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# Researching Haitian Migrants as a Haitian Researcher

In 2016, thousands of Haitian migrants made the journey through the Darién Gap, the break between the South American and North American continents, in hopes of getting to the United States. Most had fled Haiti after the earthquake in 2010 and Hurricane Matthew in 2016 to settle in the Dominican Republic and South America —Brazil, Chile, and Argentina — intent on finding better economic opportunity. When these countries fell into their own financial crises, Haitian migrants found themselves on the move again, looking for a better life for themselves and their families.

By the time I received approval to research the integration strategies of Haitian migrants living in Tijuana, they had already been covered extensively by the media. Journalists had descended on Tijuana in droves and interviewed migrants, activists, and civil society organizations about the crisis. Stories about Haitians and their traumatic journeys, heavy with death, grief, and survival, soon began filling social media.

As a researcher, I wanted my approach to be different. I wasn't going to interview migrants simply to have them relive their ordeal. I was going to use Lean Research principles, a process of data collection that benefits both the subjects and their communities. Developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and The Fletcher School at Tufts University, Lean Research is divided into four components: Rigor, Respect, Relevance, and Right-Sizing. Rigor ensures that the research is conducted to the highest standard. My research method consisted of semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews that emphasized informed consent and data protection. Respect places the dignity of the subject at the center of the research. I made sure that all my respondents clearly understood what they were engaging in when they interviewed with me and would not proceed with an interview without their consent. I also made clear that their consent could be withdrawn at any time. Relevance ensures the research has clear value to stakeholders and addresses important questions for research. The study would offer insight into the experiences of migrants in protracted displacement by exploring their financial, economic, and social lives. Finally, a right-sized approach ensures that the research scope and methods are well

suiting to the objectives. My plan was to interview at least fifteen respondents in a deeply qualitative way. I would get a diversity of perspectives without placing undue burden on the community.

As a Haitian–American who was raised in Haiti, I knew that I would be able to process and understand nuances that other researchers and journalists could not. I am a fluent French and Haitian Creole speaker with innate knowledge of Haitian culture. My expectations for myself were high. I assumed that I would arrive in Tijuana and immediately be able to fit in and connect with the migrants. I assumed that because I was a “*compatriot*,” Haitians would be ready and willing to interview with me and I would be welcomed into their community with open arms. I was wrong.

Upon arriving in Tijuana, I met a Brazilian researcher who had already been interviewing Haitians for six months. He had built rapport with the community and introduced me to a local Haitian pastor and leader. Every Sunday, the pastor was given space to hold services for the Haitian community at a church that previously served as a shelter for migrants. I was able to interview the pastor as a key informant, and he invited me to begin attending services on Sundays, to meet other Haitian migrants. At the first church service I attended, the pastor had me stand up in the middle of the congregation and introduce myself. I did so in Haitian Creole, making sure to mention that I was a researcher looking to talk to migrants about their experiences. Several people approached me after the service and I gave them a card with my phone number. I left the service fully expecting to be flooded with calls of people wanting to talk to me, but the calls never came.

I asked the pastor if there was anything I could do to give back to the community during the short time I was there, and he suggested teaching beginner level English. I started teaching classes on Sunday afternoons and soon got to know a group of migrants in my class, and a married couple agreed to be interviewed. After the interview was complete, I asked them to help me understand why Haitians in the community were so reluctant to interview. What they and subsequent respondents revealed provided context for the challenges I faced.

First, respondents revealed that when Haitians first arrived in Tijuana, many felt they had been exploited by journalists for their stories. They said some migrants were unsure about how their likeness would be broadcasted and were surprised to see themselves in stories on YouTube and other social media. In addition, as migrants repeated their stories, they realized they were getting little benefit from their interactions. Many of them failed to see the point in talking to yet *another* researcher, even if they happened to be Haitian. Their overall experiences made them distrustful of researchers overall.

I realized that I could not rely on my identity alone as an “in” to the community. I had to work to build trust. So, I started asking respondents with whom I had already built a rapport to introduce me to other migrants who would like to be interviewed, and thereby started to expand my network outside of the church. I attended events at a community center frequented by Haitians, and I also started going to the local Haitian restaurants in Tijuana to get to know the patrons there. I walked the streets of downtown Tijuana for hours, stopping and chatting with Haitians who crossed my path. Eventually, I was able to create the credibility and trust I needed to be welcomed into the community.

Putting in the extra work paid off. The participants I interviewed opened up and shared unique and personal stories. Being able to understand Haitian Creole added a richness to their storytelling. Their stories were often peppered with Haitian proverbs, slang, or cultural references that I could pick up and use to add nuance as I wrote about them. Having a shared identity with migrants enabled them to be open about their experiences with racism, xenophobia, and discrimination. For example, one migrant shared how a deeply personal incident with local neighbors impacted his trust of Mexicans:

“A neighbor was celebrating her birthday. She invited all the Mexicans but she didn’t invite me, the only black person. To make a point, when I celebrated my own birthday, I chose to invite everyone in the neighborhood. I also invited Haitians. When they got to my house, I arranged different tables for Mexicans, Haitians, and the Haitians and Mexicans who wanted to sit together, especially the Haitians who came with their Mexican girlfriends. I wanted to

show them that I treated them differently than they did me. But when I saw that this effort didn't change their attitude towards me, I've chosen to distance myself from them [Mexicans]. I've had to act just like I see them [Mexicans] acting towards me. They keep me at a distance and so do I."

These were experiences they may not have been comfortable sharing with a Mexican, white, or foreign journalist. Finally, I gained access to a group of Haitian students who had vowed, after the initial onslaught of journalists had arrived in Tijuana, that they would not talk to any more researchers.

The key takeaway is that, although my identity did not automatically guarantee rapport and trust with Haitian migrants, being able to communicate in their native language and having a shared cultural background enriched my interactions with them over time. And my identity allowed me to provide important context to their stories in a way that honored their own personal identities and placed them at the center of their own experiences.

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