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The Day-to-Day of Transnational Mobilities: Relational Practices Experienced by the Haitian Diaspora in the City of Lajeado/RS

Rosmari Terezinha Cazarotto

Universidade do Vale do Taquari – Univates – Lajeado – RS – Brasil
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8072-7346>

Fernanda Cristina Wiebusch Sindelar

Universidade do Vale do Taquari – Univates – Lajeado – RS – Brasil
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3138-7386>

Márcia Solange Volkmer

Universidade do Vale do Taquari – Univates – Lajeado – RS – Brasil
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8435-5209>

Abstract

Since the beginning of the XXI century, there has been an intensification of the global migration streams, which are configured as a strategic resource by governments, companies or kinship networks, for contributing as much to the supply of labor as to foreign currency remittance. In this context, Brazil has been a migrant destination, specially haitians and venezuelans. Thus, this study aims to comprehend the insertion spaces of the Haitians migrants in the middle-sized city of Lajeado/RS, and some of the social practices that boost transnational mobility in their daily lives. This is an exploratory study of quantitative-qualitative approach, from the phenomenological focus, through participant observation, field diaries, and formal and informal interviews. The results evidence that in the city of Lajeado, the insertion spaces and daily transnational practices of the Haitians migrants are associated to the working environments, to the mobility and circulation, to the entrepreneurial exercise, to the diaspora money remittance and to the constitution of Haitian churches.

Keywords: International Migrations. Insertion spaces. Social practices. Haitians.

O cotidiano das mobilidades transnacionais: práticas relacionais vividas pela diáspora haitiana na cidade de Lajeado/RS

Resumo

Desde o início do século XXI, observa-se a intensificação dos fluxos migratórios globais, os quais configuram-se como um recurso estratégico de governos, empresas ou redes de parentesco, por contribuir tanto para o fornecimento de mão de obra como de remessa de moeda estrangeira. Neste contexto, o Brasil tem sido destino de migrantes, especialmente de haitianos e venezuelanos. Assim, este trabalho busca compreender os espaços de

inserção dos imigrantes haitianos na cidade média de Lajeado/RS, e algumas práticas sociais que dinamizam as mobilidades transnacionais no cotidiano destes. Trata-se de um estudo exploratório de abordagem quanti-qualitativa, sob o enfoque fenomenológico, através de observação participante, diários de campo, e entrevistas formais e informais. Os resultados evidenciam que, na cidade de Lajeado, os espaços de inserção e práticas sociais transnacionais dos imigrantes haitianos estão associados aos ambientes laborais, à mobilidade e circulação, ao exercício empreendedor, às remessas de dinheiro da diáspora e à constituição de igrejas haitianas.

Palavras-chave: Migrações Internacionais. Espaços de inserção. Práticas sociais. Haitianos.

El cotidiano de las movilidades transnacionales: prácticas relacionales vivenciadas por la diáspora haitiana en la ciudad de Lajeado/RS

Resumen

Desde inicios del siglo XXI se ha producido una intensificación de los flujos migratorios globales, que se configuran como un recurso estratégico para gobiernos, empresas o redes de parentesco, pues contribuyen tanto a la oferta de mano de obra como al envío de divisas. En este contexto, Brasil ha sido destino de migrantes, especialmente haitianos y venezolanos. Así, este trabajo busca comprender los espacios de inserción de los inmigrantes haitianos en la ciudad media de Lajeado/RS, y algunas prácticas sociales que dinamizan la movilidad transnacional en su cotidiano. Se trata de un estudio exploratorio con enfoque cuantitativo-cualitativo, bajo el enfoque fenomenológico, mediante observación participante, diarios de campo y entrevistas formales e informales. Los resultados muestran que, en la ciudad de Lajeado, los espacios de inserción y las prácticas sociales transnacionales de los inmigrantes haitianos están asociados a los ambientes de trabajo, la movilidad y circulación, el ejercicio empresarial, las remesas de dinero de la diáspora y la constitución de iglesias haitianas.

Palabras clave: Migraciones Internacionales. Espacios de inserción. Practicas sociales. Haitianos.

1 Globalization, Migration as Resource, and Diaspora

Human migration is a global reality. The daily life practices of migrants in their host society as well as the analytical approaches to the phenomenon vary according to the historical, spatial, and social context. In the globalized world, technological progress accelerates displacement and shortens distances, but political processes can facilitate or hinder the crossing and permanence of people between Nation States.

International labor migration is a global process that has affected populations in all countries and continents (GERLACH; UKRAYNETS, 2021). In contemporary times, migration as resource is a strategy for companies, governments, and kinship networks. For years there have been regions exporting and importing workers, based on recruitment and formation of ethnic networks. Seeking to understand which systemic connections accompany the growth of organized export of workers, whether for private profit or to increase state revenue, is an important element to consider (SASSEN, 2010). For example, South Korea and China encourage the organized export of workers as part of their industry and investments in foreign countries. And, according to Baeninger, Gomes and Demétrio (2020), given the difficulty of finding people to work in abattoirs in transnational corporations such as JBS and others, within Global North countries,

programs such as “JBS Without Borders” have been created aiming to recruit Brazilian workers in an organized manner for these industrial plants.

On the other hand, remittance of foreign currency by migrants has been a significant source of income for some countries—each with its own particularities, of course. In Bangladesh, remittances count for about a third of the country’s foreign exchange, originating mainly from the large number of Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East, Japan, and several European countries (SASSEN, 2010). In the European Union, Romania stands out as the country that received the highest number of remittances in 2018, reaching the amount of 4,117 billion euros. Data from 2015 indicate that almost 5 million Romanians were working abroad (particularly in Italy, Spain, and Germany) and that 68% of these workers sent money to their families (MEHEDINTU; SOAVA; STERPU, 2020). Regarding Haiti, according to Handerson (2015), remittances represent 24% of the annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP), although the legal transfers observed in his study did not include informal remittances. Therefore, “the Haitian diaspora plays a crucial role in the country’s social and economic life” (HANDERSON, 2015, p. 63). Therefore, as exemplified above, the migrant category can be used as potential resource for both National States and companies.

According to Ehwi, Maslova and Asante (2021), remittances collaborate financially for the well-being of family and friends and for investments and become the main transnational social practice for migrants to prove their emotional relationship with those who stayed in their home country, even if this represents financial difficulty and decline of the migrant’s living conditions in their host country.

Around the world, and also in Brazil, international migration flows have increased significantly in the 21st century. According to Oliveira (2021), migrations observed in Brazil during the last decade show both quantitative—due to the significant number of foreign migrant inflow—and qualitative changes, given the variety of countries of origin, which are located particularly in the Southern Hemisphere (BAENINGER, 2018). In this sense, it is estimated that 1.3 million immigrants, especially Venezuelans and Haitians, entered the country between 2011 and 2020 (OLIVEIRA, 2021).

The flow of Haitians to Brazil is part of the historical context of their dispersion as a structural phenomenon, which started in the 1960s and increased in the last decade. Among the factors that favored this scenario are the Brazilian presence in Haiti, during the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), from 2004 to 2017; the global economic-financial crisis of 2008, which moved human displacement axes around the world; the strong earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010; and the growing humanitarian crisis experienced by the country in recent years. Also, at the beginning of the last decade, several Brazilian economic indicators were quite attractive, such as the situation of proximity to full employment, a favorable exchange rate, the promotion of world events (World Cup and Olympics), its consolidation as an agribusiness power, and its insertion in the BRICS. In addition, this was also a period marked by the change in the legal framework for migration (CAVALCANTI; OLIVEIRA; MACEDO, 2020).

In this context, our work seeks to understand the spaces of insertion of Haitian immigrants in the medium-sized city of Lajeado/RS and a few social practices that dynamize transnational mobility in their day-to-day lives. As for methodological procedures, it is an exploratory study with a quantitative-qualitative approach, under the phenomenological lens. Phenomenological research “starts from everyday life, from understanding people’s way of life, and not from definitions and concepts,” seeking to “rescue the meanings attributed by subjects to the object being studied” (GIL, 2019, p. 15, our translation).

This research has been developed since 2013; however, data presented in this paper were collected between 2019 and 2022. Here, we articulate information captured from quantitative data, obtained in official databases from the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, through the Annual Report of Social Information (RAIS) and the Observatory of International Migrations (OBMigra), followed by a qualitative approach through participant observation, with immersion of the researchers in the field-theme of the research and with records from field diaries, formal and informal interviews with immigrants, local political and religious leaders, as well as with other residents of the city of Lajeado/RS.

The paper is structured in five sections, in addition to this introduction. In the next section, we conduct a literature review, highlighting the political instrumentalization of the Haitian diaspora. Next comes a brief characterization of the city of Lajeado and the role it plays in the regional urban network. In the fourth section, the city of Lajeado is presented as a destination or transit route for international immigrants, with a focus on Haitian migrants. In the fifth section, we discuss transnational spaces and social practices in the daily life of Haitian immigrants in Lajeado and, finally, we present the final considerations of this work.

2 The Political Instrumentalization of the Haitian Diaspora

The contemporary debate on international migration has highlighted the role that countries play in the international division of labor. In analyzing the case of Haiti, Seguy (2014) explains that, at present, the role played by this country is that of providing cheap labor abroad. In this context, he distinguishes two Haitian migratory flows: the so-called brain drain, mainly to Canada; and the flow of manual workers, to the islands surrounding Haiti and to the United States—and, as of 2010, also to Brazil. The author also notes that the most acute departure of people with higher education in the world originates in Haiti, as 80% of Haitians with a degree end up leaving the country.

According to Handerson (2015), around 4 to 5 million Haitians are scattered around the world—mainly in the United States, France, Canada, and the Caribbean—, a number that represents approximately half of the country’s population.

Within a context of emigration and mobility, in the Haitian universe, “diaspora” means a way of being in the world, which refers to relational actions between the society of origin and that of establishment. The diaspora configures, defines, and conceives the social sphere of the Haitian national. It refers to the union of Haitians around the world, with legal recognition of the category. In this

context, diaspora can be understood both as an ideological construction and as a practice that guides social relations. Thus, diaspora and *peyi blan* do not correspond only to geographic places, but to an idealized and experienced world as well (HANDERSON, 2015).

In Haiti, currently two ministries deal with issues involving the Haitian diaspora: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Haitians Living Abroad (Ministère des Haïtiens Vivant à l'Etranger – MHAVE) (HANDERSON, 2015). In the MHAVE platform it is possible to observe a specific section called “Diaspora,” in which they deal with subjects such as diaspora personalities and ways to attract diaspora investments, demonstrating that the term is recurrent in the imagination and practice of the Haitian people, including government agencies.

The origin and motivations of the Haitian diaspora are part of a historical trajectory. Colonialism and its corollaries contributed to these people’s growing difficulties of survival, so much so that the first mass migratory flows of Haitians were observed as early as in the beginning of the 20th century, toward Cuba—a result of the crisis in the sugar industry—, and in the 1930s, to the Dominican Republic (ARAÚJO, 2020).

According to Fang (2015), three migrant waves headed for the US, where about one million Haitians live in the diaspora—the first wave in the 1960s, and the others in the 1980s and 1990s. Before that, Haitian immigration was uncommon. The motivation for this lies in the dictatorial government of François Duvalier, which called for the replacement of an educated and professional class by a new Black aristocracy. Violence ensued, hitting especially the middle class and educated people, causing them to flee and form migratory corridors to the US, France, and even to French regions of Canada and Africa. Thus began the brain drain. With this approach, Duvalier reduced the risk of future political opposition from the educated class, but he also set in motion the depletion of human talent which would continue to haunt Haiti to this day. At that time, the US made no effort to legalize or even stop migration due to the Cold War and neighboring Cuba. In the other two waves, political instabilities and unrest motivated requests for asylum and family reunification.

Within a diaspora, ties with the country of origin need to be maintained, be them social, economic, political or affective. These ties involve a feeling of belonging to a homeland, regardless of the country where one lives, which is why some authors use the term “transnationalism,” referring to social practices of a transnational nature in which immigrants are imbricated (PERELA; CAVALCANTI, 2017; ARAÚJO, 2020). From this perspective, transnational immigrants are actors in the hegemonic processes of more than one nation (FELDMAN-BLANCO, 2009), strengthening the feeling of belonging to a long-distance nationalism, which has spread in recent decades (BASCH; SCHILLER; BLANC, 2005). Such a phenomenon is present, for example, in the region of Vale do Taquari/RS from the second decade of the 21st century (CAZAROTTO; MEJÍA, 2018; CAZAROTTO; SINDELAR, 2020; MEJIA; CAZAROTTO, 2021).

The category and meaning of diaspora is also a product of the thought produced by the Haitian State, in Bourdieu's terms:

O Estado é mais do que uma entidade institucional ou burocrática que detém o monopólio da força, é também uma “estrutura mental”, ou seja, um sistema de compreensão e organização da realidade social capaz de impor estruturas de pensamento que permeiam as visões sobre o mundo e a vida a partir de princípios de divisão e separação [ou união]. Pensar o Estado significa, portanto, pensar nele a partir de categorias próprias, ou seja, a partir dos conceitos e palavras que o próprio Estado transfere aos seus cidadãos, por meio dos órgãos de socialização, repressão e controle. Dessa forma, os modos de pensar do Estado são naturalizados e internalizados na mente das pessoas, sacralizando a defesa, fetichização e reprodução contínua das fronteiras (AVALLONE, 2019, p. 33) (tradução nossa).

In other words, the (re)creation of national identity or the feeling of belonging to Haiti are (re)produced without the strangeness of “being elsewhere.”

In Haiti, during the 1990s, the idea of the tenth Haitian department was created and spread when, in his 1991 inauguration speech, former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide received at the National Palace, in Port-au-Prince, Haitian nationals who had migrated to the United States and other countries and greeted them as diaspora and members of the tenth geographic department. In 2003, this geographic department became official. With this department, the government reinforces that Haitians, regardless of where they are, can be part of the political life of their country even by means of virtual participation. (HANDERSON, 2015).

Beyond its political dimension, the diaspora, with a focus on transnationalism, is an interconnected social, economic, and cultural experience. It reveals that the migrant's day-to-day life is permeated by dynamics that connect them in networks through which they create and disseminate mobility and establishment strategies. Thus, understanding the social dynamics that produce multi-situated relationships, in the approach of contemporary international migrations, is relevant in view of the diverse possibilities of research and meanings attributed by immigrants.

3 The City of Lajeado: A Brief Overview

Lajeado is a municipality with a total population estimated at 86,005 inhabitants (IBGE, 2022), with approximately 99.6% of them living in urban areas, according to data from the last census (IBGE, 2012). It is located in the central-eastern portion of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, at approximately 113km from the capital, Porto Alegre. It is the largest city in Vale do Taquari, a region comprised of 36 municipalities (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Geographic localization of the Municipality of Lajeado/RS



Source: Adapted from CODEVAT (2017).

The city of Lajeado plays an important role in regional urban structure and organization. It acts as Regional Capital C in the urban hierarchy, polarizing, centralizing, and influencing the territory of Vale do Taquari (IBGE, 2020). Through its administrative and economic functions, it exerts centrality and capacity of territorial management in the regional space. It also mediates diverse flows (of people, goods, inputs, capital, information, etc.) between rural areas and small towns, which constitute its region of influence, and the metropolis of Porto Alegre, from which it also experiences influence within the state urban network. The growing specialization and qualification of some services offered by this medium-sized city, such as higher education, health, technology, and logistics, have also attracted companies and users from the metropolitan region, thus intensifying flows and interactions among these spaces (SILVEIRA et al., 2021).

The regional economy is heavily dependent on agricultural production. In terms of its rural production and land structure, the Vale do Taquari region is characterized by the presence of small rural properties, linked to family agriculture, whose main activities consist of chicken and pig raising and milk production.

As a result of the modernization of agricultural production, in the period from 1970 to 2010, Vale do Taquari underwent profound changes that resulted in its spatial reconfiguration. New contours in population redistribution and changes in employment structures were experienced by family farmers. In this interval, the chicken, pig, and milk production chains were strengthened and entered the agro-industrial complexes with their respective systems integrated into the food industry (BARDEN et al., 2018). Once the specialization of production was organized, these complexes started to be included in the international circuits of trade and consumption.

In the meat and milk sector, a set of spatial arrangements for the production of the agri-food sector took shape, implementing and intensifying the division of its activities into different, albeit close, spaces in the region. In these locations, the circulation of people, goods, services, and information dynamizes the interactions that give unity to the regional urban network. According to Côrrea (1989), these interactions create itineraries, intra-regional circulation routes and also routes at state, national and international levels. Data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA, 2020) indicate that the region has one of the highest concentrations of technological infrastructure in the industrial meat sector of Rio

Grande do Sul. There are 12 abattoirs distributed throughout the 36 municipalities in the region.

In the city of Lajeado there are two abattoirs, Companhia Minuano de Alimentos and BRF—slaughter and meat processing industries which are the main employers of international immigrants in the city. According to RAIS (BRASIL, 2022), Lajeado is the municipality of RS that concentrates the largest number of workers with a formal employment relationship in the industrial sector of “slaughter and manufacture of meat products,” with 5,646 job posts in 2020, which represents 15.1% of the total formal job posts in the municipality. Of these, 752 are occupied by international immigrants (95.2% of them being Haitians), which represents 13.3% of formal employment in these companies. Such landscape has been taking shape especially during the last decade.

4 Destination or Transit Route for Haitian Immigrants?

The arrival of Haitian immigrants in Lajeado was first noticed in 2012, when community health agents reported that, during their home visits, they found people who “spoke another language,” with whom they had difficulties communicating. However, it was in 2013, after a large flood hit the city, that the Secretariat of Social Assistance became aware of the large number of immigrants living in the municipality. Trucks loaded with immigrants arrived at the location set out to house the homeless—around 300, in addition to Haitian, Bangladesh, Senegal and Ghana nationals (MEJIA; CAZAROTTO, 2018).

According to data from the OBMigra Annual Report (2021), from 2010 to 2020, 1,640 international immigrants arrived in the city, 1,016 of which were Haitians, representing 61.95% of the total. At the regional level, 3,585 immigrants arrived; again, the main nationality was Haitian, with 2,210 people, representing 61.64% of the total.

Official data are important. Nonetheless, daily life reveals particularities, such as the immigrant arrival and departure flow, both within the region between the cities of Vale do Taquari and among other cities in Brazil and the American continent.

In Lajeado and the surrounding area, upon following the migratory process of Haitians since 2013, it was observed that the dreams of these immigrants do not differ from the findings of Cavalcanti, Oliveira and Macedo (2020) when they state that, among the economies of the Global South, since 2010 Brazil became an “alternative and temporary global north” for international migrants, due to restrictions imposed by rich countries in the actual Global North. This situation is portrayed the narrative of a research collaborator:

back then, I didn't even think of coming to Brazil, not only me, no Haitians did, it's a general thing, speaking generally, no Haitian had, like, any interest, our interest used to be France, Canada and the United States, it's my dream, our Haitian dream, Canada, France, and the United States. (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 23 April 2021) (our translation).

In addition, even though immigrants continue to arrive—many through contact networks, others through family reunion—, the dream of many is still

getting to the United States or Canada. Furthermore, due to the economic crisis faced by Brazil since mid-2015 and aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic (which contributed to the devaluation of the national currency against the dollar and the increase in inflation), it is possible to observe that, since the beginning of 2021, groups of migrants have departed monthly towards the border of Mexico. It is noteworthy that these groups are aware that the way to go is difficult, dangerous, and that access to the US is uncertain, but those who remain say with enthusiasm: “Haitians are a Black people who have a lot of endurance, and they really get to where they want to go” (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 21 October 2021) (our translation).

Those who remain are also waiting for these paths to open, so they can also leave. They claim that it is not for lack of work that they leave or want to leave Lajeado. They like the city; however, they claim that the cost of living has increased a lot since they arrived, and they also face difficulties remitting resources from the diaspora due to the exchange rate. While following the news of those who “travelled,” they continue in their day-to-day practices.

Now, considering the theoretical reflections presented throughout the work, the next section presents a critical reflection on spatial insertion and on transnational social practices of the Haitian diaspora in the city of Lajeado.

5 Spaces of Insertion and Transnational Social Practices

The spaces of insertion and transnational social practices of Haitian immigrants in Lajeado are associated, especially, with work environments, mobility and circulation, entrepreneurial activities, remittances from the diaspora, and Haitian churches. These are practices that, in the immigrant’s daily life, link him to more than one territory—that is, to relational territories that transcend national borders. For Almeida (2009), the insertion of immigrants in globalized territories creates immigrant individuals in multi-scale, provisional realities, as they are here, but in a way they also remain there. Research results are detailed below.

Work and Income: A Condition for Tolerable Presence

Contemporary migration to Brazil and its regions is characterized by the difficulty of finding workers for some sectors of the economy (ZAMBERLAM et al., 2014). Restructuring of production accentuated the differentiation of regional economies with the specialization of places and, as a consequence, inequalities were increased (SASSEN, 2010; SANTOS, 2006). This is reflected in the new directions of international migratory flows and “as localities are inserted into global logics, international migrations will tend to intensify” (BAENINGER, 2016, p. 23) (our translation).

In this context, companies which are at the forefront of these transformations change their strategies to attract workers, in view of the depletion faced in some sectors. Here are found part of the people involved with international human mobility, many of whom experience the migratory project. Even though, in Brazil, the migratory flow of Haitians has been exponentially strengthened after the 2010 earthquake, these nationals are inserted in communities that encourage migration, whether in their country of origin or where they currently reside.

According to Siqueira (2017), the search for migratory routes does not occur simply with a mind to live in another country, but because this is a socially constructed decision—hence a migratory project.

During the time of emigration, efforts are focused on finding work so that their earnings guarantee survival and make it possible to save money and send remittances. Many migrants submit to precarious working conditions, thinking only about the money being sent to their family and that everything will be much better when they return to their country of origin (SIQUEIRA, 2017).

In the city of Lajeado, according to Graph 1, there was an upward trend in formal employment relationships of Haitian migrants from 2013 to 2020. In this period, the number of workers grew from 101 to 789. The exception is 2016, when there was a small reduction, which can be explained by the departure of migrants who returned to international migration flows. It is also worth mentioning that the arrival of Haitian migrants to the city started before 2013; RAIS only started detailing specific information on this nationality from that year onward (previously, Haitians were included in the group of other Latin American countries) (BRASIL, 2022). A strong concentration of formal employment relationships is still evident in the historical series presented, for the whole of Haitians, in the slaughter and manufacturing of meat products sector—in 2020, it totaled 91.3%.

Graph 1 – Haitian immigrants in the formal labor market in the city of Lajeado (2013 to 2020).



Source: BRASIL (2022).

This reality is in line with Sayad's findings (1988) when he says that work is what makes the immigrant exist; not just any work, but "work for immigrants." Migrants are considered a social problem, so their presence is only tolerated in the condition of workers—a perception which is shared by different sectors of society.

According to Piore (1979), immigrants adapt more easily to intensive labor conditions. Many local workers despise such positions because they are low-paid, low-status, and offer low possibility of professional development, but they are attractive to immigrants when these see the possibility of earning more than they did in their country of origin. The author refers to this type of work as secondary, differentiating it from primary work, which he characterizes as more qualified, with mechanisms for promotion and career.

According to Granada et al. (2021), places where animals are slaughtered, cut and deboned offer precarious working conditions, to which workers who have no other alternative but to accept inhumane conditions of employment and wages that allow their survival are subjected. This information is supported by data from RAIS, which show that the wages paid to Haitian workers are relatively low. In 2013, all Haitian workers received up to two minimum wages. In 2020, 91.3% of these migrants received up to this salary range.

This fact is visible in the narratives of migrants when asked about the biggest challenges currently, “to keep up with the salary they receive and send to family members also in Haiti” (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 21 October 2021). When asked how it is to live in Brazil, the interviewee replied:

a little better, better because I work in a company, live with my family, we are living together here in Brazil. I can say that this moment is a little complicated for us in Brazil, since the moment I arrived here [2013] now it is a little complicated, for everyone, for foreigners, like, to tell you the cost is a little expensive, everything is a little complicated, people who have family there can't send money. But, thank God, if we're not sick, we can manage, we can manage. (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 21 October 2021) (our translation).

In addition, analyzing the profile of workers, it is noted that in 2020 the majority were male (66.8%) and with low schooling, as 68.1% had not completed high school (BRASIL, 2022)—which corroborates Seguy (2014), who points to the arrival of manual workers in Brazil.

Remittances from the Diaspora: Obligations to Those Who Stay

According to Araújo (2020, p. 12), “individuals who emigrate are considered spokespersons for the group; in this way, a relationship of commitment and reciprocity is established between those who stay and those who leave” (our translation). Thus, understanding migration as a collective negotiation of family networks, not an individual project (SASSEN, 2010; MASSEY, 2013), it appears that currency is fundamental for the implementation of migration projects.

As explained by Handerson (2015), in the Haitian diaspora, the remittance of money to the transnational family is a symbol of prestige. Remittances received by compatriots living abroad are called diaspora lajan, or diaspora money. They look forward to earning a salary in dollars or euros, because, as they are connected with their compatriots who live in France, Canada and the US, they know that the possibilities for remittances are much greater, thus increasing their reputation.

In Brazil, the possibility of having documentation that allows formal employment alleviates, in a way, the frustration of not being paid in dollars or

euros. However, given the devaluation of the real, disenchantment with Brazil has intensified and many are re-entering the migratory route, hoping to move to the US, Canada or even Chile. In the narrative of a Haitian immigrant living in this city, “now Chile is good for working, many go there” (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 15 July 2021). He also comments that his wife, too, needs to send financial remittances to family members who stayed in Haiti, for the same reasons. He reported that before 2014 he needed BRL 230.00 to send USD 100.00 to Haiti; in June 2019, one of the moments of the research, he needed BRL 460.00; and in 2021, BRL 600.00. He also claims that, if they wanted to return to Haiti, they would need a lot of money—in his case, four tickets, which would be unfeasible (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 12 July 2021).

In Brazil, from 2007 to 2014, the dollar did not exceed BRL 3.00 (the average commercial dollar in the period was BRL 1.96), and in 2011 it did not exceed BRL 2.00. However, as of March 2015, with the worsening of the country’s economic situation, the devaluation of the real increased and the dollar exchange rate exceeded BRL 3.00, even reaching more than BRL 4.00 in some periods (average rate of BRL 3.52 between 2015 and 2019). However, the situation is even worse with the arrival of the Covid 19 pandemic in March 2020, when the dollar surpassed the BRL 5.00 exchange rate and since then has remained at these levels, with rare exceptions (BCB, 2022).

In this context, the value of remittances sent to Haiti has progressively decreased. In the report of a Haitian woman who arrived in the city in 2020, “the situation is very difficult because, to send 100 dollars to Haiti, you need BRL 600.00, and today in Haiti, USD 100.00 is not enough” (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 15 May 2021). In addition, sending resources also contributes to the worsening of the living conditions of these migrants in their place of establishment, as observed by Ehwi, Maslova and Asante (2021).

Therefore, it is observed that while Haitians are unable to acquire the resources that guarantee social mobility in their country of origin, they continue to move through cities and countries. Their dream is to obtain enough resources to guarantee them a good quality of life on the day they return to their country of origin, which is why they claim that the time is not for return, but for mobility.

Mobility and Circularity: Characteristics of the Haitian Universe

Mobility in search of better living conditions when their current location does not offer the minimum necessary resources is a common phenomenon among immigrants. According to Nieto (2014), constant movement is characteristic of the Haitian diaspora. For Joseph and Neiburg (2020), mobility is constitutive of Haitian landscapes, in the national territory and in the diaspora. This phenomenon has been observed since the beginning of the research, in 2013; however, in some periods it did intensify, as was observed in the years of 2016 and 2021. In 2016, to circumvent the effects of the political crisis in Brazil, Chile was seen as an alternative, where salaries were USD 100.00 higher. Many also tried, and continue to try, the US, but were deported (PRADO, 2016).

However, in the city of Lajeado, of those who re-entered the international migratory route in 2016, some later returned to the city of arrival and decided to establish their lives in Vale do Taquari. Family constitution appears as a defining

element of longer stays, a phenomenon known as circulation spaces arising from repeated migration (KENNETH; VANDERKAMP, 1986), causing immigrants to decide to insert themselves again in the migratory process, and, later, return to a previously known place.

Such mobility is also driven by political changes in countries where Haitian nationals have contact networks. The arrival of Biden to power in the US and the political changes in Chile, for example, rekindled the flame of the American dream, causing, in 2021, in the midst of the Covid pandemic, an intense mobilization of Haitians in the city of Lajeado, heading in that direction month after month. Within groups, they enthusiastically encouraged each other to go on the journey together, as before them lay long, dangerous walks. It was recurrently said that only 20% of the Haitians who were in Lajeado would actually stay there (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 20 November 2021). However, in 2022, the outflow stabilized, given that some were deported from the US and others remained on the US-Mexico border.

This constant mobility implies the difficulty of elaborating and implementing long-term projects in the location of installation; the projects that remain are those that cross borders. It is also worth mentioning that Brazil, in the context of mobility and permanence strategies, is seen as an alternative Global North, while barriers and walls are erected so that geographic borders remain closed to strangers who come knocking at the door (BAUMAN, 2017).

Entrepreneurial Practices: From the Labor Market to the Constituted Migrant

Concomitant to the constant and persistent flow of entry and exit of Haitian immigrants in the city of Lajeado, there is also a movement of accommodation or permanence. One of the facts that prove this phenomenon is that of the entrepreneur immigrant, who decides to open his own business. Enterprises developed by Haitian immigrants in the city are related to commerce, sewing and making clothes, minimarkets, filming of festive celebrations and video clips, among others. Most of the current entrepreneurs previously worked jobs related to abattoirs.

According to Tedesco (2017, p. 215), “the entrepreneurial strategy is common among immigrants. It serves to escape unemployment and/or marginal working conditions. [...] Immigrants seek some benefit of their own that the job market does not give them” (our translation). In the migratory process, the individual elaborates and re-elaborates his migratory project according to the material and immaterial possibilities that are put to him (CAVALCANTI et al., 2017). Thus, in the place of installation, as agents with the ability to act and make decisions in different contexts (GOURCY, 2013), migrants create survival strategies based on autonomous work, escaping the type of work that is “appointed” to them in the society of installation.

However, it is observed that, within the scope of the effective role of the entrepreneur, there is an articulation that connects family members in a transnational network through which ideas, strategies and financial resources circulate internationally. For example, when I visited a store established by a Haitian, I met the owner’s sister, who had arrived from Haiti two weeks ago. She reported that the other brother who lives in the US financially supported their

brother's venture in Lajeado and financed their sister's arrival (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 12 July 2021). Thus, there is transnational circulation of financial resources with a view to enable the migratory project in the country of immigration. The already consolidated ideas of Massey (2013) are therefore confirmed—the migratory project is not an individual, but a family project. In this example, it is evident that family networks play a decisive role.

When asked if the opening of the store had any influence on the decision to stay in the country, the owner claimed that he does not want to be miserable in Mexico to try to reach the US or Canada, for example, as many are doing. “It is very painful. Many are going to Canada or France,” (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 12 June 2021) (our translation) he reports. If the situation gets worse here, he thinks about leaving, but he wants to go with a visa. Therefore, his plans for the future consist of working to open a bigger store.

At the time of the visit, surrounded by the sounds of a Haitian radio station, Brazilian and Haitian customers frequented the store, requesting services such as clothing repairs. The store has an employee to conduct the sewing and has a publicity card. Asked how the pandemic affected the business, he said: “It is difficult for everyone, for foreigners it is worse” (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 12 June 2021) (our translation). They are struggling; sales have decreased, especially the making of suits for Haitian weddings due to restrictions and even cancellation of agglomerations on account of the pandemic.

In one of the commercial establishments we monitored, which closed in 2022, there was a game well-known to Haitians—“every Haitian knows, every Haitian plays” (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 12 June 2021) (our translation)—, in which the draw is held in Haiti and followed over the Internet. This fact highlights yet another example of transnational practice.

Still, it is important to mention the recurrent fragility of small businesses which can easily become unstable and unsustainable, which would again lead to change in the migration project. During the process, in the specific case of the businesses we have followed since 2017, two establishments closed, the others resisted—even in difficult times of the Covid 19 pandemic—and a minimarket opened in 2022 (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 23 January 2022).

Haitian Churches: (Re)creating Identity

Religion is one of the pillars of Haitian migration. Religious practices are carriers for the strengthening of solidarity and exchange networks, with the symbolic function of maintaining the bond with Haiti (AUDEBERT, 2012). In Lajeado, during their establishment in the city, Haitians founded two evangelical churches: Igreja Evangélica de Jesus Cristo de Lajeado and Igreja Haitiana Betel de Lajeado. The former has a branch in Arroio do Meio, a city conurbated with Lajeado, where many Haitians also live. Recently, a group occupied a third space, next to a Brazilian church, dividing shifts between Haitians and Brazilians (in the morning, the church is used by Haitians and, in the evenings, by Brazilians). This space, as well as the second church mentioned above, is the result of differences between groups of Haitians that generated a split, after which, little by little, the dissidents of one church founded the other.

However, they circulate between the churches, and when parties and other celebrations are held, they participate in all of them. As a research collaborator reports, “I really enjoy getting to know the different churches, here is one way, there it is another” (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 15 May 2021) (our translation).

In the churches built in Lajeado, rituals are conducted in their mother tongue, Creole, or in French, and the religious celebrations are conducted by Haitian leaders. These are spaces for the expression of faith and for migrants to get together. They also represent a movement of accommodation or permanence of the ethnic group, even if part of the contingent of this population is constantly on the move.

Recreating churches to renew the faith practiced in their homeland is recurrent after the establishment of migrants in a diaspora context. In a foreign land, faith is part of the little that has not been lost or remained distant in the migratory trajectory (LUSSI, 2013).

The church becomes a great point of reference, a space for convivial relationships to alleviate situations of multiple difficulties that the immigrant may encounter (TEDESCO, 2010). According to Marinucci (2012), in the face of difficulties experienced by an ethnic group after going beyond the geographical borders of their country, religion enables the recreation of identity, generates a feeling of belonging, of being together, strengthened by interpersonal ties in these newly created spaces of dialogue. In other words, they guarantee the practice, albeit partial, of their own memory and culture that they bring with their trajectory, thus ensuring the identity of the group (MARINUCCI, 2012).

Figure 2 portrays some of what takes place within the Haitian churches in Lajeado. The photo illustrates a moment from a party at Igreja Haitiana Betel de Lajeado, in which a choir of Haitian female voices, a wedding ceremony, and the participation of the Haitian community can be observed (DIÁRIO DE CAMPO, 04 August 2019).

Figure 2 – Party held on 04 August 2019 at Igreja Haitiana Betel de Lajeado, founded by Haitians



Source: The authors.

Singing and music play an important role in the exaltation of feelings of faith and unity among Haitians. This represents a transnational language, in religious cults, that connects Haitians in Lajeado, also evoking ties with co-religionists in other locations and nations (MEJIA; CAZAROTTO; ROGÉRIO, 2018).

According to Tedesco (2010), religion is a cultural, social, and pragmatic resource of the migrant community that helps in collective cohesion and identification. In Lajeado, the Haitian churches have already undergone several changes in terms of address, largely due to the emergence of new churches and an increase in followers; however, they have always remained in the Centro Antigo and Moinhos districts—places where many migrants live due to the proximity of the two industries which most hire international migrants.

Final Considerations

This paper addressed the process of political instrumentalization of the Haitian diaspora and the city of Lajeado as a destination or transit route for these immigrants. Understanding mobility as a structuring element of the social relations of the Haitian population, immigration is highlighted as a family project, which connects the immigrant to different transnational spaces, maintaining ties with those family members who stayed in Haiti. The diaspora, in this context, represents not just a movement, but a social experience that connects Haitians to their native country.

In search of better living conditions and entering the international job market, these immigrants end up participating in logics that organize the supply and demand of workforce. The research analyzed the spaces of economic and social insertion in the city of Lajeado/RS, evidencing a reality of economic difficulties, considering the importance of remittance to Haiti. In this sense, some of the transnational production spaces have also become transnational spaces for the Haitian migratory diaspora.

On the other hand, even considering the context of inequality and difficulties, Haitian immigrants establish sociability practices and survival strategies in the migratory context. In this sense, social networks provide a collective identity and mobility possibilities for immigrants, promoting the circulation of protection, information, economic resources, and incentives. The research identified transnational social practices in the day-to-day life of Haitian immigrants in Lajeado, enabling them to stay in the city or to achieve the conditions for the continuity of their migratory “path.”

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Rosmari Terezinha Cazarotto. Doutora em Geografia pela UFRGS. Universidade do Vale do Taquari – Univates. Professora. Endereço para correspondência: Av. Avelino Talini, 171 - Bairro Universitário, Lajeado/RS, CEP: 95914-014. E-mail: rosmari.cazarotto@univates.br.

Fernanda Cristina Wiebusch Sindelar. Doutora em Ambiente e Desenvolvimento pela Univates. Universidade do Vale do Taquari – Univates. Professora. Endereço para correspondência: Av. Avelino Talini, 171 - Bairro Universitário, Lajeado/RS, CEP: 95914-014. E-mail: fernanda@univates.br.

Márcia Solange Volkmer. Doutora em História pela UFRGS. Universidade do Vale do Taquari – Univates. Professora. Endereço para correspondência: Av. Avelino Talini, 171 - Bairro Universitário, Lajeado/RS, CEP: 95914-014. E-mail: marcia.volkmer@univates.br.

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CONTRIBUTION OF EACH AUTHOR

Conceituação (Conceptualization) – Rosmari, Fernanda, Márcia

Curadoria de Dados (Data curation) - Rosmari

Análise Formal (Formal analysis) - Rosmari, Fernanda

Obtenção de Financiamento (Funding acquisition) - Rosmari

Investigação/Pesquisa (Investigation) - Rosmari, Fernanda

Metodologia (Methodology) - Rosmari, Fernanda

Administração do Projeto (Project administration) - Rosmari

Recursos (Resources) - Rosmari

Software -

Supervisão/orientação (Supervision) -

Validação (Validation) - Rosmari, Fernanda

Visualização (Visualization) - Rosmari, Fernanda, Márcia

Escrita – Primeira Redação (Writing – original draft) - Rosmari, Fernanda

Escrita – Revisão e Edição (Writing – review & editing) - Rosmari, Fernanda, Márcia