

PICHÓN

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Abstract

Pichón is a 30-minute documentary that captures the daily life of an Afro-Cuban family, the Galdeses, in the outskirts of *La Havana*, Cuba's capital city.

At once observational and participatory, the film centres its narrative around Silvia, Silverio and Estella, three siblings now in their sixties, descendants of Haitian migrant workers who arrived in Cuba in the early 1920s. By superimposing the siblings' recollection of the past upon their current-day economic and cultural life, the film locates the Haitian presence in the margins of Cuban society and posits the siblings' *haitianness* as both a place of marginality and a site of resistance.

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Director's Statement

My work takes a critical stance on modern-day social, political and cultural phenomena to suggest a reading of our society from its margins. I am motivated by a duty of preservation of the collective memory, not as an object frozen in time and space, but rather as a living organ that human interactions continue to feed and renew. My approach to filmmaking is rooted in the concept of Imperfect Cinema, developed by Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa. Far from being a glorification of mediocrity, Imperfect Cinema is a way for me to centre my art around the needs of the communities for which I practice and whose involvement I constantly seek. My movies don't have the ambition to deal with "universal themes"; rather, they tell stories that are forgotten (or ignored), untold (or ill-told) by the dominant cultural structures.

It is within this practice that my thesis film *Pichón* is located.

I first met the Galdes siblings in the summer of 2011 during a week-long vacation in Havana, Cuba. I was captivated by the many stories they shared with me and suggested that we make a film together. They agreed. The following spring, I went back to Cuba with a pair of DSLRs and a sound recorder to start filming. Silvia had invited me to stay at her house and it wasn't long before my camera became a regular fixture in the community for those following two weeks and the many times I returned over the last four years to capture additional footage.

The reason for my fascination with *the Haitians* in Cuba has not always been clearly articulated in my mind. Throughout production, I was convinced that I was making a movie only about *them*, *their* memories, *their* past and present cultural and economic struggles. But as I worked through the footage I gathered over the years and through the many different cuts of the current film, I have come to realize that the movie is also about me. Although our socio-

economic and political environments differ greatly, the Galdeses and I share the same blood Silvia speaks about in the film. Our shared *haitianness* has anchored the Galdeses' lived experience in Cuba and for three generations it has been a beacon guiding them through racial discrimination, economic hardships, and cultural marginalization. Capturing that site of resistance has taught me a great deal about myself and my career as a filmmaker.

Our shared "*sola sangre*"¹ reminded me that ours is the very voice that disrupted the world order at the turn of the nineteenth century by crying freedom in the face of slavery. Their voices encouraged me to keep on speaking from the margins even when the centre seems more attractive. In many ways *Pichón* is a personal film for in taking me on the road of self-discovery, it has grounded and centred what I hope is a long and fruitful journey making films.

¹ In one of our conversations Silvia declares "Tengo dos tierras, pero tengo una sola sangre"; "I have two homelands but I only have one blood" (My translation).

Background

*We refuse to be what you wanted us to be,
we are what we are,
that's the way it's going to be*

Bob Marley



Image 1: First visit to Havana

When I first visited the Galdes siblings in San Francisco de Paula, in the summer of 2011, I instantly recognized my own Haitian heritage in their way of life, their language, their music and their religious practices. That Sunday afternoon, under the *tonèl*² in their backyard, we ate good Caribbean food, drank cheap rum and smoked tobacco while drumming, dancing and

² Sort of Gazebo, popular in Haiti's rural areas.

singing Haitian songs. I felt at home. They welcomed me as if we were relatives, distant cousins who were catching up. “I am 100% Haitian” Silvia tells me, unequivocally, in perfect Haitian Creole with a loud southern accent that I recognize. Friendly, smart and hardworking, she was clearly the leader of the bunch, the one whom they have all followed to Havana from their native *Santiago de Cuba*, in the *Oriente* region of the island.

Estela, Silvia and Silverio, were born in *Oriente*. Their parents were Haitians who had migrated to Cuba in the early 1900s to work as *braceros*³ on the American-owned sugar fields. That is the reason why my hosts are called *Pichón de Haitianos*, Haitians’ offspring, by other Cubans these days. Born in Cuba, now in their sixties, the siblings have not escaped their *Haitianness*. Haiti occupies an important place in their collective imaginary, although they had never set foot in that country at the time of our meeting. I listen as Silverio, the *bon vivant* brother, explains that being *Haitianos* has not always been a positive identity marker in Cuba. It is (was) often a demarking line of marginalization.

The precariousness of the Galdeses’ living conditions and the informal nature of their economic life embolden that line. Their small unfinished dwellings with no running water, no adequate sanitation system and no “official” connection to the city’s electrical infrastructure were in a shockingly stark contrast with *Centro Havana* where I was staying in a 4-star hotel. They were not receiving any government benefits and were self-employed. Thus, both culturally and economically the Galdeses are living in the margins of Cuban’s society; they are “part of the whole but outside of the main body.”⁴ In this supplemental paper, I use Marc McLeod’s⁵

³ Name given to Haitian sugar cane cutters in Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

⁴ Hooks, “CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS.”

⁵ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens.”

comparative analysis between the experience of British West Indian immigrants in Cuba and that of the Haitians to argue, firstly, that the Haitian presence in Cuba has been marked by a very distinct anti-Haitian form of marginalization. While all afro-Caribbean seasonal workers were subjected to racial discrimination and economic exploitation, specific anti-Haitian sentiments confined the Haitians in the margins, away from the centers of economic, cultural and political power, even below other oppressed groups. As Gret Viddal remarks: “Historically, Haitian laborers were marginalized, disenfranchised, and occupied the lowest socio-economic status in Cuban society”⁶. However, the Haitian migrants of the early 1900s embraced their marginality as a space of preservation of their cultural heritage, intentionally resisting the erasure of their identity. As bell hooks explains “[...] marginality” is much more than a site of deprivation. It is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. Not a marginality that one wishes to lose, to give up or surrender as part as moving to the Center, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even because it nourishes one’s ability to resist”. It is within this site of resistance that my thesis film, *Pichón*, locates the Galdes siblings. Secondly, contrary to Viddal’s assertion that “today however, the continuation of Haitian customs is no longer linked with isolation, but exactly the opposite [...]”⁷, the film suggests that the Galdes still occupy that space of cultural and economic defiance in post-revolutionary Cuba. by superimposing their recollection of the past onto material and cultural realities of today,

The migratory movement from Haiti to Cuba at the turn of the twentieth century was a result of demand and supply for labour¹⁴. In Haiti, the disruptive effect of the American military occupation (1915-1934) “on rural livelihoods and the organization of labor” combined with other

⁶ Viddal, “VODÚ CHIC.”

⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴ Lundahl, *A Note on Haitian Migration to Cuba, 1890-1934*.

local factors such as “demographic pressure, land shortage and poor rural conditions”¹⁵ created a class of illiterate peasants ready to trade their labour for cheap. In the neighbouring island of Cuba, meanwhile, American companies such as the *United Fruit* and *General Sugar* companies were expanding their domination of the sugar industry which was flourishing exponentially and required massive labour that were not available locally. Despite a ban on immigration from Black Caribbean countries in 1902¹⁶, these companies pressured the Cuban government to open its door to workers from Haiti and Jamaica to do the work that most Cubans would not. Scholars are not in agreement on the exact number of Haitians who made the trip to Cuba. During that period¹⁷ an estimated five hundred thousand Haitians peasants found their ways to Cuba in search of a better life, among them was Sylvain Galdes, the Galdes siblings’ father.

Sylvain Galdes arrived in Eastern Cuba in 1921. His daughter, Silvia, says in the film that he came clandestinely, hidden in the skull of a ship from southern Haiti. He was 13 years-old and was looking for work opportunities outside of his country. As many Haitian and British West Indians, he would later be hired to labour the fields in *Santiago de Cuba* and *Camaguey* in the *Oriente*. “From the moment the first *antillanos* stepped ashore, they encountered the racism of white Cubans.” The anti-black racism, McLeod explains, stemmed out of deeply rooted stereotypes that white Cubans already held towards Afro-Cubans. Borrowing Aline Heg’s concept of “icons of fear”, McLeod identifies revolution, religion and sexuality as the three areas in which white Cubans held the most prejudices against Blacks¹⁸. The Afro-Antilleans were believed to be rabble-rousers who practiced witchcraft while being promiscuous beings who

¹⁵ Casey, “From Haiti to Cuba and Back.”

¹⁶ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens.”

¹⁷ Viddal, “VODÚ CHIC,” 208.

¹⁸ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens,” 601.

would bring sexual immorality into Cuban society. At least in two of these areas, the Haitian migrants were the most to be feared.

A century before Sylvain's arrival in Cuba, his ancestors had successfully broken the bondage of slavery by defeating the Napoleonian army in the bloody war of independence that culminated into the founding the first Black Republic of the western hemisphere. More contemporaneous to Galdes' time, Haitian Guerrillas, the *Cacos* were raging a war against the Americans in occupied Haiti. Thus, the fear of "savagery" and revolutionary turmoil was "most easily transferrable to the *haitiano* population"¹⁹.

In a society dominated by white supremacy ideologies to the point of enacting policies to "whiten" the population, African religious practices in Cuba were generally regarded as "heinous practices of witchcraft"²⁰. But, as McLeod notes, "[the] British West Indian braceros labouring in the cane fields [...] affiliated with the Episcopal Church."²¹. Therefore, unlike the Haitian migrants who continued to practice their ancestral religion, Vodou, the British West Indian labourers by being "affiliated with the cultural practices of white North Americans, a dominant socioeconomic group in Cuba"²² were less likely to be ostracized for their religion, although they experienced some level of discrimination within the church. Furthermore, while, "Haitian Vodou and Cuban Santería shared a common heritage in Catholicism and West African religions", the Haitians were believed to "kill children take out the hearts, to eat, to cure certain diseases"²⁴ As Viddal puts it: "Haitian spiritual practices were misunderstood and feared; even practitioners of other Afro Caribbean religions such as Santería often characterized Haitian Vodú as diabolical,

¹⁹ McLeod, "Undesirable Aliens."

²⁰ Ibid., 601.

²¹ Ibid., 610.

²² Ibid., 611.

²⁴ McLeod, "Undesirable Aliens," 611.

powerful, and potentially dangerous. Similarly, officials scapegoated Haitians to quell anxieties produced by the social and economic transformations in postcolonial Cuba”²⁵.

In pre-revolutionary Cuba, the dehumanization and marginalization of Haitian migrants were commonplace. Matthew Casey reports the words of an executive agent who noticed, in 1916 (Casey p. 124) that “[...] Cubans refuse[d] to sleep in the same quarters with Haitians and Jamaicans”. As Navia Gomez (cited Casey 2012, p. 125) emphasizes, “to the Haitian immigrant, marginalization was applied with the most crudeness, not just by white components of society, but even by Cuban mestizos and blacks who rejected them”. A US diplomat at the time agreed: “Cubans of all classes, including Negroes, are opposed to the presence of Haitians”²⁶. In one of our conversations, Silverio, one of the Galdes siblings, remembered that “no one wanted to be Haitians. In the streets, people would holler *Haitians! Haitians!* And we would hide.”²⁷ “*Haitiano* in Cuba has become synonymous with poor devil”²⁸

The working conditions were “deplorable” on the sugar plantations, which were vertically hierarchized with the cane cutters, the *macheros*, at the very bottom.²⁹ Yet, the Haitians “were ipso, facto cane cutters”³⁰. As McLeod has demonstrated, “84.4 percent of all Haitians arriving Cuba between 1912 and 1929 were illiterate”. They spoke neither Spanish nor English and “[...] were forced to work as unskilled agricultural labourers, mostly cane cutters in the sugar fields of eastern Cuba³¹”. Even when Casey who insists on reminding us that not all Haitians were cane cutters, he admits that “Haitian” became synonymous with cane cutters in the

²⁵ Viddal, “VODÚ CHIC,” 205.

²⁶ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens,” 606.

²⁷ Interview with Silverio Galdes, summer 2015. My translation.

²⁸ Lundahl, *A Note on Haitian Migration to Cuba, 1890-1934*.

²⁹ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens.”

³⁰ Casey, *Empire's Guestworkers*, 108.

³¹ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens,” 607.

minds of journalists and company administrators. As such, Haitian *braceros* worked from sunrise to sunset, were often paid less than other cane cutters, lived in *barracones*, “the barracks that were built to house slaves during the apex of Cuban slave society”³², making them “the most exploitable segment of the sugar labour force”³³ at the time. On the contrary, British West Indian labourers were able not only to occupy more prestigious and better paying positions in the sugar mills, they also had some social mobility, finding work “away from the sugar industry”³⁴ thanks to their higher literacy rate and their ability to speak the language of the American owners and administrators of the sugar mills, English.

The anti-Haitian racism in Cuba reached its highest point during the global financial crisis of the 1930s. An anti-immigrant law that sought to limit to fifty percent the ratio of migrant workers to Cubans was followed by a massive forced repatriation of Caribbean workers³⁵. Supported by their government at home, the Jamaican *braceros* were quick to comply; leaving the Haitians to face the brunt of the compulsory repatriation.³⁶ Between 1928 and 1940 “tens of thousands of Haitians” are expelled from Cuba³⁷. “Cuban authorities suddenly picked up many settled Haitians without giving them a chance to sell their possessions or even say farewell to their families”³⁸. In his memoir, Fidel Castro recounts his witnessing of an episode of the mass expulsion of Haitians as a child. He was brought by his godfather Louis Hibbert – a Haitian diplomat in Cuba – to visit a passenger ship called *La Salle* that was “a transatlantic ship full of

³² Casey, *Empire's Guestworkers*, 109.

³³ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens.”

³⁴ Ibid. P. 599

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Casey, *Empire's Guestworkers*, 205.

³⁸ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens,” 605.

Haitians, like sardines in a tin who'd been expelled from the country [...]"³⁹ He continued: "their population grew, there were too many Haitians, so they shipped them off to Haiti in that, merciless way, in that boat full of deportees. Truly inhuman..."⁴⁰. Despite the zeal of the rural Cuban police, not all Haitians were deported from Cuba. One third of them remained in Cuba, hidden in remote communities, more isolated than they were before the repatriation order.⁴¹.

In January 1, 1959, the revolutionary forces led by Fidel Castro took control of the capital city marking the beginning of the socialist era in Cuba. By that time the first generation of Haitian-Cubans – of which the Galdes siblings belong – had already been born. When I met the Galdeses in 2011, one of the first things they mentioned to me was the fact that they are called *Pichón de Hatianos*, offspring of Haitians, by other Cubans. This label, considered by many to be derogatory⁴², is an indication that even the generation of Haitian-Cubans born in Cuba has not escaped their Haitian identity marker. Therefore, one must locate them as both Afro-Cubans and *Pichóns* to understand the space they inhabit in post-revolutionary Cuba.

Mark Sawyer's concept of "inclusionary discrimination", a situation "in which blacks had formal and symbolic inclusion in the state at the same time that a significant racial gap remained between blacks and whites"⁴³ accurately captures the status of Afro-Cubans under the communist regime.

³⁹ Ramonet and Castro, *Fidel Castro*, 59.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ McLeod, "Undesirable Aliens," 606.

⁴² Silvia and Estela take offense to the use of the term *Pichón*. "What is Pichón?" Estela asked; "Pichón is what you call a bird, an animal" she underlines.

⁴³ Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba*, 176.

On the one hand, Afro-Cubans benefited, “greatly from redistribution efforts and from the economic growth created by socialism and aided by Soviet subsidies”⁴⁴. Indeed, in my interviews with them, the Galdes siblings credit the communist revolution – “Papa Fidel” in particular – for the numerous improvements in their social conditions in Cuba. Estela tells me that she was sent to La Habana to finish her education and get trained as a teacher. Later, she would go back to *Oriente* to take part in the massive literacy campaign initiated by Castro. Changes in education, health and housing implemented by the Castro regime for all Cubans meant that Blacks, too, would see their material existence improved in the years following the revolution.

But, on the other hand, the class-based approach of the revolutionaries failed to address the historic marginalization of black Cubans. As Carlos Moore⁴⁵ has demonstrated, the revolutionaries’ initial emphasis on desegregation of “labour centers” and “recreation centers” as the pillar of their racial agenda and their insistence on creating a “color blind society” meant that they “had frozen the complex fabric of nearly four centuries of violent and subtle interaction between blacks and white, African and Spaniards in Cuba into a handful of simplistic, when not demagogic, equations and axioms.”⁴⁶ That initial approach meant that racism and its material impact on black lives continued in Cuba despite Castro’s claim that the problem was solved.⁴⁷ For example, although private schools were eliminated, many black students could not enrol into some prestigious school⁴⁹. Consequently, even today, “blacks continue to receive less education

⁴⁴ Ibid., xx.

⁴⁵ Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁷ Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba*.

⁴⁹ Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba*, 69.

than whites” and are twice more likely to be unemployed⁵⁰. In housing, the vestige of pre-revolutionary racial hierarchies is still evident today as the most affluent neighbourhoods are largely inhabited by white Cubans, while the shantytowns of Santiago de Cuba and Havana are mostly populated by Blacks⁵¹.

When the regime inaugurated the “special period in time of peace”, as a response to changes in global geopolitics in the early 1990s Afro-Cubans, once again got the short end of the stick. As Sawyer demonstrates, Blacks have been excluded from the new “hybrid capitalist/socialist” Cuban economy. Less likely to have relatives living abroad, “Afro-Cubans lack the resources – namely remittances – to begin government-sanctioned small businesses”. To make matters worse, deeply rooted racist attitudes in Cuba hinder employment opportunities for Blacks in favour of those with a “better presence” for the touristic industry⁵². In *Pichón*, we witness first-hand the type of economy of subsistence in which the Galdeses are involved in the margins of the stammering market economy. While Silverio and other men in the neighbourhood earn a living recycling steel bars they scavenge from demolition sites throughout the city, the women manage a peddling business selling used clothes, shoes and bedsheets. Their economic activities are not sanctioned by the state, if not illegal. Casey thus concludes that “Haitians’ experiences in post-revolutionary Cuba were like those of Afro-Cubans in the sense that institutional efforts to reduce inequality and integrate populations did not always eliminate racial stereotypes”⁵³. One must, however, question whether the specific anti-Haitian sentiment of the previous era persist in Castro’s Cuba. Did the first generation of Haitian-Cubans fully integrate Cuban society to become fully Afro-Cuban?

⁵⁰ Ibid., 139.

⁵¹ Ibid., 120.

⁵² Ibid., 76.

⁵³ Casey, *Empire’s Guestworkers*, 271.

In a very short segment of my film, a neighbour, another black woman, greets Silvia as she walks down the street. “Hola, *Haitiana*” she says with a friendly intonation. The interaction between the two women is a subtle illustration of a point that came up in prior conversations with Silvia. Although they were born in Cuba and had never set foot in Haiti at the time of filming, first generation Haitian-Cubans cannot escape their *Haitianness*.

In *VODÚ CHIC: Haitian religion and the folkloric imaginary in Socialist Cuba* (2012), Grete Viddal argues that the ethnic based marginalization of Haitians in Cuba has been somewhat reversed by the government cultural policies of the 1970s. Viddal reports on the many efforts of the Castro regime to “integrate previously disenfranchised sectors through the arts”⁵⁴ Such effort had encouraged the emergence of several folkloric groups like the Galdeses’ *Misterio de Vodú*. Indeed, at the beginning of my film we witness a public performance of the Galdes group in front of the *Casa del Caribe*, a “research institution in Santiago province”⁵⁵. Silvia explains that they are *un grupo portador*. Such heritage groups exist in Santiago, in Camaguey and even in Havana where their public performances and festivals bring Haitian dances, and music and religious practices to wider audiences. These changes have prompted Viddal to infer that in today’s Cuba “the continuation of Haitian customs is no longer linked to isolation, but exactly the opposite”⁵⁶ Does an increased visibility truly take Haitian-Cubans out of the margins?

While such cultural performances counter a hegemonic narrative of Cuba, they nevertheless locate these practices outside of the social centre. “The ‘folklorization’ of arts and religion” that Viddal credits for making possible the formation of these cultural units is exactly

⁵⁴ “VODÚ CHIC,” 210.

⁵⁵ Viddal, “VODÚ CHIC.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

the reason one would worry that these practices are being inscribed into some “static folklore”, that is, a watering down of ancestral heritage for tourist consumption. In analysing the interview data of his survey on the special period, Mark Sawyer reports the words of many of his informants who see the *folklorization* of afro-Cuban culture as having a marginalizing effect. “The problem is, it is seen as part of the past identity of a now integrated and equal Cuba” one of them says while another one continues: “our culture is presented as primitive, backward, achronistic, not as a living, breathing culture and struggle that defines us as a people. It has been absorbed for tourist consumption.”⁵⁷ Thus, “the staging of [Afro-]Cuban Culture as folklore” and the expansion of spiritual practices into “theater, art and cultural currency” is the exact opposite of making them mainstream; for it does not posit such cultural expressions as part of the central fabric of Cubanness.

The research of scholars such as Case, Viddal, McLeod and Sawyer has allowed me to locate the presence in post-colonial Cuba as marked by marginality. During the first 3 decades of the twentieth century, they were marginalized at once as Blacks, as migrants but specifically as Haitians. In communist Cuba, the lives of Afro-Cuban changed radically thanks to the overall government actions in healthcare, education and housing. However, the class-based policies of the regime and its failure to address the historic marginalization of Afro-Cubans meant that racial inequities continued and that the Haitians descendants like the Galdeses remain in the margins of Cuban society. Yet, the margins cannot be explored exclusively as a place of victimization, a place where the Haitian-Cuban loses her agency. American feminist theorist and social activist bell hook’s offers another framework within which one can locate the Haitian presence in Cuba.

⁵⁷ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens,” 127.

In *Choosing the Margins as a space of radical openness*⁵⁸, hooks speaks of the small Kentucky town in which she grew up as a physical space sitting on the margins of a rich town “across the railroad tracks”. While folks from hook’s town were selling their labour in the neighbouring town, Jim Crow laws always ensured they return and stay in that segregated place of material deprivation that was their own town. Hooks description of the place of her childhood makes me think of the physical, material isolation of the Haitian seasonal workers in post-colonial Cuba. They lived in communities around the plantations called *bateys* in *barracones* (barracks that were built to house slaves), away from the bells and whistle of the good life in 1930s Cuba. The forced repatriation of the 1930s further expanded that isolation, pushing thousands of Haitians into hiding where “in many ways they lived as modern day maroons”⁵⁹. Just like in the case of bell hooks’ small segregated town in the South, the Haitians marginalization was not merely a function of physical boundaries but a rejection of who they are, a denial of their humanity. Discriminated against by and considered less than Afro-Cubans and other British West Indians migrants, the marginalization of the Haitians did not solely stem from their Blackness in a white supremacist society, or their status in an exploitative capitalist society. At the core of their marginalization was their *Haitianness*. Yet it is their very *Haitianness* that I posit of a site of resistance.

Without romanticizing it, hooks identifies “marginality as much more than a site of deprivation”. She clarifies that the margins are also a “space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor, [...] a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one

⁵⁸ Hooks, “CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS.”

⁵⁹ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens,” 614.

lives”⁶⁰. Being in the margins, hooks explains, shapes the way one sees the world as well as one’s “sense of self”, one’s identity. As Bar On underlines in her assessment of hooks concept of marginality, “an important form of a resistance that is at the same time the creation of a counterhegemonic discourse is a construction of the self through the creation of a memory of the past that either precedes oppression or is a memory of other resisting voices”⁶¹. The Galdeses’ ancestors, along with the thousands of other Haitian seasonal have engaged in similar strategies of resistance.

At the very beginning of the film, Estela hints to her coming-of-age in a tight network of extended family that ensured the transfer of ancestral knowledge and customs between generations. She explains that her mother, her father and other relatives would gather in the evenings and that in those gatherings only Haitian Creole was to be spoken. In my meeting with the Galdeses, I was surprised to realize how much they knew about Haitian glorious revolutionary past. The names of Haitian independence heroes like Dessalines were not foreign to them. Cultural elements such as Haitian traditional music and dance are parts of their daily lives. Silverio told me that his knowledge of Vodou rituals come from always being with his father, accompanying him to ceremonies throughout *Oriente*. These efforts cannot be seen as a sole product of necessity, rather they are deliberate strategies that the Galdes, along with other Haitians in Cuba, employ to sustain their “sense of self”. As McLeod puts it “they willingly remained isolated from the Cuban mainstream”⁶². By “clinging” to their *Haitianness* the Galdes resisted to a hegemonic discourse that dehumanized Haitians in Cuba in the first three decades of the past century.

⁶⁰ Hooks, “CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS,” 20.

⁶¹ Bat-Ami, “Marginality and Epistemic Privilege,” 88.

⁶² McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens,” 612.

In the post-revolutionary era, the Haitian descendants continued to embrace their otherness, resisting complete assimilation to Cuban society at a time when racial and ethnic distinctions were considered divisive, a threat to the new Castro regime.⁶³ If Silvia and Estela object to the label *Pichón*, it is not as a matter of rejection of their hyphenated identity. To the contrary, they continued to reclaim Haiti as their land. Although they had never set foot there at the time of our interviews, Haiti occupies a special place in their collective imaginary. While Estela answers *los dos*, (both) to my question whether they see themselves as Haitian or Cuban, Silvia asserts “I have two homelands but I only have on blood. I am Haitian one hundred percent⁶⁴”.

As argued earlier, while the state sanctioned folkloric activities represent an interesting evolution of the Haitian presence in Cuba, it doesn’t signify its acceptance into mainstream Cuban culture. I am not certain that the Galdeses want to become mainstream either. It is true that the Galdeses engage in what Viddal calls the “economy of folklore” that has developed in the *special period* in Cuba. With their group *Misterio de Vodú* they participate in festivals and other cultural manifestations sanctioned by the state. Silvia describes the group as a “heritage group” whose purpose is to preserve “these things brought by our parents in the 1920s, these things that we have lost”. Yet, “these things” are well alive in her daily life. It is possible that Silvia is conforming to the official line from the state bureaucracies “that certify the various ranks of professional performers and also to oversee and distribute resources”⁶⁵ to such groups. One thing that is clear in that description is that she draws a demarcating line between the group’s public

⁶³ Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*; Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba*.

⁶⁴ Conversation with Silvia and Estela Galdes, Summer 2014. My translation.

⁶⁵ Viddal, “VODÚ CHIC,” 211.

performances, where “spiritual practices” become “theater, art and entertainment”⁶⁶ and the Galdeses private life. Silvia speaks of this public/private dichotomy in the film in describing the architecture of Vodou temple in the back of her house. “Outside is for everybody” she says, “but only people I invite get to go inside” she specifies, pointing at the small closed room adjacent to the *tonèl*. “We cannot talk about everything” she retorts later as I inquire about what goes on inside.

The economy has also been a site of marginality and resistance for Haitians in Cuba. Generally recruited as cane cutters “the nationality of Haitians braceros positioned them at the bottom of the Cuban labour hierarchy.”⁶⁷ Even in the cane cutters category, they would be paid less than Cubans and British West Indians at times. Hence, they “were regularly accused of driving wages down in Cuba.”⁶⁸ The Haitians, however, proved themselves to be versatile by branching out of the sugar cane plantation. Taking opportunity of the “rapid expansion of coffee production in Oriente Province during the late 1920s, many migrated internally [...]”⁶⁹ Estela attests to these strategies in the film when she says “when it was sugar harvest time, they [her parents] went to Santiago, when it was coffee harvest time, they went to Holguin [...]”. McLeod remarks that “some Haitians workers proved adept at growing food crops on rocky, barren land using pockets of water caught between impermeable rocks, a technique learned in the mountainous region of southern Haiti.”⁷⁰

Just like their parents were marginalized as unskilled migrant labourers in pre-revolutionary Cuba, the Galdes sibling too are marginalized in the current Cuban Economy. With

⁶⁶ Ibid., 207.

⁶⁷ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens,” 608.

⁶⁸ Casey, *Empire’s Guestworkers*, 117.

⁶⁹ McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens,” 608.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

no family in the US – unlike many white Cubans – the Galdeses are not receiving any remittances that would allow them access to certain goods – “medicine, clothes, and good food”⁷¹ – that are exclusively available in dollars in the special period in Cuba. Lack of funds also shuts them out of the door for private businesses – home based restaurant, bed and breakfast, etc. – that the government opened in the early 1990s. Furthermore, as many Afro-Cubans, “their skin colour limits their access to the tourist economy and its rewards”⁷²

The Glades siblings’ migrant status is another striking similarity between their situation and that of their parents. As Silvia explains at the beginning of the film, they left their native province of *Oriente* to look for better opportunities in Havana without permission from the state. Thus, their presence in Havana is rendered illegal and, consequently, they are ineligible for the State’s benefits that they would otherwise receive. Native *habaneros* consistently look down upon such “migrants” from the east and they refer to them as *palestinos*, a racist reference to stateless Palestinians in the middle-east.

With no funds to start legal private businesses, no access to jobs in the tourism industry and no legal status in Havana, the Galdes siblings, just like many other Afro-Cubans, are engaged in the black market. But, as Sawyer remarks “to the extent that Cubans link their economic dislocation to failures of the government and the government’s racial policies, black market participation is not only a form of survival but also a form of resistance to the new order [...]”⁷³. Explaining the steel bar recycling business that he’s involved in, Silverio underlines that one of the things he likes most about his job is the very fact that it is not sanctioned by the state. “We don’t need any license; no police can bother us” he claims contently. We get a more

⁷¹ Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba*, 111.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 106.

accentuated sense of that resistance when Olaydis, Estela's amputee daughter, declares defiantly in the film "my business is illegal! What are they gonna do to me? When the police come, I talk to them but they cannot do anything to me. Who's gonna take care of my kids?" Silvia and Estela's peddling business is in the same situation of illegality. Once again threatened of illegality, the community affirms its right to economic self-determination against the State bureaucracy's need for control.

The Haitian presence in Cuba has been a site of marginality from the time the first Haitian migrant seasonal labourers arrived in the early 1900s to this day in the post-cold war era. Haitians in Cuba continue to inhabit the margins of Cuban society both culturally and economically. But, to use bell hooks' phrasing, their haitianness is not a place the Galdes siblings featured in my film wish "to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving into the centre [...]". Similar to hooks' marginality, their haitianness is the site where the Galdeses develop their "sense of self" and where they engage in "a struggle of memory against forgetting"⁷⁴, a struggle of affirmation against erasure, a struggle of resistance against compliance.

⁷⁴ Hooks, "CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS."

Filmmaker's Background



Image 1: Scene re-creation from Welcome to Dresden (Dir. Esery Mondesir, 2014)

Before coming into filmmaking, I had been a literature high school teacher in Haiti, then a labour organizer after migrating to North America. I decided to study film not only because filmmaking has been a repressed passion of mine since my youth, but also because it offers me a platform where all my other life interests — storytelling, history, education, and social justice — can intersect. I believe Cinema is first and foremost an art, but I do also believe that, like all cultural production, it reinforces traditional values and social norms, or challenges them. My body of work which spans from documentary, fiction and experimental, so far has stayed true to that commitment of practicing from the margins. This new work, *Pichón*, is a continuation of that journey.

My first documentary, *Welcome to Dresden* (2014), is a counterpoint to the prevailing myth that Canada has always been a land of tolerance and equality and that slavery, segregation and legislated racism are only the sins of our morally inferior neighbours to the South. Yet, Jim Crow style segregation was rampant in the town of Dresden, in South Western Ontario until a fierce campaign by the National Unity Association led by Hugh Burnett resulted in the passing of the Fair Accommodation Practices Act of 1954. With the testimony of union activist Bromley Armstrong, who took an active role in the desegregation campaign and the re-creation of key scenes in the film, the 16-minute documentary shed the spotlight on this mostly unknown chapter of Canadian History.

Shortly after this first foray into Canada's past, I made *Welcome to Canada* (2015), which chronicles the struggle against the racist Canadian immigration policies of the last century. Faithful to John A. McDonald's wishes to create a white Canada, successive federal governments enacted legislative measures that effectively blocked the immigration of non-white individuals into the country, including people from the larger British commonwealth⁷⁵ – India, Jamaica, Barbados, etc. As in Ali Kazimi's *Continuous Journey* (2004), I relied on first person accounts of the events along with experts testimonies and analysis to chip away at the Canadian myth.

Sammy (2016) is an experimental exploration of the desensitizing effect of “the surfeit images of black death and racially-motivated violence currently saturating our screens and airwaves”. Repurposing of the images of the killing of Sammy Yatim by the Toronto police

⁷⁵ Kazimi, *Continuous Journey*.

widely available on YouTube, the short compels the viewer to connect with the event both emotionally and cognitively.

While these two short were an attempt to document the black/immigrant experience in Canada, the 7.0 earthquake in Haiti in January 2010 compelled me to turn my lens on my native land. In *The Gift* (2014) Daniel and his fiancé are both of Haitian descent, theirs is a perfect relationship until the 2010 earthquake in Haiti “unearthed” some deeply kept secrets. My first attempt at a scripted narrative, this short also uses documentary and experimental techniques to commit to memory the magnitude of the disaster.

Formally my thesis film is a slight departure from the documentary shorts that I have previously written and directed. Instead of uniquely deploying documentary techniques such as narration and re-creation, *Pichón* is mostly observational. However, the observational plight is often punctuated by the disembodied voiceover of one of the siblings guiding us down the memory lane, as the expression goes.

The next section offers a rationale for such creative choices.

Creative Choices and Filmmaker's Influences



Image 3: A scene from *Pichón* (Dir. Esery Mondesir, 2017)

In her 2014 documentary *Reembarque (Reshipment)*, Afro-Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando revisits the history of the Haitian migration in Cuba. With extensive research and interviews, *Reembarque* explores the working conditions of the Haitian migrants in Cuba and focuses on the forced repatriations of the 1930s. Rolando also went to Haiti to interview a couple of the Haitians who had returned to the country because of these repatriations. My film contrasts with that of Rolando's on three significant levels.

While Rolando's film is a broad survey of the Haitian presence in Cuba, *Pichón* focuses on the story of a singular family instead, to offer a more immersive experience to the viewer within the constraints of a short film. Secondly, despite the rich historical context surrounding their presence in Cuba, I made the choice to portray the Galdeses and their community in their

current-day life to further the connection between the past and the present. Thirdly, instead of an expository film, *Pichón* deploys both participatory and observational strategies to create an intimate portrait of the Galdeses and their community. The audio track from the hours of interviews conducted with Silvia, Estela and Silverio is edited to form a sonic layer that is superimposed over the observation of habitual gestures. The voiceover commentaries either contextualize or offer a counterpoint to the action on screen.

Formally, *Pichón* references the work of contemporary filmmakers such as Kevin Jerome Everson (*FE26*, 2014), Natalia Almada (*El Velador*, 2011), and Pedro Costa.

Kevin Jerome Everson is an American filmmaker, sculptor and photographer whose work focuses on “[...] the gestures or tasks caused by certain conditions in the lives of working class African Americans and other people of African descent.”⁷⁶ Experimental in essence, his work “combines textures and gestures of archival, scripted, re-enacted, and documentary film techniques”⁷⁷ to represent the Black experience. As a unifying site of Everson’s films, Blackness is an a priori; it is therefore, a formalist inquiry that characterizes the filmmaker’s process. “I’m looking for form. That’s the game” Everson confides in an interview with Terri Francis⁷⁸. Everson’s 2014 short *FE26*⁷⁹ has been particularly influential in my conceptualization of my thesis film both thematically and aesthetically.

Shot in 16 mm, *FE26* takes us into the world of two East Cleveland, Ohio, residents who steal manhole covers and copper piping to make a living. Just as in my thesis film, *FE26* focuses on the labour of these two “gentlemen” and their life outside of work. The movie starts

⁷⁶ “Kevin j Everson’s Website.”

⁷⁷ Francis, “Of the Ludic, the Blues, and the Counterfeit.”

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Everson, *Fe26*.

in res media, with images of the two struggling to snatch the cover off a city street manhole with a crowbar. In later scenes, we see the two men pricking the darkness of a basement with their flashlight, in search of copper pipping. Another scene takes us to a local food joint with the guys as they order burger and fries. We then get into their car with them as they try to sell bootleg DVDs to a hesitant buyer. Everson's use of sound in *FE26* was particularly influential to my decision to layer sound bites from my interviews with the Galdeses over the recorded images and diegetic sound of their daily activities. Throughout *FE26* we hear what seems to be a dialogue between the two men as they discuss the rationale behind their activities. These voices not only inform us that the men do not consider what they do illegal -- since the buildings are going to be demolished anyway -- but also that our protagonist do not have any other choice in a community plagued by unemployment. In *FE26*, just as in *Pichón*, we rarely see the "talking heads".

One could argue that such creative strategy impedes on our ability to connect with the interlocutors by appropriating their disembodied voices. But the very notion that these voices are disembodied is questionable. In both *FE26* and *Pichón* the voiceover doesn't claim any impartiality or objectivity; rather it is the expression of the social actors' deepest feelings and beliefs. Thus, although unsynchronized, the extracted voiceover is undoubtedly identifiable. As Wolfe remarks "the passionate voice, or differentiated voice, at least partially restores a body to the voice; its contours and place of origin are imaginable" as opposed to the authoritarian voice of God of classical documentary films such as *March of Time*. However, it can also be told that this use of the voiceover subverts the notion of voice-of-God of the classical documentary⁸⁰. If, as Charles Wolfe remarks, the voice of God is a "transcendent force" that has "the authority to

⁸⁰ Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary."

describe, narrate or interpret a world already known"⁸¹, in both our films, that authority lays in the hand of the social actors themselves. Furthermore, the non-attributed voices that intersperse the films suggest that the interlocutors do not only speak as individuals but they speak of history and memory shared among the members of the community; they emblemize the communal voice.

As in *FE26*, in *Pichón* my camera is dynamic, following the participants through the meanders of their day and resizing the frame to guide the viewer's eye. In both our films, the camera keeps a reasonable distance that renders an intimate portrait without being obtrusive. In his conversation with Terri Francis, Everson speaks of the risk for the camera to become too voyeuristic in some sort of *otherization* of the participant which the observational film offers in spectacle. My supervisor, professor and filmmaker Ali Kazimi, and I had a series of conversations about that aspect of my film too. Throughout post production, professor Kazimi challenged me to be intentional about what I wanted to show and why. The Vodou ceremony scene is one in which the risk of what Everson calls the "zoo mentality"⁸² was potential. With the guidance of professor Kazimi, I was able to reshape the scene so that it keeps its significance in the community portrait without reducing it to a spectacle (see production diaries later).

My film does not claim to offer an exhaustive or comprehensive appraisal of the lives and history of its participants. In fact, the fragmented community portrait raises more questions than it answers. The work of Mexican-American minimalist filmmaker, Natalia Almada, has been inspirational in that sense.

⁸¹ Wolfe, "Historicising the 'Voice of God.'"

⁸² Francis, "Of the Ludic, the Blues, and the Counterfeit."

At the centre of Almada's oeuvre is an investigation of truth, history, memory and violence. Just like Everson, Almada is concerned with the ability of small gestures of everyday life to inform our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. "If film has any relationship to truth", Almada asserts, "it must lie in its ability to film gestures."⁸³ Thus, it is through the subtlety of small quotidian acts that such Almada's films reach us. Her 2011 *El Velador* (*The Watchman*) particularly influenced me.

Almada spent a year shooting the daily activities in a cemetery in Culiacan, Mexico. She wanted to find a way to capture the drug-related violence that has claimed the lives of over 35,000 thousand people in her own native state of Sinaloa⁸⁴. Yet there is not a single shot of dead bodies to testify to that violence so central to the film. Instead, Almada's lens patiently observes life as it unfolds in front of it, from a singular corner in the cemetery: the daily visits of widows who lost their husbands through violence, the construction of cathedral-like mausoleums, and the watchman, Martin whose "eyes become our eyes"⁸⁵ and with whom we "watch" the cemetery. There's almost no dialogue in *El Velador*, no narration or voiceover to comment on or interpret for us what's before our eyes; only the intermittence of the newscast on the radio intervenes to provide the viewer with some context: "Culican has become a war zone!"⁸⁶ Almada explains her stylistic choices in a conversation on the American public broadcaster, PBS:

⁸³ Almada, *El Velador*.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ *El Velador: Filmmaker Interview with Natalia Almada*.

⁸⁶ Almada and Icarus Films, *The night watchman*.

*“What interests me is to have an audience that is critical, not an audience that’s lazy. So, I’m not so interested in making films that say, ‘here’s the problem, here’s how I want you to feel and this is what I think you should do...’ but, rather putting the viewer in a much more active position, forcing the viewer to have to make their own opinion and to put the pieces together in a way. So that any thought that come at the end of it is actually theirs.”*⁸⁷

Almada’s statement is not a criticism of other modes of address of the documentary film. Her very first feature *Al otro lado* (2006) employed many of the classic tropes of the genre – Interviews, archival footage, etc. Rather, it is an affirmation that *El Velador* speaks to the viewer on a different register of the same idiom. While *Pichón* offers the viewer several contextualizing elements, I certainly share Alamada’s penchant for subtlety. The long take is an effective way to achieve such subtlety; its duration not only allows the viewer to take in the many possible nuances of the action (or non-action) unfolding in front of the camera, it can also provoke such discomfort or fatigue, that it facilitates an emotional response from the viewer *El velador*, in which the watchman waters a dirt road is a convincing illustration. A few sequences in *Pichón* make use of long takes to subtly comment on the community’s reality. For example, there is a scene in which we see one of the men in the neighbourhood struggle to straighten a steel bar. That relatively long take gives us a sense of the arduous nature of the work.

In Cuba, I came across the work of Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa. A master of the craft of cinema, Costa worked with a community of African immigrants living on the margins of Lisbon — and of society — to tell their stories in the *Letters from Fontainhas*⁸⁸ trilogy —

⁸⁷ *El Velador: Filmmaker Interview with Natalia Almada*. My transcription

⁸⁸ “Letters from Fontainhas.”

Bones (1997), *In Vanda's Room* (2000) and *Colossal Youth* (2006). The stories are constructed collectively, based on real-life events, retold and acted out by the real-life protagonists; the hierarchical lines between crew, actors and executives are blurred to create a filmmaking experience that is truly organic and democratic⁸⁹.

The beautifully crafted images of *Las Fontainhas* trilogy, the thoughtful mise-en-scène and the boldness of Costa's composition were a constant aesthetic reference as I was shooting in Cuba, exclusively using ambient lights. Sequences such as the pre-dawn one at the beginning of the film are among those I hope will be able to communicate with the viewer through the power of the visual language alone.

Another aspect of Costa's filmmaking that inspired me is his process. Although his films are illustrative of his social actors' life, they do not claim to be realities. In *Vanda's room* for example, Costa worked with the two actors to recreate scenes of their lives. I used such re-creation in one scene in *Pichón*. I had missed the arrival of Odilia which I was planning to see, the sister who came to visit Silvia and Estela from Camagüey. So, I suggested to the three sisters that they re-create the moment as they remember it so that I can film. They were thrilled by the idea and they agreed. What emerges from the experience is a sincere rendition of a moment filled with loving sisterhood.

⁸⁹ Costa, *Dialogue Avec Pedro Costa* (1/3).

Production Diary



Image 4: Silvia Galdes and director Esery Mondesir, Havana 2011

In April 2012, six months after my first meeting with the Galdes siblings, I returned to Havana for two weeks to start production. Inexperienced but eager, I was a one-man crew who had used up his savings to finance his dream of becoming a filmmaker. I welcomed Silvia's

invitation to stay at her home, knowing that it would allow me to better familiarize myself with their environment and give the community a chance to get used to my observing camera.

Silvia, Estela and Silverio received me as family: I was the distant Haitian “cousin” who came from afar and with whom they were happy to catch up. There was a festive atmosphere throughout my stay; there was a lot of drumming, singing and dancing as we socialized around food, homemade rum and cheap cigars. Yet, I was very aware of the complex power dynamics that necessarily emerge both from the filmmaker/participant relationship and from our respective socioeconomic status. The socio-political climate in Cuba was also an element that I knew I would have to take into consideration so that I did not put the siblings and their family at risk. These ethical questions were constantly in my radar and it was necessary to have an open conversation with the Galdeses from the start. We agreed that they would always have control over what, where and when I would be authorized to film. Secondly, I promised them that before I release the film, I would return to screen the fine cut for the neighbourhood so that they would ultimately have some control over their representation in the film. I recognize the limits of this agreement, however it served to establish a trusting relationship between the Galdeses and me.

I did not seek any permits from the local authorities to shoot. Although such activities are highly regulated by the state bureaucracies and closely monitored by the police, being a one-man crew with a DSLR, I did not draw any unwanted attention to myself shooting in and out of the neighbourhood. I spent only two weeks during that first visit but I had a rigorous schedule in which I was shooting almost every day. Most of that footage did not make the final cut of the film!

By the time I returned to Cuba, 3 years later, I had enrolled in the undergrad film program at York University. In fact, I was already in my last year in which I took a cinematography course with professor Ali Kazimi, an award-winning documentary filmmaker in Toronto, my mentor and thesis supervisor. That class expanded my understanding of lighting, composition and some critical skills that better prepared me for my next trip to Cuba.

My second production trip, in the summer of 2015, lasted six weeks. I needed to spend more time with the Galdeses to better capture their daily activities. Walking into the neighbourhood where the Galdeses live, one quickly realizes the pervasiveness of work in their life. Most days, the sound of the men hammering the steel bars along with the loud music often coming from different households form a deafening choir that give the neighbourhood an air of carnival. I needed to better understand the intricacies of the men's work, so I offered to accompany Silverio and his band in their scavenging expedition one day. Our agreement about the level of control the participants would have over what is filmed was still in effect, therefore Silverio exercised his right to interrupt shooting more than once that day. I didn't get to shoot everything but some very important scenes came out of my journey with the men.

Silvia and Estela also took me out to witness them at work. Together, we roamed the streets as they went door to door convincing other Habaneros to buy their used goods. Silvia and Estela put no restrictions on what I should film, so I could capture what I think is a good sampling of their daily ordeals which included miles of walking under the hot Caribbean sun, a fair dose of rejections and very little sales. In one particularly poignant moment that made it into the final cut, we can see the embarrassment on Silvia's face after yet another rejection as she avoids "eye contact" with the camera and raises her head to look at the sky.

That summer, I also met Damian Sainz, a graduate of the internationally renowned Cuban film school, la *Escuela Internacional de Cine*. Damian is an excellent filmmaker and editor who wishes to push the boundaries of contemporary cinema. He helped me organize my footage and he put together the first assembly of the film. Working with Damian was also critical in helping me question the limits of traditional filmmaking in general and documentary filmmaking. I would meet with Damian every night to review my dailies and benefited greatly from his brutally honest critiques.

I returned home from my second trip in Cuba with hours of footage “in the can”. I also had a very rough cut that Damian and I had put together before I left Havana, but I did not have a film yet. This current version of the film was shaped in the edit room.

There were some creative choices that I have made and of which I had felt strongly since the very beginning of the process: a rhythm that is organic, the superimposed audio layer, for example. However, working with professor Kazimi as mentor and thesis supervisor pushed me to look beyond the aesthetic of the piece and think about its politics; to look at both, not to establish any type superiority of one over the other, rather to appraise their convergence. Given that aesthetic choices are never neutral, one must interrogate their contribution to the overall discourse of any cultural production. More particularly, professor Kazimi, challenged me to evaluate my own positioning in the context of the film and to avoid the tropes of the traditional ethnographic films.

These conversations with my supervisor occurred throughout our consultations and editing sessions; they became even more pertinent to the Vodou ceremony scene. Originally, the scene was constructed to show a ceremony in which dancing, singing and other rituals of the

Galdeses culminate in the sacrifice of a goat. The scene itself was placed at the very end of the film as some sort of apex to the whole narrative. My supervisor rightfully pointed out the tendencies of western media to reduce everything Haitian to the practice of Vodou, not as a respectable depository of Haitian ancestral values and belief systems, but rather as a primitive set of peculiar practices⁹⁰. Although Vodou is integral to the community's life, the film run the risk of contributing and perpetuating such representations. By reshaping and re-contextualizing the ceremony scene we were able to uphold the centrality of Vodou in the Galdeses' lives without giving satisfaction to voyeuristic impulses.

Last winter, I returned to Havana to screen an advanced cut of the film for the Galdeses as per our initial agreement. Not only did I want to make sure that they concur with my representation of their community and their life, I also wanted to get their feedback and input before I finished the project. Over a dozen of community members came to the screening that took place in Silvia's front yard. It is always an honour for a filmmaker to witness audience pay such close attention to her/his film. But the positive reception of *Pichón* by those who came to see it moved me deeply. People were laughing at times, talking back to the screen, running to others "actors" in the film who were late to the screening. In the Q&A that followed the screening, they offered me some valuable feedback which I took into consideration in shaping the current version of the film.

⁹⁰ Wilcken, "The Sacred Music and Dance of Haitian Vodou from Temple to Stage and the Ethics of Representation."

Conclusion

The Galdes siblings featured in *Pichón* are the descendants of Haitian migrant workers who arrived in Cuba at the turn of the last century to work on American-owned sugar plantations as braceros. Black, illiterate peasants and “unskilled”, those workers experienced unfair labour treatments, racial discrimination and social isolation. The fear of their ancestral religion, Vodou, and the reputation of Haitians as violent revolutionaries also contributed in further marginalizing them, even from other oppressed groups – e.g. Afro-Cubans, British West Indians. But the braceros clung to their haitianness, the very site of their marginalization, drawing from it the strength to resist their dehumanization and the erasure of their cultural identity.

With its layered structure, *Pichón* posits that, three generations later, the Haitian presence in current-day Cuba continues in the margins of Cuba’s cultural and economic centres. The film borrows from both the observational and the participative traditions of documentary filmmaking to engage the viewer both emotionally and cognitively. It invites us to witness the ways in which the Galdes siblings continue the identity work of their parents while engaging in the informal market economy as a form of resistance to government policies and practices that do not create much opportunities for them.

The Galdeses’ story is not a unique Haitian story. For years, Haitians have been migrating into countries in the Caribbean, in Latin and north America and Europe. Whether we leave our country fleeing the American occupation or the dictatorships they supported in the context of the Cold War; Whether we leave fleeing the abject poverty that has its roots in the punishment Haiti received from the entire western world for daring to subvert the world

economy by saying no to slavery; whether we leave by foot, by planes, or hiding in the skull of a boat, Haitians often face a distinct form of discrimination just for being Haitians.

In the 1930s, as Cuba was expelling tens of thousands of Haitian migrants, in the Dominican Republic, a plight by the Trujillo regime to massacre 40,000 Haitians was fomenting⁹¹. When Silverio told me that in Cuba no one wanted to be Haitian I couldn't help but to think of the now famous hip-hop artist Wycleff Jean growing up Haitian in Brooklyn, NY in the 1980s. In Jean's time, no one wanted to be Haitian either, especially the young people who had rather say they are Jamaicans or French Caribbean to escape the constant bullying⁹². It is no surprise that young Haitian-Americans rejected that part of their identity, for during that same period, the science community alleged that Haitians were the primary carriers of the virus we now know as the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that causes AIDS. The disease was named 4H: Heroin users, Homosexuals, Haemophiliacs, and Haitians⁹³. More recently, the Dominican Republic government announced that they would strip hundreds of thousands of Haitians descendants of their Dominican citizenship. Just like the Galdeses these generations of Haitian-Dominicans stem from the migration movements of the 1920s. At the time of writing this paper, thousands of young Haitian men and women have left or are trying to leave Haiti for Chile, the only country in South America where an entry visa not required for Haitians⁹⁴. In Canada where I live, thousands of Haitian families are seeking refugee status, fleeing potential persecution from the American government after they announced the cancelation of the protected

⁹¹ Turits, "A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed."

⁹² Jean and Bozza, *Purpose*.

⁹³ Farmer, *Aids and Accusation*.

⁹⁴ Kozak, "Caribbean Migrants Risk Danger and Discrimination for a New Life in Chile."

temporary status (TPS) extended to them after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010⁹⁵. Many Haitian families have crossed the border into Montreal after the current Canadian liberal government had promised that Canada would welcome those rejected by the Americans⁹⁶. But it is not certain, now, that the government will honour its invitation.

I do not want to imply that migratory tribulations are unique Haitian experiences. Recent migratory crises in the Sudan and other African countries; in Syria and Myanmar compel us all to re-examine the restrictions imposed on the movements of the poor, the disenfranchised and the non-white in our “global village”. Although not an advocacy documentary, *Pichón* invites the viewer to participate in a reflection on the ways in which immigration policies and practices of the past impact our lives today. Such examination will perhaps help us better understand the role we can play today in halting the making of the marginal groups of tomorrow.

⁹⁵ “Secretary Kelly’s Statement on the Limited Extension of Haiti’s Designation for Temporary Protected Status | Homeland Security.”

⁹⁶ “Justin Trudeau Tweets Messages of Welcome to Refugees as Trump Travel Ban Sets in - National | Globalnews.Ca.”

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Appendices

Appendix A: Production stills



Image 5: Dir. Esery Mondesir (right) editing with Damian Sainz (left) - Havana 2014



Image 6: Community feedback screening in Havana



Estas son algunas fotos de mi viaje a Cuba, donde encontré, gracias a Nereida y Manuel, las raíces de mi origen: en una comunidad haitiana descendiente del barrio Las Piedras, municipio de San Francisco de Paula, La Habana: Grupo Misterios del Vodú de Haití en Cuba.

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Image 7: Prof. Glean's documentation of my first visit