Transnationalism in the Aftermath of the Haiti Earthquake: Reinforcing Ties and Second-Generation Identity

Garvey Lundy

Abstract
This article examines, first, the response of the Haitian Diaspora to the earthquake of January 12, 2010. This research operates within the theoretical framework of transnationalism, and Haitians living outside their country of origin are shown to make use of political, economic, and communication ties to assist loved ones back home and to begin the process of rebuilding their nation. Transnational ties facilitated by corporate entities, the state, and individuals are viewed as essential elements in forging what is often referred to as long-distance nationalism. Second, the article investigates the impact of the earthquake on the identity of members of the second generation—a group susceptible to the vicissitudes of the public portrayal of Haiti in the popular media and the historical context of Haitian immigrant reception. Results indicate that Haitian identity among the second generation is resilient and, indeed, the earthquake did not diminish identification with Haiti but rather increased it.

Keywords
Haiti, transnationalism, Diaspora, identity, second generation, earthquake

1Montgomery County Community College, Blue Bell, PA

Corresponding Author:
Garvey Lundy, Montgomery County Community College, 340 DeKalb Pike, Blue Bell, PA, 19422
Email: glundy@mc3.edu
The reaction of Haitians living abroad to the magnitude 7.0 earthquake that struck their country on January 12, 2010, can be viewed as an example of how transnationalism operates in the first half of the 21st century. If transnationalism is defined as the process by which immigrants fashion a multilayered relationship that actively binds them to their country of origin while they are simultaneously fully involved in the social activities of their country of settlement, the Haitian Diaspora response to the earthquake exemplifies that description. Haitians living in New York, Miami, Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia responded in a manner that solidified and reaffirmed ties between family members back home and their daily existence abroad. As viewed in the national media, the collective reaction of the Haitian Diaspora became, to many, the face of Haitian immigrants in America as they scrambled to assist and communicate with loved ones affected by a natural disaster of unthinkable magnitude (Moe, 2010a).

While Haitians abroad were gathering resources to come to the aid of their compatriots back home, they had to deal simultaneously with the psychological trauma of seeing the suffering of their country and its people displayed in the media. They were confronted with images of their country that they had to digest and explain to non-Haitians, as Haiti—once again—was making headlines around the world.

In the most recent past Haiti found itself in the news because of political turmoil. In February 2004, Haiti’s popularly elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was forced out of office by armed thugs supported by the United States, France, and Canada. Threatened by Aristide’s policy of reparations and economic justice for the poor, they effectively removed him from office and exiled him to South Africa (Hallward, 2007). Soon after, in September 2004, Hurricane Jeanne struck Haiti, killing an estimated 3,000 people, mostly in the town of Gonaïves. Most recently, in 2008, more than 90 people—mostly children—died when a school building collapsed in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Pétionville.

None of these events, however, could prepare Haitians at home and abroad for the devastation that the earthquake of 2010 would bring to the nation. Estimates put the death toll at 250,000, at the least, with more than 300,000 injured. Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive estimated that 250,000 residences and 30,000 commercial buildings were severely damaged and needed to be demolished. The nearby city of Léogâne reported that 90% of its buildings had been destroyed. To add to the devastation, many of Haiti’s government buildings, such as the Palace of Justice, the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, and Port-au-Prince Cathedral, were completely destroyed. Perhaps most painful was the severe damage to the National Palace. This widely broadcast
image became symbolic of the devastation the earthquake had wrought in Haiti. As a consequence, the earthquake of January 2010, and the public display of a nation in turmoil, was a defining moment in the exercise of transnationalism and a test of what it means to be Haitian.

This article seeks to explore the workings of transnationalism among Haitians in the Diaspora in the wake of the earthquake of 2010. To that end, the first objective is to examine how transnational forces came to bear as Haitians in the Diaspora galvanized resources to assist Haitians back home. The efforts put forth by Haitians reveal how the state and many of its corporate extensions are active participants in facilitating transnational ties. Second, still working within the framework of transnationalism, the article examines the implications of the earthquake on second-generation Haitian identity. Haitian identity, unlike immigrant identities of the past, is constructed by the transnational ties Haitians maintain with their country of origin and more specifically how these ties extend to the second generation. The unique history of Haiti and its more recent political and environmental crises have influenced Haitian identity within the second generation.

This investigation combines various research strategies. Overall, to support the theoretical framework of transnationalism as an operating force among members of the Haitian Diaspora, the article relies on media reports of Haitian Americans as they grappled with the devastation of the earthquake. In addition, this article relies on a total of 15 structured and unstructured interviews and a focus group as well as participant observations carried out in the Philadelphia area between February 2010 and October 2010. Seven men and eight women were interviewed, with each interview lasting approximately 1 hour, with some unstructured in-depth interviews lasting about 2 hours. Informants were not randomly selected but were chosen either because they occupy key positions in the Haitian community in Philadelphia or because of their active role in the relief effort to Haiti.

Theoretical Framework: Transnationalism and the Haitian Experience

Transnationalism has established itself as an important and viable theoretical framework to analyze and understand contemporary migration patterns and settlements (e.g., Cordero-Guzman, Smith, & Grosfuguel, 2001; Olwig, 2007; Vertovec, 2009). Using the lens of transnationalism, migration is examined in relation to the rapidly changing technological, political, and economic forces of society. Indeed, transnationalism situates contemporary immigrant communities in the globalized context of information technology
where space and time have been virtually truncated and, more importantly, where there is a breakdown of the nation-state as the organizing structure for political, social, and economic life. It incorporates the formidable and ubiquitous power of global capitalism and how it greatly affects people's life choices in its analysis of migration.

Transnationalism can thus be seen as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multistrained social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. Contemporary migrants are viewed as maintaining ties across borders, such that formerly concrete lines separating home and host society have become blurred, creating a single arena of social action. Unlike immigrant groups of the past, where the nation-state was characterized by its members sharing a common culture within internationally recognized boundaries, the nation-state for the current crop of immigrants includes citizens who are physically dispersed within the boundaries of other states. And here lies the crux of transnationalism: These dispersed citizens—that is, the Diaspora—however, remain socially, politically, culturally, and most often economically loyal to the nation-state of their ancestors (Basch, Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994).

Haitian immigrants are central characters in establishing transnationalism as an important sociological and anthropological concept. Their ubiquitous presence as subjects has propelled Haitian immigrants to the forefront of transnational research. Explored has been Haitians' sense of nationhood (Schiller & Fouron, 1999, 2001), Haitian identity (Fouron & Schiller, 1997), and Haitian political transnationalism (Itzigsohn, 2000). Indeed, in one of the first widely recognized works to outline a transnational perspective, Schiller and her colleagues (Basch et al., 1994) used the experience of Haitian immigrants in New York to explore dimensions of transnationalism and to examine the Haitian construction of identity. In the process, they historicized the global, capitalistic context that led to migration and the eventual formation of cross-border ties. Indeed, it was in their research of Haitian immigrants that Schiller and her colleagues introduced the seminal concept transnational social field. Borrowing from the works of British social anthropology and French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Schiller & Fouron, 1999, p. 344; Schiller & Fouron, 2001, Note 1), the transnational social field refers to an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks. It is a network that entails more than the traditional sociological use of networks that suggest chains of social relationships associated with a particular actor. In particular, the term transnational social field facilitates the investigation of larger—and thus multiple—social, economic, and political processes in which immigrant groups are embedded. Moreover, the concept facilitates an investigation of the processes by which immigrants actively
participate in social organizations of two or more nation-states. The Haitian immigrant community in New York City becomes the social laboratory in which these concepts are investigated and explored.

As the viability of transnationalism has expanded in social science research, it has been applied to explain a varied number of social phenomena and in the process has acquired a variety of nuanced meanings (Vertovec, 2009). These various interpretations of transnationalism include social morphology, type of consciousness, modes of cultural reproduction, avenue of capital, sites of political engagement, and (re)construction of place or locality. Transnationalism as a social morphology refers to the social formation of relationships (i.e., networks) that exist among the Diaspora with (a) globally dispersed members of their group, (b) the states where these dispersed members reside, and (c) their homeland. As a type of consciousness, transnationalism deals with the dual or multiple identifications members of the Diaspora harbor that link them simultaneously to more than one nation. With modes of cultural reproduction, transnationalism is associated with hybrid cultural production that is often linked to youth—whose formal socialization straddles the crosscurrents of differing cultural fields. Transnationalism as an avenue of capital deals primary with the economic exchanges that are often at the forefront of transnational relations. These economic exchanges manifest themselves in the form of remittances or capital investments, to name just two. For political engagement, transnationalism is preoccupied with the political activities undertaken by members of the Diaspora that directly and indirectly affect their country of origin. And last, as technology and ease of mobility have changed people’s relationship with space, a transnationalism of place or locality is concerned with “practices and meanings derived from specific geographical and historical points of origin” (Vertovec, 2009, p. 12).

To be sure, these distinctions are not mutually exclusive, and indeed Haitians living abroad have manifested their transnational ties to Haiti in all six domains. For the purpose of this article, however, the primary focus is on transnationalism as a social morphology, as a type of consciousness, and as a site of political engagement. These categories help us better frame the actions of Haitians outside of Haiti and how they attempt to address the catastrophic events of January 12.

The Haitian Diaspora Responds: Transnationalism as a Social Morphology

Transnationalism as a social morphology leads to an exploration of networks and connections Haitians in the Diaspora established with their home country that allow them to respond to the devastation of their country, at times
bypassing nongovernmental organizations and state governments.\(^2\) One Haitian physician in the Philadelphia area, for instance, was able to bypass the confusion and delays at the Port-au-Prince airport through his extensive connections with the Dominican Republic and in Cap-Haitien, the second largest city in Haiti located to the north of the capital.

We have made connections with the [Haitian community in Philadelphia] to coordinate efforts to send medical supplies and other resources to Haiti. From what I gather, the airport in Port-au-Prince is under U.S. military control, and access to it is quite restricted. We have bypassed all this and have established points in the Dominican Republic and the airport in Cap-Haitien to send our supplies.

In many ways it was Haitian families, acting individually or collectively through community-based institutional intermediaries, such as churches or hometown associations, that were at the forefront of the collective response of the Diaspora. Haitian families had to “double up,” so to speak, to take care of their own. They opened their homes to orphans and refugees from the earthquake, and many of them took the necessary steps to bring family members to the United States. There are no precise data as to the number of Haitians refugees living with relatives, but less than 2 months after the earthquake, 6,942 noncitizens had arrived in the United States from Haiti, and 1,300 of them came on tourist visas (Bernard, 2010b). In some instances, Haitian families have made the trip to Haiti personally to assist family members (Boccella, 2010). Table 1 illustrates the willingness of the Haitian community to provide assistance for Haitians devastated by the earthquake. When asked whether they would consider fostering or adopting Haitian orphans, an overwhelming 62% of Haitians said yes.

In many Haitian communities in the United States, it was the Haitian church, in collaboration with non-Haitian churches (mostly the African American church), that organized relief for the earthquake. These places of worship, as is often the case, served as a place to seek comfort and solace as well as a center to disseminate information about the state of loved ones back home (Bernard, 2010a). In addition, parallel sister churches back home were crucial in establishing transnational ties as the whereabouts of loved ones were often established by a point person of the church in Haiti. Church-to-church links became the route by which resources and information were transferred from the United States to Haiti. These churches, as well as other gathering places, were operating in a **transnational social field** where their
faith and material efforts were more immediately connected to family members back home.

There are several historical and social factors behind the central role of the church in the lives of Haitians. First, the proliferation of religious institutions, and the devotion that Haitians display toward their various houses of worship, is the work of several forces, among which are the cultural legacy of African spirituality—as seen through the still-vibrant practice of Vodu—that Haitians bring with them to these shores and the history of America as a religious haven. Indeed, similar to Hunt and Lightly’s (2001, p. 107) observation of Nigerian Pentecostals in London, Haitian religious practices in America are the product of both developments in Haiti and an adaptation to life in America.

Second, the earthquake has revealed a particularly American contribution to the Haitian church (whether Catholic, Protestant, or Evangelical) in the congregational structure that it adopted (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000). This congregational structure reflects both democratic and bureaucratic elements of American culture: a formal list of voting members, a governing body, working committees, and other well-defined institutions within the larger religious organization. The overall impact of such developments is to provide a sense of ownership of the institution that may not have been possible back home but is expected and desired in the present setting. Furthermore, these structural changes have made the Haitian church nimble and adaptive to the immediate needs of the Haitian community, both political and social, and as a result they have become a bottom-up structural operation, as opposed to a bottom-down operation, where edicts or commands are announced by the priest or pastor.

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Making Contact and Remittance

At a societal or communal level, Haitian professional organizations around the United States were active in sending several of their members with appropriate skills to Haiti. The Haitian government has tracked at least 1,400 Haitian Diaspora professionals, mostly in medical fields, who have been through the country since the earthquake. The Association of Haitian Physicians Abroad, known by its French acronym AMHE—just one of many Haitian American medical groups volunteering—has sent more than 500 volunteers to Haiti. By April 2010, the Boston-based group Partners in Health, which operates nine hospitals in Haiti, had sent more than 1,000 Creole-speaking volunteers to Haiti of the total of 7,000 (Bernard, 2010d). One can assume that of the 1,000 sent, many of them were of Haitian origin.

Indeed, many of the institutions that facilitate transnational life for Haitians—acutely aware of this role—responded in a manner that reinforced the links between the Diaspora and Haitians back home. For example, to ease the process of sending remittances, Western Union introduced “no transfer fee” pricing for any amount sent to Haiti from the United States, Canada, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and select locations in France. Furthermore, aware of the demographics of their clientele, Western Union also set up a special account in the United States for customers to send money to Haiti (Western Union, 2010). Furthermore, airlines that serve Haiti, likewise, have responded to the humanitarian crisis by allowing their customers—Haitians from the Diaspora—to send aid supplies free of charge and have converted their frequent-flier programs as a mechanism to donate funds for Haitian relief (Hunter, 2010).

One of the most visible displays of transnationalism during the earthquake was the scramble to communicate: Haitians abroad were frantically trying to establish communication links with relatives and friends in Haiti. At familiar gathering sites such as the barber shop, hair salon, local market, and church vestibules, Haitians clustered to listen to local radio reports, to access the Internet, and to use cell phones—media that shorten the distance between Haiti and its community abroad (Moe, 2010b). Likewise, in Haiti, Haitians were in a similar scramble to communicate, not just with fellow Haitians at home but also with relatives and loved ones in the Diaspora.

Inexpensive cell phones and the fast-growing wireless telecommunications market in Haiti have facilitated this process (Vertovec, 2009, pp. 54-61). Indeed, Digicel—the largest mobile telecommunications operator in Haiti—was quick to act to reestablish communication links to Haiti and to create a relief fund for one of its most important markets. Digicel initiated a free SIM
card replacement program for anyone who lost an existing SIM card. The company provided price reductions on its products, and, more importantly, Digicel established supplementary charging stations throughout Port-au-Prince to so that customers could charge their phone batteries at no cost. About a week after the earthquake, most Digicel sites were up and running across Haiti (Digicel Group, 2010).

In addition to cell phone communication links, remittances are one of the most essential ties for migrants with their country of origin. After the earthquake, Haitians increased their financial contributions to family members back home. Figure 1 illustrates the extent to which Haitians have increased their financial contributions to aid family members caught in the devastation of the earthquake. The Haitian economy is heavily dependent on remittances sent by Haitians living abroad. According to Haiti’s Central Bank, Haitians remit $1 billion a year, or more than a quarter of Haiti’s GDP. In 2004, the Haitian government estimated a total of $930 million in remittances, more than twice the amount sent 5 years earlier. With political instability and a series of natural disasters as the backdrop, the growth in remittances to Haiti has accelerated more rapidly since the mid-1990s, rising from only $108 million in 1995 to almost 10 times that amount in 2004 (Orozco, 2006). In the aftermath of the earthquake, remittances have become more important for Haitians still living in Haiti. It is through these remittances that many of them have been able to leave their country to join relatives living abroad.
Other than the endeavors of private companies to reinforce transnational ties and thereby facilitate aid between Haitians at home and abroad, the U.S. federal government's decision to grant Haitians temporary protected status for 18 months was also crucial to the process. "Temporary protected status" allowed 200,000 Haitians currently living in the United States without proper documentation to reside here and work without fear of deportation. Perhaps more importantly, it allowed Haitians to continue to send money back home through formal remittance channels (Bernard, 2010a).

A survey of the Haitian community in the United States revealed that Haitian Americans were deeply affected by the earthquake. Three fifths reported losing a loved one in the earthquake, and two thirds of them reported feeling the situation in their country was so dire that they were willing to move back to Haiti for a period of time to help with the reconstruction (New America Media, 2010). Many more Haitian families in the United States have relatives who have been physically and psychologically traumatized by the earthquake. These families are opening their doors to relatives and nonrelatives who were able to make it to the United States. Indeed, in many instances, it is the Haitian community through transnational ties that is providing the respite necessary as Haitians attempt to recover from the trauma of the earthquake.

Establishing and Redefining Political Ties

Perhaps the most telling manifestation of transnational connection occurred in the arena of political engagement. Many Haitians saw the earthquake as an opportunity to restructure the political relationship between Haiti and its Diaspora. Although overtures had been made in the past by the Haitian government to tap into the resources of its Diaspora, by and large the relationship has been strained. Unlike Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Columbia, Haiti does not recognize dual citizenship, and Haitians in the Diaspora are not allowed to participate in the political process.

The political relationship between Haiti and its Diaspora is slowly emerging from a legacy of polarization that was put in place during the Duvalier regime. Haitians abroad were kept at arm's length as they were perceived as a threat to the authority of Francois Duvalier (Papa Doc) and later his son—Jean-Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc). Moreover, consistent with the campaign of fear and intimidation at home, Haitians abroad were forced to choose sides in the battle between the "authorities" (i.e., state supporters) and the "others" (i.e., members of the opposition). For those living abroad the choice in this divide had real or implied consequences for family members still living in Haiti. As Trouillot (1990) writes,
Every individual was constantly forced to define his or her position vis-à-vis the regime, to situate himself or herself in terms of the fundamental divide between those who ruled and those who were ruled. . . . Sadly enough, the political opposition—and the exiled opposition in particular—fell blindly into the Duvalierist trap, intensifying the polarization and thus repairing gaps that might otherwise have threatened the chief of state's authority, especially that of Jean-Claude. (pp. 179-180)

During his first term in office, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide made an effort to reconcile the divide between the Haitian state and its citizens abroad. In his initial campaign for office as well as in his experience as a president in exile after the 1991 coup d'etat, Aristide received considerable aid and support from Haitians abroad. Aware of the social and human resources that the Diaspora represents, he made a considerable effort to channel those resources for the collective good of Haiti. First, he elevated the status of the Diaspora by symbolically referring to them as the "Eleventh Department"; second, he established a government consulate specifically for Haitians living abroad.4

Despite the efforts taken at the state level and the fluidity of Haitians moving from Haiti to various destinations abroad, at the local nonstate level there is still some level of suspicion of the Diaspora. Haitians living abroad are perceived to be a threat to the few white-collar jobs available in Haiti. In addition, Haitians still living in Haiti are resentful of the Diaspora for not doing enough to rebuild the nation (Bernard, 2010c; Dewan, 2010; Schiller & Fouron, 2001).

With this legacy as a backdrop, the earthquake of 2010 has forced both sides to reconsider the relationship. While in Montreal, Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive called for a restructuring of the relationship between Haiti and its Diaspora, and it was through the efforts of the Diaspora that the Organization of American States convened a meeting to map out reconstruction policies for Haiti (Dewan, 2010). Haitians in the United States have used the earthquake as an impetus to be more politically organized and to be a viable force in advocating for Haitian affairs in their community. As Semple and Gebeloff (2010) in the New York Times write,

As awful as the news has been, they say, it has given [Haitians] an opening to talk about the shape and direction of their community. In the long term, many hope the magnitude of the emergency will bring them more coherence and clout, and deepen an involvement with their homeland that has weakened with each new generation.
The statement above suggests a two-way street of influence as the Haitian state opens the political door for Haitians abroad to participate, while in turn Haitians outside of Haiti have used the earthquake to restructure its own institutions. There has been avid attempts, although not always successful, to coordinate transnational political relations from above (Haitian state) and below (Haitians in the Diaspora). Indeed, since the earthquake a handful of Haitian presidential candidates have made campaign visits to the United States, much like their Colombian counterparts in New York City and Los Angeles. This process is filled with the symbolic nationalist sentiments that connect Haitians in the United States to Haitians back home. These transnational political events are often covered by local media and provide symbolic capital for the Haitian community—and eventually material capital for the presidential candidate (Guarnizo, Sanchez, & Roach, 1999).

In addition to face-to-face meetings with their “constituents” abroad, Haiti’s presidential candidates are active in communicating their platform and introducing themselves to as many Haitians as possible through the use of the Internet. This development has in fact made the Internet an important tool for dialogue among the various sectors of the Haitian population and has created “diasporic public spheres,” enabling Haitians to view themselves as a linked community although they live in geographically dispersed locations (Appadurai, 1996; Parham, 2005).

Second-Generation Haitian Identity

The second-generation Haitian Diaspora has become more visible as its efforts to address the earthquake have captured media attention. Hip-hop star Wyclef Jean’s failed attempt to enter the Haitian presidential race is perhaps the most visible effort by a member of the second generation to address the issues that confront Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake. Having left Haiti at the age of 9 and living most of his adult life in the United States, Wyclef Jean announced his candidacy for Haiti within a year of the earthquake. He claimed that his candidacy was spurred by the appeals of the youth of Haiti who looked up to him and his music as a symbol of hope. As a member of the second generation, his candidacy illustrates the reach of transnationalism and the viability of the term as a social scientific construct. Moreover, his candidacy begs the question of how the earthquake has affected their identity or their consciousness. Wyclef Jean’s ability to speak Haitian Creole—or more precisely his lack of fluency—became a major issue for those opposed to his candidacy. In response to his critics, and symbolic of the transnational cultural boundaries that those of the second generation straddle,
Jean announced that if elected president he would govern in both Creole and English (Lush, 2010).

Indeed, given the potency of transnationalism as an explanatory tool for contemporary migration and settlement, it is only logical that transnationalism would apply to the more abstract subject of identity. Immigrant identity, and in particular second-generation identity, has been of particular interest to scholars of transnationalism. Nancy Foner (2001), for example, suggests that transnational ties will persist among the second generation and even among the third generation as migrants of all ages continually enter the United States to enrich and replenish the immigrant stock. This almost perpetual process, which is a hallmark of contemporary migration, will ensure that children of immigrants will have a link to their ancestral land and thereby affect their sense of identity and citizenship.

For second-generation Haitians, identity has been circumscribed within the unique historical and political landscape of Haiti as well as within the circumstances of migration and the demographic context of the host nation (Schiller & Fouron, 2001; Linstroth, Hall, Douge-Proper, & Hiller, 2009; Zéphir, 2001). To that end, second-generation Haitian identity can be viewed as going through several permutations as those variables of Haitian politics—manner of migration and the condition of the host nation—vary with time.6

As with most early Caribbean migrants, Haitian identity—and for that matter second-generation Haitian identity—was rarely at the forefront of Black identities (Kasinitz, 1992; Waters, 1999). The relative size of the Haitian community and the lack of viable community organizations simply made it easier for members of the second generation to subsume their identity within that of their proximal hosts, who in most instances were African Americans (Mittelberg & Waters, 1992).

To that end, members of the second generation were reported to engage in a phenomenon known as “cover-up”—an active process of distancing oneself from one’s Haitian ancestry. Young Haitians were said to have anglicized their name or to have identified themselves as Jamaican, French, or African American—anything but Haitian (Stepick, 1998; Zéphir, 2001). Fueling the push away from Haitian identification was the decision in the early 1980s by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control to single out Haitians, along with homosexuals, hemophiliacs, and heroin users—the so-called 4-H club—as a high-risk group for AIDS.

The collective reaction of Haitians to this classification as well as the efforts of leaders of the Haitian community to educate members of the second generation have resulted in members of the second generation having a more positive Haitian identity. As with their parents, these younger members of the
Haitian community have become long-distance nationalists. That is, they have asserted a claim to membership in a political community that exists beyond the territorial borders of a homeland, and this process has generated an emotional attachment that compels young Haitians to political action ranging from displaying a home flag to an attempt to seek the presidency of a land they left many years ago (Schiller & Fouron, 2001, p. 4). For members of the second generation, transnationalism is constructed from their existence in a context where migrants (i.e., their parents and extended family members) live their lives across borders. In the process, the children who live in the midst of a transnational household influence friends and neighbors who are not, themselves, living in transnational households. Out of the transnational flow of ideas and images through radio, television, the Internet, and newspapers, which surrounds these youth, their self-identity is being shaped.

This emerging identification with Haiti among the second generation is evident on college and university campuses in the United States and Canada as Haitian students increasingly distinguish themselves from other Caribbean students, and from African Americans, by establishing Haitian student associations. Rather than subsume their identity within an organization constructed for the greater Caribbean region such as a Caribbean student association—which exists on many college and universities—or for that matter organizations constructed for the whole of Black students on campus, Haitian students have decided to stand apart and form their own institutions. Haitian student associations are in large part populated by members of the second generation, and because of their attachment to a Haitian identity, they have established associations to speak to that identity. Like their African American counterparts, college seems to be the social context that forces students to choose an identity (Massey et al., 2003). Many African Americans respond by aligning themselves on college campuses with African American organizations and African American thematic dorms. Second-generation Haitians, likewise, join the Haitian student organizations on campus (Schiller & Fouron, 2001, p. 162).

**Second-Generation Identity in the Wake of the Earthquake**

Haitian students at a local Philadelphia university gathered one warm fall evening to discuss the situation in Haiti, several months after the earthquake. The discussion ranged from the political aspirations of Wyclef Jean to the role of the Diaspora in the reconstruction of Haiti. Overall, these second-generation
Haitians, of whom a handful had never been to Haiti, felt an obligation to their homeland. Indeed, their presence at the weekly Haitian student organizational meeting lends credence to their open identification with Haiti. They expressed their solidarity with Haiti by organizing a fund-raiser and a conference to address the political and humanitarian issues surrounding the earthquake.

Several themes were prominent among these Haitian American students when discussing the earthquake and their Haitianness. Primary among them was the certitude of their Haitian identity in the midst of the tragedy of the earthquake and the negative images of their nation in the media.

Q: Let me ask you some questions related to the catastrophes that Haiti has encountered: Hurricane Jeanne, the coup d’état, the earthquake. . . . How does that make you feel about Haiti? When you see your country portrayed in a negative way in the media, does that make you want to not be Haitian? Do you move away from being Haitian? (A collective “no” from the group.)
A (female): I get angry. You always have to be defensive against people, their remarks. People are talking about more than a country; they’re talking about my family. Don’t talk about my family like that. I get upset.

Moreover, in their responses these students reveal a level of sophistication about the political and social dynamics of a country that many of them have never visited. They attribute the scale of the catastrophe to, and direct their anger at, the failings of the Haitian government. As one student puts it,

After the earthquake it hurt me to see people going through so much, but after a while it made me angry. I was angry because the structure wasn’t there to prevent the magnitude of the destruction. There wasn’t the political structure. In March I was getting angry with the government. The people can’t do anything if the government isn’t there to help.

When pressed about the nature of their identity as Haitians, these students were able to historicize the Haitian experience in the United States and view themselves as a unique transnational cohort, where the pressure to subsume one’s identity as Haitians is no longer as prevalent.

A lot of [Haitians] came to this country when it was not cool to be Haitian. They haven’t lost that mentality, so when they have their kids,
it’s “Oh my God . . . I’m not going to let them put that out their [that they are Haitians] because they are going to get beat up in school.” My older brothers, for example, got beat up when they were in high school in New York, for being Haitian. It’s that mentality versus someone like my mother, who says, “You are Haitian. I don’t care what they tell you or call you; I don’t care if they call you Black; you are not Black you are Haitian. . . . You are Haitian.”

These and other statements by members of the second generation point to the contradictory messages about identity that Haitian parents transmit to their children, which in turn result in the complexity of Haitianess among the second generation. As their children get older, there is a desire to define themselves and assert a unique identity. Indeed, individuals define their identities along two dimensions: social, based on membership in various social groups, and personal, based on the idiosyncratic elements that distinguish an individual from others (Howard, 2000). For members of the second generation, that social group sometimes straddles both Haitian culture and African American culture, but more importantly, on a personal level, when members of the second generation begin to assert Haiti and its culture as their own, the resistance they encounter from family members can be a force to either heighten that identity or reject it altogether.

It all depends on how a child is raised. Some people in here have the mentality that says, “Why am I going back to Haiti for” because their parents planted that seed in their head.

It’s funny that you say that. I was raised to speak Creole. If I spoke in English they would say to speak Creole. You speak English outside of the house. But with that said, we never had a strong Haitian culture. My mother would be the first one to say to me that you’re not Haitian. I went through this phase where I had my Haitian flag and everything and my mother would say, why are you doing this, you are not Haitian. You don’t even know what Haiti is like. They [our parents] would put you down.

Despite the contradictory messages from parents, the verbal and sometimes physical attacks by peers, and the negative portrayal of Haiti in the media, these students found a way to connect with Haiti and make their Haitian identification their own. Many of them constructed a mythical image of Haiti or looked to the historical glories of Haiti as a source for positive self-identification. As expressed by these students,
Yes, I could speak the language—Creole. My parents are Haitians but it didn’t mean much to me. It wasn’t until that I learned that Haiti was one of the first free Black nations to win its independence. I learned all this cool stuff. Now, I’m proud to be Haitian. Why not show it off?

It was personal for me, when I started talking to my grandma. She didn’t speak English and I wanted to know more about her. That’s when I started learning about the culture and get into the culture. . . . My Dad would say, you are in the Haitian club, you’re not even Haitian. But I would say to him, “It’s because of you that I’m Haitian. Why do you say that?”

(A collective “yes” from the group.)

These statements illustrate the complexity and subjective understanding of what it means to be Haitian. It is a more fluid notion of identity, which unlike the older generation of Haitians does not require being born in Haiti, an unwavering interest in the political and social affairs of Haiti, or the practice of Haitian traditions in the exact way they were practiced in Haiti (Zéphir, 2001).

When pressed further about Haitian identity and the impact of the earthquake on that identity, the students revealed that the earthquake had the effect of “outing” more Haitians on campus. Many students who did not openly identify themselves as Haitians prior to the earthquake were doing so in the wake of the earthquake, such that the Haitian student group saw a temporary rise in membership. As they said, people were coming “out of nowhere and identifying themselves as Haitians.”

Q: So you are saying you were not afraid to say you were Haitian after the earthquake.

(A collective “no” from the group.)

A (male): In fact we saw a lot more Haitians on this campus after the earthquake. All these people who we didn’t know were Haitians were coming out after the earthquake and publicly identifying with the country. Random people were coming out—post-earthquake Haitians.

A (female): It’s unfortunate that it would take a tragedy like that for people to identify with Haiti. We call them post-earthquake Haitians.

Similar to the collective response of Haitians against the classification as a high-risk group for AIDS in the 1980s, second-generation Haitians are responding as their increasing profile galvanizes resources to address the problems they face.
Conclusion

Transnational relations between Haitians abroad and Haitians at home are redefining many of the institutions that were previously seen as either fixed or stagnant. Political, social, and ideological differences that were once thought of as insurmountable are now viewed as barriers to be overcome. The impetus for this monumental rethinking is the tragic event of January 12, 2010. The earthquake elicited a response from Haitians in the Diaspora that was both material and psychological. Haitians living abroad came together to aid in the recovery process and asserted themselves as central players. Through communication efforts, remittances, and medical and social aid, Haitians gathered as many resources at their disposal as they could to help their brethren back home. All these efforts were facilitated by the transnational nature of human migration. This display of transnationalism in action is no small feat, however, given the history of Haitian governments that worked to limit ties between Haiti and its expatriates for fear of being toppled. The rapprochement that began with the fall of the Duvalier government in 1986 has reached a significant turning point in the aftermath of the earthquake.

The economic and infrastructural rebuilding that Haiti has to undergo is indeed a monumental task. The Haitian Diaspora—Haitians living in the United States in particular—is itself hampered by economic limitation, but nevertheless, in relative terms, these Haitians are in an advanced position with greater access to resources to shape the future direction of their country in a manner never before imagined.

A key player in the reshaping and reconstruction of Haiti is the second generation. Its links to Haiti are at times tenuous, and the forces of transnationalism have facilitated its ability to speak and act on the issues that confront the land of its forebears. Its identity as Haitian is continuously replenished and reaffirmed, and as a result it seeks a voice in the future of Haiti. Indeed, Wyclef Jean may have been dismissed for suggesting that if elected he would govern in both Creole and English, but his proposition speaks to the reality of the worlds that members of the second generation straddle. In the end, no one can predict with precision the future of Haiti, but for certain the Diaspora will be a more potent player in that future.

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Notes

1. Guarnizo, Sanchez, and Roach’s (1999) analysis of Columbians in New York City and Los Angeles serves as an interesting point of comparison. In their article they examine Columbians’ transnational connection in terms of economic links, political participation, and transnational social-cultural activities—categories similar to those outlined by Vertovec (1999, 2009).

2. For an interesting comparison, consider the response of the earthquake that shook Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan, and India in October 2005. It was noted that the Indian and Pakistani Diaspora responded in a more direct and effective manner than states and nongovernmental organizations (Rehman & Kalra, 2005).

3. Indeed, the term Diaspora emerged in the midst of the battle between the Duvalier regime and its opposition abroad. For supporters of the Duvalier regime, the term Diaspora was reserved for Haitians who had emigrated and hence abandoned the nation—in effect against the nation. In contrast, Haitian leaders abroad used the term Diaspora to connote that all Haitians outside of Haiti are exiles or political refugees, whose ultimate goal was to return to their country (see Schiller & Fouron 2001).

4. Haiti is a state consisting of 10 geographical sections or departments.

5. Although not born in the United States, because of his early age of entry into the United States, Wyclef Jean is considered a member of the second generation.

6. Schiller et al. (1987) describes four historical phases of Haitian migration to the United States and how it correlates directly with Haitian identity and the collective effort to create a unified Haitian community. Political events in Haiti such as the rise and fall of the Duvalier government (Francois Duvalier and Jean-Claude Duvalier), the class and urban or rural population from which the migrant population emanates, combined with the size of the Haitian migrant community in the United States all contribute to variation in identity and community formation.

7. Flore Zéphir (2001) uses the term Haitianess to describe the very complex phenomenon among second-generation Haitians to identify as Haitians and to display that identification. For example, she writes of the second generation,

[The meanings and manifestations of being Haitian] are entirely based on their subjective understandings of the concept of Haitianess they develop in the
context of their own reality in the United States, which is shaped by the characteristics (physical, linguistic, religious, and cultural) they bring along and the social environment that surrounds them. (Zéphir, 2001, p. 60)

References


**Bio**

**Garvey Lundy** was born in Cap-Haitian and migrated to Brooklyn at an early age. He is an instructor of sociology at Montgomery County Community College, in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania. His research focuses on Haitian immigrant communities, education, and race and ethnic relations.