisan history of discriminatory immigration policies designed to keep Haitian migrants out of the U.S. For over two centuries, the U.S. has pursued a policy of Haitian containment, detention, and expulsion through militaristic intervention and immigration enforcement practices, indiscriminate incarceration, and pseudo-scientific medical policymaking portraying Haitians as carriers of life-threatening diseases. (Decker 2022: 15)

Since then, while a significant number of Haitians have managed to enter the US and wait for their immigration or asylum hearings, in 2021 alone more than 20 thousand Haitians – even those who had been living in Brazil or Chile and with children born in these countries – have been forcibly deported back to Haiti, a country most of them had not seen in years and which has seen increased political instability and insecurity since the beginning of the pandemic, including the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse on July 7, 2021 (2022: 41).

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<sup>120</sup> After the expiration of Title 42, the US has returned to the standard immigration processing known as Title 8. Available at: <<https://reuters.com/world/americas/title-42-is-ending-us-mexico-border-what-is-it-what-happens-now-2023-05-05/>> (Accessed 20 May 2023)

*Conexão 48 Hostel/Inna the Place studio, Florianópolis – 6 July 2021*

*After an afternoon spent with Very Larose at his room/studio, I called an Uber to go back to my accommodation. A driver accepted my request, and suddenly his name and picture appeared: Jovenel, a Black man. I showed Very and commented 'I think he's Haitian'. Very laughed and agreed. We went out into the night, and I said goodbye to Very. As I entered the car, I saluted Jovenel in Kreyòl 'Bonswa, kouman ou ye?'. He laughed in surprise. I told him about my research, and my effort to learn the language, all of which made him say he was happy to get to know a Brazilian who actually made some effort to speak the Haitian language. He said he was a musician as well, and showed me a picture of his bass guitar, the avatar of his Facebook profile. I added him. He mentioned he liked to play música sertaneja, and I asked, 'And what about konpa?'. He said 'Wi, se mizik mwen' (Yes, that's my music). As the news and comments about popular discontent with President Jovenel Moïse (involved in the corruption scandal of PetroCaribe and recently ruling the country by decree) were frequently circulating in Haitian WhatsApp groups, I asked him what he thought of his namesake. He answered that Jovenel seemed a good president to him, adding that ruling the country was difficult due to fierce political disputes, gang violence, and corruption. The ride ended and we said goodbye, wishing each other good luck in life. Only a few hours after saying goodbye to Jovenel, the Haitian Uber driver, I became aware that Jovenel, the Haitian president, was assassinated in his own home in baffling circumstances.*

The manifold silences and circumstances which surround the Haitian exodus from Brazil in the pandemic bring to the fore a contemporary manifestation of what philosopher Achille Mbembe has termed necropolitics (2003). Mbembe's concept assumes that 'the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die' (2003: 11). In a clear resemblance with the logics of Bolsonaroism, the necropolitical right to kill, Mbembe suggests, has been most closely articulated within state regimes of exception and emergency, where the creation of fictionalized enemies is a common denominator dividing people into those who must live and those that must die (2003: 16). Drawing on Foucault's conceptual pair of biopolitics and biopower, Mbembe highlights the connection between necropolitics and colonialism by remembering that the foremost technology for operating such division is racism: '[i]n the

economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state' (2003: 17). Drawing on Frantz Fanon's description of the spatialization regimes characteristic of colonial occupation, Mbembe emphasizes how racist technologies of biopolitical partition expressed (and continue to express) the operation of necropower, defining who mattered and who did not through the writing of new spatial relations: boundaries, enclaves, zones, camps (2003: 25–7).

The neglecting, detaining, and deporting of Haitians between Brazil and the US–Mexico border shows how the political calculations of the Brazilian and US governments during the pandemic framed them as dispensable human beings. Haitians' (im)mobility during the pandemic offers a contemporary example of the persisting legacy of the spatialization of colonial occupation and its racialized contours, of necropolitics in action during a global health emergency. It renders visible how the pandemic was used to enforce different regimes of mobility by individual states and international regulation, contrasting the 'privileged movements of some and the co-dependent but stigmatised and forbidden movement, migration and interconnection of the poor, powerless and exploited' (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013: 188). As foregrounded by Hinojosa et al. regarding precisely the Central and North American context, Covid-19 served as a pretext for the uneven manipulation of borders, justifying the deportation of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers without due care and observance of human rights (thus conceivably acting against its own rationale by contributing to the spread of the virus) while at the same time allowing the movements of other populations (2021: 593–4). Yet such dire circumstances weren't enough to wipe out the power and aesthetic agency of Haitian voices and music making. As suggested by Gautier, in resisting the oppression of biopolitical silencing, musical reactions might offer a glimpse of an

affirmative biopolitics of life (2015: 187). Following such a proposition, in the following I examine how the aesthetic responses to the experience of the route and the pain of death through music composition bear witness to the intersection between the political aesthetics of migration and necropolitics.

### **The (necro)political aesthetics of migration: (deathly) silences and music as resistance**

In early June 2021, *kalfou danjere* manifested itself, intersecting the route with my fieldwork, when I learned through social media that Jeffrey Verilus, a 33-year-old Haitian artist who had been living in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, drowned while crossing a river in the Darién Gap (see Figure 31). His unexpected death impacted the Haitian diaspora in Brazil and overseas, producing myriad displays of mourning, especially as many weren't aware of his departure. Silence, I would come to understand, was also a part of the preparations for the journey, frequently kept secret from all but family and the closest of friends. While working with Very Larose in Florianópolis, I met Haitian photographer and filmmaker Djullyen, Jeffrey's childhood friend. He couldn't believe his friend died in the search for a better life. He told me that Jeffrey had never mentioned his intention of leaving Brazil, something which he regarded as unlikely as things seemed to be going fine for Jeffrey and he knew of no urgency that justified the risks of the route (personal communication with the author, 2021).

Known by the alias of King Kong Lion, Jeffrey was regarded as a talented rapper, enjoying the full respect of many of my research interlocutors. We met briefly on different occasions during my fieldwork as a master's student at Haitian cultural events in Rio Grande do Sul, and even worked together on one of his compositions in 2019, a R&B love song in Portuguese entitled 'Sem fim' (Endless), finished but never released. The silence brought by

Jeffrey's tragic death in the Darién jungle adds a plaintive layer of silence to Haitians' exodus from Brazil, offering a clear-cut example of how Haitians' 'search for a better life is invariably articulated to the virtuality of death' (Handerson and Neiburg 2020: 475). Or, as one of Greg Beckett's Haitian interlocutors muses in his study of Haiti's 'endemic' crisis, 'sometimes, when you search for life, you find death' (Beckett 2020: 69).



*Figure 31 - King Kong Lion and Mal Adi (source: King Kong's Facebook profile)*

King Kong's death was dearly felt by many of my research interlocutors. Besides the multitude of posts and comments on social media, the mourning for his passing also came to

manifest itself through the songwriting of Alix Georges. The story of how the song came into being and the message advanced by its lyrics offer further evidence of the entwinement of the pandemic's conjuncture with the engaged aesthetic agency of Haitian artists in Brazil, of how the coping mechanism of songwriting manifests a (necro)political aesthetics of migration, responding to the silence of death with an affirmative biopolitics of music. Alix confessed that the news of Jeffrey's passing in the Darién Gap came as a huge shock. At that point, he was only superficially aware of Haitians' escalating exodus from South America and did not know the magnitude of the dangers of crossing Darién. The emotional shock experienced by Alix left him sleepless for three nights. During those long hours, the lack of information and the rumours that circulated about King Kong's death on social media and WhatsApp induced him to seek information about the Gap on the internet. He watched dozens of documentaries about it on YouTube, seeking to find an explanation for such a tragedy. Then, Alix's attention was suddenly drawn to YouTube's suggestion list, and to a documentary that told of the plights of a similar story of searching for life: the contemporary migration of Africans towards Europe across the Mediterranean (Alix Georges, personal communication with the author, 2022).

To Alix, the experiences of Haitian migrants trying to reach the United States and Africans heading towards Europe are two sides of the same coin, one cast in the forge of (neo)colonialism and imperialism and in which racism was a key feature. As he became cognizant of the sad and distressing details of these stories of contemporary Black migration waves, a creative urge and a sense of duty struck him, and he decided to compose a song. The lyrics of 'Qu'allez vous faire?' (What will you do?) powerfully and poignantly evoke the drama of hopelessness and famine lived by African youth and its migration towards Europe in search of better lives – yet also criticize the prevalence of a form of 'mental slavery', to quote

Bob Marley, in its doomed pursuit of ‘the Western dream’ (*le rêve Occidental*), as Alix had previously done in his song ‘Mental Decolonization’.<sup>121</sup>

L’immigration clandestine qui  
détruit nos familles  
Les Africains qui fuient de la  
famine  
Pendant q’uils pillent les  
richesses qui sont dans nos pays  
Pendant que nos dirigeants  
gaspilles  
La jeunesse africaine  
se desespèrent  
À la conquête de ses rêves  
Beaucoup se noyent dans la mer  
Dans la région de Sahel  
Abandonnés dans le  
desert

Clandestine immigration which  
destroys our families  
Africans who escape from  
famine  
While they pile the  
riches in our countries  
While our leaders  
waste  
African youth  
despairs  
In the pursuit of its dreams  
Many drown in the sea  
In the Sahel region  
Many are abandoned in the  
desert

*Chorus*

Messieurs le président, le  
gouverneur  
Qu’allez-vous faire?  
La jeunesse africaine  
se desespère  
Qu’allez-vous faire?  
Beaucoup d’entre eux sont  
abandonnés dans le desert  
Qu’allez-vous faire?  
Pour ceux qui risquent leur vie  
dans la mer  
Qu’allez-vous faire?

Mr. President, Mr.  
Governor  
What will you do?  
African youth  
despairs  
What will you do?  
Many amongst them are  
abandoned in the desert  
What will you do?  
For those who risk their lives in  
the sea  
What will you do?

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<sup>121</sup> A pre-mix, unfinished version of the song (still unreleased) can be heard at <<https://youtu.be/pWbf-PLEdOI>> (Access 13 March 2024).

Pour Les vies risquées dans la de  
Darién

Qu'allez-vous faire?

Qu'allez-vous faire pour nos  
mères?

Qu'allez-vous faire pour nos  
pères?

Qu'allez-vous faire pour nos  
soeurs?

Qu'allez-vous faire pour nos  
frères?

Qu'allez-vous faire?

Si la coopération est bilatérale  
Pourquoi le traitement unilatéral?  
Géopolitique internationale qui  
favorise l'homme occidental  
Dans nos pays ils sont tous bien  
traités comme des touristes  
Dans les leurs ont est tous  
maltraités par le racisme,  
xénophobie  
Persécutés par la police quelle  
injustice! Immigration

Salaam Aleikum  
Aleikum Salaam  
Négedef Maifi

Mes sentiments de solidarité  
s'adressent à la jeunesse  
africaine, qui se desespère  
À ceux qui se trouve au coeur de  
la région de la région de Sahel  
Abandonnés par l'état du Niger  
au milieu du desert  
Leur vies dépend des sentinelles  
À la recherche d'un rêve, un rêve

For those who risk their lives in  
Darién

What will you do?

What will you do for our  
mothers?

What will you do for our  
fathers?

What will you do for our  
sisters?

What will you do for our  
brothers?

What will you do?

If the cooperation is bilateral  
Why is the treatment unilateral?  
International geopolitics which  
favours the Western man  
In our countries, they are all  
well-received as tourists  
In theirs, we are all  
mistreated by racism,  
xenophobia  
Persecuted by the police, how  
unfair! Immigration

Salaam Aleikum  
Aleikum Salaam  
Négedef Maifi

My feelings of solidarity  
go to the African youth,  
who despairs  
To those who find themselves in  
the heart of the Sahel region  
Abandoned by the state of Niger  
amidst the desert  
Their lives depending on guards  
In search of a dream, a dream

Courage mon frère, courage ma  
soeur, je suis avec toi, courage

Courage my brother, courage my  
sister, I'm with you, courage

The song's chorus emulates an imaginative dialogue with those deemed ultimately responsible for such a situation, African politicians, and leaders, questioning the abandonment and disenfranchisement dispensed to their fellow countrymen and exhorting the need for action by the authorities ('What will you do?') even if he knew that nothing would be done about either King Kong or others that perished on the way. Alix also puts forth an explicit critique of the unequal regimes of mobility (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013) and uneven treatment dispensed to white Westerners and Black migrants, contrasting the welcoming and fair treatment of Western tourists in Africa and Haiti to the racism, xenophobia, and policing of Africans and Haitian migrants in the West. Concluding the song, in the last verses Alix situates himself in a posture of solidarity to African and Haitian youth, as possible listeners to his song: 'Courage brother, courage sister, I'm yours in this fight'. Though he has not taken the route, opting instead for one of Canada's migration programmes for skilled workers, Alix himself left Brazil in mid-2023, migrating with his Haitian-Brazilian family to Montreal, Québec – where he found not only a long-established Haitian diasporic presence but also some of his former Brazilian students.

Alix's song would not be the only one whose initial inspiration would come from the Darién route and bear emotional connections to King Kong's death. Another one would soon follow, which epitomizes the 'aesthetic agency that joins music and migration' (Bohlman 2011: 152) through its singularly personal relationship with the experience of the route. On September 7, 2021, Brazil's Independence Day, as Bolsonaro delivered an inflammatory antidemocratic speech in São Paulo, I parted ways with B-Wade (the artistic alias of Wedler

Celestin), as I participated in his last video clip in Brazil, a partnership with Alix Georges entitled ‘Lavi pa fè kado’ (Life does not give gifts) (see Figure 32).



Figure 32 - Brazilian filmmaker Henrique Lahude, Alix, and B-Wade at the shooting of ‘Lavi pa fè kado’s video clip (photo by the author)

A few days earlier, we’d met for an interview midway between our houses at the local airport, where he later boarded a flight to São Paulo with his wife and daughter, afterwards continuing the route by land to the US. As we talked about the story of his life and musical endeavours, the issue of taking the route came up, precipitated by the constant sighting of other Haitians walking, waiting, and sleeping in the airport – future *wout* (route) companions by him easily identified. B-Wade liked Brazil, he said. It is *bon peyi a* (a good country) to which Haitians can easily come and enjoy the rights to live, work, and access social benefits as legal foreign residents (interview with the author, 2021). But the conflation of the pandemic, precarious living conditions, economic recession, and recent familial misfortune

(the collapse of his mother's house during the earthquake on August 14, 2021, in Haiti) left him no alternative but to *chache lavi* elsewhere.

After successfully crossing the Darién Gap and reaching Mexico, B-Wade contacted me to work on a new composition while he waited in Tijuana, Mexico, for a decision on his family's asylum request. Along the route, the impact of his lived experience progressively coalesced into words and sound, in a song which he entitled 'Nou se ewo' (We are heroes). He sent me the song's verses and chorus in an audio message via WhatsApp, inviting me to participate by recording electric guitar and working alongside BaadBadu in the song's arrangement – he conceived of it as a fast Afro-Rabòday track. He told me that it was a song 'that speaks about the journey Haitians undertake, that speaks about the difficulties and bad people they meet on the way to get to the US. That I personally lived in my experience along the way. It inspired me to create this song' (WhatsApp message, February 10, 2022).

In the song's lyrics, B-Wade addresses fellow Haitians, whom he labels heroes due to the sacrifices they face in the search for better lives. The first verse begins by linking Haitians' mobile predicament to Haiti's structural and endemic crisis, also drawing attention to instances of humiliation that are frequently associated with migration. The chorus is a call to Haitian compatriots to recognize their own worth and the value of their sacrifices, alluding to the obstacles gone through in migrating. Notably, in its description of the *mizè* (misery) gone through along the journey, B-Wade also employs the crossroads as a metaphor to symbolize the many challenges and plights gone through and alludes to King Kong's tragic fate in the Darién Gap, along with the uncertainty of success represented by the looming possibility of deportation.

Si lakay te bon  
Nou pa tap riske pou yon vi meyè  
Si lakay te miyò  
Nou pa tap riske poun fè rèv nou  
reyèl

If (our) home was good (i.e. in order)  
We wouldn't risk it for a better life  
If (our) home was better  
We wouldn't risk it to make our dreams  
come true

Si lakay te ankadre  
Nou pa ta pral imilye  
Si lakay te striktire  
Nou pa tap imigre

If (our) home was organized  
We wouldn't humiliate ourselves  
If (our) home was structured  
We wouldn't immigrate

### *Chorus*

Ayisyen frèm yo! Nou se ewo!  
Pou mizè nou pase  
Pou kalfou nou janbe  
poun rive  
Ayisyen frèm yo! Nou se ewo!  
Nou janbe dlo! Janbe, janbe lanmè!  
Nou pase mizè! Domi nan  
forè!

Haitian brothers! We're heroes!  
For the misery we endure  
For the crossroads (i.e. problems) we  
pass to arrive  
Haitian brothers! We're heroes!  
We cross the ocean! Cross, cross the sea!  
We go through misery! We sleep in the  
forest!

Gen nan yo ki tonbe  
Gen nan yo rivyè pote ale  
Gen nan yo trepase  
Dlo yo fini swaf yo pa pase

Some of them fell  
Some were taken by the river  
Some died  
Their water ends, but their thirst does not

Gen timoun yo vyole  
Gason kou fanm nèg yo kouche  
Genyen ki fin rive  
Yo depòte yo

There are children they violate  
Men and women, whom they rape  
There are some that manage to arrive  
They deport them

B-Wade and his family made it to the US and are now living in Massachusetts. As we continued to chat via WhatsApp, he told me that although BaadBadu sent him the finished beat he still hasn't had the time (or money) to go into the studio and record the song's vocals

and plans to include it in his upcoming EP. Like him and King Kong, dozens of research interlocutors left Brazil in 2021, some of them important mainstays of the Haitian diasporic musical community in Brazil. It was frequently through social media posts that I discovered research interlocutors were in Mexico, or, less frequently, already in the US. All year long, I witnessed their departures, fearing for the things that might happen to them but also understanding the reasons why, amidst the silence and stillness of such *kalfou danjere*, they chose to leave Brazil. In November 2021, as I chatted on WhatsApp with Widler Oris about a year before he left Brazil, I asked him about the IBCC Music Band with whom he played with Extenson on the weekly Haitian service at Canoas' Central Baptist Church. He had already mentioned to me how things had begun to fall apart after Extenson moved to São Paulo (and later to Florida, then Massachusetts), yet his final comment struck me as it encapsulated the magnitude of the Haitian exodus from Brazil during the pandemic: 'I'm the only one left'.

With each departure, both my fieldwork and the Haitian diasporic music scene in Brazil seemed to grow a bit more silent. I came to think of the Haitian exodus from Brazil and the Darién Gap as representing many manifestations of silence: the unrepairable silence of King Kong's tragic death; the menacing and transient silence of Darién's crossing, when migrants are completely out of reach; the blank, silent spaces left by the migration of so many research interlocutors. Of all those cited in this chapter, now only BaadBadu and Asid remain in Brazil. Silences intersected Haitian voices, lives, and movements not only in Brazil but in Haiti as well. Sometimes, it is emblematic of oblivion: until mid-July 2021, Haiti was the only country in the Western hemisphere without a single dose of any Covid-19 vaccine (Gough 2021). Forgotten amidst a global crisis, Haiti once again only made it into the headlines with the magnicide of President Jovenel Moïse and the August 14 earthquake – only when the facts

fitted the narrative, when the frame through which the West recognizes its ‘Other’ matched, was Haiti was seen, talked about, heard (if fleetingly).

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have tried to frame the occurrence of different sonic phenomena connected to Haitian migrants as a way of providing a view into the (necro)political aesthetics of migration that modulated the lives of Haitians in Brazil during the pandemic period. Calling attention to the relevance of migrant voices and silence, I tried to bring to light the contours of the many layers of precarity connected to racism, right-wing authoritarian politics, and colonial history that has structured their lives and shaped their transnational (im)mobility during a global crisis which, ironically, may have affected Haiti in lesser ways than the aggravation of its own ‘endemic crisis’ (Beckett 2020), most recently represented by the magnicide of Jovenel Moïse and the critical escalation of gang violence and insecurity in the country.

The first episode bore evidence of how the frail, but consequential sounds of an anonymous Haitian migrant’s voice were converted into different politicized sonic expressions by native Brazilians, ranging from nationwide *panelaços* to spontaneous DIY music produced by quarantined artists. The viral repercussion of the Haitian giant’s defiant words against Bolsonaro and their transmutation into the very first slogans of protest against the president’s denialist politics offers a peculiar and powerful example of an appropriation of the Haitian’s defiant words by a politically polarized host society, sparking xenophobic reactions from those aligned with the government and providing hope and inspiration to those who opposed him. Yet both sides failed to properly consider and heed the uncomfortable and ambivalent position of many Haitians in the country, who did not wish to be implicated in

Brazil's polarized battleground, either due to fear of retaliation or the straightforward notion that it was none of their concern. Despite the best efforts of sectors of Brazilian society, political parties, and institutions – epitomized by over 130 impeachment requests – the sounds of protest gradually died down as the pandemic's death count continued to grow. Defeated in the 2022 presidential elections by former left-wing president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (PT – Workers Party), Bolsonaro left office with Covid-19 statistics pointing to a death toll of almost 700,000.<sup>122</sup>

In contrast to the denialist inaction which characterized Bolsonaro's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, musical responses to the new 'invisible enemy' by Haitian artists in Brazil have come to represent a striking difference between a cautious and socially responsible message put forward by marginalized migrants and Bolsonaro's boisterous scientific denialism and reckless handling of the pandemic. Reverberating in the diaspora longstanding precedents of social and political engagement, the Haitian artists and songs here portrayed musically evince the strength of the idea of *mizik sosyal* amongst them, who responded to the new context mobilizing their aesthetic agency to raise awareness amongst Haitian and Brazilian audiences.

Subsequently, I proposed an analysis of how silence manifested itself in different ways in relation to the context of Haitians living in – and leaving – Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic. From the dangerous crossroads of pandemics, generalized crisis, and social invisibility/inaudibility, there emerged several meaningful silences that speak loudly about the

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<sup>122</sup>Available at: <<https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/brazil#what-is-the-cumulative-number-of-confirmed-deaths>> (Accessed 14 January 2023)

Brazilian government's failure to see, hear, and care for migrant and refugee populations, about tragic individual histories such as King Kong Lion's, and about racist and colonial legacies that influence Haitian (im)mobility in the present. While not oblivious to the importance of their individual agency as represented in the choice to seek a better life, I tried to illustrate how the conjuncture lived by Haitian migrants in Brazil during the pandemic and their 'endemic' mobility signalled by the expressions *pran wout lan* and *chache lavi* evinces the workings of necropolitics' racist colonial legacies, rendering their bodies time and again as objects of government intervention across borders. Ironically, perhaps the country most responsible for abiding by negative and bigoted representations of Haiti remains the dream place for many Haitians and a place offering (at least potentially) better possibilities of *bon viv* (living the good life) and sending economic remittances to Haiti. As many Haitian contacts posted on social networks during the period, *reais pap janm dollars* (the Brazilian Real will never be [as valuable as] the US Dollar).<sup>123</sup>

But if such silences point to a negation of subjectivity in global and local sociocultural power relations in which Haitian migrants are historically embedded as racialized Others, their bodies and voices remain sites and vehicles of resistance and heroism, of a musical and engaged biopolitics of life. Against the silencing that rendered Haitian bodies and voices expendable and inaudible during the pandemic, Alix and B-Wade's songs exemplify how, in responding to the direst of circumstances and the mourning of death, songwriting serves as an important coping mechanism and expressive output with which to affirm self-worth,

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<sup>123</sup>Available at:

<<https://facebook.com/Poonybtag1/posts/pfbid02yUFmekzstvwqpo39sLFhALiDQP7rVqxb5Q6y6TcGEi4dUszAgLnAEjx4PFXUTgpWl>> (Accessed 20 May 2023)

solidarity, and empathy, in addition to performing a critique of racialized regimes of mobility and their linkages to colonialist and imperialist heritage. In the face of the multiple vulnerabilities in which Haitians, at home and *lòt bò dlo* (overseas), find themselves in their search for a better life, there might be no words more fitting than B-Wade's to account for such inexhaustible strength, perseverance, and faith in a better future: 'We are heroes'.

## EPILOGUE

*Sak cho nan peyim la? Saudades*  
(*What's up in my country? Saudades*)

*Fòk yon nég kite Brezil pou wè enpòtans Brezil*  
(*One must leave Brazil to realize its significance*)

*Messages by former BigUp#1 members*  
*in the band's WhatsApp group, 2023*

‘Ayiti se tè glise’ (Haiti is a slippery country), so a popular Haitian saying goes. While I still have not been able to set foot in Haiti (due to many reasons, not the least a pandemic and escalating insecurity in Haiti), throughout my fieldwork with Haitian artists in Brazil I also had the sensation I was losing my feet. Earlier, as I prepared to migrate to Oxford and begin a DPhil, I projected a vivacious and busy period of fieldwork with a migrant musical community whose thriving and rooting in Brazil was – albeit slowly – certainly on the rise, as Haitian artists throughout the country were patiently and laboriously working their way, against all odds, out from the margins of Brazilian society. Timing and conditions seemed perfect for the development of a sound and engaged piece of ethnomusicological scholarship, as I, a scholar from the so-called Global South admitted to the ‘high table’ of the English educational system (as Stuart Hall once said), was given the opportunity to develop my own contribution to the field of ethnomusicology and to make the voices and musical creations of my research collaborators listened to outside Brazil.

And then came SarS-Cov2, (or, as Asid Adult Man labelled it, ‘damn Corona’). The world came to a halt. The University of Oxford, as most higher education institutions throughout the world, suspended all research involving close human contact that was unrelated to Covid-19. Stuck in Oxford, I waited as months went slowly by with no light at the

end of the tunnel, no foreseeable closure to such unprecedented and worrying situation. Many died, in the UK, Brazil, Haiti, and elsewhere. Anxiety piled as I wondered when (and, to a lesser extent, if) I would be able to go back to Brazil, be close to family and friends again, and begin my research. To quote Asid again, I missed my 2019. Many of the anxieties, hardships, and disillusionments I was living through were also part of my research collaborators' daily lives. Most were also separated from their families; many were held back from working or facing unexpected financial hardship. Perhaps every one of them wondered about what would follow, when the end to the pandemic would come, when life would get back to 'normal'. In ways both similar and different to Haiti, Brazil was also slippery, *tè glise*.

Yet their material circumstances were entirely different from the ones I was experiencing. While I was able to safely quarantine in the UK and Brazil, most of my interlocutors had to do the best they could to protect themselves in much humbler and insecure circumstances. While I benefited from government and university financial support in the UK, in Bolsonaro's Brazil the political opposition faced intense government resistance to create *Auxílio Brasil*, the country's emergency financial support program for the pandemic. Though it was open to foreign citizens with an Individual Taxpayer Registry (CPF) number, many Haitians faced considerable difficulties in accessing it due to lack of information and proper guidance. While I managed to safely fly between Brazil and the UK a couple of times during the pandemic, Haitians leaving Brazil for the US faced countless barriers and hindrances to their mobility (mostly by land) within and across borders, not to mention serious risks to their lives.

As discussed with particular emphasis in the last chapter, although the 'wout Miami' (Montinard 2020) was already emerging as an alternative to searching for life (*chache lavi*)

elsewhere during Brazil's downward economic spiral and political turmoil since the mid-2010s, the remarkable intensification of the exodus of Haitians from Brazil during the pandemic evidenced how a growing precarity shaped the diasporic experience of Haitians in the country from 2020 onwards. As welcoming as the Brazilian state and large sectors of Brazilian society may have been to Haitian migrants overall (especially before the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018), thousands still thought that the risks of a perilous transcontinental journey and the uncertain prospects of success in entering the US were worth it, potentially ensuring a life that would be better than the one they could have in Brazil.

The route north was also dangerously slippery. Crossing the Darién Gap, a slip of the foot could prove to be mortally dangerous, leading to injuries that might leave one stranded in the jungle, abandoned to their own fate. Or, perhaps, one might lose their footing while crossing a river, such as befell King Kong Lion. I guess one never begins an ethnographic research project expecting to witness the death of a research interlocutor, less still one with whom the researcher is particularly interested in working with. I wish it had not been so. Although aware of the 'silent' exodus of Haitians from South America since early 2021, it was only after King Kong's death that I began to realize how it would deeply affect my research and the Haitian musical community in Brazil. While I waited for a safe time to 'go out into the field' after immunization, I could not see how, outside the safe walls of my accommodation, the very 'field' itself was also metaphorically slipping, as Haitian musical activity in Brazil dwindled, and artists began to leave the country. No better condensation of the volatile state of affairs during fieldwork exists than that given by Princeneer, describing the reality of BigUp#1: *'moun ale, moun vini, moun antre, moun tounen, se konsa djazz la'* (People go, people come, people enter, people return, the band is like that).

Another moment of epiphany happened after I returned to my hometown of Porto Alegre in August 2023 to finish writing this thesis, and it was a change that, a year before, I simply could not have imagined: Alix Georges did not live in Brazil anymore. The man responsible for introducing me to Haitian culture, music, and to a large number of research interlocutors; the man who translated Rio Grande do Sul's 'second anthem' and swore love to Brazil, Rio Grande do Sul, and even Alegrete; the man who ran for office in Porto Alegre's municipal chamber and did so much for the local Haitian community. Upon my return, Alix's absence actually made me feel estranged from the city for a while. In our conversations after his migration to Canada, I could notice how he was amazed to find a more musically active and prosperous diasporic Haitian musical community in Montreal: a greater number of professional and amateur Haitian ensembles, renowned artists and bands on tour performing in the city, festivals featuring Haitian bands. However, he simultaneously manifested a desire to keep connected, mentioning that despite the distance, we could continue to work together, in academic and musical ways. Future plans await.

As previously alluded to in the last chapter, some Haitian migrants who eventually managed to enter the US did change their views about Brazil after travelling through the route and experiencing life in America, coming to see that life in Brazil was not as difficult as they thought. They remained close to Brazil, following news and even expressing their political sympathies in the 2022 election, with many acquaintances on social media openly rooting for the Workers Party (PT). In similar fashion, some research collaborators with whom I kept in touch would frequently use the Portuguese word *saudade* to express feelings of emotional attachment to Brazil and nostalgia for the time they had lived there. *Saudade* has been characterized as an untranslatable word, a 'key feeling of the soul' in Portuguese-speaking

countries, one which is ‘located at the intersection of two affections that present absence: the memory of a cherished past that is no more and the desire for this happiness, which is lacking’ (Santoro 2017: 6003). In everyday parlance and in the arts, *saudade* has been widely used to express feelings or notions of Brazilianness (Da Matta 1984: 16), frequently in association with being away from Brazil and desiring to return. In that sense, *saudade* articulates a prime way of being and feeling Brazilian.

Prince Amki, artist, and owner of BSP, eventually managed to enter the US in 2023 after being deported to Haiti once. Throughout 2022 and 2023, we sporadically exchanged messages on WhatsApp and Instagram, usually reminiscing about our times working at the studio’s first location, in Prince and Poony’s house in Canoas, or just the habitual politeness of asking ‘*Ki jan ou ye? Anfòm?*’ (How are you doing? Good?). When I asked him about the plans of resetting BSP with Poony somewhere in the US, Prince mentioned he is still keen to do it. Yet to restart chasing that dream, he first must find his ‘financial stability’, securing a job which will cover his expenses and allow him to send some money to Haiti. Recently, I was moved when in the middle of one such conversation, he wrote ‘*Tenho mais saudades de você cara. Você é uma das pessoas que me lembra quem sou eu quando eu tento me desaparecer*’ (I have more *saudades* of you man. You’re someone who reminds me of who I am, when I try to disappear myself). On my very last day of fieldwork, Saturday, 18 September 2022, I wandered through a tranquil Canoas as I waited to meet and interview BaadBadu. I decided to stop by the house where the studio once was and have a look. While I stared at the peeled-off and stained white walls of Prince, Poony, and BaadBadu’s former home (and studio), I dwelled on a bittersweet sensation of *saudade*, *saudade* for all of them and the good times we

had recording music. And, somewhat selfishly, I wished I could enter and find them still there, inside, working on a new beat.

In BigUp#1's WhatsApp group, former members currently living in the US or Canada frequently manifest themselves in myriad discussions that concern Brazil, which in 2022-23 ranged from the expression of relief with Lula's victory to simple everyday updates on their life and musical activities abroad. *Saudade* was a word and feeling that often came up, both in relation to what Brazil represented to them and with regard to their time playing in BigUp. A former member living in New York used Kreyòl and Portuguese to inquire for news: '*Sak cho nan peyim la? Saudades?*' (What's up in my country? *Saudades*). On another occasion, the same musician commented: '*Saudade da caipirinha do Brasil, não aguento mais. Tenho que tomar uma hoje*' (I miss Brazil's caipirinha, I can't take it anymore. I must drink one today).

Feelings of nostalgia about Brazil were also expressed in more 'Haitian' ways by other former members, such as exemplified by the following sentences: '*Brezil sa telman mankem*' (I miss Brazil so much) and '*Fòk yon nèg kite Brèzil pou wè enpòtans Brezil*' (One has to leave Brazil to realize its importance). In a telling resemblance, the last sentence evokes the feeling of nostalgia associated with diaspora and migration embedded in Bayard's 'Ayiti Cheri/Haïti Cherie', as if 'translating' its second verse: '*Fòk mwen te kite w, pou mwen te kapab konprann valè w*' (I had to leave you to understand your worth). The use of *saudade* by Haitians to express longing and affect is a potent signal of how they have sought to translate themselves in/to Brazil, and how 'momentous and life-altering' that process of translation was (Cronin 2006: 70). Returning to Benjamin, *saudade* may perhaps be seen as an accessible tangential point for Haitian migrants' process of translation since it enunciates a common human feeling, an 'archetypal reminiscence and desire' (Santoro 2017: 6008) which, as

Brazilian anthropologist Roberto da Matta suggests, makes us realize that ‘we are all passengers, all immigrants’ (1992: 229). Though perhaps stretching the metaphor of cultural translation a bit too far, I suggest that such efforts by Haitian migrants in translating themselves to Brazilians (an endeavour they pursued frequently through the medium of music) have largely failed. Beside the many more obvious barriers that Haitian migrants’ music making in Brazil faced – such as linguistic adaptation and financial precarity – it seems that their plight was once again best described by Princeneer when conveying BigUp’s difficulty in finding cultural space and building musical alliances within Brazilian society: ‘*nap chache ouvèti*’ (we’re seeking openness).

Nevertheless, if Brazilian ears in general have ultimately remained closed to Haitian music making in the country, even those Haitian migrants who now *chache lavi* in the US, Canada, France, or elsewhere have carried words, experiences, memories, ideas, emotions, and knowledge along with them on their journey outwards from Brazil. For better or worse, such ‘souvenirs’ of Brazil have become part of them, and represent ‘the traces of the specific histories, traditions and identities that not only formed them but enable[d] them to produce themselves anew and differently’ (Hall 2017: 282). They have also taken with them an expanded musical knowledge and repertoire following their contact and engagement with Brazilian popular music, one they may draw on for future musical adventures in their new settings. Such prospects, along with the possibility of the maintenance of social, cultural, and musical ties with Brazil and Brazilians, may in the near future offer stimulating opportunities to further ethnomusicological engagement and inquiry with Haitian diasporic musicking and the very particular (and complex) maps and histories in which it is embedded (Clifford 1994: 302).

But if the overall mood and closing notes of this thesis and epilogue seem to drift towards departure, fading, and silence, there have also been recent signs of resistance and tenacity amongst those few Haitian artists who remain in Brazil. In mid-November 2023, Haitian artist and social media influencer Emmanuel Villus (a.k.a. SMOG) contacted me on WhatsApp with an invitation. He felt it was time Haitian artists reassembled and joined together in an effort to make themselves heard and recognized in Brazil and, more widely, in the transnational Haitian diaspora, and he counted on me as a Brazilian ally to help pursue that goal. As he said in an introductory message in the new WhatsApp group he created, '*Apa, Brezil gen lò toujou*' (Brazil still has [Haitian] 'gold'). Named 'Kilti-Eritaj Mizik/Haiti-Brezil' (Culture-Heritage Music/Haiti-Brazil), the project has centred its actions in social media campaigns to introduce and publicize the group's members and their musical work, all done through SMOG's YouTube and Facebook page, NègMawon TV. Though still in its early stages, the group has served as a substitute for HAB's waning activity, providing an important online forum for debate, encouragement, and collective action for close to thirty Haitian artists who remain steadfast in pursuing their musical dreams in Brazil.

If searching for a good life in Brazil became a particularly 'slippery' affair for Haitian artists at the beginning of the pandemic, SMOG's initiative shows that there are still many who have set their feet firmly on the ground, and their eyes firmly on the horizon, actively battling and searching for openings and the chance to pursue their musical dreams in Brazil.

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