

Haitian migration and dreams in Chile: Questions for global mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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By

I met Pierre (34)[\[1\]](#) in a northern Santiago neighbourhood during my ethnographic fieldwork early in 2018. He was one of the hundreds of Haitians who arrived in Chile, and particularly to this area of the city, following what some Latin American newspapers have called the “Chilean Dream”. This refers to the flow of Latin American and Caribbean migrants who came to Chile looking for new work opportunities and improvements to their quality of life in early 2010. Although Pierre and his family had partially fulfilled their Chilean dream by finding a job in the building sector and sending money to his parents and brothers in Haiti, several everyday obstacles have impacted them diversely in psychosocial terms. Pierre, as with other Haitians that I met in the neighbourhood, tended to manage their afflictions within family and community spaces, primarily through the Evangelical churches. From this, what attracted my attention was the central role placed among Pierre’s family members on the practice of telling and sharing dreams. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pierre and his family’s dreams became central for the management of the malaise and uncertainty associated with the coronavirus disease, the economic crisis, and closure of borders, among others. For my research, the Haitians’ practice of telling dreams became crucial as it allowed me to interrogate the current relationship between migration, the global mental health (GMH) agenda, and subjectivity in the context of a post-dictatorship neoliberal Chile. In this short piece, I focus on how Haitians’ dream uses can interrogate the strategies of global mental health on the management of afflictions in a time of pandemic.

In the beginning of April 2020, a month after the first COVID-19 case in Chile[\[2\]](#), Pierre told me via the telephone: “I have not slept well, and I have had many dreams with deceased relatives.” Pierre attributed his insomnia to anxiety associated with the potential loss of his job in the coming weeks. Besides this, he was concerned and depressed about some expressions of racism towards the Haitian community associated with the coronavirus outbreak. Pierre added: “The same thing happens to my wife. She dreamed that she was sick in a hospital, with many doctors.” Their dreams showed how current social constraints entered into the

oneiric life. Dreams related to deceased relatives, sickness, hospitals, and doctors revealed family concerns associated with the pandemic context. The content of these dreams demonstrated what several researchers have highlighted for more than a century, that is how “the social” penetrates dreams, providing them with daily characters, symbols, and spaces, among others (Freud, 2010 [1900]; Devereux, 1969). Sigmund Freud called this “day residues,” that is, memory traces caused by daily events and psychic processes associated with these events (Freud, 2010 [1900]). In line with this, different contributions have highlighted the relevance of everyday life in dreams, such as the studies of Charlotte Beradt (1966) on Nazism in Germany, and Roger Bastide (1972) on racism in Brazil, among others.

Nevertheless, Pierre and his family’s dreams become analytically relevant not only by their content but also by their social and political place and uses. As several researchers have shown from cultural and psychoanalytic anthropology, the dreams’ social and political place changes depending on different societies. Similarly, as I noticed on several occasions during my fieldwork, dreams significantly influenced Pierre and his family’s decision-making about their collective future. Dreams delineated decisions related to, for example, the family’s migration process and everyday life. The social place of dreams in Haitian society can be understood from the role of Vodou worldview. Vodou is not only a religion through which subjects may or may not ascribe but is part of the foundation of the worldview of Haitian society (Hurbon, 2001; Price-Mars, 1990 [1928]; Vonarx, 2012; WHO/PAHO (2010)). Far from a Cartesian worldview, the Vodou, through its interactions with other religions such as Catholicism and Protestantism, shapes complex dynamic representations of the universe, personhood, health/disease, and death, among others (Rey and Stepick, 2013; Woodson, 1993). Although anthropological research has not tended to focus on the dream life of the subjects in Haiti, Erika Bourguignon (1954), in her contributions on dreams and their interpretation in Haitian rural contexts, argued that Haitians tended to classify dreams as “things I see at night” or as supernatural visits. Besides this, she stressed that Haitians conceived dreams as an opportunity to meet with their ancestors and gods.

Moreover, the practice of sharing dreams appeased Pierre and his family’s day-to-day concerns. While Pierre usually shared his oneiric life with his father, brothers, and wife in Haiti, he did it only with his wife in Chile. He told of his dreams because he considered them “strange images” or because they provided him with “messages or advice from God” about the future. Pierre reported that he felt that he could obtain a better understanding of different difficulties after recounting a dream, while feeling “calm” and “hopeful.” In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pierre seemed to find a safe place in his oneiric life and, in turn, a space to

think about the future with his family. He said: “God has also told me in a dream that we must trust that when everything happens, it will be for the best (...) perhaps after this, there will be more work here, or we can return to Haiti.” He added: “God always wants the best for us and the best of us.” As Bourguignon (1954) argued on her study in Haiti, by telling and sharing their dreams, Pierre and his family interpreted their oneiric life. Through this practice, they seemed to reaffirm a knowledge system and to validate a worldview.

Highlighting Pierre and his family’s coping strategies becomes particularly relevant in the context of contemporary discussions in GMH (Bemme and Kirmayer, 2020; Lovell, Read, and Lang, 2019). The widespread context of the GMH agenda in different countries has shaped what Béhague and MacLeish (2020) have recently called a “global psyche.” That means an available “idiom” through which subjects and communities represent their suffering and mental health based on knowledge, practices, and metrics of the global mental health agenda (Lovell, Read, and Lang, 2019). From this framework, rather than dreaming, what seems central in the current pandemic context is the increase of “sleep disorders” and “anxiety/mood disorders” and their consequences in daily life (e.g. “performance”, “productivity”, etc.). Within this scenario, biomedical and psychiatric approaches deploy psychopharmacological treatments that can disturb and reduce dreaming due to potential side effects (Gursky and Krahn, 2000). For its part, in this framework, dreaming becomes a neurobiological mechanism that allows the consolidation of memories through the REM phases. Thus, the empire of neurosciences reduces dream life to a neurobiological level, neglecting the relationships that different societies have with the oneiric life.

The gradual introduction of a GMH agenda in Chile over the last 30 years has invisibilised these kind of coping strategies. The implementation of mental health reforms since the 1990s (Araya, Alvarado and Minoletti, 2009), as well as the medicalisation and pharmacology of malaise and suffering (Cuthbertson, 2015; Crespo Suárez and Machin Suárez, 2020), has influenced how most Chileans understand themselves, and how they process their suffering and mental health in a neoliberal context (Han, 2012; Aceituno, Miranda, and Jiménez, 2012). Therefore, Pierre and his family’s life invites reflection on the role and value of dream life, particularly in the uncertain times such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, although sometimes coopted for medicalisation and pharmacologisation, dreaming can be understood as a space that has the potential to imagine alternative futures.

Gabriel Abarca-Brown is a PhD Candidate and Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at

King's College London. His PhD thesis is entitled "*Becoming a (neuro)migrant: Culture, race, class and gender in Santiago, Chile*". He is Co-founder of the Platform for Social Research on Mental Health in Latin America (PLASMA).

Footnotes

[1] Pseudonym.

[2] On April 5th, the number of COVID-19 cases reached 4,471 people while deaths confirmed were 34. On July 21st, the number of cases reached 334,683 people while deaths confirmed were 8,647.

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