
Male Migration, Female Perdition: Narratives of Economic and Reproductive Impotence in a Haitian Transnational Community

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Abstract: Distant members of a Haitian transnational community are creatively adapting an old reproductive affliction to mediate new, arduous experiences of prolonged conjugal separation and frustrated hopes of socio-economic advance. Perdition (*pèdisyon*), meaning repressed pregnancy, plays out in social dramas enacted between Léogâne and Florida, sites inhabited by impoverished migrant labour producers at home and their hopeful emissaries abroad. The dramas ensuing from repressed pregnancy span not only national boundaries but also religious borders dividing Protestants from Catholics.

Keywords: Gender, transnationalism, affliction

Résumé : Les membres éloignés d'une communauté haïtienne transnationale adaptent de manière créative une ancienne forme d'affliction reproductive comme médiation pour de nouvelles et pénibles expériences de séparation conjugale prolongée et d'espoirs frustrés d'ascension socio-économique. La *perdition* (*pèdisyon*), au sens de répression de la grossesse, est jouée dans des drames sociaux entre Léogâne et Florida, des lieux habités par des ouvriers migrants pauvres au pays et leurs émissaires d'espoir à l'étranger. Les drames découlant de la répression de la fécondation franchissent non seulement les frontières nationales mais aussi les frontières religieuses séparant les protestants des catholiques.

Mots-clés : Sexes, transnationalisme, affliction

Distant members of a Haitian transnational community are creatively adapting an old reproductive affliction to mediate new, arduous experiences of prolonged conjugal separation and frustrated hopes of socio-economic advance. *Pèdisyon*, or perdition, has long been known in Haiti as a biomagical disorder believed to cause female subfecundity, a true purgatory in a society that highly values progeny. A case of perdition may occasionally be attributed to naturalistic causes, including exposure to "cold," and may respond to treatment by a midwife. But more often, the cause has to do with personal relationships with persons and other categories of being. A wrathful inherited, anthropomorphic spirit (*lwa*), a malevolent force known as *lougawou*, or a sorcerer, working on behalf of an envious competitor, traps the fetus in the womb. A magical healing ritual can liberate the fetus and allow its normal development. Subfecundity is reformulated as a "personalistic" affliction (Foster 1976) whose diagnosis, accusation, magical therapy and ritual healing inform the script for a "social drama" (Turner 1957).

Whereas diminished fertility appears to have been perdition's most frequent and agonizing symptom, as reported in past literature, accidental fecundity seems to have become a potent indication of the affliction today. Migration, a disorder dividing many Haitians' marriages, appears to have provided a new social and cultural rationale for the perdition syndrome. The potential scandal of a home wife conceiving a child while her husband is abroad can be avoided through a diagnosis in hindsight of a repressed pregnancy. This paper describes how perdition has played out at the center of transnational social dramas enacted between Léogâne and Florida, the sites inhabited by impoverished migrant labour producers on the one hand and their hopeful emissaries outside (*deyò*) on the other. The dramas ensuing from repressed pregnancy have spanned religious boundaries as well as national limits, breaching sectarian borders separating Protestants from Catholics in Haitian transnational communities.

What is Perdition?

Pèdisyon has been translated as “arrested pregnancy” (Murray 1976) and “repressed pregnancy” (Richman 2002). The condition articulates with social structures of male polygyny, female monogamy (often serial), bilateral inheritance, extended kin lines in urban settings and land-based descent groups in rural contexts. All of these patterns reinforce the idea that offspring represent assets and insurance in old age, creating a strong desire for women and for men to ensure their fertility and their claims on offspring. It is not an exaggeration to say that most poor Haitian women and men fear being childless. In a culture that both prizes fertility and that accepts the capacity of spirits and sorcerers to do harm, the fertility of humans as well as livestock is a logical target. Infants are believed to be particularly susceptible to sorcery and witchcraft, even mildly, unwitting thoughts of envious women, a form of symbolic aggression with counterparts in many sociocultural settings, including in Latin America, Africa and Europe (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Rubel 1964; Thompson 1967).

Well-known proverbs reiterate these strategies and norms. “Children are a poor woman’s wealth” (*Pitit se richès fanm malere*), or “A mule has children so its back can rest” (*Bourik fè pitit pou do l poze*). I was instructed in the values of these proverbs firsthand after the birth in 1982, of one of my own goddaughters. The baby’s mother, Immaculat, who was my age, surprised me as we prepared for the baptism of her youngest of three children. My *makomè* (co-godparent) had a serious tone when she drew disapproving attention to my precarious state of childlessness, a state that I, a graduate student, was obviously not in a hurry to redress. Immaculat said to me, “You see, I could die now, and it would be alright because I have children. But you, if you die before you have children that would be a tragic waste.”

Perdition is a common, dreaded “dis-ease” in Haiti (Farmer 1988). Gerald Murray (1976) found perdition to be a common affliction in the Cul de Sac Plain village where he conducted ethnographic research. Among 219 women surveyed in the mid-1970s, one third reported having suffered perdition at some point during their childbearing years. Analysis of data from a 1990-1991 national survey by Jeanine Coreil, Deborah Barnes-Josiah, Antoine Augustin and Michel Cayemittes (1996) found “arrested pregnancy syndrome” to be a prevalent condition throughout the country.

The experience of perdition in Haiti has antecedents and correlates elsewhere. Variations of the condition were commonly reported until the 20th century in Europe and the United States and continue to be documented

in Rwanda, Tanzania and Pakistan. Biocultural explanations attribute the dis-ease to spirits, sorcerers and witches, which attack the fetus and delay or reverse its development. Biomedical clinical examinations of women who reported being pregnant for prolonged periods, even years, found no biomedical evidence confirming the women’s presentation of pregnancy. As a consequence, biomedicine identifies the condition as “pseudopregnancy” or “pseudocyesis” and attributes the condition to psychosocial factors (Coreil et al. 1996:425-426).

The Anthropological Study of Perdition

Gerald Murray first drew anthropological attention to the disorder of “an unborn child trapped in the womb, a child who ‘can’t be born’ (*pa kab fèt*)” (1976:61). He described “arrested pregnancy,” perdition in detail:

The woman knows that she is having regular coitus with her husband; she sees that her period stops for one or more months; her stomach may in a few cases even begin to swell—then suddenly she bleeds for several days. She looks to see if it is a miscarriage. If she sees that it is not, and if her bleeding comes the following month, she knows that she is in “perdition,” that the child in her womb is the victim of one of the many forces which can rob it of the maternal blood it needs to grow normally... The growing internal supply of blood suddenly bursts and escapes via the woman’s vagina and the child’s developmental progress is immediately and completely reversed. The foetus shrinks to the tiny speck of blood it was a few days after conception, (but it) is not expelled with the blood (this bleeding is not to be confused with menstruation because she is pregnant). It remains attached to the mother’s womb. [1976:61-62]

There is no limit to the time that a foetus may remain trapped in her womb. And until it is freed, no other child can be conceived. Murray explains that it frequently happens that the couple separate, or the husband dies. The separation has no effect on the case of perdition. If the child is freed (and born) after she forms a union with a new spouse, the biological father of the child is expected to be notified of the birth so that he can recognize his child at the baptism and the child will have inheritance rights to his estate (1976:63).

Murray’s analysis emphasized the social structural and religious functions of this “folk medicinal maternal complex.” Consensual unions tend to be fragile; thus, children can be the glue that holds together consensual unions. The desire to produce this glue can be so strong as to inspire a woman to invent a pregnancy. Mama Lola, a Haitian female ritual specialist (*manbo*)

in Brooklyn, admitted to her “ethnographic biographer,” Karen McCarthy Brown, that as a young woman, she attempted in vain to convince a lover to claim paternity of a child she knew was not his. She defended her tactic with the justification, “Women got to do all kind’a thing” (Brown 1991:243).

Perdition can serve as an empowering prescription for a woman who believes, or wants to be believed, that her pregnancy is under attack. She and her allies can take positive action by soliciting the help of a male or female ritual specialist (*gangan* or *manbo*) who can confirm the diagnosis of perdition and administer its cure—the liberation of the pregnancy—through ritual performance. The reason a woman would not seek a biomedical doctor is not because she does not believe in biomedicine but because biomedicine does not recognize perdition. Neither can biomedicine cure a “sent” affliction. Biomedicine treats non-personalistic, random diseases originating in the realm of the creator god (*Bondye*). Moreover, since biomedicine does not recognize perdition, it cannot address naturalistic, or non-personalistic cases of perdition, which Haitians attribute to “cold.”

The concept of *Bondye* is central to Murray’s analysis (1967, 1991). He argues that Haitians conceive of the Judeo-Christian God as a French-speaking, colonial power, whose inaccessibility leaves plenty of room for lower-ranked, Creole speaking spirits (*lwa*) to intervene in the lives of humans. Although the spirits lack the power to create life or to control natural forces, they can arrest, “seize” or “hold” (*kenbe*) pre-existing life. Fittingly, the anthropomorphic spirits are accessible and can be symbolically controlled and, in the case of perdition, persuaded to let go of the captive fetus and revive the pregnancy. Murray concludes that “the colonial history of Haiti, by placing fertility in the hands of a foreign God, removed it from ritual control by the folk; the perdition complex, by providing the device of imprisoned embryonic life, subtly places that control back in their hands” (1976:62).

There is little doubt that Haitians generally suffer from a lack of adequate access to health care for the many conditions and illnesses associated with the distant, all-powerful High God. Although Murray did not pursue the connection between biomedicine and power in his 1976 paper, the intersection of embodied illness and biopower provides a logical segue to an article published a dozen years later by Merrill Singer, Lani Davidson and Gena Gerdes (1998). Their study links perdition to the political-economic structuring of poverty, infertility and inadequate access to health care in Haiti, and in the city of Jacmel, in particular. Despite biomedicine’s alleged ineffectiveness in dealing with “sent” illness like perdition, women

may still strategically seek access to biomedical doctors who are unlikely to recognize their condition. They reason that doctors are sometimes able inadvertently to treat an illness they did not or could not diagnose. Biomedical experts would be mistaken to assume that the poor women who present at their clinics are actually passive patients. The study by Singer et al. (1998) of 37 women describes how poor women translate their perdition into medical terms that are legible to biomedical doctors. The “patients” use of medical terminology of uterine tumor and hemorrhage helps them get access to treatment that may indirectly cure them of perdition. Their research indicates the salient flexibility of this biocultural illness, which is illustrated in the research presented in the analysis below.

My previous study of perdition (Richman 2002) focused on the gender politics underlying perdition. I argued that repressed pregnancy should be understood in relation to female embodiments of “sick” social relations, which are perceived through the symbol of blood (Farmer 1988; Weidman 1978). The blood of women, which is said to be greater in both volume and temperature than men’s, is represented as their most vulnerable corporeal constituent. The common debility known as “bad blood” (*move san*) is thought to result from emotional stress produced by women’s relations with men. The diagnosis of “bad blood” initiates the objectification of the disease, bringing the authority of the collectivity to bear upon the behaviour of the obvious, if unnamed, source of the woman’s pain.

Examining one particular perdition case, I endeavoured to show how poor Haitian women use rhetorical skills—eloquence and wit—as tactics to maneuver in the volatile arenas of gender relations, which are charged with contradictory cultural commitments to patriarchy, women’s economic autonomy, and matricentric kinship. As a result of migration and of rural Haitian communities being transformed into migrant labour nurseries and nursing homes, protracted separation of husbands from wives and parents from children is now the norm. “Miami Money and the Home Gal” (Richman 2002) thus described a case of transnational perdition, which unfolded between the home anchor in Ti Rivyè, Léogâne and Belle Glade, Florida. A “home gal” (as the beleaguered woman referred to herself) conceived long after her husband’s departure and bore a child. During the social drama, the home gal said, “For the sake of Miami money, a home gal dies.” The home gal’s statement captured the purgatory commonly felt by a young home-wife of a male migrant, who is expected to demonstrate “respect” (sexual fidelity) to her husband for the length of his migration. If the

husband fails to send sufficient money to support her and their children, she may have few alternatives to disrespect, that is, seeking support from another man. This particular home gal failed to give him his respect, and became pregnant with a child fathered by another home man. Her husband sent a cassette letter threatening to take their (other) children and place them with his maternal kin. When the home gal, contrite, went to her in-laws to receive their final damnation, her husband's aunt, a woman well respected for her thunderous eloquence, intervened.

Rather than defending her nephew (and surrogate son), the migrant's aunt, interceded to redefine the adulterous pregnancy by diagnosing in hindsight a previously undetected condition of repressed pregnancy. In other words, the aunt deployed her loud theatrics to declare that the home gal had been pregnant all along "for" her man and, unbeknownst to everyone including the mother herself, she had been suffering from perdition. She claimed that the child was not the offspring of the home gal's partner with whom she had been having relations nine months before the child was born. Rather, the child was the issue of her migrant husband who had been away the whole time. (Recall Murray's explanation that a woman in perdition who takes a new mate will not be able to conceive until the condition is resolved.) Even if some doubted the medical verdict, they nonetheless acquiesced to it.

This demonstration of "situational feminism" (Pessar 1995), delivered in public as a teachable moment for all to see and hear (through the migrant communication circuit), obviously disrupted patriarchal claims over women's reproduction. At the same time, however, the performance threatened to undermine women's legitimacy; the drama of perdition requires fingering an agent, human or supernatural, who sent the affliction into the woman's womb in the first place. The suspected human aggressor seems inevitably to be a woman—an ordinary neighbor or relative with little power to fend off the calumny. In this case, the aunt's emphatic proclamation of the post-facto diagnosis of her nephew's wife's perdition inevitably raised suspicions about her niece, the migrant's sister, as the anxious look on her niece's face at the time suggested. But the aunt acted to obviate the misogynistic fallout. She predicted, correctly it seems, that since the disease of perdition had been cured long ago (evidenced by the birth of the child), there was little risk that anyone would bother to pursue a new round of accusation and retaliation, especially if they doubted the diagnosis, which they nonetheless consented to endorse.

Perdition is usually self-diagnosed. The plausibility of a post-facto diagnosis of subfecundity-induced perdition

relies on its power to resolve not just the scandal of the home wife's blatant transgression of the patriarchal norm of monandry, but also to forestall the absent husband's less tangible, but no less humiliating disgrace. Local (and translocal) cultural norms of consensual union and parenthood inform a cuckolded husband's investment in his home wife's perdition narrative. Consensual union (*plasa*) is represented as an exchange of male material support for female sexual fidelity (Lowenthal 1987:120). According to this conjugal contract, a husband must "take care of" (*okipe*) his wife and a wife's duty is to "respect" (*respete*) her husband. Neither romantic love nor male sexual prowess is deemed essential to the arrangement. A man is expected to convert his economic prowess into sexual success. Sexual success, in turn, can translate into more progeny. Therefore, in this patriarchal, polygynous, "procreative" context, men with more material assets are expected to seek the sexual loyalty of more women; in other words, to have more (monandrous) wives and more children. Poor men are compelled to confine themselves to "fighting poverty" (*bat mizè ak*) with just one spouse (and only the offspring the two of them can produce). By the same logic, if a man's wife takes up with another suitor, one may assume that her husband failed to provide adequately for her (and their children). His sexual inadequacy will not immediately be suspected as the reason she "disrespected" him (Lowenthal 1987:132). The husband's disgrace will be attributed to his economic neglect or failings, which in turn cause him to be a sexual loser, rather than to any imagined sexual inadequacy.

In the case of the "home gal" and the "Miami migrant," the diagnosis of perdition redeemed the reputations of both the pregnant home wife and the long-absent husband. The aunt called upon these sociocultural norms to create the impression that the home gal was not sexually disloyal and that her husband was not economically impotent. The aunt's authoritative and incontrovertible finding saved face for both the "home gal" and the "Miami migrant" and, thereby, their transnational consensual union.

Attention to the male partner's humiliation as an important etiological factor has rarely been the focus of scholarly discussions of perdition. Research for the particular case of transnational perdition described below was inspired by conversations that took place in Léogâne in 2010 and 2011 and in phone conversations in the United States. The analysis draws upon the multisited ethnographic research that I have been conducting in this transnational community since 1981, in both the home anchor in Léogâne and in the migrant members' settlements in Florida. The case suggests that the absent husband may play a crucial, if overlooked, part in the

perdition social drama. A cuckolded migrant may have an interest in accepting the diagnosis of his home wife's perdition and even in actively promoting its truth. Indeed, in the case described below, the husband was so invested in the perdition narrative that he risked alienating his consanguineal kin in his zealous endorsement of it.

Between Léogâne and Pampano: A New Transnational Perdition Drama

On December 24, 2010, I received a phone call from my *Monkonpè*, Wilner. I am the godmother of one of his children. We have addressed one another as "My co-godparent" (*Makomè mwen, Monkonpè mwen*), even though my goddaughter died more than two decades ago. My *Monkonpè* was calling to wish his *Makomè* a joyous Christmas. Our conversation was hardly joyous. Wilner reported in a melancholy tone that his current wife, Gertrude, finally gave birth on August 3, 2010 to a child who had been trapped in her womb for three years. The pregnancy had been repressed, that is, since Wilner's previous visit to Léogâne three years ago. Wilner seemed to be describing a case of perdition. He confirmed the disease in our conversation:

- K: Did she have perdition for you?
Li fè pèdisyon pou ou?
- M: Yes.
Wi.
- K: How do you know that your wife had perdition for you?
Ki jan ou fè konnen madanm ou fè pèdisyon pou ou?
- M: Her stomach got big, she bled, it got big again. A *gangan* in Kalfou Dufort (Léogâne) saw everything (and cured it).
Lestomak li vin gwo, li senyen, epi li vin gwo ankò. Se yon gangan Kalfou Difò ki wè tout.
- K: What is the cause of the perdition?
Sa k koz Pèdisyon an?
- M: It is a person. The same person caused my wife to lose a previous twin pregnancy. She had a miscarriage and she had to have a "DNC." (Miscarriage is different from perdition.)
Se yon moun. Se menm moun ki koz madanm mwen pedi yon pòtay marasa. Li te fè avòtman a li te gen pou pase yon "DNC."

A malefactor had allegedly attacked his wife's and his most precious product, their progeny, not just once but twice, using two distinctly different weapons. The villain's first weapon caused a miscarriage; the second held the fetus in its mother's womb. I inquired if he suspected a

particular person. He responded with a dreadful accusation of a member of his own family. Appalling as the accusation was, it was almost predictable in a social context that pits long-term obligations to consanguineal kin, especially matrilineal kin, against newly forged bonds with affines and a magical context that arms the warring factions with symbolic weapons to attack one another's life and livelihood.

- K: Do you know who the person is?
Ou konnen ki moun li ye?
- M: It is my sister. It is Marie-Carmelle.
Se sè m. Se Marie-Carmelle.
- K: Why would she do that?
Pou ki rezon?
- M: Jealousy.
Jalouzi.

Wilner's accusation of his sister surprised me. His sister had converted to Protestantism many years ago. (She converted after their other brother, who travels back and forth between the United States and Haiti, became an active evangelical—his kin often address him as "pastor.") Protestants emphatically denounce magic and sorcery as devil's work. But many Catholics I have interviewed doubt that Protestants in fact disavow the practice of magic and sorcery (Richman 2005, 2008). Wilner echoed this common view when he asserted that his sister continues to pursue sorcery. He insisted that she is not an actual Protestant, that she is an initiated servitor of the *lwa* (spirits) and, since serving spirits is opposed to sorcery, the *gangan* who initiated her is disappointed in her as well.

- K: But she is a Protestant.
Men se levanjil li ye.
- M: She is an initiated servitor! Even Ti Roro (the ritual leader) who initiated her told me he initiated her for good, not for evil. He is upset with her about this.
Se ounsi kanzo li ye! Menm Ti Roro, ki kanzo li, di li kanzo li pou byen, pa pou mal.
- K: But initiated servitors don't learn to do that type of thing when they "lie down" (go through the rite of initiation).
Men ounsi kanzo pa aprann fè bagay sa yo lè yo kouche.
- M: That's true.
Se vre.
- K: Do you mean she went to a sorcerer?
Ou vle di li t al kote yon bòkò?

M: That's right. Even (my nephew) Resnèl knows about it.

That's right (English) Menm Resnèl konen.

During his last visit, he went to see his mother to present the case.

M: I went to my mother to try to speak to her about it. She swore at me and told me she no longer considered me her son.

(Lè m te la a) M t al wè manman m pou m pale sa a. Li joure m, li di m m pa pitit li ankò.

Perhaps Wilner had not fully contemplated whom he was accusing. For he was not only indicting his youngest sister (by his mother), but also his mother as well; thus, not an individual person, but an inseparable female duo. Marie-Carmelle is not merely Fanilia's youngest child; she is the one who has never left her mother's side. She is the one child of Fanilia and Frankèl who did not go to live with a step-mother after their parents separated, the one who stayed behind when the others left on their father's boat headed for the United States, the only one who has continuously shared a household with their mother, which includes her own ten-year old daughter. The indelible, somatic bond between this mother and daughter calls up the imagined inextricable connection between the tough, long-suffering female *lwa*, Ezili Dantò, and her child. The visual image of Ezili Dantò and her offspring is fused with iconography of Mater Salvatoris holding in her arms her baby Jesus, whose gender is perceived as feminine. As Karen Brown (1991) describes, this influential representation serves as a model for the formidable relationship between Mama Lola and her daughter, Maggie, who refer to themselves as "Siamese twins" and "Wonder Women." Wilner clearly did not anticipate his mother's ferocious reaction to the allegation of her daughter's malfeasance.

When I visited her the previous March, I had been unaware of the rift. My mere mention of Wilner's name provoked a titanic of rage, a shocking outburst from this ever-composed senior woman, indeed, a woman known for her stoicism and unflappability:

Wilner? Don't mention his name to me! If he were to come here, right here, I would take a stick and hit him on the head two or three times and then I would... I would kill him! I don't want to hear Wilner's name uttered in this yard! To take the word of an arriviste. Marie-Carmelle grew up in my hands. It would have been better for him to have said it was I instead of my child. You might as well have said that I did it.

Wilner? Pa nomen non li devan m! Si l te parèt isit, isit menm, m ta pran yon baton, m t ap bat tèt li de,

twa fwa epi m ta... m ta touye l menm! M pa vle tandè non Wilner nomen nan lakou sa a ankò! Pou pran lapawòl yon arivis Marie-Carmelle se nam men mwen li leve. Pito li di se mwen angiz pitit mwen. O mèd di se mwen menm ki fè l.

Because I wanted to hear his side and refrain from partiality, I did not inform my *Monkonpè* that I had myself tasted his mother's angry reaction to his accusation of her daughter. Neither did I even understand the full dimensions of his mother's fury, whose exploration had been obviated by her visceral indignation. Wilner then laid out what appeared to have been a well-rehearsed argument:

I had been sending money to my mother in my sister's name. My mother is old. She doesn't know how to read. But instead of taking care of my mother, Marie-Carmelle spent the money on sorcerers (who would bring her sister-in-law down). Gertrude (my wife) went to visit my mother and saw that she didn't have enough to eat. She asked me to send money to her so she could buy food for my mother.

M voye lajan bay manman m sou nan sè m. Manman m granmoun. Li pa konn li. Angiz okipe manman m, Marie-Carmelle gaspye lajan nan men gangan. Gertrude (madanm mwen) t al fè manman m visit e li wè manman pa gen kont manje. Li mande mwen voye lajan ba li pou l kapab achte manje pou manman m.

K: Your mother told me that your wife had bought her the things she likes: coffee, sugar and tobacco for her pipe (the latter is one of her greatest pleasures) But why would Marie-Carmelle want to harm your wife's unborn children?

Manman ou di mwen ke madanm ou te pote bagay li renmen tankou kafe, sik ak tabak. Men poukisa Marie-Carmelle pa vle wè pitit nan vant madanm ou?

M: She doesn't want me to have my own life with my wife. But that isn't right. A man has a right to find a wife and to support her. His family can't stop him from doing that. A man is not the provider for his sister.

Li pa vle ke mwen chache lavi mwen ak madanm mwen. Men "that's not right." Yon gason gen dwa chache yon fanm epi okipe li. Fanmi li pa kapab wete l. Yon gason pa fèt pou okipe sè l.

By killing the first two lives (twins) his wife had conceived, and arresting the growth of the fetus of her subsequent pregnancy, his sister (and her Siamese twin mother) almost succeeded in undermining his wife's fertility, the essential basis for their union. According to his narrative, competition between in-laws for a migrant's

loyalty was at the root of the conflict. When the migrant is a bachelor, his kin do not have competitors vying for the emissary's wages. His sister wanted to keep him from marrying again after his separation from his first wife. The new union threatened her claim on her migrant brother's resources. Had her brother remained single, there would have been fewer outstretched hands competing with her for his wage remittances. She had a lucrative scheme siphoning off her mother's share of his repatriated earnings, using the money for her own evil purposes. If it weren't for Wilner's wife discovering their mother's hunger, she might have starved. Wilner's case against his sister makes sense.

Discussion

The only hitch in the migrant's story of unswerving filial obligation and largesse is that it is unfortunately not true. Wilner has never been a very successful migrant and he did not support his mother and sister from abroad. He arrived in Florida in 1980 along with two of his full siblings and several of his paternal half siblings aboard their father's sail boat. Working at the lowest rungs of the economy as a farmworker and, recently, in light manufacturing, he has struggled to make a headway. For the past few years he has been working in a tire factory earning US\$11 an hour. But as a farm worker for most of the past three decades, earning an average annual income of US\$10,000, he hardly supported himself, let alone his home kin. Indeed, his younger brother, who also struggles to make ends meet, was incensed to learn that their mother loaned money he had sent to her to his elder brother during one of his home visits. When I called him after my conversation with Wilner, he said,

It's not as though Wilner was sending a lot of money to my mother. In fact, one time she loaned him money. He has struggled for a long time. He often calls me asking for money. But lately he has had a steady job and seems to be doing better.

I suggested to Wilner's brother that Wilner's accusation of his sister rests on the assumption that Wilner had been a "good" (generous) migrant. Wilner's brother agreed with my interpretation of the case. Wilner appears to be the productive migrant and, through no fault of his own, his wealth (*byen*) is being diverted and wasted. He claimed that his sister took the money he sent for his mother (and her) and then spent it on payment to a sorcerer to attack his wife's reproductive capacity, thereby preventing her from bearing heirs whose birth would have cemented the transnational marriage and created more competitors for the migrant's wages. Wilner

would have "done more for" his home kin had his sister not diverted his remittances. He finally scraped together the US\$45,000 to buy a plot and to build a home for his wife in the city of Léogâne. That home was destroyed in the earthquake. Along with much of the city, his entire investment evaporated in the dust and rubble of the *goudou-goudou*, as the cataclysm is mimetically represented in Haitian Creole (Dorsainville 2011). Especially in the wake of the devastation of the *goudou-goudou*, Gertrude's infidelity and her ongoing woes of subfecundity presented an opportunity for her husband to convert the humiliating disappointment of his migration into an alternate narrative of the successful migrant who has been deceived and betrayed by Marie-Carmelle, his jealous, home-based sister. Marie-Carmelle was the person who had been reporting Gertrude's affairs with other men in phone calls to her migrant brother, but now the messenger of the unwelcome news was transformed into the antagonist. The migrant's compulsion to re-present his failed quest as a productive journey trumped his need for reciprocity with his home-based maternal kin.

Reputation is valuable social capital in small, close-knit societies, regardless of whether the membership spans a vast transnational space. In a society that has turned to migration as a means of economic survival, the migrant's reputation as a dutiful and productive emissary is powerful social capital. As I have documented elsewhere (Richman 2005), families in this community raise children as beloved emissaries of their social and economic aspirations. The loyal migrant "leaves in search of a livelihood for his family" (*chache lavi pou fanmi li*). People in this transnational community candidly rank migrants as to whether they have already sent to "do for" (*voye fè pou*) or "have not yet sent to do for" (*poko voye fè pou*) their families, terms that capture positive expectation rather than negative finality. "Sending to do" means remitting money to invest or "*fè ekonomi*" literally, "to make economy" exclusive of remittances for family members' immediate consumption, namely, purchases of food, clothing, medicine, and so on. The quintessential symbol of "sending to do for" family members at home is the construction of a new home out of such high-status materials as cinder block, cement and mosaic tile. Other symbols of "doing" include buying or renting cultivable land, purchasing livestock, buying a fishing boat, investing in a trade, financing children's school fees, meeting ritual obligations and sponsoring a relative's emigration. The migrant who abandons his family and is abandoned by his kin is like a "cow without a herdsman" (*youn bèf san gadò*), a disgrace to himself and his community.¹

Idealized hopes for migrants' success abroad and real fears of the emissaries' failure or death "outside" are

driven home in a locally popular spirit song (*chante lwa*) whose refrain is “do for me.” The song depicts a spirit, who is the narrator, abandoned by the person(s) responsible for worshipping the spirit. The devotee went away and no one is left behind to take up the ritual obligations. No doubt the song pre-existed the massive boat migrations of 1979-1981, when Wilner departed on his father’s boat, and the pithy, catchy lyrics proved particularly relevant for capturing these sentiments. The rudimentary lyrics of the choral refrain, typically intoned in response to the soloist’s improvisations, are:

Do for me; I’m going, oh God.	Fè pou mwen, m prale.
Do for me; I’m going.	Fè pou mwen, m prale.
[migrant’s name] left;	Entèl ale,
And didn’t leave behind.	Li pa kite dèyè.
[migrant’s name] left;	Entèl ale,
And didn’t leave behind.	Li pa kite dèyè.
Whoever remembers God	Sa k sonje Bondye
Will do for me. I’m going.	Ap fè pou mwen, m prale.

When the song is intoned to clarify a migration relationship, the words invoke an unsavory image of someone who departed and failed to “do” back home. Malgre Sa, a member of Wilner’s community who came to the United States aboard Wilner’s father’s boat, explained how the song can be used to comment on and critique an irresponsible emigrant. He said,

Someone who left and didn’t leave behind is worse off than someone who never went away... You become like a person with no family, someone who didn’t leave anyone behind. If you are here working, you have to have something saved. You can be ill for who knows how long... If you don’t have behind, if you don’t leave behind, if you are deported, what will you live on?... And as long as you don’t send to do, you are nothing. [Richman 2005:126]

Yon moun ki pati ki pa kite dèyè pi mal pase yon moun ki pa janm pati... Ou se yon san ras. Yon moun ki pa kite dèyè. Si ou isit ou travay, fò ou gen youn bagay sere. Ou ka fè konbyen lè malad. ... Si ou pa gen dèyè, si ou pa kite dèyè, si ou depòte, sou ki sa ou pral viv?... E tout o tan ke ou pa voye fè, ou pa anyen.

On his last return visit to Léogâne in 2012, Wilner made a genuine attempt at rapprochement with his home kin. Knowing that he might still be unwelcome in his mother’s yard, he asked someone else to deliver his gift of seventy dollars. Though the sum represented the coveted promise of food for the large, extended household for many days, Fanilia refused to accept it. She told the messenger to return the money to its sender. Yet when I

last saw Fanilia (in 2012), she signaled that she might be ready to consider making amends with her migrant son. She told me that if he were to try to come see her, she would not reject him.

Conclusion

Prolonged separation of husbands and wives and parents from children is one of the untoward costs this society pays for its incorporation in the global economic system. Rather than producing and marketing the crops of their small farms, the vestigial peasants of Léogâne have turned to raising migrants who will leave in order to “search for livelihoods for their families” (*chache lavi pou fanmi yo*). When migrant emissaries fail to realize their own and their families’ hopes for rescue from their poverty, the quest for an account of mitigating circumstances can become as urgent as the pursuit of resources remitted from abroad. The search for an explanation to vindicate the male migrant’s economic impotence may trump the desire to avenge his home wife’s sexual dishonor and even to maintain good relations with some of his own kin.

Understanding local and translocal cultural constructions of conjugal exchange is essential to appreciating why a migrant man would endorse a narrative of his home wife’s accidental fecundity. A diagnosis in hindsight of his home wife’s perdition can help quell doubts not only about a migrant’s failure but also about a husband’s impotence, which is a function of economic, as opposed to sexual prowess. The perdition narrative can create the impression that she was not sexually disloyal and that he was not a failed migrant. Previous analyses of perdition have emphasized female agency in the mediation of this female reproductive dis-ease. Attention to the migrant male partner’s humiliation reveals an important etiological factor in the diagnosis and remedy of perdition in Haitian transnational communities today.

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Note

- 1 See Chapter Eight in *Migration and Vodou* (Richman 2005) for a fuller discussion of the expectation of migrants' reciprocity and the use of the "do for me" song and other sacred songs to send indirect messages, or *pwen*, to pressure and persuade migrants to remain loyal economic emissaries. Examples of these songs are on the compact disc accompanying the text.

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