



Haiti and Cuba: Trans-Caribbean Conversations and Cross Border Movements

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This essay will explore the interconnected histories of Haiti and Cuba: their migrations, ethnography, culture, politics, and music. In the twentieth century, important historical actors from both of these Caribbean nations collided with, interacted with, and informed each other. While this essay will look at the parallel histories of both countries, it will attempt to do so through a Haitian perspective, though the fluidity of their histories often escapes such confinement. The *noirisme* and *negrismo* movements centered and praised African influences, and the communist movements highlighted economic iniquities and promoted class struggle. The glaring omission in these movements was the question of gender and the position of women within the Haitian and Cuban patriarchal states. Academic work examining these particular histories through a consciously gendered perspective seems to be lacking. For this reason, this historical examination will include the voice of Martha Jean-Claude. Her story provides a useful and interesting frame from which we can explore the interconnectedness of Haitian and Cuban histories, as her own journey includes cultural, political, and musical travel between the two countries.

The radical and transformative movements of twentieth century Haiti were not singular. Ethnographic and political movements occurred in parallel to similar movements in Cuba. Historically, Haiti and Cuba have similar tales, although the specific contexts vary. The twentieth century histories of the two nations have been characterized by an exchange of exploitable labor from Haiti to Cuba, but the connections do not end there. While Haiti had Jean-Price Mars, Cuba had Fernando Ortiz. When Haiti expounded *noirisme*, Cuba offered *negrismo*. While Haiti shook off U.S.

occupation in the 1930s, Cuba removed the shackles of the Machadato.¹ Both countries skirted around possible communism in the mid-twentieth century, and by the end of the 1950s and early 60s, both countries had experienced tremendous political change. When Jacques Roumain was creating Haitian peasant novels, Cuban author Alejo Carpentier was preoccupied with *lo real maravilloso*. While misogyny was deeply entrenched in Haitian culture, Cuban *machismo* was privileged. While Haiti claimed Martha Jean-Claude by birth, Cuba claimed her by love.

The creation of a deeply nuanced, context-dependent, and coded oral culture served as a survival strategy for slaves within Haiti and Cuba and throughout the Caribbean. The creation of this oral culture was driven by multiple factors of great historical, social and political significance. This oral culture served multiple purposes, such as providing a conduit of communication and unity amongst the different African ethnic groups being sold as chattel. It thus allowed slaves to re-center the margins. Slave oral culture created an insider-outsider dynamic, in which slaves positioned themselves on the inside and colonialists were purposefully excluded. This defiant orality was in and of itself an important socio-political institution, and remains so today.

Slave oral culture remains as important today in ‘post-colonial’ Caribbean spaces as it was historically. These oral cultures, forged from experiences of struggle and agency that elude the static narratives of victimization, serve as the foundation of numerous contemporary musical and cultural movements. These movements foreground and politicize the narratives of the marginalized and disenfranchised masses. In Haiti, the codified oral culture draws from and informs the religious practice of Vodou observed by most Haitians. Vodou was transported across the Atlantic and recreated, accounting for new social relations, in colonial Saint-Domingue. The violently relentless suppression of Vodou, both in Saint-Domingue and post-independence Haiti, has proved unsuccessful because of the decentralized nature of the religion and its history as an oral tradition.

Oral culture in Haiti has become politicized through prevalent Vodou-informed musical traditions, which have been

¹ Jules Benjamin, “The Machadato and Cuban Nationalism, 1928-1932,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 55, no. 1 (1975): 66-91.

transformed into popular cultural expressions that posit peasant traditions as the “soul of the nation.”² In this way, Vodou and transgressive musical expression are linked. Although the tiny elite sector of Haitian society has maintained governmental and economic power, they hold what Michael D. Largey terms “dominance without hegemony.”³ The insider-outsider dynamic has allowed the masses to remain on the inside, controlling and defining their own culture against elite-imposed ideologies.

Bodily social memory “is enacted through musical performance in ways that allow an individual to move beyond imagining the nation through print-capitalism.”⁴ Musical culture allows the masses to move beyond merely “read[ing] the nation; they can see, hear and participate in it.”⁵ Through popular cultural expression the masses can lay as much claim to historical and political production as do the elite, the academics, and the politicians. The daily, the mundane, the human, the governmental, the international, and the political converge in popular cultural expression. Thus, cultural expression *becomes* political, and a divide between *low* and *high politics* loses relevance within Haiti.

1791 is an important year in the migratory connections between Haiti and Cuba. As revolution, revolts, and violence intensified in colonial Saint-Domingue, a wave of French settlers accompanied by their slaves relocated to Cuba.⁶ These new settlers primarily occupied the Guantanamo province on the eastern part of the island.⁷ The pull to Cuba would again intensify about a century later. This time, Haitian *braceros* made up the migratory population as Cuba’s sugar economy, driven by U.S. demand, required cheap

² Gage Averill, “Haitian Dance Bands, 1915-1970: Class, Race, and Authenticity,” *Latin American Music Review* 10, no. 2 (1989): 215.

³ Michael D. Largey, *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 9.

⁴ Largey, 16.

⁵ Sue Tuohy, “The Sonic Dimensions of Nationalism in Modern China: Musical Representation and Transformation,” *Ethnomusicology* 45 (2001). In Largey, 16.

⁶ Susan Hurlich, “Creole Language and Culture: Part of Cuba’s Cultural Patrimony, 1998” Bannzil Kreyòl Kiba Socio Cultural Project, <http://www.walterlippmann.com/docs140.html>.

⁷ Hurlich.

exploitable labor.⁸Haitians faced extreme racial discrimination that manifested itself in pay rates, living conditions, and the broader social context. The condition of the Haitian *braceros* was “not much better than slavery.”⁹ As Cuba’s economy faltered in the 1920s and further collapsed in the 1930s, the already deplorable conditions of Haitians worsened.¹⁰

The discrimination against Haitians, fueled by racial whitening policies being undertaken in Cuba, was defined by the “three icons of fear: revolution, religion and sexuality.”¹¹Arguably, the greatest of these was the first, the fear of Cuba facing a Haitian style revolution. As the Cuban economy further destabilized, both Cuban and immigrant laborers began to protest, leading to large-scale repatriations of Haitians. In the 1930s alone, approximately 38,000 laborers were forcefully repatriated to Haiti, being given no time to sell or gather their assets.¹² It is worth noting that the Communist Party of Cuba, which would later ally itself with Haitian communists, opposed these anti-immigration and specifically anti-Haitian measures.¹³

Today, Haitian culture and language still has a deep influence on the province of Guantanamo, which “has been historically the most important region for Haitian residents”.¹⁴ A study by Cuban sociologists in the 1980s estimated that approximately 45,000 Haitian descendants and approximately 4,000 native Haitians lived in the province.¹⁵Haitian culture has definitely left its mark upon Cuba in more general ways as well. Cuba’s national language is Spanish, but the second most commonly spoken language is Kreyòl.¹⁶ 1991 saw the formation of the Association of Haitian Residents and Descendants, and in 1998 a

⁸ Marc C. McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in the Comparison of Haitian and British West Indian Immigrant Workers in Cuba, 1912-1939,” *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 3 (1998): 600.

⁹ Hurlich.

¹⁰ McLeaod, 603.

¹¹ McLeod, 600-601.

¹² McLeod, 599.

¹³ McLeod, 605.

¹⁴ Hurlich.

¹⁵ Hurlich.

¹⁶ Hurlich.

Kreyòl library was opened in Havana, attesting to the huge impact Haiti and Haitians have made on Cuba.¹⁷

Cuba's acceptance and elevation of Haitian culture within its own borders seems at odds with its earlier policies of population whitening. It seems incongruous that, in the late twentieth century, Cubans were not only embracing but also actively creating space for Haitian cultural expression when previously everything Haitian had been so thoroughly devalued and demonized. Arguably, this radical shift has much to do with the parallel ethnological movements occurring in Haiti and Cuba in the 1930s and 1940s. These movements sought to realign their respective nations with their African influences and elevate the expression thereof.

Elizabeth A. McAlister posits that there are three contributing factors resulting in the "emergence of contemporary constellations of black popular expressions."¹⁸ These are (1) the displacement of European models of culture and of Europeans as universal subjects (2) the present dominance of the USA as the center of global cultural production and circulation (3) and the decolonization of the third world and the construction of decolonized sensibilities and subjectivities.¹⁹

All three factors can be found in what Gage Averill has termed the "Haitian Renaissance [where] indigenous movements looked deeper into the culture of the countryside for inspiration."²⁰ It is important to note that while McAlister's three factors of black popular expression hold up within the Haitian context, they privilege the elite's reactionary shift towards peasant culture coinciding with the U.S. occupation of Haiti. That is to say, African-influenced popular expression amongst the non-elite masses predated its recognition and legitimization by the elites in state institutions and rhetoric. Before Haitian elites denounced the very European models of culture and civilization to which they had so fervently clung as markers of superior status, Haitian peasants were already honoring and reveling in African-derived traditions. Once U.S. racism

¹⁷ Hurlich.

¹⁸ Elizabeth A. McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 195-196.

¹⁹ McAlister, 195-196.

²⁰ Averill, 215-218.

destabilized Haitian hierarchies of color, class, and status, the elites needed to embrace, under the alibi of decolonization, an Afro-Haitian culture that Haitian peasants and the non-elite masses had already embraced.

It was during this “Haitian Renaissance” that Jean Price-Mars espoused the view he held in his 1928 work *Ainsi parle l'oncle*, which urged for Vodou musical traditions to be integrated into elite institutions.²¹ This ideological shift stressed Haiti’s deep connection and immense debt to Africa.²² Price-Mars is often cited as the father of Haitian *noirisme*. *Noirisme*, an intellectual movement that expanded on cultural *indigenisme*, took a racialist view of culture and politics while asserting the primacy of African thought and traditions over those of a “stagnant old” Europe.²³ Political subscribers of *Noirisme*, driven by an adherence to color politics, “advocated the total control of the state apparatus by black representatives of the popular classes.”²⁴ From the *noirisme* tradition emerged a group of thinkers originating from outside the elite upper classes, the *Griots*.²⁵ The *Griots* held a romanticized belief in the inherent virtue of the masses. Their belief was placed in the “beggar, the unwashed, the peasant with calloused feet who descends from the mountains with his garden produce.”²⁶ The black peasant was the purest citizen, and to these citizens they wrote: “You are the pillars of the edifice;/Disappear,/And everything will collapse like a house of cards.”²⁷

While Haitian elites, intellectuals and political thinkers were realigning their focus towards Africa, exponents of Afro-Cuban culture were busily constructing a parallel movement of their own. Price-Mars provided *littérature indigène* for Haiti while Fernando Ortiz provided his own investigations into indigenous Afro-Cuban

²¹ Averill, 215-218.

²² David Nicholls, "Ideology and Political Protest in Haiti, 1930-46." *Journal of Contemporary History* 9, no. 4(1974): 3-5.

²³ Nicholls, 4, 5, 10.

²⁴ Matthew Smith, "VIVE 1804!: The Haitian Revolution and the Revolutionary Generation of 1946." *Caribbean Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2004): 26-27.

²⁵ Nicholls, 6.

²⁶ Nicholls, 6.

²⁷ Quoting *La Revue Indigène*, 1927, 71-72. In Nicholls, 7.

culture.²⁸ Arguably, Ortiz's investigations of Afro-Cuban culture did not celebrate or elevate the importance of Africa in the same way the works of Price-Mars did. The work of Cubans Nicolás Guillén and Alejo Carpentier do carry clear admiration for the African connection in Cuba and throughout the Caribbean.²⁹ The parallel movement of "Afro-Cubanism in the Hispanic Caribbean also contributed to the Haitian revival", and the work of Alejo Carpentier served to merge the parallel Haitian and Cuban movements.³⁰ His work praised Afro-Cuban traditions and further extolled the virtues of Haiti's African past and the similarities between Afro-Cuban and Afro-Haitian traditions.³¹

Carpentier, a novelist, musicologist, and musician in his own right, produced in 1946 what remains to this day the most extensive and influential study of Cuban musical history, *La Música en Cuba (Music in Cuba)*. Carpentier explores Cuban musical traditions from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, covering European elite traditions as well as Afro-Cuban folk music. Before publishing *La Música en Cuba*, Carpentier took a trip to Haiti that influenced all of his subsequent publications along with his entire approach and style. It was "only after his visit to Haiti [in 1943 that he began] to publish the works" for which he is now famous.³² His short sojourn in Haiti shifted his focus from Cuba alone to the wider Caribbean, including Haiti specifically. *Viaje a la Semilla (1944)* and *El Reino de Este Mundo (1949)* were inspired by his admiration for Haiti and his belief that "Haiti [was] the musical cornerstone of the Antilles."³³ The musical and political potential of Haiti captivated Carpentier.

A self-affirmed communist and supporter of the 1959 Cuban revolution, Carpentier helps represent a particular brand of communism deeply influenced by the romanticism of the *noirisme* and *negrismo* movements. Haiti's history arguably features

²⁸ Alejo Carpentier and Timothy Brennan, *Music in Cuba* (1946. Reprint, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 34.

²⁹ David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race Colour, and National Independence in Haiti* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 157-158.

³⁰ Carpentier, 159.

³¹ Carpentier, 33-34.

³² Carpentier, 34.

³³ Carpentier, 33.

proponents of a type of communism that borders on the spiritual, in stark contrast to the anti-religious and suppressive communist regime of post-revolutionary Cuba. Because Haiti and Cuba experienced the romanticism of *noirisme* and *negrismo* respectively, it is interesting to view the 'spiritual' sector of Haitian communism juxtaposed against the anti-religious communism of Castro's Cuba. While in both Haiti and Cuba religious belief was largely seen as incompatible with communist practice, this was not the case for Haiti's Jacques Roumain, who founded the Haitian Communist Party in 1934.³⁴ Roumain was a fervent supporter of the peasant classes and their cultural institutions; he claimed to respect religion and religious practice, Vodou included.³⁵ Roumain's interest in Vodou was so great that it would eventually lead him to publish *Le Sacrifice Du Tambour-Assôtôr* (1943), which recorded the Vodou songs and practices of the particular celebration that served as the baptism of the *Assôtôr* drum.³⁶ Roumain conceptualized the importance of Vodou as a "vehicle for conserving the folk tradition of the masses."³⁷ Roumain's close political and personal ties to the Cuban *negrismo* poet Nicolás Guillén further speak to his political alignment with the peasant and Afro-Haitian masses.³⁸

While communism is now considered largely incompatible with religion, this was not always the case. The work of José Carlos Mariátegui, one of the main founders of Latin American communism, relates his view of communism as an "ethical, political and spiritual concept."³⁹ His understanding of communism was imbued with a deep romanticism, and he unapologetically equated communist revolutionary emotion with religious emotion. As Mariátegui succinctly states, "the revolutionaries' power is not in their science but in their faith, their passion, their will. It is a

³⁴ Nicholls, "Ideology," 14.

³⁵ Nicholls, "Ideology," 12, 15.

³⁶ Benjamin Hebblethwaite and Joanne Bartley, *Vodou songs in Haitian Creole and English*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 53.

³⁷ Nicholls, 12.

³⁸ Matthew J. Smith, *Red & Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict and Political Change, 1934-1957* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 51.

³⁹ Michael Lowy and Mariana Ortega Breña, "Communism and Religion: José Carlos Mariátegui's Revolutionary Mysticism," *Latin American Perspectives* 35, no. 2 (2008): 71, 74.

religious, mystical, spiritual power. It is the power of myth. Revolutionary emotion is a religious emotion.”⁴⁰

However, there was no room in Socialist Cuba to conceive of communism as taking part in any spiritual or religious fervor. As Cuba transitioned into Soviet style Marxism, “a single system of free secular public education” was created, and all religious schools were forcibly closed.⁴¹ The declaration of an atheist Cuban state resulted in extreme discrimination against all religious adherents. This discrimination was formalized in 1975 and would remain institutionalized until 1992 when Cuba transitioned from state atheism to secularism.⁴²

Where do Martha Jean-Claude’s narrative and voice fit in the historically multi-layered connection that Haiti and Cuba share? The story of Jean-Claude can be understood as a microcosm of the historical, cultural and political connections between the two nations described above. Jean-Claude, born in 1919 on Haitian soil, has been cited as one of the most influential artists from the time her career began in the 1940s to the time of her death in 2001.⁴³

Jean-Claude’s career began in earnest in 1942. From the outset her Vodou informed music elucidated her communist leanings and her commitment to rallying for the disenfranchised masses. Ten years later, her association with communism and her subversive work would land a pregnant Jean-Claude in Haitian prison. Following the publication of her anti-government play, *Anriette*, and her husband’s involvement in a housing redistribution project aimed at providing homes for economically marginalized Haitians, President Paul Eugene Magloire ordered her immediate arrest.⁴⁴ Released from prison only two days before going into labor, Jean-

⁴⁰ Lowy, 73.

⁴¹ Aurelio Alonso, “Religion in Cuba’s Socialist Transition,” *Socialism and Democracy* 24, no. 1 (2010): 152.

⁴² Alonso, 153-156.

⁴³ “Singer Martha Jean-Claude Dead at 82.” The Haiti Support Group . www.haitisupportgroup.org (accessed November 19, 2012).

⁴⁴ “Singer Martha Jean-Claude Dead at 82.”; Gage Averill, *A Day for the Hunter, A Day for the Prey: Popular Music and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 69.

Claude realized the grave danger she faced and she self-exiled to Cuba to join her husband in 1952.⁴⁵ She migrated under duress to a political climate where her own politics could be voiced.

Haitians and Cubans alike affectionately knew Jean-Claude as Mamita, because of her unwavering loyalty to the peasant masses.⁴⁶ She described her goal as such, stating that she wished to “sing the song of the peasants that is what’s in my heart. I learn toward these people. My songs are what one calls protest ballads.”⁴⁷ Jean-Claude was never hesitant to define her work – in acting, screen writing and musical performance – as overtly political, and as she saw it, “[i]t’s natural that I struggle for social justice.”⁴⁸

In 1959, Jean-Claude was quick to side with the revolutionary cause and effectively became an ambassador of the Cuban revolution throughout the Caribbean and the world. Although Jean-Claude was in communist-controlled Cuba and free from the immediate violence of the Duvalier regime, her songs and artistic expositions attest to her commitment to her people struggling under the violent father-son dictatorship. Mamita sang songs honoring those who suffered under the regime, and in 1974 she worked to produce the documentary *Simparele*, a staunchly anti-Duvalier piece.⁴⁹

Jean-Claude is both narrator and participant in the documentary, which tells the story of Haiti through a multitude of art forms.⁵⁰ The film gives an extremely emotional portrayal of the 1791-1804 Haitian revolution, and largely revolves around Afro-Haitian culture, primarily the practice of Vodou as an important socio-political catalyst for change. Louise Diamond and Lyn Parker

⁴⁵ Averill, *A Day for the Hunter*, 69.

⁴⁶ *Martha Jean-Claude en Haiti*. Film. Directed by Juan Carlos Tabio. Havana : Instituto Cubano del Arte y la Industria Cinematográficas (ICAIC), 1987.

⁴⁷ “Singer Martha Jean-Claude Dead at 82.”

⁴⁸ “Singer Martha Jean-Claude Dead at 82.”

⁴⁹ *Sun Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale)*, “Martha Jean-Claude, 82, Legendary Haitian Singer,” November 17, 2001. http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2001-11-17/news/0111160886_1_haiti-and-cuba-haitian-communist-ruled-island.

⁵⁰ Louise Diamond and Lyn Parker, “Simparele The heartbeat of a people,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 19 (1978): 20-21.

suggest that *Simparele* “bridges a gap that has existed in Marxist ideology between political praxis and spiritual consciousness.”⁵¹ This intimation is a powerful one in light of discussions of the spiritual communism that existed within Haiti. Jean-Claude, like Roumain and Mariátegui, served as part of a radical tradition that challenged the assumptions of a secular, non-religious, and non-spiritual communism in Latin America and the Caribbean.

As a “powerful exponent of indigenous music,” Martha’s great success is important because of the positive gender repercussions it has affected within Haitian popular institutions.⁵² As political singer Manno Charlemagne states, “Martha Jean Claude was the raisin [roots] movement. She had to endure a lot. To be a woman singing in those days [1940s-1950s] in Haiti, she was called a *puta*, a whore. But she is a monument.”⁵³ The success of Jean-Claude as a powerful and politically assertive female entertainer promoted the advancement of Haitian women in the musical world, and she provided the “model of many Haitian female folkloric singers to follow.”⁵⁴ Because of her connections to both Haiti and Cuba, her success challenged the institutionalized patriarchy and *machismo* of both states.

A self proclaimed “*famn de zil* (woman of two islands)”, Jean-Claude successfully deepened the already existing conversation between Haiti and Cuba. When the Duvalier dictatorship fell in 1986, Jean-Claude returned to her native Haiti. The film *Martha Jean-Claude en Haiti*, under the direction of Cuban Carlos Tabio, captures Jean-Claude’s return to her homeland after almost 40 years of exile. In a touching show of affection for her land and her people, Jean-Claude requests that the crowds gathered at her arrival let her fulfill the promise she had made of kissing the ground when she returned to Haiti. With the crowd’s dispersal, Mamita kneels on the ground and puts her lips to the Haitian soil for which, as her music clearly showed, she had been longing. The last scene of the documentary captures well the life and public career of Jean-Claude. As she dances amongst crowds of Haitians in an outdoor venue her lyrics boldly protest:

⁵¹ Diamond, 21.

⁵² Averill, *A Day for the Hunter*, 57-58.

⁵³ Averill, *A Day for the Hunter*, 69-70.

⁵⁴ Averill, *A Day for the Hunter*, 65.

Bolívar y Pétiion en el mundo de la verdad van a cita a América por una nueva convención, tengo mucha fuerza me siento muy fuerte, Bolívar le dijo a Petión a esa no le pasara igual igual que en panamá América esta de pie,...cuando repica el tambor me montan los negros grandes, Dessalines me monta, Toussaint también me monta, vamos cabalgando por toda las Américas, me da fuerza todo eso...intervención, marinos hambre y dictadores, nos hacen pagar un jamón no sabemos el gusto del jamón, Boukman toco el tambor comunicando al continente de la gran asamblea que nos convertía en un sola patria, tengo mucha fuerza, me siento muy fuerte, dijeron que mi pueblo estaba muerto, yo les dije que no era cierto lo convirtieron en zombi, el 7 de febrero comió mal.⁵⁵

When the popular Haitian musical group Boukman Eksperyans spoke in 1995 about the political and social commitment of “mizik rasin,” they said: “Rasin is the next reggae. There is spirituality and there is politics. We're talking about a revolution.”⁵⁶This succinct observation captures many of the threads that weave through this essay. By referring to another Caribbean musical-political movement, Jamaican reggae, Boukman Eksperyans illustrated the migratory potential of these movements and the trans-Caribbean and transnational political conversations that emerge from musical traditions. Their quote highlights the socio-political importance of cultural expression, and the politically transgressive and revolutionary potential of a defiant oral culture expressed through popular music. It also alludes to previous conversations about spiritual communism, where the revolution to uplift the marginalized masses is dependent on and driven by a spiritual connection to the people and the cause. Caribbean oral traditions and popular musical expressions are mini-revolutions, serving as constant reminders of the transformative potential of these historically rooted weapons that allow the masses to re-center the margins.

⁵⁵*Martha Jean-Claude en Haiti.*

⁵⁶Schreiner, Claus. “Bouyon Rasin: First Haitian Roots Music Festival Live” *Tropical Music*. <http://www.tropical-music.com> (accessed December 3, 2012).

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