

Communication, migrant activism and counter-hegemonic narratives of Haitian diaspora in Brazil

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Abstract

This article presents ongoing findings of a larger research project oriented towards the analysis of counter-hegemonic narratives produced and shared in digital media by Haitian immigrants during 2015 and 2017. The analysis demonstrates how these narratives evidence racism experienced by these immigrants residing in Brazil. The analytical corpus is comprised of a selection of these media narratives as well as the examination of in-depth interviews conducted with Haitian immigrants in the Southeast, South and Mid-East areas of Brazil. Results show two dimensions in these narratives. On the one hand, the recognition and denunciation of racism marks the insertion and trajectory of Haitians in Brazil; on the other hand, the growing efforts for producing other representations in Haiti and Haitians in Brazil.

Keywords

Digital media, Haitian immigration, narratives, racism, activism, Brazil

Introduction

This article gathers partial results of a research project oriented towards the analysis of narratives produced by Haitian immigrants using digital media in Brazil. The analysis focuses on those counter-hegemonic narratives that expose racism experienced by immigrants. The research comprises, on one hand, the collection of a corpus of different modalities of narratives produced and shared in digital media environments by Haitian immigrants in Brazil between 2015 and 2017. On the other hand, it also includes the analysis of semi-structured interviews with Haitian immigrants involved in the production of these narratives. The analysis is developed from the selection of two main dimensions that cross these narratives, in an articulated manner, and that can be evidenced both in the content of media productions and in interviews with immigrants.

Haitian immigration in Brazil: A brief contextualisation

In 2010, after the earthquake that hit Haiti, Brazil began to consolidate itself as one of the new migratory routes of Haitian diaspora, whose priority destinations were historically countries such as the United States, France, Canada, Dominican Republic, some Caribbean islands (Bahamas, Martinique, Guadeloupe) and French Guiana (Audebert, 2011; Handerson, 2015). According to the official data of the Ministry of Haitians living abroad (MHAVE), there are 5 million Haitians living in other countries, which represents half of the Haitian population, estimated to be 10.413.211 (Handerson, 2015: 40-41).

In Brazil, estimates point to the existence of approximately 60 to 65 thousand Haitians living in different regions of the country¹ in 2017 (Handerson, 2017).² Brazil is the country in South America with biggest presence of Haitian immigrants, and one of the main transnational spaces that integrate, currently, the South-South route of this diaspora³ (Audebert, 2017). Through the National Council of Immigration (CNIG), the Brazilian government created, in 2012, a new legal device – named a humanitarian visa – oriented towards the regularisation of Haitians that arrived without the demanded visas for entering the country. Initially, the resolution allowed two interpretations: the production of a possibility of legalisation of Haitians in the country and the restriction of the arrival of new immigrants. A great part of Haitians arriving in Brazil between 2010 and 2012 did not reside in Haiti anymore, but came from other countries such as Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Cuba and Chile (Handerson, 2015:34).

The state of São Paulo was consolidated as the main destination of Haitians arriving in the country in 2010, followed by the states situated in the Southern region of the country – Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. However, although they have preferred big urban centres, in the first four years of insertion in the country Haitian immigrants were already present in approximately 15 out of the 26 Brazilian states. This shows that the geographical dispersion has been one of the specificities of this migration, possibly driven by the logics of network and contracts offered by companies in cities of different Brazilian regions (Handerson, 2017:16). According to the 2017 Migration Observatory (OBmigra) report (in Cavalcanti, Oliveira, Araujo & Tonhati, 2017), Haitians are the migrant group with the biggest presence in the Brazilian formal job market, surpassing classic migrant communities in the country, such as the Portuguese. They also have the biggest presence in the registrations of the Federal Police in Brazil.⁴

From interviews with Haitian immigrants in Brazil, Handerson (2017) raises a set of perspectives that could have contributed to choosing this country as a new migratory destination of the Haitian diaspora since 2010. These perspectives appear crossed by communicational dimensions that operate in production of national and racial imaginaries about Brazil as a main destination. The author highlights the specific position occupied by the Brazilian army in the command of the United Nations Mission for the Stabilization in Haiti (MINUSTAH)'s troops. The mission that operated in Haiti between 2004 and 2017 was a target of serious criticism both regarding the violence that surrounded its operations and the interference in the processes of autonomy in Haiti. However, the Brazilian presence in the field of MINUSTAH could have contributed to the familiarisation of Brazil in the Haitian universe, as well as the action, in Haiti, of Brazilian non-governmental organisations such as Viva Rio.⁵

Handerson (2017) refers to the public position of the Brazilian government in a public discourse that reiterated openness and hospitality in relation to Haitians. Narratives about the incentives that would be given to Haitian migration to Brazil were shared in Haiti and other countries. Within these narratives, information about job offers for the 2014 World Cup stood out as well as the high salary levels in the country or even the concession of free housing and food to migrant workers – information that would contrast with the reality found by Haitians in Brazil at their arrival. Pimentel and Cotinguiba (2014: 33) remind us that, right after the earthquake, Brazilian president Luíz Inácio Lula da Silva visited Haiti and, in an open speech, said that Haitians could come to Brazil and that they would be received with open arms. In February 2012, the president Dilma Rousseff visited Haiti and emphasized 'as it is the Brazilian nature, we are open to receive Haitian citizens that choose to pursue opportunities in Brazil' (Handerson, 2017: 14).

One last aspect mentioned by Handerson (2017) refers to the propaganda and image of Brazil in Haiti, linked to the idea of a 'racial paradise'. This could have influenced the imaginary of Haitian immigrants facing discrimination in the Dominican Republic and in Ecuador. Such imaginary is supported in the cultural historic bonds maintained by Brazil and Haiti related mainly

to cultural elements such as the common African origin, music and soccer. Or even the references to *telenovelas* (soap operas) and Carnival parades of Rio de Janeiro broadcasted by Haitian television.

The visit of the soccer player Pelé to Haiti in 1978 remains as a memory for older generations, as well as the saying, known in the Caribbean country, 'Haitians are more Brazilian than Brazilians themselves', in an allusion to the approximately 60% of the Haitian population that are supporters of the Brazilian soccer team (Handerson, 2017: 14). The reiteration of cultural bonds between both nations was observed in 2004, with the 'Peace Game', a soccer match between the Brazilian and Haitian soccer teams in Haiti. The game was aligned with the Brazilian government's objective of 'having international political presence, showing the country's potential to host the 2014 World Cup' (Handerson, 2017: 14).

Theoretical Framework: Migration in Brazil, racial relations and media

Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery in the American continent, as well as the country that received most of the enslaved Africans, which were present throughout the Brazilian territory. It is estimated that 4.8 million Africans were landed in Brazil, with the first arrivals dating from 1550 and the last ones in the 1860s⁶ (Schwarcz & Gomes, 2018). The context created by slavery transformed colonial and postcolonial Brazil into a mestizo society, at the same time deeply marked by the African presence and by inequalities: discriminations and exclusions of the black and mestizo populations, which result from this slavery past, even after 130 years of its extinction.⁷

In this context, it was the African oral tradition that ensured the transmission of cultural elements and values of the various ethnic groups of Africans that were enslaved in Brazil. In the diaspora, while working, Africans taught aspects of black culture, at the same time as they resisted living in poor conditions, imposed by slavery. The processes used included, among others, the capoeira's 'jinga', as a means of self-defence and of communication through drum playing (Cogo & Machado, 2011). Dances, playing and fights revealed the updated body language in the space and time lived by Africans brought to Brazil (Janheinz, 1963). The musicality also guaranteed the diversity of beliefs and customs of the traditional African cultures, contributing to the preservation of memory and the creation of an Afro-Brazilian culture, which kept alive symbolic elements of black Africa in Brazil. These dynamics of resistance to enslavement unfolded simultaneously in other cultural and communicational practices, such as those aimed at the development of a black press and, more recently, the appropriation of digital communication technologies in the struggles for equality and citizenship of African descendants in Brazil.

In this context of formation of the national society, Brazilian researchers such as Seyferth (2000) demonstrate the existence of strategies to control immigration in the country since the first flows, associated with the ideal of the Caucasian, European immigrant. Between 1819 and the end of the 1940's, Brazil received approximately five million immigrants, mainly Italians, Portuguese, Spanish, Germans and Japanese. There were other migrant groups in this period less represented in numbers, such as Russians, Austrians, Syrian-Lebanese and Polish (Seyferth, 2007). With the support of the Brazilian government, these immigrants moved to the Southern region of Brazil. After the first half of the 1880's, the state of São Paulo became the main destination of foreigners arriving in the country (Seyferth, 2000).

Seyferth believes that the country's government developed policies with the idea that ideal immigrants were 'white, healthy workers, exemplary farmers coming from the European rural setting, with all the "good qualities" of countrymen and craftsmen, obedient to the law, docile and regulated, with impeccable morals, etc.' (Seyferth, 2000: 3). Amongst the European, there were also those considered 'undesirable', such as refugees, people with disabilities, gypsies, political activists, old people, communists and convicted felons (Seyferth, 2000: 3). Even though

racial or cultural prejudice in the beginning of European migration to Brazil was secondary, there was no tolerance for people who did not fit into this profile of the ideal immigrant.

In 1888, after the abolition of slavery in Brazil, the alternative found to black people's labour was the remuneration of European and Asian settlers for working in rural areas and in other sectors of the economy. As free workers, former slaves began to be deprived of available jobs, as well as to face difficulties in negotiating, with landowners, the rules of insertion in the new labour regime. This situation forced many of them to abandon the places where they lived, being deprived either of the portion of the lands where they worked or of reparatory policies by the Brazilian government. This process contributed to a growing social economic exclusion of the Afro Brazilian population and the establishment of social inequalities focused on this population, which is evident until today (Chaves & Cogo, 2013).

The thesis of a process of 'whitening' the Brazilian population was key in the debate about the need for immigrants' assimilation. It took place from the beginning of the 19th century until the government of President Getúlio Vargas (1937-1945). On one hand, this idea inserted Europeans as part of a process of cultural miscegenation; on the other, their integration into the national culture was expected through a process of 'becoming Brazilian'. The nationalist imaginary, profoundly attached to an ethnic sense of the nation's formation, helped to create other forms of exclusion by degrees of assimilation (privileging migrants with proven *latinidad*), as reaffirmed in the racist ideas of disqualification of 'Asian and African natives' (Seyferth, 2000).

The process of whitening the Brazilian population had special features that conditioned the racial relationships in a different way than in other nations, with the creation of national migratory policies that focused on white immigrants. The concept of 'white supremacy', which excludes those who don't fit in the imposed standard, was replaced by the admission of 'white superiority', supported by the hierarchy amongst races in the exclusion or non-inclusion of those considered 'different' or 'inferior'. This specificity can be explained in the permanent and intense process of miscegenation that ended up constituting Brazil as a multi-racial nation, not bi-racial or clearly polarised, as it is the case in the United States. This reality created more complex racial relations and manifested in the incidence of racism that persists in Brazil (Chaves & Cogo, 2013).

With the impossibility of being reversed, miscegenation was re-signified by the intellectual, scientific and political elite, through strategies of rationalisation that included the reinforcement of the assimilationist ideology (Skidmore, 1991). Such ideology was based in the concept of a racial democracy that operates in social relations to conceal racism, conflicts and inequalities between ethnic groups in Brazil. Based in the concept of harmonious coexistence and pacific union of three races – white, black and native Brazilian – that formed the country, the idea of a racial democracy was popularised by the proposition of the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (2002), transforming miscegenation into a fundamental perspective in the constitution of the ethnic-racial relationships in the country.

Munanga (2004) synthesises the complexity of the systems of belonging that demarcate the identity experience of the African descendants in Brazil. The concepts of black and white assume, in the author's view, an ideological and political nature, rather than a biological one, which helps to explain, for example, the fact that there are black people who have introjected the ideal of whitening and do not consider themselves as black. As a counter-discursive strategy constructed by black social movements and intellectuals, efforts to assign a positive connotation to the term 'black' have contributed on triggering a process of blackening in Brazil and, consequently, new updates of identities, such as those related to non-black people who declare themselves as black by origin or by empathy.

In this perspective, deconstructing racial democracy, as a foundational narrative for the national identity, became one of the main issues in the fight of black and anti-racism Brazilian social movements in the country. Such deconstruction can be observed in disputes involving the

implementation of policies of affirmative action in Brazil in the first half of the 2000's, considered constitutional by the Federal Supreme Court in 2012 (Chaves & Cogo, 2013).

It is important to consider the impact of the Haitian Revolution⁸ (1791-1825), led by the freed slave Toussaint L'Ouverture, in the ideas and struggles of the black movement, but also in different Brazilian social sectors. The revolution that peaked with the abolishment of slavery and proclamation of independence in Haiti inspired and marked the history of black movements' fights in different national contexts. Regarding repercussions of the Haitian Revolution in colonial and imperial Brazil, between 1800 and 1840, Morel (2017) explains that the leaders of the Revolution, captives that became political figures, were known in Brazil and started to represent a threat to the slave owners' interests, in addition to getting sympathy from different sectors of the national society. The author emphasises four non-hostile repercussions of the Haitian Revolution in Brazilian society: national sovereignty, popular sovereignty, anti-racism and criticism towards slavery. To recognise such acceptance of the Haitian Revolution in the beginning of the 19th century in Brazil implies admitting a dissemination of this issue in different sectors of society. This disclosure came through unusual trails, by manuscripts or spoken word; it was not limited to a restricted social circle and it was connected to a strong tendency of concealment and/or disqualification. Although it was restricted or concealed, it was not mutually eliminated, in a symbolic fight of consequence (Morel, 2017: 307)

This article examines how these historic bonds related to the cultural and racial experiences in Haiti and in Brazil are present in the current transnational migratory dynamics of Haitian immigrants. In the field of migratory studies, Guarnizo (2004) says that immigrant transnationalism cannot be reduced to its economic impacts, since it also consists in an intense flow of ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital linked to the original and destination societies of immigrants. Castles (2010: 27) highlights the need to contextualise migrant transnationalism, with studies that articulate the macro, medium and micro structural instances, and that focus on the reality of immigrants. To recognise that macrostructures regulate or limit the action of individuals in the migratory processes does not imply, however, disregarding the existence of spaces of autonomy and action for migrants that, to a large extent, can be perceived at a micro level, as is the case in practices developed in media spaces.

Starting from the centrality of media in contemporary societies, Silverstone (2010) situates participating in media culture in an increasingly important dimension of our social experience. According to the author, understanding participation as action implies recognising that activity or agency presupposes some type of responsibility, given that the 'polis' of media does not exist without participation, including media production. According to Silverstone, 'the social or political responses of the participants are strictly linked to the world they seek to represent and dispute through media images' (Silverstone, 2010: 168).

Hall (2016), reflecting on representation, explains that meanings are being constantly elaborated and shared in each social interaction. The author assures that, in the landmark of these interactions, meanings are created in 'a variety of media; especially nowadays, in the modern mass media, in the systems of global communication, of complex technologies, that make meanings circulate between different cultures in a speed and scale unknown to history' (Hall, 2016: 22). According to Hall, meaning allows cultivating the notion of identity and belonging, linking it to issues about how 'culture is used to restrict or maintain identity within the group and the difference between groups' (Hall, 2016: 21). Silverstone emphasises, however, the uneven character that involves the disputes over meaning and the participation in media spaces, given that the 'power to accept or to respond to dominant meanings, which are spread by media, is distributed in an uneven way amongst different societies and within them' (2010: 168-169).

In a context of intense imagery flow about transnational migrations, Geourgiou (2018: 47) invites reflection upon the tensions between media hypervisibility and the possibilities of

inclusion of migrant and refugee voices in the media. Georgiou quotes Horsti (2016, in Georgiou, 2018: 47) to warn that, in the European context, 'immigrants coming in a boat were extremely visible, but remain silenced to a great extent'. The author examines digital initiatives in which immigrants speak with and to Europe in the context of the so-called 'migratory crisis' and observes that the incorporation of refugee and migrant voices in the digital environment is no guarantee of recognition. On the contrary, this incorporation 'reveals the complex politics of digital representation: challenging structures of hegemonic power, but that, most of the time, reaffirm digitally the power of the frontier and their symbolic articulations' (Georgiou, 2018: 45).

Martín-Barbero (2004) also reflects on the social processes of appropriation, resistance and resignification of productions, contents and logics of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Without disregarding the dynamics of imposition, domination and homogenisation, the author recognises different possibilities of appropriation of technology that can create other forms of knowledge, perception, sensibilities, languages, social aspects and ways of intervention in social reality.

In different countries where the Haitian diaspora is present, immigrants have constituted socio-communicative spaces through the ICTs. From the perspective of Parham (2004), diasporic websites and forums began to constitute new social bases for the production and exercise of national subjectivities, as well as transnational discourses that extrapolate borders and create links between dispersed national communities. Based on the conceptual notion of diasporic public sphere, Parham (2004) analyses this dynamics based on a study carried out in the United States on the participation of Haitian immigrants in the Global Village Forum, a website geared to the Haitian diaspora. If, from the 1960s to the 1990s, Haitian immigrants and refugees built diasporic links through radio and newspapers, since the 1990s, the internet has become the main content production space for the Haitian community. The internet allows Haitians to connect with friends and family, to search news and information, to cultivate community and national identity, to discuss community issues, to work in solidarity in different areas, including those that aim to support the development of projects in the country of origin. Parham's study shows the potential of public deliberation in the interactions of Haitians in the context of the Global Village Forum website, whilst emphasising its limitations on articulating actions outside the internet space. According to Parham, the diversity of diaspora websites and mailing lists provide the material for comparative research on the linkages between communication in digital contexts and the Haitian diaspora networks in the world.

In the Canadian context, Jolivet (2017) reflects on the role of media and social networks in the emergence of connected territories for Haitians in Montreal, emphasising the sound dimension of this territoriality. The emergence of community radio produced by the first Haitians in Montreal seeks to pluralise racialised and stereotyped representations dominant in Canadian media. More recently, the diversification of media practices favoured by the use of smartphones and internet, would allow Haitians to better face the experience of uprooting engendered by migrations and to maintain, more easily, the links with the different lived spaces. Socio-spatial relationships multiplied by the uses of ICTs become means of connecting with the immediate context, as in the case of integration in a neighbourhood or a community, as well as of having a transnational social network. In this context, the concept of 'multiple anchoring', developed by the author, allows thinking of territoriality not as an immutable rooting, but as an experience in movement that is conditioned to the trajectories of each immigrant in his connection with space. It can be found in the ways Haitian immigrants in Montreal listen to radio programs, watch videos or consult information produced directly in Haiti. According to Jolivet, 'Through the notion of 'multiple anchoring', we emphasize the importance of relationships that create links between places of

existence and the incidence of the ‘co-presence’ allowed by ICTs in the advent of connected territories, networked places’ (Jolivet, 2017: 11).

In Brazil, it has been possible to observe similar practices among Haitian immigrants who, since their arrival in 2010, have created different spaces on the Internet, such as blogs, websites, groups and profiles in social networks such as Facebook⁹ or YouTube, with the objective of articulating, reporting and giving visibility to their demands for citizenship. These demands comprise legal regularisation, access to housing, health and education (such as having access to Portuguese classes and revalidation of diplomas), spaces for entertainment, job seeking, sending goods to their original countries and family reunification.

In 2015, Haitian immigrants questioned journalistic ethics involved in digital media after the publication ‘without consent’ of a picture of a Haitian immigrant. With the headline ‘Haitian showers in urinal’, the picture was published by *Agora* and *Folha de São Paulo* newspapers and shared on internet. The picture was captured on 19 May 2015, in a bathroom of Missão Paz, a confessional organisation linked to the Catholic Church, where a Casa do Imigrante (Immigrant House) is located.¹⁰ This image, supposedly taken without consent of the photographed immigrant, and later winning the category Photography of the Vladimir Herzog Prize,¹¹ gave way to a public debate in the media field around the impacts of media visibility in human rights and citizenship of Haitian immigrants in the country. The debate driven by Haitian immigrants themselves in the media space was also marked by the issues of selectivity and racial hierarchy that mark the insertion of international immigrants in Brazil (Cogo & Pássaro, 2017).

Haitians’ online networks have been contributing to the production and circulation of narratives that propose the dislocation of dominant media representations of migration. Between 2011 and 2014, in the Brazilian media these representations were marked by the reaffirmation of poverty, precariousness and vulnerability of Haiti and Haitians. Such representations reiterated, on the one hand, the rhetoric of Haitians’ ‘invasion’ and, on the other, consolidated discourses about this new immigration as a ‘problem’ and ‘conflict’. From 2014, cases of racial violence against Haitians in many Brazilian cities and on the social media, reflected the imbrications between Haitian immigration and the strong political polarisation, intolerance and hate that marked the last presidential election in the country (Cogo & Silva, 2016).

Methodology

The analysis of narratives about racism produced by Haitian immigrants on social media was guided by a qualitative methodology (Fragoso, Recuero & Amaral, 2011; Guber, 2004) that comprised two procedures. The first one consisted of the observation and collection of a corpus of data in different formats and genres produced and shared in the context of digital media (websites, social networks, etc.) by Haitian immigrants in Brazil between 2015 and 2017. In some cases, these were produced with the aid of institutions and governments, such as the cities of São Paulo and Santo André.

Figure 1: Online sites selected for the analysis

Online production	Link
1 Theatrical Show Voodoo City	https://bit.ly/2UcPBVI http://bit-ly.ml/pkx9
2 Theatrical Show ‘We are Haiti’ ¹²	https://bit.ly/2FnxDg https://bit.ly/2UcPBVI

3	Experience Project – Webseries Overcoming (episodes: The arrival, Overcoming and Daily Life)	https://bit.ly/2YicGFI https://bit.ly/2HEbmYU https://bit.ly/2HQJLp
4	Comic News report ‘Haiti is here: another story of Haitians in Brazil’	https://bit.ly/2Fxmqqp
5	Videoclip Brains escape	https://bit.ly/2JL0qKC
6	Facebook page ‘What media doesn’t show from Haiti’	https://bit.ly/2TX9JMe
7	Video campaign for the renovation of the Social Union Headquarters of Haitian Immigrants in Brazil (USIH)	https://bit.ly/2FxlUAn
8	Biography ‘Dreams that move a Haitian immigrant’	https://bit.ly/2FwPpbN
9	Video-campaign of crowdfunding for the construction of a school in Haiti	https://bit.ly/2FyIY9n
10	Web radio Progressive Haitian Youngsters	https://bit.ly/2FrzIqq
11	Program The Real Face of Haiti	https://bit.ly/2TW10da

Some of these materials, which could not be considered strictly mediatic, such as theatrical performances, were chosen because of their communicational nature and because they had a significant presence both in digital media spaces created by the Haitians themselves and in widely covered and disseminated contents by the Brazilian media. These are digital materials characterised by the diversity and convergence of formats and languages, as a result of the possibilities opened by the internet access and its increasing use by immigrants.

The materials were created by groups of Haitians and, in some cases, with the collaboration of Brazilians and immigrants of other nationalities. Their production is generally the result of voluntary work and is not tied to groups or to communicational practices that have an organic, regular or permanent existence. This is, according to our perception, a reflection of both the recent presence of Haitian immigration in Brazil and the fluidity and transience that characterise, on the one hand, migratory networks and, on the other hand, the field of digital media production and diffusion itself. In some cases, such as the two theatrical spectacles and the Web series ‘Superação’, the immigrants had financial resources from local governments for the production of the materials, including those obtained via public call for projects.

Most of these materials derive from production processes that have had a transient and punctual existence, due to the very limited conditions that immigrants had for their production, and to the very nature of communicational production (like in the cases of theatrical spectacles, comic strips, biographies, video clips and the two video-campaign of collective financing). Only the profile of Facebook ‘O que a mídia não mostra do Haiti’ (‘What media doesn’t show of Haiti’) and the Webradio Youth Haitian Progressives, are produced regularly. Materials analysed were produced in one or more of the three languages used by Haitians – Portuguese, French and Creole.

Some of the productions do not focus only on experiences related to racism, but they attribute centrality to the racial issue. This was, in fact, the priority criterion adopted for the selection of materials, since it was impossible to analyse the complete flow of digital media productions of

Haitians in Brazil. The specific characteristics of these productions and online sharing, conditioned the process of approaching, mapping and collecting the materials for the composition of this research analysis corpus. Access to the materials was possible through the different interactions established with the Haitian immigration networks in Brazil, with networks of researchers and immigration activists, or even with their dissemination on Brazilian media organisations, such as Portal UOL and Folha de Sao Paulo. Also interviews provided information on digital productions addressed to Haitians.

The second methodological procedure involved conducting ten semi-structured interviews with Haitian immigrants – seven men and three women – living in six cities (four of them capitals) of the South-east, South and Midwest regions of Brazil. The interviewees were chosen for their experiences of activism within the Haitian immigrant community in Brazil and for having some participation in the production and circulation of narratives that compose the materials previously listed. Some immigrants participated in the production of more than one of the materials analysed.

For the analysis of the narratives of both the collected materials and the interviews, we considered the reflections of Arfuch (2002), who emphasises how narratives are structures of identities of subjects who, when talking about ‘themselves’, recognise themselves and perform an imaginary unification of a variety of experiences. Digital technologies have contributed to the expansion of spaces and narrative devices, as well as to the emergence of individual and collective hyper-dimensional subjects that narrate themselves in dynamics marked by bonds and affection, but also by tensions and disputes about their experiences (Cogo & Olivera, 2017).

Haitians, racism and counter-hegemonic narratives in digital media

Data systematisation and analysis allow us to evidence narratives produced by Haitian immigrants in digital media expose the dimensions of a structural racism in Brazilian society and the impacts of this racism in their insertion in Brazil. Summarised by the titles and the approach of two theatrical shows - *‘Haiti Somos Nós’* (‘We are Haiti’) and *‘Cidade Vodou’* (‘Voodoo City’) - as well as the comic strip *‘O Haiti é aqui: uma outra história dos haitianos no Brasil’* (‘Haiti is here: another story of Haitians in Brazil’), this dimension is supported by the evidence that racial relations that historically bring Brazilian and Haitian cultures closer can also distance them in migratory flows experienced nowadays by the Haitian immigrants in Brazil.

The theatrical show Voodoo City focuses on the story of a Haitian character – Breda – that begins in the 17th century and crosses different steps of the Haitian national life, suggesting a fusion between the affective experiences of the character and the history of the country. Breda lives, along with other characters of the play, the experiences of oppression, revolution and emancipation of the Haitian people in episodes of the Haitian Revolution, the earthquake in 2010 and the processes of migration and insertion in Brazil. In a documentary about the show Voodoo City shared in social media, the director José Fernando de Azevedo, summarizes the proposition of the play:

It is a play elaborated by Brazilian and Haitian artists thinking about their relationship, perceiving the similarities about Haiti’s and Brazil’s current situation ... When they come to Brazil, they face what they didn’t imagine they would find, racism ... We reveal the perspective of silenced Haitian immigrants and refugees, who talk on the stage about the prejudice they found here.¹³

In the same video, two other actors of the show share their experiences of racism in Brazil. The Haitian filmmaker and actor Patrick Dieudonne says ‘when I came here I didn’t have open spaces because of racism, everything is very closed. Here, people do not have an open mind to talk to the foreigner, especially if you are black [...] If you are black, there is a place that is not made for

you'.¹⁴ The musician and actor Joel Aurilien evokes the hierarchy and selectivity of the treatment given to immigrants with black origins by the Brazilian migratory policies.

It is not only that we are foreigners in this country. If you go to *Polícia Federal* (Federal Police), you are going to see many Germans, Americans, Colombians, Bolivians, processing the same document, renewing documents, protocols, the same thing, but what I can call prejudice is that they only see people of colour, black people.¹⁵

The play '*Haiti somos nós*' ('We are Haiti') has a similar perspective. Haitian actors share their experiences with the audience about migration and inclusion in the city of São Paulo, and the discovery of the specificity and subtlety of 'Brazilian racism'. Language and History teacher in Haiti, currently living in Brazil, Fedo Bacourt is one of the Haitian actors in the play who also participated in the video campaign for the remodelling of the Social Union of Haitian Immigrants building in Brazil, over which he presides. In the video, Fedo remembers 'when we got here in Brazil, we suffered a lot with discrimination, racism and slave labour'.¹⁶ When interviewed, he mentioned the few results obtained in reports of racism experienced by Haitian immigrants in the Public Ministry and in other Brazilian institution by the Social Union of Haitian immigrants in Brazil. He compares his perceptions about the singularities of structuration of racial relations and racism in Haiti with those in Brazil.

Haiti is a black country; any white person is considered black there. There is prejudice, but racism is difficult to happen. I won't say it's impossible, but it's difficult, because people are considered black there. They aren't used to facing prejudice, racism, people saying go back to your country, Haiti is not here, many, many words, you know, bad (FB, Personal Interview, 2 September 2016).

In the comic strip '*O Haiti é aqui: uma outra história dos haitianos no Brasil*' ('Haiti is here: another story of Haitians in Brazil'), Haitian Jena Sony highlights that 'many people won't give us jobs as clerks because we are black'¹⁷ to bring the relationship between the job world and racism in Brazil together, as well as punctuating the distance between the two cultures, despite their African roots. Sony says that 'we want to show a little of how we think, a lot of Brazilians don't know Haiti and think we are Africans'.¹⁸ In his biography 'Dreams that move a Haitian immigrant',¹⁹ Simon states that he remains proud of his origins, even if in Brazil he sees discrimination based on skin colour: 'People think that because we're black we're ignorant, they speak badly about the culture' (Gaviria Mejía & Simon, 2015: 36).

In the field of interfaces between media and narratives, Richard Johnson (1999: 92) says 'we tell stories about the past, in the form of memory, that build versions of who we actually are'. In the case of Haitian immigrants, the racial prejudice experienced in Brazil materializes in narratives that point towards the construction of other representations of Haiti and Haitians through a retelling of a story of their nation and their people. This way, immigrants seek to reaffirm the autonomy of Haiti as a nation in the digital media space, through the reconstitution of an 'unofficial' history related especially to the Haitian Revolution, as can be seen in the two theatrical plays analysed.

The Haitian revolution located the country as the only nation state formed by a rebellion of slaves, as the first country in the Americas to abolish slavery and the second to proclaim independence in colonial and international geopolitics (Morel, 2017). Racial relationships were central in the fights for autonomy of the Haitian nation; while hegemonic representations about the country were consolidated by the lack of goods, precariousness and poverty, Haitians seek to deconstruct these representations in the narratives analysed here. Through them, Haitians aim to bring Brazilian society closer to other versions of Haiti, as well as to normalise their presence and experience as immigrants in Brazil.

People say that in Haiti there is no money, always in a negative tone. But I think they say that because they are not aware of our reality. If you go to Haiti, you'll see that it is not like how everybody thinks. I was a trader when I was there; I worked bringing products from one country to another. I made business by buying fruits such as avocado and banana²⁰ (W, interviewed at the Comic news report 'Haiti is here: another story of Haitians in Brazil').

I have seen Brazilians saying that in Haiti there isn't anything, water, food, chicken, once I've talked to a guy from Bahia and he only spoke bad things about my country. The movie was a good idea to show the opposite²¹ (JS, interviewed at the Comic news report 'Haiti is here: another story of Haitians in Brazil').

Haitians leave their families looking for work, they go to any country to look for a better life [...] They came to Brazil seeking life. They are strong men and women, from 15 to 60 years old, full of knowledge, full of talents, engineers, doctors, nurses and even illiterate people²² (Excerpt of the song 'Escape of Brains' sung by Haitian immigrant Alix Georges).

Another media initiative that follows the same counter-hegemonic perspective is the show 'The True Face of Haiti', presented with the objective 'of showing Haiti's positive side, showing opportunities Haiti has to offer. In Brazil, we promote the work of our Haitian brothers, everything good they make, either on music, entrepreneurship, art, cinematography, and so on'.²³ In the profile 'What the media doesn't show from Haiti'²⁴ on Facebook, the Haitian musician Alix Georges, who lives in the city of Porto Alegre, South of Brazil, shares images and content that propose other views, in opposition to the media images of poverty and victimisation of Haiti and Haitians. These images became dominant in the Brazilian media after the earthquake that hit the country and the consequent increase of Haitian immigrants in the country in 2010.

...with the arrival of Haitian immigrants, something automatically awakened in me, which was showing other things about Haiti, that the media wouldn't ... Because since I got here, the way media dealt with Haiti was completely different from what it actually is ... So whenever I studied, I always wanted to show how Haiti really is ... We are talking about this issue of showing the other face of Haiti, enough about disgrace, the disgrace in Haiti the media already shown too much. Now we are going to show the good stuff. We only show our wonderful beaches, our wonderful food, our hotels, our music, our culture, the good stuff about our culture. And we've received a lot of feedback from Brazilians, who want to go to Haiti after seeing these images (AG, personal interview, 13 March 2016).

Some immigrants question the position of Brazilian media in the construction of hegemonic representations and their relationship with the racism experienced by immigrants. In addition, they question, in Georgiou's (2018) perspective, the absence of the voices of Haitians themselves in media productions that talk about their reality.

With the arrival of immigrants, the media made the situation get worse, because, if you read the news there were '5 Haitian immigrants arrived in the bus station and the unemployment rate rose', 'A bus full of Haitians arrived, the unemployment rate rose'. So, the population understood that the Haitian came to go after or steal the Brazilian's job. From that moment on I thought: I have to react, I will have to act somehow. I started to fight, to protest to see if a part of the media began to soften the situation, if they stopped saying bad things, questioning the arrival of black immigrants, but rather understanding it as a normal cycle of life, because there aren't only black immigrants arriving, right? If you see the number of immigrants arriving in Brazil, the biggest number is not Haitian, but media are always talking about Haitian immigrants. Therefore, I relate that with the issue of racism, racism and xenophobia with the black country, because they don't want black immigrants (AG, Personal Interview, 13 March 2016).

A lot of times I have the impression that journalists are speaking for the immigrants, telling

the story, but not putting words in their mouths. In many news reports, immigrants do not appear as characters, as lead characters of their story, usually there is someone telling a story and there isn't any interview with them, it's only observance and then, I will write this, I will write that [...]. And usually it is always about the poverty in the original country, war, hunger, there is more space for that stuff, the negative stuff (NL, Personal Interview, 20 April 2017)

To seek a new positioning of representations of Haiti implies the reaffirmation of the desire of immigrants both for renewing the sense of belonging in Haitian diaspora and for direct participation in the political and economic life of their original country. In the videoclip 'Brain Escape', Alix Georges sings that, in the Haitian diaspora in Brazil 'some came to study, others stayed because what they look for is a clear future, some like me wished to go back to change the country because the country does not offer anything', saying that 'the brain of the country is gone, the strength of the country is gone, the soul of the country is gone, the whole country is gone'.²⁵

The video campaign of crowdfunding for the construction of a school in Haiti²⁶, an initiative created by Haitian immigrant Geneviève Cherubin, who before coming to Brazil worked for three years as an educator in a school in her original country, suggests that the action of a transnational activism should be oriented towards the participation and intervention of the diaspora in the Haitian national life. 'Because, sometimes, in order to help others, you must leave your country. So maybe if I were in Haiti I wouldn't make this crowdfunding I am doing. Maybe, maybe not. Nobody knows. All I know, now, is that this gives me the opportunity to help others (GC, Personal Interview, 20 April 2017).

Conclusions

This article starts from the current regime of media hypervisibility of contemporary migrations reflected by Georgiou (2018), to reflect on the creation of micro-spaces of autonomy and agency by Haitian immigrants in Brazil, engendered through their experiences of activism and appropriation of digital media. We seek to understand how these immigrants produce narratives that expose their daily experiences with racism, as well as showing their efforts in proposing other representations of Haiti and Haitians.

In their narratives, Haitians revisit the historic dynamics and contradictions of a common African root that, in the context of their migratory processes to Brazil, bring both cultures and nations closer together and further apart at the same time. From a geopolitical transnational perspective, these narratives suggest that, in South-South migratory flows, there are also hierarchies reproduced and supported by the idea of race. From a nationality perspective, these narratives question the myth of racial democracy as the foundational narrative of the Brazilian nation, evidencing that race remains a marker of selectivity of migratory policies and a producer of inequalities in different social spaces in Brazil. This way, the re-telling of Haitian history in spaces of digital media reveals a counter-hegemonic dimension of narratives of immigrants that operate to dislocate dominant media representations that associate Haiti and Haitians with poverty and vulnerability.

What we can identify as a counter-hegemonic character of Haitian immigrants' narratives in Brazil points towards the need for further studies on the consumption of these narratives that focus on their social incidences in the representation of South-South contemporary migrations. There remains the challenge of consolidating methods of investigating the media productions by

transnational immigrants, in the context of fragmentation and convergence of formats, languages, temporalities, ways of sharing and interaction that characterise digital society and culture.

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NOTES

- 1 Between 2010 and 2012, approximately 7 thousand Haitians went through the border of Brazil, Colombia and Peru, at the state of Amazonas. Between 2010 and 2015, 40 thousand immigrants entered the country in the border of Brazil, Bolivia and Peru, at the state of Acre. The others arrived in the Brazilian airports – mainly in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasília – with a visa requested in the Brazilian Embassy in Port-au-Prince, capital of Haiti (Handerson, 2017).
- 2 Despite the arrival of new groups of immigrants from 2008, Brazil has a small percentage of immigrants within its population, approximately 0.9%, a total of 700 thousand foreigners in a population of more than 200 million people, if we take into consideration those immigrants who have acknowledged legal immigration status in the country.
- 3 Chile, Ecuador and Peru are another three South American countries with expressive presence of Haitians.
- 4 Institution in charge of the processes of regularisation of international immigrants in Brazil.
- 5 Brazilian social company which have developed, for 24 years, projects in different areas, including projects in Haiti. Available at: <http://www.vivario.org.br/quem-somos/>
- 6 There are records of illegal sending of Africans between 1858 and 1862 (Schwarcz & Gomes, 2018).
- 7 According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - IBGE), more than half of the Brazilian population (54%) is currently made up of black or brown individuals, and out of every ten people, three are black women. In 2015, white Brazilians earned twice as much as black ones, while the Brazilian black population was the most affected by the economic crisis and unemployment, totalling 63.7% of the unemployed (equivalent to 8.3 million people). In addition, 71 out of every 100 people murdered in Brazil are black. Black women are also the majority of victims of female murders and domestic violence (Oliveira, 2017).
- 8 Haiti was the name given to the former colony of Saint-Domingue after Independence.
- 9 For example, Haitians in Brazil (<https://goo.gl/dypQYq>); Carioca Haitians (<https://goo.gl/nSiJE>); Haitian Community in Brazil (<https://goo.gl/UyPzWR>); Haitien Porto Velho Brasil (<https://goo.gl/uQ2BKK>), Haitians in São Paulo! (<https://goo.gl/G17qyL>); Haitian Workers Association in São Paulo (<https://goo.gl/TbkeVf>); Haitians in Rio (<https://goo.gl/RHm5pe>).
- 10 Immigrant centre located in Downtown São Paulo.
- 11 One of the most important prizes in the field of Journalism, amnesty and human rights in Brazil.
- 12 The author of the study watched live both theatrical shows of the research corpus. The links mentioned are examples of some materials that were on the media about the shows and that were used in the research.
- 13 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2uq62iW>
- 14 In the transcription of the interviews in Portuguese, the researcher opted not to correct the grammar, however, in the translation, a more neutral construction was used.
- 15 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2uq62iW>
- 16 The acts of race and colour discrimination are considered crimes in Brazil since 1989, according to the law 7.716.
- 17 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Fxmqqp>
- 18 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Fxmqqp>
- 19 The autobiographic book was written in co-authorship with the researcher Gaviria Mejía.
- 20 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Fxmqqp>
- 21 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Fxmqqp>. The Haitian is referring to the webseries *Overcoming* that is also a part of the corpus of media in this article.
- 22 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2JL0qKC>
- 23 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2TW10da>
- 24 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2TW10da>
- 25 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2TW10da>
- 26 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2FyIY9n>