

Mezanmi, Kouman Nou Ye? My Friends, How Are You?: Musical Constructions of the Haitian Transnation.

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"Mezanmi, Kouman Nou Ye? My Friends, How Are You?": Musical Constructions of the Haitian Transnation

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Diaspora 3:3 1994 "Mezanmi, Kouman Nou Ye? My Friends, How Are You?": Musical Constructions of the Haitian Transnation Gage Averill Wesleyan University In 1990, Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide appointed Farah Juste, a well-known political singer from Miami, to be the representative to the government from the Dizeyem Depatman (10th Department),¹ a neologism for the Haitian diaspora or diaspora (diaspora). Aristide hoped to draw on the resources, talents, and investment potential of the diaspora to rebuild insular Haiti.² By appointing a singer as its representative, Aristide recognized the leading role of musicians in

constructing and sustaining a notion of a Haitian nationhood *lot bo dlo* (across the water). The transnational character of the Haitian diaspora was impressed on me in my first interview on the subject of Haitian music. The director of the Haitian American Chamber of Commerce in Miami interrupted our conversation to listen intently to the daily broadcasts from Haiti over one of the 60 Haitian radio programs in Miami. Many experiences like this led me to question how immigrants variously "belonged" to Haiti and the United States and how Haitian popular music, which circulated freely in the diaspora and at home, articulated this sense of dual belonging. For these reasons, I borrowed the transnational "tour" by Haitian musicians as the spatializing metaphor for my own doctoral dissertation research (Averill, "Haitian Dance Band Music"). Haitian populations overseas correspond to the most restrictive criteria for diaspora status (Safran 83) except for a lack of consensus over the question of returning to the homeland. Among Haitians, individual outlooks on this vary considerably, and they vary in the aggregate over time. I argue that the increasingly transnational character of the population, the rise in circular migration patterns, and the increased possibilities for regular electronic and physical contact render this question—and to some extent the stability of the concept of diaspora—obsolete. The lives of many Haitians come to resemble Haitian commercial music in at least one critical aspect: they are increasingly suspended in the new transnational space between nation state and diaspora. Haitians conceive of themselves as a people twice displaced, a diaspora within a diaspora. They are descendants of Africans who Diaspora 3:3 1994 were displaced by the slave trade, who then reconstituted themselves into a new multi-ethnic African nationality (and nation state), and who were dispersed again by poverty and political turmoil. Paul Gilroy correctly stresses that the African diaspora, now conceived within four nodal points—the Caribbean, the United States, Europe, and Africa—forms a larger context for cultural exchange (157). In the Haitian case, immigrants relate intimately not only to a host society, the society they left behind, and the Haitian diaspora, but to another transnational entity, the African diaspora, finding commonalities with this larger entity. The process by which transmigrants conceive of a homeland and incorporate it into daily life has emerged as a critical topic in diasporic studies. Mark Slobin has advocated more attention to how diasporas and homelands communicate and influence each other. Citing both Gold and Anderson, Slobin (64) stresses the importance in immigrant communities of the concept of the "mother country" and challenges researchers to investigate it more fully in all of its dimensions. Despite the circumstances that encouraged emigration, many Haitian exiles hold nostalgic views of home that have been amplified by the time and distance away from Haiti; reinforced by the indignities of immigrant life and encounters with American racism and xenophobia; and focused by reflexive and purposeful activity of politicians, journalists, and artists (especially musicians). This article examines the musical linkages between transmigrants and their homeland, tracing the ideological changes in this notion over time. It also investigates how the transnational circulation of Haitian popular music has helped to configure new postnational social spaces and social relations that span homeland and diaspora. I find that both the musical process (the circulation of transnational musics) and the discursive products (especially musical texts) have served to construct transnational Haitian identity. "When You're in the White's Country": Migration and Nostalgia Transnational labor migration from Haiti results from an interdependent set of political and economic factors. In the 30 years after the election of François Duvalier (1957), nearly a million Haitians — approximately...

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Gage Averill
Wesleyan University

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