

Introduction

Dèyè mòn gen mòn

People think of Haiti as being very small, but the more you go to Haiti, it gets bigger and better. There is so much undiscovered territory in Haiti. We have to re-imagine Haiti. We have to look at Haiti from a different lens. Somebody has picked this prescription for us. Now is the time for us to put on our own lenses, and for us to make the stories, the distribution, put our cultures out there for the world and for ourselves. We need to buy our own art. How do we spend our money? We're a Black country but everything that is big and significant is owned by somebody else.

—Jacquil Constant, filmmaker

Dèyè mòn gen mòn means “Beyond the mountains are more mountains.” It is one of my favorite Haitian proverbs because it challenges stereotypes about Haiti and pushes those who think they know Haiti and its history and culture to rethink their often-myopic views. Countless books have been written about Haiti, especially about its art and religion. It is the first Black republic in the world, and the only place where enslaved people gained the independence of an entire nation, yet the most common descriptor of Haiti remains “the poorest country in the Western hemisphere.” In terms of the dominant narrative in the West, the image of Haiti is still very much linked to the stigma of poverty and instability. Through my analysis of Haitian popular films, I hope to provide a more complex and nuanced understanding of Haiti that goes beyond such simplistic portrayals and helps to shift the conversation about what Haiti means both in the academy and beyond it.

I became interested in these films about two decades ago when I visited family members in Florida, Georgia, New York, and New Jersey and observed how they responded to the stories. It was clear to me that my family's interactions, analysis, and interpretation of these films were very much in keeping with the Haitian concept of *lodyans*. In Creole, *bay lodyans* literally means "to tell stories to an audience." The idea of *lodyans* or *bay lodyans* is to entertain, whether it is one or two people or an entire group. *Lodyans* can refer to joking, telling stories, or gossiping among friends. For example, a group of women at the beauty salon may be talking to one another about a family drama or their love lives, and that can be an example of *lodyans*. Similarly, a group of men at the barbershop or playing cards or dominoes at someone's house may be participating in *bay lodyans*. These are the people's films; their primary goals are both providing entertainment and transmitting specific messages that are useful in everyday life, as well as helping people think through the challenges they face on a daily basis. I could recognize myself and my friends, family members, and acquaintances in these films. Though the production qualities of the films were sometimes poor, I understood they had important value. For example, they showed characters living in the U.S. diaspora trying to create a sense of home, and I could relate to some of them on an intimate level.

In these stories we find the often forgotten and marginalized voices of Haitian people along with discourse on political, economic, and social issues. They respond to the needs and desires of communities both in and beyond Haiti and focus on the complexities of community, nostalgia, belonging, and identity, including representing the varied emotional landscapes of exile and diaspora. As Haitian scholar and novelist Beudelaine Pierre has written, "Seeing myself multiple is not being groundless; it is, rather, expanding my being/becoming; it is acknowledging the body-at-work whose story began so very long ago, whose story is so old."¹ The films I examine here are a means by which people from the Haitian diaspora work to understand their lives and their place in their diasporic community. They help to anchor viewers' sense of self: "I see myself onscreen, therefore I am." Films such as *Deported* and *Ayiti, mon amour* privilege the voices of the people themselves and give them a space to tell their own stories to the world. As the films I examine provide spaces in which to explore themes that are relevant to the everyday reality of Haitians in Haiti and the diaspora, we might consider these works as a

variation on the theme of what Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino called “Third Cinema,” focused on portrayals of life as it is lived, and in which aesthetic concerns may be, in the words of Teshome Gabriel, “as much in the after-effect of the film as in the creative process itself.”²

My analysis will focus primarily on the ways in which these works depict gender, language, class, and other social variables. Drawing from my own biography as a Haitian American scholar who constantly navigates some of these issues of identity, I create theories that are applicable to the forms of Haitian popular culture that I will refer to as the Haitian film *mouvman*. I use the Creole term *mouvman* to stress the fact that I am talking about an unfolding, dynamic, fluid cultural space. I am not referring to a specific artistic “movement” in the aesthetic sense of the word. Indeed, the films produced within this *mouvman* can even be hard to classify into specific genres.³ Though there is no studio system, shared aesthetic, or set of tropes that unites these filmmakers, the films I analyze as part of the Haitian *mouvman* generally share the following characteristics: on-location shooting; a frequent use of nonprofessional actors; and linear storylines that depict themes such as economic struggles, love stories, religious themes, the challenges of negotiating identities between the United States and Haiti, and immigrant life in the United States more generally. I also chose films that are (or in a few cases were) readily accessible on YouTube in their entirety, and that fit within the main themes I want to analyze. These films may be didactic, moral, or utilitarian in focus. The filmmakers seem to share the assumption that cinema can better society and bring about awareness of certain everyday realities that Haitians in both Haiti and the diaspora are facing.

Many of these films, all produced between 2000 and 2018, were shot mostly with digital cameras or cell phones and are geared toward distribution via the internet (mainly YouTube). This new Haitian cinema is a means through which Haitians in Haiti and the diaspora are able to tell their own stories as new technology is making the tools of representation more widely available. The filmmakers are from all walks of life and mostly untrained. Many of these works are low budget. At times the films were shot in only one or two locations, and the characters do not go outside much if at all during the entire film. I am interested in what these films’ flaws and limitations can tell us, as in essence, the filmmakers are depicting an oral performance of their own lived realities using new technology. They are not necessarily presenting

critically thought-out depictions of scenes or themes. The stories they choose to portray are based on their worldviews, and they often have a very specific audience in mind.

It is clear that the majority of filmmakers whose work I am placing in the category of the Haitian *mouvman* have little, if any, access to production and distribution. These works are independently produced and distributed through informal channels or platforms that are available without charge, and therefore their monetary success is not such a relevant factor in assessing their popularity, although I do sometimes include information related to the number of views on YouTube if it is available. Yet despite the eclectic nature of their creation, production, and distribution, as I have described, these works have come to play a central role in the life of Haitian diasporic communities.

The majority of the films I analyze have as their primary objective to entertain the public or teach a lesson, such as the importance of serving Christ and not Vodou as if the two exist only in an either/or relationship. These films are generally in Creole, or in a blend of Creole and English. Individual films can be ephemeral, at times disappearing and reappearing. These films are available in some stores on DVD or on the streets in Haiti or in states such as New York, Florida, and New Jersey where there are large diasporic communities; some are also available in full on YouTube, while it may be possible to find only parts of others. At times one cannot see the whole film or can find only one part of a two- or three-part series. Parts of the film may not be in focus. Sometimes several parts of the same film have been uploaded by different people or at different times.

Other films I will look at here consist of features and documentaries made by professional filmmakers. The main objective of this second group is to tell stories, whether in dramatic or documentary form, that represent Haiti in a different light, and to push back against stereotypes of Haiti as a place of poverty and disaster. Some of the works I will address take into account aesthetic concerns such as movement, sound, light, and music. Others generally have a simple plot and seek a solution to a particular contemporary issue in a way that will satisfy their audience. Yet the two groups are linked by their common goal of representing Haiti in ways that are true to the reality of its people and culture and that respond to the concerns of Haitians themselves, whether in Haiti or in the diaspora.

Julio Garcia Espinosa describes what he calls “imperfect cinema” as a form of art that finds a new audience in those who struggle and

finds its themes in their problems. For imperfect cinema, “lucid” people are the ones who think and feel and exist in a world that they can change. In spite of all the problems and difficulties, they are convinced they can transform the world in a revolutionary way. Imperfect cinema exists organically, in a sense, and it may be said that a greater audience exists for this kind of cinema than there are filmmakers able to supply that audience.⁴ The types of visual representation that I will address in the chapters that follow, though they may look quite different and have different audiences, are “imperfect cinema,” representations that are, at base, about people’s conviction that transformation is possible, and that film is a powerful medium through which to effect social and cultural change.

Cinema has long been a part of Haitian life. I have vivid memories from my childhood growing up in Haiti of occasions on which some film lover would set up a makeshift screen and show movies in the neighborhood where I lived. Haiti was among the first countries in the Caribbean to be exposed to cinema, in 1899, after its invention by the Lumière Brothers in 1895. Continuous projections of films started in 1907 in Pétionville, a suburb of Port-au-Prince. In those early years, Haiti was purely a consumer of cinema rather than a producer. In the past two decades, however, it has become both a producer and consumer of cinematic works.

In his famous essay “*Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?*” (“What Is Cinema?”), French film critic André Bazin posited two types of films: one in which the camera faithfully records what is in front of the lens, and one in which the image can be changed and manipulated according to the director’s will. Yet postmodern criticism has troubled the notion of a purely documentary film; the essence of film is a *mélange* of reality, sound, focus, and editing. As Andrew Dudley notes, “Cinema, essentially nothing in itself, is all about adaptation, all about what it has been led to become and may, in the years to come, still become.”⁵ Our contemporary digital culture has brought about constant changes and transformations in terms of cinema and filmmaking, yet for some reason questions about what constitutes “genuine cinema” are still raised.⁶ Thus the subject of this book—films made by untrained filmmakers as well as professionals who may be working with cell phone cameras to depict the fabric of everyday life for Haitians in the diaspora and in Haiti, films that do not fit into a particular genre or subgenre of traditional Western cinema—may be seen by some in the academy as unworthy. In my view, this is all the more reason to write about them.⁷

These films can provide a sense of how immigrant Haitians understand their cultural identities. For instance, some may give more weight to their immigrant identity while at the same time trying to maintain their connections to home. They must also negotiate the complexities of being Black in the United States. We find tensions between the United States and Haiti, between “home” and adopted home, between tradition (embodied by parents) and modernity (children born or being raised in the United States). There is a clear antagonism between Haitians and Black Americans that stems from misunderstandings and stereotyping, for example, and the filmmakers address stereotypes that Haitians have of Black people born in the United States, and how they pass on these stereotypes to their own children who are born in the United States—as well as how parents attempt to pass on pride in their culture of origin to their U.S.-born children who are growing up between these two cultures.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, it is estimated that more than one million Haitians live in the United States,⁸ and the Haitian film *mouvman* plays an important role in shaping how many in the diaspora reconstruct Haitian identities abroad. Contemporary Haitian cinema helps viewers maintain ties with Haiti by providing a resource that those living in the diaspora often find difficult to find elsewhere; it also serves as a bridge to keep those in the diaspora connected to the latest political and sociocultural events at home. These films explore conflicting cultural paradigms (Haitian vs. American) and bring to light important issues concerning language use (English/Haitian Creole and/or French). Some of the films are very Haitian-culture specific, while others give a Haitian flavor to universal themes. These films depict images that are reflective of the lives of the people watching them while challenging stereotypical representations and helping to rectify the negative images instilled in popular culture by films such as *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988), which remains one of the most widely known popular representations of Haitian Vodou in the United States. Haitian filmmakers tell complex stories of Haitian im/migrants, interweaving these with stories from home. Although the entertainment value of these works is noteworthy, they also educate, inform, and raise awareness of larger issues that reflect current sociopolitical and cultural issues pertaining to family drama, kidnappings, im/migration, economic hardship, religious and sexual identity, and emotional upheaval due to settling in the United States.

As they depict how Haitians and Haitian Americans move within the worlds of Haiti and the United States, these films challenge traditional

definitions of the concepts of “home” and “homeland” and put a greater focus on transnationalism as a hallmark of contemporary Haitian life.⁹ Technological innovation has facilitated links between Haitians living in Haiti and the United States; for Haitians in the United States, access to cell phones and apps such as YouTube, Signal, and WhatsApp have facilitated communication with friends and family members in Haiti even outside the main cities of Port-au-Prince, Gonaïves, Les Cayes, Hinche, Jacmel, and Cap-Haïtien. As sociologist Peggy Levitt notes, “The assumption that people will live their lives in one place, according to one set of national and cultural norms, in countries with impermeable national borders, no longer holds. Rather, in the 21st century, more and more people will belong to two or more societies at the same time. These allegiances are not antithetical to one another.” The diasporic works that I consider here dramatize these trends. They depict first- or second-generation Haitian Americans who define themselves simultaneously from the perspectives of both Haiti and the United States. Further, they represent how these groups negotiate culture, language, citizenship, religion, gender, sexuality, and the search for economic advancement. The Haitian immigrant experience is not uniform; some people are mainly economic immigrants, while others are motivated by a complex series of factors. Regardless, the majority are living binary lives: they are bilingual, or in some cases trilingual; some have houses in both Haiti and the United States; and they remain abreast of political, social, and cultural happenings in both countries. I can relate to this in-betweenness because I constantly live it myself.

In this book I hope to challenge simplistic depictions of Haiti by helping to reveal the varied work that filmmakers are creating as I take to heart Haitian American scholar Gina Athena Ulysse’s cry that “Haiti needs new narratives.” In her introduction to *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives*, Ulysse notes, “I would always be part of two Haitis. There was the one that, due to migration, was being re-created in the diaspora, and the one in the public sphere that continually clashed with the one in my memory. Or perhaps there were three Haitis.”¹⁰ Haiti is a multiple, multivalent space—and the films analyzed in this book allow us to unpack their complexities, particularly those currently evolving in the diaspora.

The works I discuss here help define what “home” means for Haitian diasporic communities. Many Haitians still refer to the Haitian diaspora as the tenth *département*, adding to the official nine regions or

departments of Haiti, even though an official tenth department (Nippes) was added in Haiti in 2003. The idea of the tenth department is a way to include Haitians living in the diaspora around the world, be they in North America, Europe, Africa, or elsewhere. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who is credited with articulating the concept of the tenth department, states in his 1993 autobiography, “Even before February 7, 1991, we had created a tenth department encompassing our compatriots outside, who had multiple roles. Without them, what would become of some of the families on the island? . . . A new citizenship was being forged, together with a new society that cooperates with its branches overseas.”¹¹ Aristide’s assertion further complicates concepts of nation, boundaries, and geography.¹² It also suggests that many Haitians and Haitian Americans living *lòt bò* (literally on the other side, meaning outside of Haiti) still feel as if they do not truly belong, even if they become naturalized citizens of the country in which they live. They may also see their exile as temporary, dreaming of returning to Haiti. For many Haitians in the diaspora there is a distinct difference between citizenship and nationality.

The term *diaspora* in the Haitian context is fluid, generally referring to those living outside of Haiti or those who return to Haiti for a period of time. According to Michel S. Laguerre in “State, Diaspora, and Transnational Politics: Haiti Reconceptualised,” “When a Haitian refers to someone as ‘diaspora,’ he or she means one of two different things: either someone residing abroad or a returnee. It must be stressed that in the local parlance the returnees are also called diaspora. This simply means that the category diaspora is resilient because it outlives the conditions that once exclusively defined it.”¹³ Representations of the diaspora and the ways in which people living in the United States negotiate their relationship to Haiti is a key theme depicted in the films I discuss in this book. As they explore the challenges facing Haiti and critique Haiti and the Haitian government, these works also shed light on the issues that have forced Haitians in Haiti in search of greener pastures, even when they know they are going to a land filled with uncertainty.

Haitians lead highly transnational lives, re-creating and remembering home in diasporic communities through language, objects, and food. With the current U.S. immigration policy and criminalization of immigrants, Haitian immigrants, like countless others living in the United States, are generally viewed as the threatening “other.”¹⁴ Few people think about the connections between globalization and immigration or transmigration. If they had political, economic, and social stability,

most people would choose to remain home. In this context, these films investigate transmigrants' complex life and lived experience, and reflect their humanity as they move precariously across and between borders, be they linguistic, social, economic, religious, or political.

It is estimated that one of every four Haitians living abroad contributes to Haiti's sociopolitical and economic landscape. According to a 2017 United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs report, remittances sent to Haiti account for 33.6 percent of the country's GDP. This figure includes only official remittances and does not take into account the various other ways that people contribute to Haiti's economy, for example by sending money via family members and friends; sending large containers of various items including food and clothing; and contributing via their churches.¹⁵ Thus the Haitian diaspora is instrumental in Haiti's economic growth and development. Meanwhile, Haitian migrants actively nurture a continued connection to Haiti, for instance through maintaining direct contacts with home as well as through social relationships, religion, food, and language. In the films I analyze, people gather in spaces such as churches and barber shops to share and exchange news of home and talk of political and economic instability. Restaurants or stores (the store itself may represent the cultural marker) offer a place to buy CDs, rice, and calling cards, or send money home, and thus they constitute nodal points in a network of exchanges that help build community. These places of exchange and belonging, created to serve the Haitian community, satisfy a need—and the films represent how people are creating these dual spaces that are no longer simply Haitian or Haitian American, but rather *Haitian and Haitian American*. This is not a postcolonial space but rather a transnational, hybridized, multilingual space. There are multiple and diverse ways to be Haitian.

Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden define transnational cinema this way: “The global circulation of money, commodities, information, and human beings is giving rise to films whose aesthetic and narrative dynamics, and even the modes of emotional identification they elicit, reflect the impact of advanced capitalism and new media technologies as components of an increasingly interconnected world-system. The transnational comprises both globalization in cinematic terms, Hollywood's domination of world film markets and the counterhegemonic responses of filmmakers from former colonial and Third World countries” (1). This definition fits accurately with films from the Haitian film *mouvman*. On a more granular level, Haitian filmmakers are modern griots, to use the

words of the late Senegalese filmmaker Sembène Ousmane. The griot plays a fundamental role in maintaining a country's history and culture; they are at once historian, genealogist, entertainer, and messenger. The filmmaker as griot can illuminate and transform their audience as they rethink, re-imagine, and retell Haitian immigrant stories. In this sense their work is similar to that of immigrant writers like Jean-Philippe Dalembert, Marie Célie Agnant, Edwidge Danticat, Daniel Legros Georges, René Depestre, Dany Laferrière, and Jan Mapou, among others.

While large Haitian communities exist in Montreal, Paris, the Dominican Republic, and the Bahamas, as well as in Brazil and Chile, I focus on Haitians in the United States because that is where the largest population of Haitians outside of Haiti is located. Florida, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Georgia are hubs for Haitian immigrants, and many of the films I analyze either take place in one of those states or allude to them. For many Haitians, Miami today is what New York was for English-speaking Caribbean immigrants in the early twentieth century: an epicenter of cultural exchange between their country of origin and the United States. There Haitians can find or recreate the tastes, sounds, sights, and rhythms of their homeland. It is easy to travel to Haiti from Miami or New York City; moreover, in those cities there are ongoing festivals and celebrations, such as the May 18th Flag Day parade, that allow people to feel close to home. For many others who live in places that do not offer these cultural markers, films can be an important way to be close to Haiti; Haitians both in Haiti and the diaspora see themselves represented on screen and thus remain connected.

While American and European television programs (particularly from the United States and France) continuously infiltrate the Haitian television market through cable or satellite TV and the internet, the films I examine are notable in part because they represent an important market produced by and for Haitians. Indeed, they constitute a global phenomenon with social, political, and economic implications for identity and culture, and have an important impact on Haitian culture, politics, economy, and religion, both in Haiti and the diaspora. This is akin to the Nollywood movement, which represents Nigerian films made by Nigerian filmmakers both in Nigeria and in the diaspora. Haitian *mouvman* films are comparable to films in the Nollywood industry at the beginning of that movement in terms of the themes they explore, such as love, marriage, betrayal, conflict, deception, and faith.¹⁶ The storylines represent

events relevant to the local culture, and it does not matter if the acting is not done by professionals.¹⁷

While the majority of the films that I analyze here have entertainment as their primary goal, they also play a crucial role in defining a culture that is constantly changing, and that is influenced by diasporic experiences. Through social media, mainly YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook, people discuss the latest works and comment on their themes, as well as on the actors and directors. This type of visual culture serves as a platform for people to discuss current issues and problems both in Haiti and the diaspora, such as kidnappings, political groups, government corruption, the earthquake and its impact, and the weight borne by Haitian immigrants living in the United States who must support their families and friends through regular remittances, to name but a few of the issues that these films address. It is viewer response theory at its best.

I come to this book with the idea that images are a powerful means of overturning the simplistic notions of other people and cultures that have contributed to making our world as a whole so inhospitable to immigrants. For over fifteen years, when I taught French language and Francophone cultures courses to students who were generally taking a language course to fulfill a requirement, I would incorporate film and music videos so that students could go beyond the negative stereotypes of places with which they were not familiar. Students were shocked when, for example, I showed a Senegalese film with a businesswoman living in a city with a nice house and a lover, for such images went against the notions they had of “Africa.” When I showed certain images of Haitians’ daily lives, some students were amazed that they had electricity. I used to tell them that it was easier and cheaper when traveling in the early 2000s to have access to the internet in Haiti and in some countries in West Africa than in the United States and Europe because there were cyber cafés everywhere. Once again, they were shocked. It was clear to me that images, and importantly filmic images, allowed for a deeper and more complex engagement and understanding across cultures and social realities.

The films I study here seek to undermine some of Haitian culture’s most strongly held gendered, linguistic, economic, social, political, and religious ideologies. As they navigate among Haitian Creole, English, and French, the filmmakers’ language choice may be practical, political, and or cultural. We see how Vodou is engrained in all areas of Haitian culture, despite the fact that in many instances it is still demonized

there as well. These films also provide a space in which to analyze salient themes such as how gender identity and sexuality are represented in a culture that is very patriarchal. Some also show how women are economically dependent upon men, and therefore must abide by the patriarchal structure in order to survive.

As a heterosexual Haitian American woman scholar, I am mindful of my own positionality and privilege as I discuss films that represent the struggles of newly arrived immigrants, for example, or the challenges that queer Haitian women face. As an immigrant, I bring to bear my own experience of moving to the United States at the age of twelve and growing up in Newark, New Jersey, in the late 1980s and 1990s. This experience has given me insight into the lives of immigrants who come to a new country, but it does not mean that my experience is the same as that of another Haitian person who moved to the United States, even from the same part of Haiti and during the same time period.

As a literary and cultural studies scholar, I read these films as texts, analyzing them the way I would a work of literature, a painting, or a song. I also sometimes integrate my own life experiences to help me theorize the films I study. This type of writing is not new. As Barbara Christian writes, “[P]eople of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.”¹⁸ Throughout this book I will use storytelling and other less traditionally “academic” modes in order to fully and appropriately analyze the works at hand. Moreover, I analyze these films from the perspective of Haitian epistemological frameworks, meaning that I privilege theories that are relevant to Haitian culture such as the concepts of *jerans* and *kafou* as a way to challenge the dominance of Western theoretical modes and perspectives. Too often, scholars of color and others working on non-Western subjects must prove that we have studied and can navigate the myriad of Western, predominantly white, theory and theorists in order to be taken seriously. Here, reading and viewing Haitian popular films through *natif natal* (homegrown) theories and epistemologies can help center Haitian ways of knowing when we theorize Haiti in the academy.

The term *jerans*, from the French *gérer*, meaning to manage, takes on specific connotations and significance in Creole depending upon whether

it is used in relation to a sexual, economic, political, and/or religious situation. It is a commonly used term filled with nuances and meanings that suggests what is sometimes not completely said. One often hears people refer to how the government is unable to *jere* the kidnapping issue in Haiti, for example. Here, the use of the term *jere* can mean both the government's inability to act, because it does not have the means, and its unwillingness to act, because kidnapping is to its advantage. *Kafou*, derived from the French word *carrefour*, meaning crossroads, is often used in the context of the Vodou religion to refer to one of the *lwa*, or spirits. Here I use the term to analyze filmmakers' representations of the complex negotiations of linguistic identity of Haitians living in Haiti and in the diaspora, as they engage with French, Creole, and English. The concepts of *jere* and *kafou* are powerful in this context because they help illuminate Haitian dynamics and realities in Haitian cultural terms.

The ideas and insights I share can add to our understanding of how performance shapes diasporic identity. I view many of these works as performing Haitian identities, reminiscent of and echoing the culture of *lodyans* in Haitian oral tradition. As Jessica Adams notes, "Performance offers one of the most powerful critical vocabularies for understanding cultural contact."¹⁹ I consider these films as "[s]ites of performance and performativity [that] incorporate the past into present action and enact relations of power and definitions of identity . . ."²⁰ They are in direct dialogue with performative identities through language and sexuality. Furthermore, they represent the ways in which technology supports the migration of ideas and cultures.

Many of the films I examine present characters dwelling in a world of dichotomies: Haiti and the United States, Creole and English, normative and non-normative sexuality, Christianity and Vodou. In *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination*, Rosamond S. King develops the notion of the "Caribglobal," a pan-Caribbean perspective that "includes the areas, experiences and individuals within both the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora" (3). As such, "home" and "diaspora" can be studied simultaneously. The concept of the Caribglobal provides a space to examine identity through linguistic, class, gender, national, religious, economic, political, and cultural lenses at the same time as I explore the nature of postmodern diasporic identity for Haitians and Haitian Americans. These filmic narratives depict postcolonial migration through encounters between Haitianness and Americanness, which describe an in-between space that is neither Haitian nor American but rather a new

form of “imagined community.”²¹ Gender, sexuality, race, and nationality are intrinsically linked to the problematic of immigration and the politics of identity, and these films play a fundamental role in helping people to process political and social change. The prevalent themes here, such as home, belonging, and identity, are found often in diasporic literature. For some Haitians and Haitian Americans, these films can also serve as a type of emotional manifestation in the ways in which they help people in the diaspora feel better about their lives as they connect to the stories being told in the films as well as to the characters. These works sometimes serve either to challenge or to reify common aspects of the “home” culture, such as stereotypical notions about gender roles. In this context, we should note that nostalgia may function in such a way as to impede the development of rights for women, for example.

The book comprises five chapters, each of which is followed by a section titled “Conversations.” These conversations, drawn from interviews I conducted between May and December of 2019, offer a rare unfiltered glimpse into the thoughts and experiences of Haitian filmmakers, actors, and scholars working in the field, and help to illuminate the subject matter I discuss in the previous chapter from a new angle. Including these exchanges is part of my work in creating a *natif natal* (homegrown) theory of Haitian cultural production, as well as a way of paying homage to filmmakers and scholars who are “creating new narratives” and depicting Haiti in a more complex light.

The first chapter, “Searching for Home: Im/migration, Deportation, and Exile in *Diaspora \$100*, *Kidnapping*, and *Deported*,” examines how immigrants re-create home within diasporic communities. The economic impact of transnational migration is huge, and these films depict how Haitian transnational immigrants are maintaining, negotiating, and building identities individually and collectively, as well as how this process affects their children. It addresses the ways immigrants are negotiating the laws that threaten their livelihood, as well as the challenges faced by young people who have been deported to Haiti, often finding themselves alienated while at “home” in a space that is not welcoming.

I then engage these issues in conversation with Rachèle Magloire, a filmmaker born in Port-au-Prince who grew up in Montreal. She returned to Haiti in the early 1990s and worked as editor and news director for Télé Haïti. She currently resides in Haiti and is very active in Haitian cinema and culture.

In chapter 2, “Language, Class, and Identity: Pale franse pa vle di lespri pou sa” (Speaking French does not mean that you are intelligent), I consider how films from the Haitian *moviman* can shed light on the linguistic negotiations that Haitians face on a daily basis among Creole, French, and English, and examine what code-switching reveals in terms of identity politics and class for Haitians. In *Barikad* and *Les mystères de l’amour Nicodème*, we find Haitians and Haitian Americans negotiating their linguistic and class identities simultaneously. Using the concept of *kafou*, I argue that as a primarily monolingual (Creole) country, Haiti is constantly at a crossroad in terms of how those in power (politically and economically) use language and class as a *barikad* (barrier) to prevent the majority of the population from having access to education, which would give them access to and control of political and economic power.

Following this chapter, I include conversations about language with Jacquil Constant and Rachele Salnave. Constant was born in Brooklyn to Haitian parents, and as a Haitian American filmmaker, he wants to change the image of Haiti through his work. He created the Haiti International Film Festival in Los Angeles in 2015 as a way to educate people about Haitians’ diverse experiences and backgrounds, and to challenge the often stereotypical representations of Haiti and Haitians in the media. Salnave is a Haitian American filmmaker, director, and producer born in Harlem and currently living in Miami. She co-founded Ayiti Images as a way to make Haitian films widely available to both Haitians and non-Haitians. She has made several documentaries, including *Harlem’s Mart 125: The American Dream*, which won the 2010 African World Documentary Film Festival in St. Louis, Missouri.

In chapter 3, “Representations of Religion: Protestant Views of Vodou in *Madan Pastè a* (1 & 2) and *Matlòt* (1, 2 & 3),” I turn to images of another crucial marker of identity in the Haitian context. The films I consider here demonstrate some of the ways in which Haitians and Haitian Americans living in the United States may negotiate issues related to religion. I examine how the filmmakers typically reinforce stereotypes of the Vodou religion, often as a result of the influence of Protestantism in Haiti. They put Vodou in direct opposition to Christianity, even as they confirm the common saying that Haiti is 60 percent Catholic, 40 percent Protestant, and 100 percent Vodou.

I follow this chapter with conversations about religion with Haitian scholars Mario LaMothe and Anne François. LaMothe is an anthropologist

and performance artist who describes his work as focused “on embodied pedagogies of Afro-Caribbean rituals” and “intersections of queerness, spectatorship, and social justice.” Among other publications, he is the co-editor, with Dasha A. Chapman and Erin Durban-Albretch, of the special issue of *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* entitled “Nou Mache Ansanm (We Walk Together): Queer Haitian Performance.” François is a Haitian American scholar who has written on French and Francophone cultures, especially in West Africa and the Caribbean. She is the author of *Rewriting the Return to Africa: Voices of Francophone Caribbean Women Writers*.

In chapter 4, “Gender and Heteronormative Sexuality: *Cousines*, *Facebook Player*, and *Gason*,” I focus specifically on issues of gender, which have threaded throughout the text thus far. This chapter addresses links among patriarchy, financial interdependence, and culture. The films I look at here demonstrate that despite the fact that women are typically hailed as the *poto mitan* (center pole) of Haitian society, they suffer acutely from a lack of agency. While the Haitian government has laws on paper that supposedly give equal access to men and women, the reality is far different. Using the concept of *jerans*, I show how Haitian women negotiate their livelihood as well as the complex gender dynamics in Haitian society.

In the conversations that follow this chapter, I discuss these issues with Rachèle Magloire, Jacquil Constant, and Carole Demesmin. Demesmin, also known as Carole Mawoule, is one of the best-known Haitian singers in Haiti. A *manbo*, activist, and community leader, she was also the lead actress in the film *Life Outside of Pearl*, which depicted the challenges that Haitians and Haitian Americans deal with as they navigate Haitian and Haitian American cultures.

One compelling aspect of the Haitian film *mouvman* is that some of these works focus on non-heteronormative gender representations, which are not commonly seen elsewhere in Haitian culture. Chapter 5, “Negotiating Same-Sex Desires: *Fanm* and *Jere m Cheri*,” considers how these texts effect a deconstruction and destabilization of heteronormativity and other Haitian social norms. While the representations of same-sex desire in both films are very problematic, it is nevertheless important that there are some depictions confirming the reality that same-sex desire is an aspect of Haitian society. I examine both the representation and the suppression of same-sex desire in these works, along with how these representations relate to the larger cultural and social context. In the

section that follows, I address these issues in conversations with Haitian scholars Mario LaMothe and Anne François.

In the conclusion, I emphasize the importance of the voices of Haitian filmmakers by reflecting on a tweet by Haitian filmmaker Gilbert Mirambeau Jr. and its impact on the social movement #petrocaribe in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora. In the epilogue I briefly reflect on the current situation in Haiti at the time of this writing and further stress the necessity to create new narratives.

The book includes an appendix containing the filmography of the filmmakers interviewed as well as data about a large number of Haitian popular films and brief statistical analyses of their content. Included in appendix 1 is a list of 210 popular films that I define as part of the Haitian film *mouvman*. I also include materials in the appendixes that quantify the characteristics of these films. Among their salient characteristics are the following: they are generally, though not always, made by nonprofessional filmmakers; they are shot via digital camera or cell phone; and they are released on the internet and readily available on YouTube. In addition, the actors and actresses are often not professionals. It is clear that the director is making use of environments/settings that are available; the films may resemble theater, as the characters stay in one place for a one-hour or ninety-minute film. The décor does not often reflect the reality of the situation. For instance, someone may supposedly be very well off, yet their home is that of a person of a lower economic status. These films are dramas or comedies that depict themes drawn from everyday life, including love, immigration, exile, religion, family conflict, and economic problems. The themes of these films typically involve drama around family issues, love stories, political instability, and religion. The power of this genre stems from its availability (via the internet) and its linguistic accessibility (many of the films are in Creole). I hope that the ideas and information I share about these films in the pages that follow will inspire other scholars to continue this research.

In my study of these films, I have been influenced by the work of women of color such as Gina Athena Ulysse, Régine Jean-Charles, Myriam J. Chancy, bell hooks, Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, Roxanne Gay, and Omise'ke Natasha Tinsley. Their theories assist me in analyzing the ways in which these works are helping diasporic communities to maintain their identities and their ties to Haiti. I am also indebted to scholars such as N. Frank Ukadike, who paved the way for non-Western filmmakers to be represented in academia, in turn giving

voice to characters who are often marginalized and presented in filmic works only as an afterthought. It is thanks to these pioneers that I am able to write a book about Haitian popular culture.