

**CHILDREN AND THE POLITICS OF VIOLENCE IN HAITIAN CONTEXT:
*Statist Violence, Scarcity, and Street Child Agency in Port-au-Prince***

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**Author's Note:* Where necessary for the protection of the child subjects cited in this essay, names have been changed or altered so as to preserve their identity. The author takes personal responsibility for references translated from Haitian kreyol.

In the early morning hours of 30 September 1991, the first democratically-elected president in Haitian history - Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in office for little more than eight months, was ousted in a violent coup d'état orchestrated by army Chief-of-Staff Lt. General Raoul Cedras. Understanding that popular support for Aristide could effectively hamper the usurpation of presidential power, the army moved to prevent the people from gathering, from erecting barricades, and from ultimately unleashing a popular insurrection against the coup. Before organized demonstrations could assemble, the military was dispatched throughout the capital and the rural *depatmans*, firing weapons

indiscriminately, killing scores of civilians in the first few hours of the putsch. Assisted by contemporary factions of the notorious *tonton makout* - the rightist, army-supported civilian death squads - Cedras completed what would turn out to be the bloodiest coup d'état in recent Haitian history. Terror was carried out methodically and in brutal form toward the discouragement of popular reaction; and the young, politically-mobilized partisans of the pro-Aristide *Lavalas*¹ movement were specific targets.

By 1986, years before his election, Aristide had already had a large following. A Catholic priest of the Salesian order, he was one of the few prominent individuals in Port-au-Prince who had risked public expressions of discontent and disgust with a second-generation totalitarian Duvalierist regime. Aristide had helped to create in the capital the climate of civil unrest and impatience that had made the departure of Jean-Claude Duvalier absolutely necessary. By the time Duvalier had left for exile in February of that year, Aristide was one of the most visibly prominent of the many priests, sisters, and laity who together formed Haiti's *ti legliz* - the 'little church' of liberation theology (Wilentz, 1989). It was through this radical theological base that he succeeded in raising the social consciousness of the urban poor, as well as the violent ire of the state apparatus.

Rather than work within the bounds of programs for the poor already established by the orthodox Salesian Church in Port-au-Prince, Aristide instead opted to initiate his own projects; most notable for the concerns of this paper was the *Lafanmi Selavi* orphanage. Its name means "the family is life", and it was instituted in 1986 in order to provide housing, food, and vocational and literacy training for an emerging number of Port-au-Prince street boys², displaced from often intact kin groups due to the economic crisis of late-eighties. *Lafanmi Selavi* would rapidly become first and foremost a political safe haven for the children, as they would become active, participatory agents of democratic change in the waning days of the Duvalier dynasty and thereafter. Their visibility and vocality against the Haitian state would make them specific targets for repression in the years to follow. *Lafanmi Selavi* began to emerge as a vehicle for the political voice of children in social discourse, and as a nucleus for responsive action.

What can be said about the social world inhabited by the escalating numbers of street children in Port-au-Prince, since the economic collapse and urban centralization of the 1980s under Jean-Claude Duvalier? Regarded as largely outside the normative socializing control of adult society, there is evidence to support the claim that the children who live on the street develop their own social organizations, territorial domains, and networks of support linked to the sharing of food and goods.³ Frequently these networks and associations are maintained as expressions of political alliances. Despite such evidence, rising popular conceptions frequently portray street children as *unsocialized* or *asocial* threats to established order; further, street children are frequently represented as the primary causes of escalation in social ills, such as crime, drugs, prostitution, and inner-city decay (Scheper-Hughes, 1992; 1997; Stephens, 1995). We will see below how the construction of such negative identities perpetuates the image of street children in Port-au-Prince as nuisances and criminals - maligned as a tacit and persistent reminder of Haitian society's inability or unwillingness to protect its children. Add to this paradigm the radical political mobilization of street children (such as that advocated and encouraged at *Lafanmi Selavi*), and they become de-legitimated criminals - and thus acceptable targets for state repression.

Sickness, scarcity, sexual abuse, hunger, and thirst all contribute to a set of conditions which routinize greater rates of child morbidity and child death on the street. The persistence of these conditions has been compounded by both the Haitian public and private sectors, which have come

to normalize child morbidity and death as an expected outcome for children forced to live and work on the street. The very fact that such a reality has become veritable Haitian custom further amplifies the problem as it contributes to the social and political invisibility of street children. Aristide never hesitates to emphasize the political underpinnings of *Lafanmi Selavi*, frequently pointing out that the condition of street children in Haiti is the result of the extreme stratification of society into a hierarchy of impossibly rich and impossibly poor in uneven proportion. He isolates the Haitian state apparatus itself as responsible for the everyday violence of life on the boulevards and avenues of the capital, thus vocalizing the frustration of the poor majority, most of whom live on, in, or about the street.

Aristide instituted *Lafanmi Selavi* as a new template for Haitian nationalism - one built on a platform of justice, reconciliation, democracy, and 'poverty with dignity'. The nationalistic theme of 'reconciliation' has proven to be a trying concept to develop among the children at *Lafanmi*. Reconciliation - in this sense, unilateral Christian forgiveness of the army and *makouts* following their legal justice at the hands of the Haitian human rights courts following the coup - has been a fundamental ideal of Aristide's *Lavalas* platform since at least 1994. If *Lafanmi Selavi* is to provide an institutional model for the new Haitian citizenship, then this idea of civil contrition must be implemented in both the orphanage pedagogy as well as in its schoolyard, and it has. The children (mostly the boys) fight amongst each other with a fair amount of frequency. These confrontations run a range of escalation, from angry exchanges of words, to threats and posturing which suggest aggression, to (in many cases) physical violence. Many of the boys in residence at *Lafanmi Selavi* possess razor blades salvaged from street dumps, and their readiness to produce them in arguments is unnerving. In 1997, a schoolyard confrontation erupted between two of the boys over a game they were playing, and one boy slashed the back of the other repeatedly with his razor. The offending boy was ousted from the *Lafanmi Selavi* program by the administrators, and spent a number of weeks begging and sleeping at the International Airport before returning to the orphanage to seek forgiveness and re-entry to the program. *Lafanmi's* Director had a private meeting with the boy, and after a number of punitive punishments and corrective measures had been decided upon, the boy was readmitted to the program. The case exemplifies the orphanage's determination to incorporate the notion of reconciliation into its pedagogy.

Firmly rooted in Haiti's *ti legliz* liberation movement, the orphanage is currently home to over 400 boys and girls, all with greater or lesser degrees of experience with the street (or in the case of some of the girls, harsh treatment in domestic service). The program actively seeks to raise the democratic consciousness of the children it serves, thus permitting the introduction of child identity as legitimate terrain for the settlement of violent political difference. Participation in demonstrations, support of cooperative agricultural initiatives, and a pro-democratic children's radio station all contribute to *Lafanmi's* reputation as a nucleus of political dissension, and as a voice of solidarity for street children; who since at least 1986 have formed the very backbone of front-line activism against martial Duvalierist regimes, including the most recent of Cedras.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes has adequately documented the institutional contribution to the routinization of and indifference toward everyday violence and the child death with which it comes (Scheper-Hughes, 1984; 1985; 1989; 1992; 1997). Her critique of the culture of Brazilian poverty and violence is bent toward the understanding that a specific architecture of policy, rhetoric, institution, and politic is largely responsible for the predication of the social conditions in regions of extreme scarcity. Of particular interest are her arguments concerning the role of liberation theology as participatory in or at least tolerant of the routinization and indifference toward the lot of the poor

(Scheper- Hughes, 1989; 1992). The liberation theology movement throughout Latin America as a whole imagines a kingdom of God on earth - one based on political justice and equality, and one devoid of the social madness associated with hunger, sickness, and high rates child mortality. But Scheper-Hughes contends that the movement remains mute on the orthodox theological sources of gender oppression and cites the church's historical contribution to the useless sufferings of poor mothers and children who, she argues, are abandoned by a rhetoric of empowerment elicited from a sociopolitical reading of the gospel (Scheper-Hughes, 1989). She recognizes the challenge leveled by the liberation movement against theodicy - the system of natural theology vindicating divine justice in allowing the persistence of human suffering. She argues however that liberation theology, at least in the Brazilian case, has failed to offer a doctrinal alternative solace to child death and morbidity.

At issue is the discrepancy between the orthodox church as a body of doctrine and dogma, and a theology of liberation, which as a social justice movement is faith *in praxis* and as such stands in fundamental *opposition* to such doctrine and dogma. Liberation theologies take to task the search for meaning in suffering, whether as penance or the path of martyrs. The rejection of theodicy is evident in social endeavors to eliminate the root causes of suffering altogether, not as a challenge to divine will but rather as an expression of it.

I stand in wholehearted agreement with Scheper-Hughes' body of work concerning the normalization of child death and the routinization of everyday violence in cultures of poverty. But my preliminary field research among street children in Port-au-Prince since 1994 has yielded evidence which suggests that significant aspects of Haiti's liberation theology movement stand in proactive opposition to such normalization and routinization, rather than in active contribution to them. *Lafanmi Selavi* provides a sound example. As an institution of the Haitian liberation movement, the orphanage represents itself as a cultural counterpoise to the routinization and political impotence of street children, raising the social awareness and political resolve of *citizen-children*, rather than simply feeding them (an influential statement in a country where sixty percent of the population is under the age of 25 years, forty percent of whom are under 15, most of them living or working in or about the street). The artistic expressions of the children at the orphanage give frequent testimony to the effectiveness of Aristide's endeavor to stimulate the social resolve of street children in-residence at the facility. In early 1998, the children were encouraged by the *Lafanmi Selavi* staff to decorate the rather bland interior of the wall surrounding the orphanage compound with a mural which would reflect the social issues that the children considered to be of most pressing importance to Haiti's social reconstruction. The result was a colorful, 30-foot-long collage of Port-au-Prince life through the eyes of street children. Punctuating the visual imagery of the mural are informed written statements and interrogatives which reflect the social attunement of the children who wrote them. Beside declarations which read "*Pa koupe bwa!*" {"Don't cut down trees!"}⁴ and "*Tout Timoun Se Moun*" {"All children are people of worth"}⁵, is a child's rendering of Cité Soleil, arguably Haiti's most destitute urban slum. Accompanying the image of the cramped shantytown is a caption which challenges, "*Eske tout sitwayen panse a Site Soley?*" {"Do you know the entire situation in Cité Soleil?"}. Beneath an illustration of two children asleep in the street is written the legend, "*Si timoun yo ap dominan la ri ki sa n'ap fè pou yo?*" {"What are the children who sleep in the street to do?"}. And above a depiction of a table laden with bowls of food, behind which sit several people, is written the question, "*Eske timoun bo tabla?*" {"Are children seated around the table?"}⁶.

Aristide's involvement in matters political, such as his initiation of *Lafanmi Selavi*, has not endeared him to the powerful orthodox Catholic hierarchy which stands in contradistinction to the

progressive liberation theology upon which the orphanage is based. But more important for our matters here, Aristide's *Lafanmi Selavi* had not endeared itself to the martial Haitian states since the collapse of Duvalier in 1986. As a result, its children have paid profoundly for both their ties to Aristide and their active participation in pro-democratic discourse, under Cedras and over the course of the years since.

For most of the children who have come to *Lafanmi Selavi* (they range in age from four- to eighteen-years-old), the Cedras coup government - in power from 1991 through 1994 - was the backdrop for early childhood. Characteristic of the regime was the resurrection of *makoutist* means of coercion, carried out by the army and death squad *attaches*. By its unique extremism, *makoutisme* permits the profound penetration of the state into the affairs of the civil sector. Emblematic of this political violence is the deconstruction of traditional, cultural constraints on the state's use of coercive force, including the targeting of clergy, women, non-political groups, the elderly, and certainly, children (Trouillot, 1990) - especially those at *Lafanmi Selavi*. With Cedras' seizure of power from Aristide, martial law was put into place, and democratically-oriented institutions like *Lafanmi* became criminalized. Political attacks on the children of the orphanage - rapes, disappearances, firebombings, torture, executions (I have documented instances of all of these against the children) - are the means by which the *makoutist* state and its *attaché* proxies have sought and continue to seek the suppression of social change and the prevention of opposition movements from undermining *de facto* legitimacy.

The *attaches* themselves are the contemporary representation of Francois Duvalier's *tonton makout*, and like them are drawn largely from the marginalized poor classes. Elected to the Haitian presidency in 1957, and keenly aware of the historical propensity of the Haitian army to act as the executors of coup d'état against heads of state, Duvalier chose to consolidate his executive power with the creation of a paramilitary counterpoise to the army, a secret police organization answerable directly to the National Palace. This organization, the *tonton makout*, borrowed its name from a bogeyman of *vodou* folklore - a malevolent creature who lives in the hillside and snatches up "bad" children, carrying them off into the night. The *makouts* would become the brutal implementers of political terror, acting on behalf of the state as informers, neighborhood bosses, extortioners, executioners, and thugs. The fact that most *makouts* were and are of the poorer classes has permitted the state an unprecedented penetration of nearly all aspects of the everyday life of the citizenry. *Makoutisme* became the strong-arm pillar of the Duvalierist regime, and was the sole guarantor of the state's monopoly on violence. Their existence, activities, and participation in political office in Haiti were rendered illegal by the 1987 Constitution, ratified after the fall of Duvalier. Despite the constitutional mandate against it, *makoutisme* persists at the hands of the *attaches*, and was illegally represented under Cedras in the Chamber of Deputies by FRAPH (*Front pour l'Avancement de Progres Haitien*⁷). FRAPH and its *attaches* hinged their existence on the support of the Haitian army, who outfitted, armed, and protected them in exchange for parliamentary support of the regime and alliance in terror on the streets of Port-au-Prince and in the rural *depatmans*. FRAPH was instrumental in the suppression and neutralization of popular challenges to the *de facto* regime, centralizing and legitimating violent state coercion; and because of its *attaches*, the Cedras government lasted longer than anyone could have anticipated in late 1991.

Despite the fragile restoration of democratic order since the 1994 US-led UN invasion, right-wing *makoutist* violence persists in Haiti, particularly against the politically-mobilized children of *Lafanmi Selavi*. The method, form, and praxis of *makoutisme* raises some concerns regarding the nature of political violence in a particularly Haitian context. An anthropological discussion of the unique

context of political terror against street children in Haiti must originate from a theory that embraces the totality of relevant violences, and proceed to identify the ramifications for cultural identity. Scheper-Hughes (1992; 1997) has provided the essential cultural-historical foundation for an understanding of the everyday, lived violence of street children in divided nations. It is the amalgam of life-realities intrinsic to a political economy of the street - hunger, scarcity, poverty, criminalization, displacement, abandonment, isolation - in conjunction with the symbolic and institutionalized violence of the modern, even democratizing state that contribute to what may be called, a *culture of everyday violence*.

But beyond this, and as an expression of the cultural violence intrinsic to repressive polities, political terror may emerge, as in the case of contemporary Port-au-Prince. Carole Nagengast identifies assimilation, homogenization, and conformity within narrow ethnic and political ranges among the primary goals of the modern state; she also includes among these goals the creation of societal consensus about which categories of individuals are legitimate and which are not. The ideal state attempts to ensure conformity of the civil society through the formation of diverse cultural forms which assist in the determination of the range of tolerated social, political, ethnic, and national identities (Nagengast, 1994). Some modern states, however, have developed the ability to persuade and influence the civil sector through less overtly violent means than other modern states. Talal Asad has argued that *repressive* states, such as Haiti in the late twentieth-century, share the pretenses of virtually all states to intervene profoundly in the civil sector, but have failed to sufficiently develop the administrative and social control infrastructures necessary to effect such penetration in less extreme manners. They are essentially *weak* states, resorting to physical coercion and terror because they cannot secure their political ends through the more subtle and manipulative practices of power associated with the predominantly Northern 'surveillance' societies - those relying more heavily on tacit political persuasion rather than the use of overt force (Asad, 1992; Gledhill, 1994). This alternative to the "softer" forms of state persuasion and control is a direct attack on citizens - arbitrary arrest and interrogation, imprisonment, disappearance, and finally, torture, mutilation, and killing; nonetheless, even the most stable of Northern "surveillance" states may resort to threats or even open violence against "disorderly" or "criminal" social groups when institutions of social consensus are weakening or changing (Scheper-Hughes, 1992). In short, agents of the repressive state *have* to kick in doors and initiate the activities of death squads; that is if they wish to see certain political ends met (and they invariably do).

The crisis of the modern state originates from its differential ability to monopolize social power, and from the nuisance of peripheralized groups who challenge state definitions of who and what should be repressed (Nagengast, 1994). We must be reminded that the exercise of state power is *always* violent, and that the state *always* claims a monopoly on force. The relations between the state and the civil society are power relations; and power is not merely a representation or model, nor ought it be reified through instrumental definition as some-*thing* which is either present or absent in a society. It emerges as a particular arrangement of groups and institutions in the midst of social and ritual relations. With this consideration, it should be specified that political violence is in fact a ritualized means of deploying power within differential social relations. Often it is the tool that states use to enforce themselves and to maintain power, though state violence need not be primarily applied by the state apparatus itself. It has been seen throughout Latin America that statist activities, including the exercise of political terror, may be undertaken by groups independent of the government in power - often by civilian proxy; and *makoutist* violence in Haiti is but one example. The collaboration of civil police (who are appointed by local politicians), with hired *pistolerios* employed

by plantation estate owners in the operations of extrajudicial Brazilian death squads is well documented (Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Hecht, 1998).

Several researchers (Foucault, 1977; Scarry, 1985) remind us that the goal of state violence is not merely the infliction of pain and suffering; rather, it is the social project of creating punishable categories of people, forging and maintaining boundaries around them, and building consensus about those categories that specify and enforce state-desired behavioral norms. It is a process of legitimating and de-legitimizing specific groups, and is a function of cultural violence. More simply, the goal is not so much the exploitation of the targeted 'other' as an enemy of the state, as much as it is the 'other's' mere consciousness of the possibility of total domination by the governing body politic (Simmel, 1955). It is a unique exercise of the state's monopoly on force - one which looks toward the terrorization of society into conformity. Riches (1986) has argued that violence need not be perceived as merely practical, visible, or physical, but that it may also manifest as symbolic, invisible, or emotional; though as Nagengast (1994) points out, Riches does give primary consideration to the more overt displays of violent force that people use to achieve certain goals. Alongside of the instrumental definitions of political violence - the use of physical coercion, bodily harm, torture, the infringement of property or dignity - there is also the dramatic *portrayal* or *representation* of any of the above: the threat of physical force, the public exhibition of executed political targets, threatening political graffiti. Scheper-Hughes has suggested that the very idea of the prevalence of the state's proactive disappearance of street children in Brazil is violence, in that it forms "a backdrop for everyday life and confirm[s] [the community's] worst fears and anxieties - that of losing themselves and their loved ones to the random forces and institutionalized violence of the state" (Scheper-Hughes, 1992). The violence is a threat to cultural identity, a social domination measure - one which moves beyond the physical bloodshed to destabilize social normatives, community sustainability, and cultural viability. Every act of political terror is then not an act intended to destroy a single individual's identity, but rather is one intended to undermine an entire 'body politic' (Robben & Nordstrom, 1995). The grotesque display of an executed political target shatters the mirage of an ordered, just world, while making the community a witness to the death. The immediacy and indeed the very *proximity* of the violence is evoked by "tortured and abandoned bodies, corpses out of place" (Warren, 1993) - a jarring, secondary violence, especially in those regions where one's home community is the very fulcrum for cultural identity. John Gledhill (1994), reflecting on Sri Lankan political terrorism, writes that the non-burial of the dead and the public display of their dismembered corpses also victimizes living relatives, permitting the violence to penetrate into the very fabric and core of social relations. Acts of political rape (a veritable custom of Haitian politics since the late 1950s) are not just examples of the politicization of gender with violence, but are also intimate reminders of the state's extreme ability to penetrate civil society, even into the profoundly private realms of femininity and sexual identity and marital sanctity. Political violence is a representational threat not just to the individual singled-out for the punishment, but to the civil society's vulnerability *writ large*.

These political terrorisms are the modal manifestations of cultural violence, performing the task of de-legitimization and destabilization, becoming the precondition for the reproduction of civil violence. In Haiti, much as in Brazil, social constructions have situated street children as dangerous social threats who are perceived as supernumerary nuisances and criminals. In another but equal respect, the democratic mobilizations of street children (such as those at *Lafanmi Selavi*), have drawn the social ire of a Port-au-Prince community that may regard them as dangerous *political* agents - thus de-legitimated by the social groups most powerful and thereby most threatened.

The criminalization of street children leads logically to the social denial of human rights that would otherwise be extended to them. This negative conception of human rights denies those who are perceived as non-citizens, living “outside” social norms or civil law. A culture of violence may here persist reflexively, combining the everyday violence of the street with legitimated and routinized political terror against those thus criminalized. The stubborn persistence of Haitian *makoutisme* since Duvalier is a prototypical example of just such a culture - one in which terror continues to be reproduced and sanctioned for the preservation of a socially-constructed perception of civil stability. We can see then “the workings of a hegemonic discourse on criminality/deviance/marginality and on the ‘appropriateness’ of police and state violence in which all segments of the population participate and to which they acquiesce, often contrary to their own class or race interests” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992). The structural basis for the criminalization of street children is widely recognized by the adolescents at *Lafanmi Selavi*. Consider the following translation of a song written by the orphanage musical group, *Sewom*:

We live in a country, we don't have freedom of speech.
We're always fighting. We're not making progress.
We are children, just like any other children.
God created us.
If we are suffering, the big shots are responsible.

All over Haiti there are children going to school and living their lives.
But the street children are considered troublemakers,
And society always sees them as guilty.
We are children, just like any other children.
God created us.
If we are suffering, those in authority,
Those with power,
Are responsible.

Expressions of child agency in political conflict is corollary to social identities that emerge in cultures of violence; the Palestinian *intifada*, adolescent stone-throwers in Belfast, and Haiti's *Lafanmi Selavi* are but three of many examples which illustrate this claim. Just as the uncertainty of violence relates to a summoning of fear, terror, and confusion, so to does violence provoke innovations in resistance, survival, hope, and creativity (Robben & Nordstrom, 1995) – even on the part of youth (especially those who live in conditions of extreme scarcity and who therefore are among those with the most at stake in matters of political-economic transformation). The contribution of children and adolescents to the political forms of such innovations ought not be discounted. Youth agency in politics is frequently the by-product of the construction of childhood in highly volatile state-formations.

The political agency of children (including participation in strife, resistance, victimization, and social witness) may find material basis in the economic realities and general life conditions in which they live, as is the case with adult political agency. Samuel Martinez highlights the threat that poverty alone presents to core human rights, including individual political and civil liberties (Martinez, 1996). In conjunction with scarcity, displacement, criminalization, and civil abandonment, poverty may be identified as the root political-economic factor alienating the street children of *Lafanmi Selavi* from their civil liberties. From this bottom-up vantage, adolescent political agency is understood to arise from children's identification with certain human rights, and a realization of those rights denied. When *Lafanmi Selavi* was invited to participate in the 1997 Youth Summit in the United States, two

young girls from the *Tifi Lafanmi Selavi* project were selected to attend. They identified school, a home, and health care as the absolute rights of all children; rights that could not be claimed by Haiti's street child population.

Adolescent mobilization for democracy in Haiti originates from the children's identification with fundamental human rights denied them for whatever reason, thus provoking the initiation of civil challenges to state legitimacy. In 1996, the administration of *Lafanmi Selavi* established *Radyo Timoun*, a low-frequency, all-children's radio station, broadcasting from the main facility compound in downtown Port-au-Prince. The stated intention of the station was to give *Lafanmi*'s street children a voice in the national debate surrounding children's issues. With well over 80% of Haiti's population functionally illiterate, and in a political climate which affords the Haitian press few freedoms, radio provides the broadest base for the dissemination of information, especially to the poorer classes – the intended recipients of *Radyo Timoun*'s broadcasts. The station has expanded since 1996 to fourteen hours of programming a day, and includes a decidedly unpolished format of extensive in-depth news reports, social analysis, music, and commentary. The foci of the commentaries are clearly influenced by the liberation politics advocated at *Lafanmi* – expressions such as “bougeoisie” and “International Monetary Fund restrictions” are employed liberally, and a recently-aired special addressed the plight of children in Haiti's prison system.⁸ The young staff broadcasts daily commentaries on a range of volatile political issues, from the new National Police, to on-going discussions of why education should be free. Eighteen-year-old Laronce, who arrived at *Lafanmi Selavi* in 1991, talked on the air about his life on the street, and his recognition that he was somehow being socially deprived of rights that should be accorded him: “I remember when I was living on the streets. My heart would break when I saw other children going to school and participating in activities myself and other children living on the streets could never do. It's humiliating, because people who see you on the street treat you like an animal, and you can do nothing to defend yourself. Instead you feel very sad, and the sadness never leaves you.....We need laws to force the government to take care of these children. They have a right to live like children who have parents. I would like other street children to have the chance to become the man I am today. I say this in the hope that children in all countries can live”.

Not overlooked by the children at *Lafanmi Selavi* is the contradiction implicit in the promise of democratization and the failure of that goal to actualize. One 12-year-old boy said in a recent *Radyo Timoun* broadcast, “We need to be able to freely elect a government that's non-corrupt. That's a fundamental right, and only a non-corrupt government will prevent the killings by the army [and the *makouts*]. My family was beaten and raped, and many of us were murdered in the streets by the *makouts*”.

Public challenges to the legitimacy of Haitian political authority has frequently drawn the state into repressive activity. Since 1994, I have documented several notable instances of *makoutist* repression against *Lafanmi Selavi*. A 1991 firebombing killed five of the children; and a second firebombing in 1992 injured scores of the children and destroyed an office building which housed the children's dossiers - the only real evidence of their identity ever compiled. For twenty-two months beginning in 1992, paramilitary *attaches* rented a house adjacent to *Lafanmi Selavi*, regularly entering the orphanage compound brandishing automatic weapons and machetes, beating and harassing the boys, and pressing them into domestic servitude at their rented house.

With his restoration to the Haitian presidency in 1994, Aristide demobilized and then later disbanded the army, and by default interrupted (without completely ending) the activities of *attaché*

groups who relied on the mentorship and support of military authority. In July 1995, a US-recruited and -trained National Police was established to maintain civilian order in Haiti. Drawn largely from the ranks of the now-defunct military, they were envisioned to be the cornerstone of the country's new democracy. Predictably, the force has been fraught with violations of both civil and human rights, ranging from the beating, torturing, and killing of suspects to the "blind" discharging of weapons into peaceful crowds (Drummond, 1997).

Moreover, the National Police are an ineffective defense against continuing *makoutist* terror. On 11 September 1997, I witnessed and documented an *attaché* intimidation of *Lafanmi Selavi* which illustrates the point. The incident took place at the *Lafanmi Selavi* car wash on Route Nationale 1 in Port-au-Prince. The car wash was set up in 1996 in order to provide voluntary, paid day-work for the children of the orphanage, as well as for any street child who is interested in making a day-wage. Late in the night, an unknown number of demobilized soldiers, former members of FAd'H (the now-disbanded *Forces Armees d'Haiti*²), tore a triangular section of sheathing from the roof of the building with the intent of threatening the children of *Lafanmi Selavi* in order to have certain ends met by the René Preval government. The inventory of stolen items included a hot water heater and supplies of motor oil and transmission fluid. But the theft was secondary to the greater political vandalism and the written threats that accompanied it. Oil and grease were smeared over the clean outside stucco walls of the facility, as well as in and throughout the office of the car wash. Most disturbing were several threatening messages written in various media. Several were inscribed on the walls with charcoal and then smeared with motor oil to make their erasure difficult. The messages were variously in denunciation of the leadership of the new National Police, and professed allegiance to Dany Toussen (a former army officer and known *makout*). All of the messages were signed "FAd'H". The principal threat of the messages originated in a demand that Aristide convince Preval to pay their pensions (suspended with the abolition of the army for human rights abuses), and concluded with a promise to *boule* (literally, "to boil", or in this case, "to burn") *Lafanmi Selavi* if the demand was not met. Interestingly, the vandals left their threats in media which all suggest flammability or fire - kerosene, grease, motor oil, and charcoal: a subtle and intentional underscoring of the message. As I inspected the scene, I was warned to be watchful of explosives, which were frequently left by *attaches* at the scenes of their assaults as boobytraps for the National Police who would investigate. There were none. The *attaché* demands were in fact never met, and curiously the threatened firebombing of the orphanage was left unactualized as well.

While typical of the state violence against child agents of democratization in 1990s Haiti, these cases adequately emphasize the high level of political importance accorded this particular institution. *Lafanmi Selavi* is *specifically* targeted as an institution of liberation theology, its children are *specifically* targeted as active agents of political discourse, and its educational program is *specifically* targeted as promoting insurrection. Such high-intensity justifications of political violence lend credence to the argument that the children at *Lafanmi Selavi* were a considerable threat to the longevity of the Cedras government, and continue to be a tacit antagonism to the anti-democratic elements in Haitian politics today.

While the *Lafanmi Selavi* program is promoted as a social haven providing children protection from the abuse, battery, and exposure characteristic of life on the streets of Port-au-Prince, there are glaring contradictions and problems intrinsic to the facility's professed mission as a locus both for the children's security as well as their political voice. Not the least of which is the question of how the support of child involvement in dangerous political mobilization can contribute to the specific conditions under which children are nurtured and protected. Clearly, as suggested, *Lafanmi Selavi*

recognizes child identity as legitimate ground upon which the fight for political-economic justice in Haiti may be waged. In what respects then are children, as symbols of what is at stake in contests over cultural identity, pivotal in the structuring of a Haitian democratic order?

As a result of their socialization within the theo-political paradigm of *Lafanmi Selavi*, children are vocal participants in the democratization discourse, not its passive witnesses. And in this respect, these children need to be viewed as active *agents* of change, rather than as merely spectators to or victims of violent government suppression. Social refusal to acknowledge the political potency of children is not just manifest in the literature on child rights, but such refusal is also increasingly argued to be detrimental to the understanding of certain cultural realities of state formation. Sharon Stephens (1995) has argued that “compared to [the] extensive literature on gender, explorations of ‘the child’ and its structural role in modern society are still relatively underdeveloped”. Pamela Reynolds (1995) advises that to ignore youth interpretations of political oppression is tantamount to demeaning their contributions to social opposition, and to deny their inventiveness inherent in processes of change. Further, Tobias Hecht, speaking specifically with regards to a Brazilian context, contends that the denial of child agency in greater socio-political contexts is the result of de-humanizations and de-legitimizations that have come to be socially embraced. He also points to the consequences of such denials:

Stripped of human agency and placed in a pantheon of faceless victimhood, street children become objects in a largely adult debate that does more to enhance the status of those who crusade in their behalf than to shed light on the myriad ways children in fact live violence (1998).

The children at *Lafanmi Selavi* are structuring the design of their cultural as well as their political identities from the precedents of the past, participating in political discourse, and clearly stating the terms upon which each will express his or her intentions in contemporary Haitian society. The lyrics of a song written by Ti Sony (the lead singer of the orphanage musical group) translate as follows:

Forget, we will never forget.
It's freedom we're asking for, freedom.
Why can't we have freedom?

Why did Aristide have three years of coup d'etat?
Because he was struggling for us to have justice.
Since he has returned, we must say democracy lives.

Why, when the street children suffer, don't you join hands with them?
If you do that, you won't lose anything.
You must join hands with them, for them
To be recognized as people with dignity.

Why did they kill Father Jean Marie Vincent?¹⁰
Because he wanted us to have democracy.
Today we must call for freedom.

Despite repeated violent repression, and the unquestioned freedom to come and go from the orphanage as they please, nearly all of the children at *Lafanmi Selavi* choose to stay. They

acknowledge that they are participatory in Haiti's transition to democratic order, and recognize that the basis of their social empowerment is their membership in the *Lafanmi* program - empowerment that the children themselves frequently acknowledge they did not have on the street. One young boy, Pierre, related in 1997 that "[w]hen I used to be at my house, I had nothing, nothing that kept me from the streets.... I had to steal because I was living on the street....I went to seek help and found it at *Lafanmi Selavi*. They showed me what I can do as one person for Haiti's tomorrow". Another boy commented that, "I lived in misery [on the street]. I had no one to help me, only Father Aristide and some others. They say that I can work for liberty, I don't have to steal" (personal correspondence, 1997).

The children at *Lafanmi Selavi* are developing a unique child identity which is shaped by their own sense of individual rights, the influences of a politically-active peer group, and their solidarity as both displaced street children and political targets. Many of the children recognize a continuity in political consciousness and action both laterally (among their comrades) and longitudinally (through generations). Most interviews thus far indicate this strong sense of solidarity among peers, while the life histories of some are revealing that political activity (civil disobedience, demonstrations, church-based empowerment, community organization, radio-based vocal dissension, illegalized labor cooperation) was common among their parents and older kin under the Duvaliers.

Leigh Binford (1996) is correct in arguing that anthropology has not been at the forefront of the study of collective and political violence. Reportage from human rights and non-governmental organizations (which represent the backbone of traditional reportage on political violence) has accumulated data which is tragically limited with respect to the fact that investigation begins at the point of victimization - political targets are introduced to a general audience as beginning with a deprivation of freedom, security, or life without just cause. The introduction of more detailed personal biography enters into the commentary only when it may lend some insight into the motivations of the oppressors. Such selective inclusions and omissions can only contribute to oversimplistic dichotomies between oppressor and oppressed, and between perpetrator and victim; others are cast as merely witnesses to the violations, their agency in the discourse either ignored or denied. Discussed in categories as shallow as 'clergy', 'union leader', 'peasant', 'activist', or in this case, 'street child', the protagonists of the drama unfolding in the data remain little more than two-dimensional stick figures, their social identity characterized in the literature as dehistoricized (Binford, 1996) - what Wolf would call, *a people without history*.

If there is an anthropological role in addressing state violence and human rights abuses, it is where those rights and their abuses by the state or its proxies are a function of cultural conflict. Resolution to these conflicts must be sought through the situation of human well-being above a particular ideological or cultural normative as defined by the state polity in question (Doughty, 1988). With rising child agency in political discourse, anthropology must be willing to adopt a preferential option for the study of the specific conditions under which children are nurtured and protected, rather than battered and exposed. Cultural rights, including health care, housing, work, protection against hunger, and other economic and social necessities are as important to the discourse as civil and political rights, if not more so (Martinez, 1996). Regularly and predictably violated in certain nation-states, abuses of cultural rights constitute exactly what Scheper-Hughes has called the *violence of everyday life*; and child agency in dangerous political mobilization is often a consequent of the structural compromise of those rights by the state or its proxies. *Lafanmi Selavi* may at this point be introduced as a material and symbolic space, not only as a salvo to the everyday violence of street

life; not only as an engine for child participation in the culture of Haitian politics; but also as a terrain of social witness to and child agency in the changing state of Haitian nationhood.

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NOTES

¹ *Lavalas* is a kreyol expression which translates literally as “cleansing flood” and refers to the torrent of popular support which swept Aristide into office in 1990. More recently, the term has come to embrace the much broader idea of Haiti’s greater liberal reconstruction.

² *Tijî Lafanmi Selavi* was added to the orphanage program in 1996, providing services to *restaveks* - adolescent, female estate domestics (frequently abused in their host homes) - and to girls living on the street as well.

³ Solidarity among the street children at *Lafanmi Selavi* is often expressed through the sharing of food. In 1995 I was joining the children for their supper, an activity that I always look forward to because the children are rarely as conversational amongst themselves as when they are enjoying their dinners. Mealtime rules at the orphanage require that all children refrain from touching their food prior to the recitation of communal grace. I watched Ti Frankel’s plate taken from him by one of the orphanage staff because he had eaten a spoonful of food during the prayer. Although the staff member intended to return the plate to the child’s place after grace, a boy sitting next to Ti Frankel was not so sure. Before the prayer had ended, the boy had emptied half of the food from his plate onto the table in front of his friend.

⁴ Haiti is 95% deforested. The reasons are many. With the state in economic collapse over recent years, a hungry peasantry has stripped the land of its tree cover in order to plant rapid-growth (but soil depleting) foodstuffs. Furthermore, remaining trees have been felled by the rural poor for charcoal production, the country’s primary fuel source. The deforestation of Haiti is not a new phenomenon however. Once covered with dense forestation, the trees were rapidly disappearing by the late 1800s; by 1954, Haiti had a tree cover of less than 9%. Today, less than 5% of the land area bears any canopy of mention. If the trend continues, Haiti’s remaining forests will vanish within the next fifty years. The loss of forested land has a dreadful domino-effect on Haitian agriculture. Without the network of arbor root support, the soil is rapidly eroding. As a result, rivers flow in torrents, making effective irrigation an impossibility (Cobb, 1987). *Lafanmi Selavi*’s agricultural project is an attempt to ‘reconnect’ street children to the land, and to the politico-economic lessons of Haitian farming. Once a week, voluntary work teams of street children from the orphanage are accompanied by an agronomist and local farmers to a parcel of farmland that *Lafanmi* owns in Tabarre, a short ride from Port-au-Prince. The children cultivate fruit, trees, bananas, okra, corn, and sweet potatoes, and in the process learn to till the soil and irrigate by digging canals. The produce of the cultivations helps to feed the over 400 children at *Lafanmi Selavi*, and helps to reinforce the principle that Haiti’s farmers should be able to reap the benefits of their labor.

⁵ This is an extrapolation of the *Lavalas* slogan “*Tout moun se moun*”, or “All people are people of worth”.

⁶ In a largely illiterate society like Haiti, verbal imagery becomes an effective means for the transmission of political ideas, and Aristide is unarguably a competent weaver of metaphor. During the course of his election and subsequent presidency, Aristide argued that only the wealthy elite and politically powerful (including the army) were ‘seated around the table’ (*bò tabla*) of prosperity, while Haiti’s majority, the poor, were kept ‘beneath the table’ (*anba tabla*), feeding on the scraps that fell from the meal above them. Aristide continues to argue that social justice in Haiti cannot be achieved unless all Haitians are seated at the table together, equally sharing in the wealth of the nation. The symbol of the *Lavalas* party is still a large table, around which sit a businessman, a farmer, a middle-class woman, and a poor market woman holding a child.

⁷ “Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti”. The French acronym FRAPH is aurally similar to the verb “to hit or strike”.

⁸ I wish to thank Pacifica journalist Lyn Duff for the contributions her work has made to this analysis of *Radyo Timoun*.

⁹ “The Armed Forces of Haiti”; the Haitian army.

¹⁰ A prominent Roman Catholic priest, a liberation theologian, and a close friend of Aristide, Vincent was shot and killed outside his home on 28 August 1994, presumably by army gunmen. The assassination prompted US State Department spokesman Michael McCurry to level a direct challenge to the Cedras coup government: “[Y]our crimes only increase our outrage and strengthen our resolve to rid Haiti of your abuses. Make no mistake, outrages such as these reinforce the determination of the international community to take all necessary means to bring about the early restoration of democracy to Haiti”. Roland Perusse (1995) points out that by “all necessary means” McCurry meant a UN-sanctioned intervention. Less than a month after the killing of Vincent, on 19 September 1994, the first contingent of 3000 US combat troops entered Haiti as part of Operation Uphold Democracy, a UN-sanctioned invasion which would ultimately lead to the restoration of Aristide to the Haitian presidency.