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Unmapping knowledge: connecting histories about Haitians in Cuba

This article is an exercise in comparing narratives that depict the 'presence' of Haitians in Cuba. It focuses on the creative forms through which groups of *residentes* and *descendientes*, formally designated *asociaciones*, are experimenting with new modes of creating relationships with kin, histories, places and times. Rather than emerging exclusively from the memories of past experiences of immigration and the belonging to 'communities', these actors seem to emphasise that histories apparently associating them with certain bounded existential territories can in fact be created and recreated in multiple forms, mediated by diverse objects and events, and apprehended through a critical perspective, albeit one subject to personal interpretations.

Key words ethnography, history, Cuba, knowledge, migration

Introduction

In an old building in downtown Havana, around the end of 2004, a group of about ten people gather every week to rehearse presentations of Creole songs and dances. This small collective formed part of a larger group called *Dessaline*, whose members are children and grandchildren of Haitian immigrants. During one of their rehearsals, Felicia told me how a friend's craving for a dish of Haitian origin had put her in contact with countless *paisanos* ('fellow countrymen') living in Havana. Far from the Cuban capital, on the outskirts of the city of Villa Morena, a group of pensioners would also meet regularly to hear and discuss Haitian history. Every month, and on special commemorative dates, an *asociación* ('association') called *Los Hatianos* (hereafter *LH*) organised meetings of local *residentes* (as those born in Haiti are called) and *descendientes* (children of Haitians born in Cuba). Dedicated to holding debates and promoting cultural activities, these associations performed what Cuban scholars have called the 'Haitian presence in Cuba'.

Although these practices seemed to emphasise official views in which contemporary experiences of the *asociaciones* were depicted as folkloric elements related to a foreign country, a distant past and rural settlements called 'Haitian communities', groups like *Dessaline* and *LH* were creating connections with other modes of existence and collectively shared family experiences. Hence rather than emerging exclusively from experiences of immigration and belonging to 'communities', these actors implied that the histories supposedly associating them with certain places and times could be told and retold in multiple forms, mediated by diverse object and events, and apprehended through a critical perspective, albeit one subject to personal interpretations (Toren 1988).[1] The existence of *asociaciones*

did not mean that the gatherings of *residentes* and *descendientes* provided members with collective memories, allowing them to recall a distant and localised past, but enabled them to produce new forms of relationship as a way of creating a politically possible actuality. Rather than being interconnected to form a 'social group' – defined by origin, nationality and religion – these new collectives were points of inscription that connected histories, people, memory, faith, kinship, politics and other elements.

These connected histories appear in different situations and are linked to diverse networks that, following Strathern (1991) and Latour (2005), we might call 'open associations' that cannot be readily used to define the boundaries of Haitian 'presence' and 'communities'. As I shall attempt to show, whether as a way to distance themselves from specialised interpretations or reify their outlines through their commitment and association with government agencies, some members of *Dessaline* and *LH*, as well as other Haitians and *descendientes* not formally linked to these groups, insisted during our conversations on the need to give voice and emphasis to the 'Haitian presence' inscribed and intelligible in personal stories. Thus the reference to the 'history of the presence of Haitians in Cuba' – as recounted in the specialised literature – was simultaneously incorporated, contested and obliquely criticised. This article will be an exercise in comparing those narratives that depict the 'presence' of Haitians and their *descendientes* in Cuba through an official cartography with the personal histories performed by the members of the *LH* and *Dessaline*. Inspired by Bruno Latour's reflections and his ANT (actor-network theory) (2005), my aim here is to provide a different understanding of the creative forms through which collectives like *Dessaline* and *LH* experiment with diverse models of agency.

Mapped presence

Though not univocal, understandings of the experiences of Haitian immigrants in Cuba range from the awareness of a threat to the 'discovery of a tradition'. Moving beyond the countless articles expounding the perceived 'Haitian threat', immigration from Haiti became a relatively important topic in the Cuban historical literature in the first half of the twentieth century. In *Azucar y Población en las Antillas* (1927), a nationalist diatribe against the expansion of sugar and coffee plantations in the central and eastern provinces, Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez exhorted government authorities to combat a not-so-new target – illegal immigration and the massive entry of *braceros*, seasonal workers used to harvest sugarcane – as a way of curbing the activities and profits of US companies operating in Cuba. The first massive influx of Haitian workers was unleashed by the Cuban government in 1912 following an agreement signed with the United Fruit Company. Between that year and 1921, roughly 81,000 Haitians and 75,000 Jamaicans entered the country (Pérez de la Riva 1979). However, as historians have demonstrated, the Haitian presence in Cuba dated back to the first slave insurrection in 1791, and has involved a constant flux of ideas and people ever since. In some regions, this encompassed the arrival of the families, slaves and slave owners of 'French colonists' and Creoles born in the French colony after the revolution in Saint-Domingue (Ferrer 2003; Scott 2005). They settled in the eastern part of the island, in particular Santiago de Cuba, forming a prosperous class of slave owners and French-speaking 'free men of colour' (Pérez de la Riva 1979; Alvarez Estévez 1988; Milliet 1988; Navia 2003; Valdes and del Valle Torres 2007; Casey 2011).

However, it was the contingent of immigrant *braceros* that provoked Guerra's ire, a feeling shared by the Cuban workers' movement in the 1930s: the immigrants lowered the cost of labour and were also associated with the operations of foreign companies with vast landholdings that used a range of strategies to bring in illegal seasonal workers from different parts of the Caribbean at harvest time. In 1933, a law nationalising the labour market and reserving it for 'national workers' made *bracero* immigration illegal. According to Pérez de la Riva (1979), this merely led to a steady increase in the influx of illegal workers. Although eastern Cuba was the port of entry for visitors with tourist visas, particularly those from the rural and urban regions of northern Haiti, the illegal ports on the Caribbean and Atlantic coasts became alternative points of access for immigrant workers, encouraged by contractors, farmers and domestic and foreign companies with large landholdings. The *braceros* headed for the major producing areas concentrated in the central provinces of Camagüey and Ciego de Ávila. When the sugar harvest was over, they sought work on the coffee plantations in *Oriente*. While a small number returned to Haiti, most set up homes in small rural settlements called *bateyes* located near the sugar-growing centres and struggled to survive under a cruel debt-peonage system, their labour paid for by 'vouchers' that bound them to the contractors and farmers. Unlike West Indian workers, who were literate and generally organised in political and religious institutions, most of the Haitians were not only illegal immigrants but spoke only Kreyol (Lundahl 1983; McLeod 1998, 2003).

The fact that these immigrants were perceived as a threat both in the official agendas and in the popular imagination during the first decades of the twentieth century provides an insight into how the image of the Haitian worker as a depersonalised, culturally inferior, black, primitive, vodou-worshipping figure made its way into numerous texts: official, academic and fictional. Some of the imagery surrounding the Haitians and their descendants in Cuba has been explained by contrasting their two forms of immigration and, by extension, their distinct cultural and geographic imprints. On one hand, we find the powerful 'French heritage' that punctuates intellectual output and the local tourist industry – as in the case of the city of Santiago de Cuba (Viddal 2012). On the other hand, we find attempts to literally 'map' the existence of 'traditional settlements' of Haitian immigrants in rural areas and, at same time, the gradual inclusion of former *braceros* into Cuban culture and citizenship. This mapping approach guided diverse endeavours to produce knowledge on isolated rural settlements.[2]

The interest in understanding the settlements and way of life of Haitian workers grew after the 1959 revolution. A wide process of transformations led to the creation of some of the institutions that would have a particular impact on the production of knowledge and the cartography of 'the Cuban people', *el pueblo cubano*. This knowledge was made possible by the creation of a nationwide project designed to identify 'cultural traditions' and subsequently implement *planificación* (planning) policies in urban and rural areas (Hernandez-Reguant 2005). One of the first initiatives

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2 Since the mid-1980s, scholars from Santiago de Cuba's institutions and tourism bureau have been researching the organisation of festivals, seminars, touristic publications and other initiatives exploring the 'French Heritage' of some of Santiago de Cuba's neighbourhoods and the Haitian communities in rural areas. This includes aspects that differentiate places likes Santiago de Cuba from more cosmopolitan regions of the 'West' – in particular the architectural heritage of the city of Havana – such as its 'ethnic diversity' and geographic and 'cultural' proximity to the Caribbean. For a detailed analysis of the investments made by members of the *Casa del Caribe* and local groups, see Viddal (2012).

undertaken in this area was the creation of a *Centro de Estudios del Folklore*, together with the *Teatro Nacional de Cuba* and the *Seminario de Estudios del Folklore*, held in November 1960. The idea was to provide basic technical training for 'young people interested in folklore'. With the aid of UNESCO and the supervision of Peter Neumann, an anthropologist from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), a small group of students and technicians conducted the first nationwide field study to produce a preliminary inventory of its 'ethnological problems' (Sandoval and Hernandez 2002; Guanche and Campos 1986). A 'field study commission' was formed with the aim of identifying 'the problems that have arisen during the transitional period of our Revolution'.[3]

The nationalisation and expropriation of large estates involved policies for removing, organising and renaming rural colonies and settlements associated with foreign companies. This radical transformation in forms of property ownership, labour relations and rural production provided the context for an 'ethnographic' focus on the living conditions of Cuba's rural workers (Leon 1966). The nationwide campaign to map Cuba's 'culture' and 'folklore' stimulated the interaction of technical and scientific institutions and the central agencies of the revolutionary State, such as the *Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria* (INRA) and the *Junta Central de Planificación* (JUCEPLAN) and led to the creation of a database on the situation of rural workers (*campesinos*) and new units of farm labour and production. Preliminary data from the survey enabled the specialists to identify the *comunidades* or *grupos humanos* existing in rural Cuba, which were characterised as *asociaciones campesinas*, *ingenios*, *granjas*, etc. In the initial reports issued by the *Instituto de Etnologia y Folklore*, the concern with the presence of *braceros* and their descendants living in the so-called 'Haitian Community' appears as part of a wide-ranging ethnographic project.[4]

In the early 1960s, this cultural mapping initiative received special coverage in *Actas del Folklore*. This publication contains the first scientifically based reports on the presence of Haitians, located throughout the eastern part of the island. Having attended the Institute's seminars as a student, Alberto Pedro Díaz was the author of one of the first articles in which the presence of Haitians in rural areas is analysed in the form of 'communities' (1966, 1967). By reinforcing the religious and linguistic specificities of Guanamaca's inhabitants, Díaz described the slow process of transformation of the community. This text would later be cited in other leading articles and would inform a specific view of the social insertion of a distinctly 'Haitian culture' and religious faith ('Haitian Vodou') among the Cuban *pueblo* and *campesinos*.[5]

This new approach is particularly significant when we observe how the concept of the 'community' was utilised in the descriptions of rural settlements. In 1978 an ethnographic expedition involving 17 Cuban researchers and '3 Soviet collaborators from the N. N. Miklujo Maklay Ethnographic Institute of the USSR Academy of Science' headed to the provinces of Camagüey and Holguín (Alvarez 1991: 4).[6] Following in

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3   Instituto de Etnologia y Folklore de la Academia de Ciencias de la Republica de Cuba. La Habana, 1962, Circular no. 3, p. 7.
4   See *Actas del Folklore* I(1) and I(10–11) of 1961 and Leon (1966). For a critical review of this literature see Hernandez-Reguant (2005) and Palmié (2010). See also *Actas del Folklore* I(1), p. 8.
5   Instituto de Etnologia y Folklore de la Academia de Ciencias de la republica de Cuba. La Habana, 1962, Circular, no. 1, p. 5.
6   See *Informe del Pilotaje efectuado al Cuestionario de MPT, durante el primer semestre de 1979, elaborado en octubre de 1979 por Martha Esquenazi* (Ms.). My thanks to researchers from the Centro Juan Marinello del Desarrollo de la Cultura for granting me access to the Atlas's archive.

the wake of the articles published by Díaz, a study of the 'Haitian community' of *Caidije*, co-authored by Jesus Guanche and Dennis Moreno (1988), proposed a model of the 'Haitian community' based on the Soviet theory of 'ethnos'.[7] Their fieldwork was conducted in 1976 in the town of Minas with the help of local technicians. Located near the Noel Fernandez (previously Senado) sugar plantation, *Caidije* was a former *batey* of about 360 people, including 116 Haitians. According to the researchers, the community contained 'vestiges' of several waves of immigrants and retained the imprints of these stories: family farms and factories whose output was for their own consumption, 'rudimentary' farming methods, the extensive use of Kreyol by older people and the first generation of *descendientes*, Catholic and Vodou religious rites and calendars, and finally the tendency for subsequent generations to scatter and migrate within Cuba. Hence, according to the authors, it was possible to identify 'a specific process of natural Cuban–Haitian ethnic assimilation that has different traits determined by the generation and linguistic-cultural parameters involved' (1988: 124). From this perspective, the idea of a 'Haitian community' appeared as an outcome of the immigration history. Moreover, since immigration had been interrupted by the end of 1930s, according to Perez da la Riva and others, the cultural and linguistic marks that characterised these communities were at risk of disappearing. A history of official and illegal 'flows' of *bracero* workers without family links, who married daughters of Haitians or Cuban women and who, due to the isolation of their communities, were described as the lost link with the past, was localised in each generation of descendants. Bilingualism, interethnic marriages and internal migration were viewed as factors that signalled a pattern of assimilation occurring over the course of several generations as immigrants came into contact with the Cuban culture and people. This orientation would have significant repercussions in terms of both the conception of the *Atlas Etnográfico de Cuba* and the development of rural planning policies (Bromlei and Kozlov 1989; Dragadze 1980).

The research mobilised to produce the *Atlas* was key to ensuring the recognition of the *asentamientos* – former *bateyes* located near farms and colonies – and *comunidades* – relatively isolated groups living in rural villages that had not become *cooperativas agrícolas* or *granjas del pueblo* (Esquenazi Pérez 2000; Corbea 1984; Figarola 1995; Figarola *et al*. 1988; Montes 2007). The ethnographic mapping project was undertaken in conjunction with a major investment in rural and urban planning, which led to profound changes in the patterns of territorial settlement underway since the late 1960s.[8] Internal migration and above all the growth of cities, along with the intensification of migration to Havana and its outskirts, were causes for concern. The mapping project was initiated shortly after the process of expropriating land for agrarian reform took hold, creating new *comunidades*, *asentamientos* and *granjas comunales* and reviving *bateyes* in the vicinity of the former sugar plantations.[9] In the mid-1970s, an intense wave of internal migration began, originating in the east (the provinces of Santiago de Cuba, Holguin, Guantanamo and Granma) and the central provinces (Ciego de Ávila and Camagüey)

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7   As Lindstrom points out, 'Soviet ethnography, archeology and biological anthropology all consider the ethnos to be a basic unit of study […] Ethnographers search for the particular cultural traits that define ethnic groups, and they reconstruct histories of the ethnogenetic events as the material culture to their creation' (2001: 61).

8   Cuba. Instituto de Planificación Física. *Proceso de Concentración y urbanización de la Populación Rural, 1970–1980.*

9   Cuba. Instituto de Planificación Física. *Diagnóstico de los Asentamientos de Base. Ciudad de la Habana, 1992.*

and moving west (particularly to the periphery of Ciudad de La Habana). Consequently, the government became concerned about the 'unequal' territorial distribution found in urban and rural areas.

Unmapping existence

Despite the ethnographic and cartographic boundaries inscribed by the State and academic specialists, groups of *residentes* and *descendientes* proliferated in areas not traditionally recognised as their 'cultural reference point', such as semi-rural towns and poor districts on the outskirts of Havana. As some members of *Dessaline* recount, Haitian immigrants and various generations of their descendants had been living in the densely populated low-income districts of Havana for some time. For Cubans in general, these differences are rarely perceived: skin colour, clothing and speech identified with the eastern region of the island and a supposed association with magical practices turn all of them into 'Haitians' and, when associated with poverty and criminality, 'Palestinians' or 'Orientals'.

The main difference was that in the 1990s *residentes* and *descendientes* had begun to form groups with the aim of organising the gathering and networking of their *paisanos* within legal frameworks, taking the form of *asociaciones* (Armony 2005; Cunha 2010). Although the right to form *asociaciones* was guaranteed by the Cuban Constitution, revised in 1992, the first specific post-1959 law containing all the requirements necessary for their institutionalisation and recognition was issued in 1976 (Hernandez 1998/1999: 42–3). A new law was passed in 1985 that improved the procedures for legalising associations – providing the means for 'regulating the exercise of the right to association' – and the role of the Justice Ministry (MINJUS) was also enhanced. The law stated that Cuban citizens who were 'initiators or founders' of 'scientific or technical', 'sports', 'cultural or artistic' or 'friendship and solidarity' associations had the right to 'request authorisation' for such groups to function. The *asociaciones* could be 'national' – in which case they would send an application to the ministerial agency responsible for the type of activity involved – or provincial/municipal. In the latter case, authorisation had to be requested from the local *Asamblea del Poder Popular*.[10] National associations acted as a centralising agency for local entities affiliated with them. Institutions whose requests for authorisation were denied could not operate until their by-laws, aims and membership rules had been changed.

The original *asociación*, the group that gave rise to the *Dessaline* group, was one of the first organisations of its kind, created in 1991 at the beginning of the 'special peacetime period'. A consequence of the US economic embargo against the Cuban government, together with the end of a long period of political and economic cooperation with Eastern European countries and the adoption of an austere economic policy marked by a scarcity of basic foods and inputs, the so-called 'special period' became the most important temporal reference point in terms of comprehending the contingencies that radically transformed the Cuban population's relation to old and new markets and to different forms of consumption. It is within this context of the relations between Cuban citizens and the State – marked by logical frameworks of value and morality, described by

10 Resolución no. 53, MINJUS, 14/7/86. Dicha el Reglamento de la Ley no. 54 de 27/12/85, Artigo 29, pp. 23–31; and Cuba. Ministério da Justica. Ley de Asociaciones y su reglamento. Ley no. 54 de 27/12/1985, p. 6.

some authors as a 'double morality' – that new forms of 'associativism' and autonomous organisation may be perceived as problematic (Holbraad 2010; Hernandez-Reguant 2009; Tanuma 2007; Cunha 2010). But it was also during the 'special period' that the first contacts took place between local *residentes* and *descendientes*, on one hand, and the groups and NGOs composed of Haitians living in Haiti itself and abroad, on the other. As Viddal observes in relation to groups from Santiago de Cuba, 'as the Special Period opened venues for contact with the world outside Cuba, culture ministries, academic institutions, festival producers, and conference programmers became active culture brokers, distributing resources such as access to audiences and travel opportunities' (2002: 232).

Apart from the unseen non-State-oriented activism and *participación*, *Dessaline*'s existence seemed to challenge the designated cartographic boundaries that localised the Haitian presence in the central and eastern part of the island. At the same time, it revealed the growing network of individuals and families of Haitian origin living in *cuarterias*, *solares* and *ocupaciones* in degraded neighbourhoods such as Centro Habana and its poorest *municipios*. In addition to disrupting 'scientific' and 'historical' knowledge concerning who the Haitians and their descendants in Cuba were and where they lived, *Dessaline* linked up with other networks. Its first attempts at institutionalisation involved contacts with a transnational political and cultural network of non-governmental organisations and agencies working with groups representing the 'Haitian diaspora' in the Caribbean and the United States (Richman and Balan-Gaubert 2001).[11]

The emergence of these and other forms of mobilisation and 'social participation' aimed at institutionalising cultural manifestations such as associations in the late 1990s seems to have put a check on those expressions that traditionally characterise Haitian groups as an invisible part of a 'multiethnic' nation (Fleites 2004; Dilla 1999). However, groups like *Dessaline* appear to have avoided and even rejected such pigeonholing. They prefer to describe themselves as *residentes* and *descendientes* when organising their members and winning local and international recognition. Nevertheless, though classified as *asociaciones* and *proyectos* – official categories established by Cuban legislation – groups like *Dessaline* cannot be easily defined in terms of their official character and whether they are relatively or totally private, independent and autonomous from known forms of state territorialisation and institutionalisation. In different parts of the island, collectivities of residents or descendants adopting diverse approaches and distinct forms of organisation have been using kinship, religious affiliation, Kreyol classes or even events chosen from national calendars (Cuban and Haitian) as motives for their meetings. Rather than any absolute convergence in these possibilities, there are instead some profound distinctions: between those claiming to be 'Christians' and the 'others', for instance, or between *residentes* and *descendientes*, or between Kreyol-speakers and non-speakers. Moreover it is not uncommon for some of these activities to receive State support, transforming them into events that emphasise official discourses on the singularity of the Haitian presence as bounded 'communities'.

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11   One of the main sponsors of the activities of groups like *Dessaline* was the Martha Jean Claude Foundation, run by heirs of the deceased Haitian artist, who lived in Cuba for many years. Relations between groups of residents and descendants and the Haitian diaspora were not included with the scope of the present research. The association between the experiences described here and nationalist discourses and mobilisations both within and beyond Haiti have yet to be studied in much depth. However, for the Haiti–USA case, see the analyses of Richman (1992), Glick-Schiller and Furon (2001), and Richman and Rey (2009), among others.

Pablo attempted to register the first association in 1991, together with other Haitian descendants scattered in the peripheral districts of Ciudad la Habana and other people in the populous district of Centro Habana. This grouping and networking activity was carried out in conjunction with other 'streams' of organisations involving Jamaicans and other immigrants and their descendants living in Cuba (Hansing 2001). A more widespread effort at gathering and networking as an *Asociación Central* was made, but from the official perspective this proved fruitless. Jamaicans and their descendants ended up forming a separate group, and the embryo of what would become the *Asociación de Descendientes y Residentes* was formed. Some of the disputes between the group and the government agencies responsible for officially registering the new association stemmed, in part, from these turbulent beginnings.

Though not officially registered as an *asociación, Dessaline* enjoyed the support of the Ministry of Culture and a local *Fundación* as its main sponsors. But it is important to note that *Dessaline* was actually founded as a *proyecto cultural* after Pablo came into contact with other *colectivos*. This endeavour to form the *asociación* in Havana was far from consensual: an influential portion of the *Asociación Central*'s membership was made up of Haitians who had arrived in Cuba in the late 1950s, some of them political exiles who disagreed with Pablo's aim of fostering a transnational interpretation that made a generic Creole rather than Haitian Kreyol the basic factor for bringing together what he called the 'community' of Haitians and *residentes* in Cuba. Furthermore, the emergence of numerous associations of Haitians seems to indicate new ways of producing connections not exclusively linked to the State institutions, although still heavily influenced by what Trouillot calls 'state effects' (2001: 17): the nomenclature and hierarchy of certain bureaucratic practices, the production of legal records and documents, levels of significance, and the recognition of State authority and its system of organisation. Such agencies can be understood, therefore, not only as expressions that go against the State but complex ways of producing relationships between institutions, people, migration and work experiences.[12]

Micro networks and alternative inscriptions

References to 'history' are an active part of the lives of many *residentes* or *descendientes* when they talk about their past experiences as Haitian immigrants in Cuba and indeed sometimes assume an almost ritualised form. Although other possible forms of ritualised mnemonic discourse may be present in the Haitian festivals and religious practices found in different parts of the island (Figarola *et al.* 1988; Corbea 1984; Figarola 1995; Viddal 2012), here I refer to the use of a kind of propitiatory object through which distinct pasts could not only be created but also compared: the use of tapes produced by Haitian groups in the USA for educational purposes (Richman 2005; Richman and Rey 2009). In November 2004 I took part in a meeting that could be described simultaneously as a rite of contestation between specialised attempts to localise Haitian individuals and descendants within an official cartography, and a civic ritual celebrating dual belonging to Cuba and Haiti. The meeting of *LH* members was

12   The notion of 'state effects' coined by Trouillot encompasses a wide range of state, government, community, global and private organisations and practices in distinct contexts. Despite the lone reference to the author, I emphasise the breadth and complexity of the debate and literature on the theme. Space limitations and the objectives of the present analysis prevent a discussion of other related subjects.

held in a modest one-room house, the headquarters of the local *Consejo Popular*, where about 50 people, most of them older women over the age of 50, gathered on Sunday afternoons. It began with the singing of the national anthems of Cuba and Haiti, followed by discussion of the association's calendar of activities, and concluded with a debate on different interpretations of Haiti's history and the experience of Haitians in Cuba. One of the activities involved the remembrance of an event symbolising the painful task of remembering the experiences of Haitians workers in the region. A group of *residentes* and *descendientes* annually pay homage to the Haitians killed and persecuted as illegal aliens by the Rural Guard in numerous Cuban *colonias* and *bateyes* during the first half of the twentieth century (MacLeod 1998; Alvarez Estévez 1988; Casey 2011). But remembering the dead *paisanos* requires more than knowledge about the place of Haitian workers in local and national histories. Given the difficulties faced by the Cuban population in terms of transportation and access to material resources, the celebration involves diverse forms of political persuasion, as well as personal commitments. It was the small contributions made in *moneda nacional* (Cuban Pesos) by many of the association members attending these Sunday meetings that enabled a group of senior women to use the modest sums raised to organise these activities.

Kreyol songs were played from a small tape deck. The meeting started with everyone standing and singing Cuba's national anthem followed by the anthem of Haiti. After opening the meeting in Kreyol, Ramón read out the agenda and gave a brief talk in Spanish on the difficulties of maintaining the *asociación*'s activities: the need for members to pay their fees on time, and the need to continue the work with the city government to introduce a training initiative for chefs specialising in Haitian cuisine and employed by the local tourism network, as well as the Kreyol lessons given by Rámon himself in his home to various children and adults. Although unanimously given clear support, recognising Ramón's personal commitment, all of these issues were treated in an almost bureaucratic fashion. Participation would come later. Seated in front of the other participants, Ramón and Rodrigo, the vice-president of the *LH*, not only lamented the dearth of resources for implementing activities but encouraged those present to demonstrate and express their own knowledge about *la historia y la cultura haitiana* (Haitian history and culture).

During my first visit to his home, Ramón, the president and founder of *LH*, had already shown me the Jean Julien cassettes *Istwa Peyi Dayiti* (History of the Haitian Nation) produced in New Jersey to mark the bicentennial of the Haitian revolution. The tapes were a gift from a group of Haitians living in the USA who had recently visited *LH* and were being used by him in the Kreyol classes given in his home. But it was at this meeting that I, along with other *LH* members, first heard one of the tapes. Narrated in Kreyol, the story about the origins of the Island of Hispaniola, the policy of enslaving the indigenous population and the position of the Catholic Church attracted everyone's attention and interest. While listening to the tape and interpreting and discussing some of the issues presented almost didactically by Rodrigo, each member of the group had the opportunity to improve their Kreyol. Other participants quickly intervened and observed that they had learned at school in Cuba that Father Bartolomé de Las Casas had been a stout defender of the Indians. Maria, a member of a choir of descendants called *Dessanndan* ('Descendants' in Kreyol), brought up in the neighbouring Camaguey district, seemed unhappy with the idea of participating merely as a listener. She wanted to establish some form of interaction and exchange between the knowledge contained in the tape recordings, the experiences of the older

people present at the meeting, and her own understanding of the Catholic Church's stance during the colonial and slave-based regimes. 'In fact,' she pointed out, 'by protecting the humanity of the Indians, he implied the same possibility for the labour of the Africans who were beginning to arrive as slaves.' At that point several people expressed their agreement.

Rodrigo interrupted and attempted to structure the responses, but was clearly pleased at the members' involvement and their desire to express opinions. However, the story told by the people present was not the accepted narrative. Spoken in Kreyol, not only the subject matter but the way it related to the memories of each participant attracted Rodrigo's interest and his 'coordinated' intervention. Some people recalled words with similar meanings in Spanish and Kreyol, and thus the story recounted on the cassette tape gradually acquired other interpretations, mediated by personal life stories. Speaking in Kreyol or being able to translate and interpret its meanings in Spanish therefore revealed much more than linguistic abilities, or the distinctions between residents and descendants. It seems to have mobilised other meanings related to the idea of a shared history. Rather than focusing on the technicalities and exegesis surrounding the ideas of Father Las Casas, the conversation was redirected towards a debate on the best way to use words and expressions in Kreyol. Certainly Rodrigo's interventions were not made to correct the forms used by the speakers, but as part of the individualisation of interpretations associated with shared relations and experiences and with other expressions of 'relatedness' (Carsten 2000). In many cases, people started recounting life stories by saying 'My mom told me…', or 'When I lived in such-and-such place, I met a woman who used to say that…', or 'there was a man/woman in the *poblado* ('small settlement') where I lived who knew many stories about that'. Both the memories of situations related to family events and the context in which certain words or similar expressions were used served as 'documents', while other suggested meanings were contested (Strathern 1990; Riles 2006). Consequently, any attempts to turn them into a version of the history 'of Haiti' or even 'of Haitians' were reformulated by personal interpretations in which the speaker justified his or her viewpoint through reference to an affine.

To understand how history, migration and networks of kin and affines come together, we must briefly return to the histories of Felícia and Pablo, members of *Dessaline*. Felícia was born in Guantánamo in 1946. A sweet maker and worker on the coffee plantations, her mother was born in Aux Cailles. Her father, a contractor who 'sabia leir y escribir' ['was literate'] whose Haitian surname was Mounet, adopted the surname Hernandez when he arrived in Cuba with his wife and mother-in-law. At the age of 13, Felícia migrated to Esmeralda municipality with her mother and maternal grandmother. There her mother married Emílio 'Pol' – the surname a corruption of Paul attributed to many Haitians without official documents when they were obliged to sign work contracts. Her mother had another two children with Emílio. Felícia lived with her family close to the Central Jaronu, selling sweets in a settlement of mixed families, while her parents worked in sugarcane cutting. During the off-season they headed to Palma Soriano to harvest coffee. Felícia lived in Esmeralda with her grandmother, who spoke just Kreyol, until she married at the age of 19 to a *pichón* musician, the son of a Haitian woman and Cuban man. In 1963 Felícia moved to Centro Havana. In Havana she met an 'old Haitian woman' called René Cadet. Known as *Marabout*, illiterate and someone who 'no hablava el espanhol', Cadet directed a music and dance group called *Jean Jacques Dessaline*. It was with her that Felícia learned to compose and

remember old songs in Kreyol and it was through this activity that she met another *paisano* recently arrived from Camagüey, Pablo, the founder of *Dessaline*.

The daughter of Haitians originating from Aux Cailles, Pablo's mother was born in Palma Soriano (Ciego de Ávila) and migrated between Camagüey and the coffee plantations of Guantánamo in search of work. Pablo's father was from Carvaillon in Haiti. 'Despues que triunfó la revolución', his mother received her first pass to work at the American base of Guantánamo, which was where she received the first documents in which her Haitian name was replaced. Finally, in 1978 Pablo's mother moved to Havana, remarried the son of a Haitian woman and survived on a small monthly income given by the State to the elderly and retired. Although Pablo's generation did not experience the same process of depersonalisation and violence in which Cuban names and surnames were imposed on 'Haitians' through the obliteration of their own family names, they did directly experience one of the repercussions of this policy: his siblings and other family members have different surnames, meaning that they do not constitute a family under the law. The rejection of Kreyol and the discrimination of those speaking it left deep marks, since the language was the primary indication of their origin.

Conclusion: relating and connecting kin and histories

The history of Hispaniola and the birth of Haiti, as narrated in the tapes, were transformed into the subject matter of interpretative exercises and critiques and thus a matter for everyday reconstruction of their own family histories. Telling or interpreting a story means temporally connecting and reconnecting links, experiences, kin and controversies concerning 'who and where the Haitians are', accumulated and heard throughout their lives. The connections between multiple knowledge and the heard and lived experiences work as 'open associations', since they are able to encompass both 'official' and subjective narratives, and include different kinds of objects and ontologies, establishing what Latour calls 'non-social ties': 'links between unstable and shifting frames of reference rather than […] keeping one frame stable' (2005: 24). My description of the collective event of listening to the tapes should not be taken as a unique event. I remember how during our first encounter in his humble house on the outskirts of Villa Morena, Ramón appeared to 'recite' a text populated with information on 'la presencia haitiana en Cuba', a topic I had known from academic and specialised texts. It was as though he could mould his knowledge on the activities of his companions from *LH* to shift between an 'official' and distant emphasis and another emphasis, more personal and much less well-known. What makes Ramón's story unique, however, was his desire to connect both: to focus on his experiences and on the lives of other individuals, as well as on a certain history of Haitian immigration obtained from texts. Although a recent immigrant compared with most other members of the *LH*, who are second- and third-generation descendants of Haitians, Ramón speaks as an unusual kind of Haitian descendent. His experience as a retired union leader and member of post-revolutionary people's councils seems to mediate many of his attempts to 'speak as a Haitian'. Ramón appears to refer to 'us' – meaning the *descendientes* – more frequently, as if by doing so his Haitian nationality would be undeniable. This is the 'place' where he seems to feel most comfortable – or, perhaps, protected – when delineating a historical narrative concerning the first groups of Haitian workers to settle in the area.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, allusions to the 'Haitian presence' do not possess a univocal meaning, nor is their use confined to authorised interpretations based on a cartographic perspective. By forming groups and justifying their desire to formalise this movement through official recognition and legal nomenclature, *residentes* and *descendientes* are expressing their intention and 'right' to produce connections, relatedness and existential associations. The stories of residents and descendants seem much more visible when connected to their constant movement from Haiti to Cuba, from the sugar fields to coffee plantations, from rural areas to the cities, or from the Oriente and Villa Morena to the periphery of La Habana and Central Havana. These perceptions differ from those that have been of interest to local ethnologists, historians and institutions looking to deepen scientific knowledge of the country's culture. The question is whether such disparate voices refer to the same things and to what extent the distances between them – if they exist – can be apprehended. If the markers that define the 'Haitian presence' are the same, where, when and for which audiences and interlocutors are they presented differently? And finally, if the meanings and situations in which the expression is utilised do differ, why are these possibilities merely insinuated rather than revealed through opposition, confrontation and contestation, thereby dissipating any attempt to understand the relationships between these groups and the State and its authorised narratives?

In my description of collective listening to the tape recordings of a 'history of Haiti' in Villa Morena, I have tried to show how difference is produced as a mode of associating time, place and existence, and above all as a mode of establishing relations with affines. Maria's critique, the opinions of the *paisanos*, and the sequence of objections, contributions and modes of telling or recalling histories in Kreyol, were simultaneously narratives in which the reference to family ties temporally and spatially 'extended' the 'presence' of the Haitian immigrants and their descendants beyond official versions. Moreover, it signalled in a sensible and affective form that history was an experience shared *with* kin: a succession of small networks of affines who converge and diverge, which can be remade by recollecting, celebrating and meeting in the spaces formed by the *asociaciones*. When references to migration – particularly those involving women and children – are associated with the family histories, they configure and express different ways of producing 'relatedness' (Carsten 2000; Olwig 2007). The families, constituted through endless movements of spatial approximation and distancing, are made from the histories 'frozen' in official readings. However, when discussing the families, members of collectives like *LH* and *Dessaline* do not formulate them as elements confined to a unique community territory, nor ascribe them fixed start and end points. On the contrary, they are depicted as open associations in which the migrant and the relative, always in movement, become merged.

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