

**FACTIONAL TERROR, PARAMILITARISM, AND CIVIL WAR IN HAITI:  
THE VIEW FROM PORT-AU-PRINCE, 1994-2004**

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## **Abstract**

### **FACTIONAL TERROR, PARAMILITARISM, AND CIVIL WAR IN HAITI:**

#### **THE VIEW FROM PORT-AU-PRINCE, 1994-2004**

Almost ten years after a U.S.-led United Nations invasion of the country to restore a democratically elected president to office, civil violence in Haiti has escalated to unprecedented proportions as Haitian politics have again devolved into a street fight over local vacuums of power left by departing international forces, a failed democratic electoral processes, and an exiled president. The structural instability of Haitian government has been accompanied by overt terror on the streets of the capital, where brazen, heavily-armed partisans are again adopting arson, disappearance, and summary execution as the lexicon of political difference. Fragmented paramilitary arms of the National Police are the principal state forces charged with the task of *ap toufe sibat* (“choking off”) the violence of a rebel uprising that began in February 2004. The result has been the transformation of Port-au-Prince into a warzone, where civilians caught in the crossfire are modifying their social and cultural relations to the state and to one another in the interest of individual, family, and community survival. All of this amid the most abject poverty in the Western Hemisphere.

This paper constructs a theoretical model for studying Haiti’s current civil war that calls for a deep ethnographic situation of the violence, one that draws on a comprehensive political history, social analysis, and cultural contextualization in assessing the changing relations within and among factions of the Haitian state and civil society since the end of the most recent coup d’etat in 1994. By focusing on the structural and cultural roots of political conflict in Haiti, this paper examines the interrelationship of rural decline, the formation of repressive political structures, street violence, and the development of the country’s interior security forces. It is informed by the author’s ethnographic research in Haiti between 1994 and 2004.

[KEYWORDS: Haiti, violence, terror, police, ethnography, theory]

## **Factional Terror, Paramilitarism, and Civil War in Haiti:**

### **The View from Port-au-Prince, 1994-2004**

When I arrived on the street in Port-au-Prince in early March of 2004, most of the city was still largely outside the control of the government. A rebel insurgency movement made up of former members of the now-disbanded Haitian army (*Forces Armées d'Haïti*, FADH) had successfully unseated President Jean-Bertrand Aristide who won re-election to office in 2000 amid opposition electoral boycotts, disputed results, and accusations of fraud. With Aristide's resignation and exile to the Central African Republic and later South Africa, state paramilitary police forces have fanned out into the capital to hunt down armed supporters of Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party. A concentrated rebel effort is now underway to reinstitute the FADH, with recruitment of new soldiers and their outfitting with new uniforms financed by wealthy families with an interest in restoring the pre-Aristide status quo. Factions of heavily-armed Aristide loyalists calling themselves *chimere*<sup>1</sup> are also on the offensive, and the city has descended into violent anarchy. The Haitian National Police (*Police Nationale d'Haïti*, PNH), routed by the rebels just about everywhere in the northern two thirds of the country, fire their weapons indiscriminately into civilian crowds, often in the most destitute of the capital's slum districts.<sup>2</sup> Arson, riot, looting, and summary execution have once again formed the lexicon of political conflict on the street. Vigilante bands and entrepreneur assassins roam the Port-au-Prince slums of Bel Air, Cité Soleil, and La Saline with Uzis, semiautomatic handguns, combat-grade shotguns, assault rifles, bayonets, whips, and machetes. Amid the chaos and a state of siege on the streets, and in the complete absence of legal authority, political scores are being settled alongside of personal animosities being avenged. Summary executions are being carried out on roadsides, the bodies littering the streets with single bullet holes through their foreheads. Dozens of others are being killed in less formal ways, their bodies machinegunned, hacked to death, decapitated, mutilated, burned alive. Some victims of the conflict

have been disemboweled, some strangled with their own underwear. There are rumors of a young girl from the militantly pro-Aristide Citè Soleil slum having been raped to death by rebels after the departure of Aristide. By October of 2004, pro-Aristide gangs had begun the systematic beheading of PNH officers killed in factional clashes under the rubric of “Operation Baghdad” (though unlike similar beheadings in Iraq, the decapitations appear to be post-mortem and are not filmed). The war has come to Port-au-Prince, and it is not being fought around the civil society as much as it is being fought directly through it. At the time of this writing, there have been over three hundred Haitians killed in factional clashes since the fighting began in earnest in late February 2004.

While the government has imposed a curfew and urges residents of the capital to seek shelter indoors when shooting is heard, the truth of the matter is that when a bullet is fired in Port-au-Prince there is little difference between inside and outside; here, in the most volatile slums, most homes are made of cardboard and tin. Haiti’s violent history of successive coups d’etat has shown how political conflict can become a civilian bloodbath when the fighting reaches the capital, even when people do stay indoors. There appears to be no end to the violence in sight. Though the rebel army had pledged to lay down their arms now that a Brazilian-led U.N. peacekeeping force has arrived to reestablish order, they have shown little real interest in doing so, even as the foreign troops conduct disarmament and policing operations throughout the country. Outfitted in new fatigue uniforms and brandishing automatic weapons, members of the “New Army” depart daily from their Petionville headquarters and descend on the capital down the hill in a show of force intended to quell the pro-Aristide gangs and assuage the concerns of a business elite growing impatient with the insecurity and the toll it has taken on their commercial interests.

The destruction in the capital is being superimposed onto an urban landscape already devastated by the crushing poverty of the Western Hemisphere’s most destitute economy. Long the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti was further crippled by the floodwater

obliteration attributed to Hurricane Jeanne which struck the island in September 2004 and claimed over 3,000 lives while leaving 200,000 homeless. In the northern city of Gonaïves – the first city to be routed by the rebels in February 2004 – the floodwaters have caused a hunger crisis like never before seen. Mothers pick through the muck to salvage fallen fruit, washing it in septic water before feeding it to their starving and emaciated children. Men chop away with machetes at collapsed shanties, searching for what remains of their families' homes. In the third week of October, some in the north had not eaten for three weeks. The New Army has since stepped forward in Gonaïves, brandishing their weapons at international relief workers who they charge are ineffective at the distribution of food aid, which is increasingly looted from World Food Program warehouses. Everyone involved in the relief effort agrees that insecurity is the greatest obstacle to feeding the victims of the floods.

In Port-au-Prince, where the hurricane “merely” resulted in the overflow of raw sewage into the homes of the poor living in low-lying slums, street boys zombified by their glue-sniffing habit and suffering from oozing vapor burns around their noses and mouths sleep against the wall surrounding the National Cemetery. That wall is itself scarred with the dimpled craters of gunfire, and is covered with a cacophony of vicious political graffiti and counter-graffiti, variously in condemnation or support of the deposed president. One of the street girls congregating there in March 2004 told me bluntly, “I am beyond hungry. I am already dead.” Inside the cemetery, tombs have been looted, caskets smashed, corpses strewn about. I stoop down to examine the splintered coffin of a child, wedged between two mausoleums. Some of the small corpse is inside, but much of it has been scattered about the space, here and there among the bones of many others. In these times, the desecrations are as often the work of political partisans targeting the tombs of opposing families as they are that of the common grave-robber, or less frequently still, the necromancer.

In the Bel Air slum I step through gutters filled with raw sewage mixing with coagulated blood from an earlier street shooting. The upside-down shells of burned out cars line streets obstructed by heaps of smoldering garbage, some as high as ten feet. In one such car the charred skeleton of the driver sits bolt upright in his seat, his blackened skull grimacing at the Armageddon playing out before him. In the first days after the departure of the deposed president, bodies and pieces of bodies in varying states of decay could be found stuffed in trash-clogged drainage culverts and thrown like so much litter against the side of the city morgue. Formidable roadblocks of burning tires, often manned by armed and masked factions, occasionally by street kids, stop traffic and pedestrians in search of victims and valuables. The cityscape is a wrecked vision, the absurd and impossible but nonetheless real consequence of a profound civil destruction imposed on preexisting urban disorder. The war in the capital has left chaos and mayhem in the middle of a slum constructed not by logic or symmetry but by human necessity and the struggle for space in which to live, eat, love, reproduce, and die. For the poorest Haitians who depend everyday on the city for life itself, the ruination of Port-au-Prince writ large has completely shattered an already cracked mirage of an ordered and just world, as it has compelled entire communities to again bear witness to the carnage of machinegun politics. Since February 2004, spectacular acts of violence in the capital, a place where over one-and-half million people are crammed into the least amount of space per capita of any other city in the Americas, have made close to one-quarter of the city's population direct witnesses to and thus participants in the violence. Even this troubling statistic betrays the reality of tens of thousands more who in one way or another are suffering because of the incidentals of war.

Somehow, Haitians manage to maintain a semblance of normalcy even as their social and cultural worlds are crumbling around them. Street children recover from the loss of their friends to gunplay by expressing firm and certain knowledge of their understanding of what has happened to

them. They impose a logic born of the war-torn conditions that frame their lives of poverty, scarcity, fear, and death. Some say that their friends were taken to be made into *zombi*. Others say that they were *manje* (eaten, consumed, exhausted, destroyed, disappeared) by monsters, which is not so far from the truth. But they also recover their comrades by speaking their names and telling stories of their good friendship and humanity. Social and cultural lives go on. Women give birth, vendors sell candies and cigarettes on street corners, welders ply their trade on the sidewalks in front of their shops, *tap-taps*<sup>3</sup> carry passengers between markets and homes, children make their way to school, street kids wipe the hoods of passing cars. Laborers lay cinderblock around a memorial commemorating Haiti's two hundred years of independence from French rule; 2004 marked Haiti's bicentennial as well as its descent into anarchy and war. They are seemingly undeterred by the bullet holes that already mar their work from yesterday. In these and many other ways, Haitians in Port-au-Prince are demonstrating the resilience, resistance, and creativity that anthropologists are increasingly realizing are qualities characteristic of communities transformed by violent conflict. The business of everyday life must go on even in a civil warzone, where a façade of the ordinary masks the reality of lives lived under truly extraordinary circumstances.

### **Beyond Bodies and Fetishes: The Meaning of Violence**

How is anthropology to contribute to an understanding of the *meaning* of the political violence in the Haitian capital today, violence of a type that is so absolutely pervasive throughout the slums that constitute most of Port-au-Prince that everyday life simply cannot be lived without some engagement, or at least negotiation, of it? The problem is as much one of method as it is of theory, insofar as it implies a request for a reliable ethnographic method for approaching violence as much as it is a request for a hermeneutics of violence itself. The challenges of doing ethnography in a warzone are often prohibitive enough to preclude most researchers from even trying, which has left many of us who work at the epicenters of conflict without the fundamental methodological tools

to so do safely and effectively. Ethnographers of violence have increasingly bemoaned this lack of field method for studying the lived reality of conflict, and have begun to craft new strategies for dealing with it in the field (Nash 1976 Bourgois 1990; Peritore 1990; Sluka 1990, 1995; Feldman 1991; Nordstrom and Martin 1992; Lee 1995; Robben and Nordstrom 1995; Daniel 1996; Nordstrom 1997, 2004; Kovats-Bernat 2001, 2002). But even once a method has been established, how can we confidently use it to comment on the meanings of violent social processes that are still unfolding? This last problem should really be a small one for anthropology, as our discipline alone among the social sciences is charged with in situ descriptions and articulations of meanings behind immediate cultural processes that are ‘in the making.’ But it is the intensely oppressive nature of violence, and its ability to absolutely contaminate an entire community, that makes it fundamentally unlike all other fluctuating aspects of social life that we study. The civil war in Haiti today serves as an apt illustration of the problem. A disorderly and disordered violence has reduced the country to a state of emergency where ethnography is complicated by “sensory and narrative distortion” and “surrealistic particularities” (Feldman 1995: 228) that make the country, and the capital that is now at the center of the crisis, resistant to ethnographic truth-telling. The black smoke of a thousand unchecked fires chokes city streets and limits visibility, gunfire barks out in sputters at unpredictable moments, schoolchildren leap over gelatinous puddles of blood and mud, street kids are paid by gangs to keep tire barricades burning, bodies long since cold and still are nonetheless furiously hacked by machetes as they lie in the street, and market women step around the corpses, their burdens borne expertly atop their heads in the Haitian way. These are hardly ideal circumstances amid which to conduct a traditional kind of ethnography.

Under such circumstances, individual perceptions, the actions based upon them, and in fact all of social life is bent to the service of human survival and community sustainability, rendering the validity and usefulness of otherwise decontextualized and matter-of-fact ethnographic observations

highly suspect. An alternative cultural code continuously adapted to prevailing circumstances, a sort of reactive social coping, takes over in fields fraught with violence, for the subjects and the researchers of anthropological investigation. The immediacy and graphic nature of violent conflict skew objectivity and seduce the ethnographer into believing that the meaning of the events unfolding is *embodied by* the violent acts themselves, rather than seeing those violent acts as *embedded within* a larger process of war that culminates rather than erupts in acts of profound brutality that produce lasting effects for entire communities. The real impact of social violence penetrates far deeper than the bodies rendered and transformed by acts of aggression themselves. The very immediacy of violence in dangerous fields – concretized by gunfire, intimidation, corpses out of place, burned-out autos, grimacing skulls, threat of arrest, blood in the street – distorts the social reality and can misinform, confuse, or paralyze ethnographic analysis through the creation of “feeble fictions in the guise of realism...flattening contradiction and systematizing chaos” (Taussig 1987: 132). The result is an “epistemic murk” that extends the problem of ethnographic observation and representation beyond the merely philosophical – obscurity becomes a “high-powered medium of domination” (Taussig 1987: 121), compelling the ethnographic gaze to fixate on isolated, patently manifest acts of war and terror – troop movements, summary executions, riot events, massacres, armed clashes, arrests, beatings, torchings, lynchings. A great deal of anthropological accounts of war and violence fall prey to this seduction, this fetishization of violent acts. The danger here lies in the flawed assumption that soldiers, rioters, executioners, torturers, their weapons, and their victims are the very *embodiment of violence* and the only data that matters. This assumption is fed by “official” accounts of war in the news media, embedded journalism, the after-action reports, and the formal histories of conflict that confine their attention to the acts of decision makers, soldiers, battle scenarios, and technologies, rather than on the longer-term social impact that war has on the everyday lives of the people it is being fought through. The very instruments of terror

(soldiers, executioners, torturers, rifles, machineguns, napalm, machetes, grenades, landmines, rocks, fists, batons, firebombs) and their targets (bodies, buildings, and landscapes) are indeed aspects of war, but they do not in and of themselves embody and isolate it from the fabric of community life. Perpetrators, weapons, and victims are embedded in a wider set of political histories and social relations that extend spatially and temporally far beyond the moments of bloodletting, fire, and destruction. Carolyn Nordstrom writes that:

Before I was caught in these riots [in Sri Lanka in 1983], media and literary accounts had taught me to think of communal violence as consisting only of “rioters” and “victims,” and of riots as being explosive one-day events. These accounts did not convey the fact that there is no escaping the riots – for anyone. It never occurred to me...that riots involved looking for nonexistent food and medicines long since burned and looted; that people “of the rioter’s side” risked their lives to protect people “on the other side”; that young children were caught in the violence, standing with eyes too wide, wondering what to do and what was happening to their world – and that these experiences were as much the meat of political violence as the rioters attacking the victims. [2004: 29-30]

The present conflict in Iraq brings Nordstrom’s point into stark relief. American news accounts of the human toll of the war fixates on the over 1,200 U.S. troops killed since combat operations began in March 2003, rarely mentioning the tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians killed during the same period. This before one considers the displaced, the homeless, the wounded, the crippled, and the amputated; and even this before one considers the devastating impact that the war will have on market systems, family life, community relations, utilities distribution, education, health care, and more for generations to come. Nordstrom describes this secondary political process of war and conflict as “erasure,” “deletion,” “editing out”; a process of “making things invisible” in the interest

of limiting the crisis to chosen embodiments of it in order to make it strategically palatable to certain audiences. She points out that much of the meaning of war lies in these unanalyzed domains of social life on the frontlines:

...Violence is set in motion with physical carnage, but it doesn't stop there.

Violence reconfigures its victims and the social milieu that hosts them. It isn't a passing phenomenon that momentarily challenges a stable system, leaving a scar but no lasting effects. Violence becomes a determining fact in shaping reality as people *will* know it, in the future. So while a study of violence may begin with direct and immediate carnage, it shouldn't end there...Researchers are still in scientific infancy in charting the progress of cultural trauma on the body politic.

We are far from knowing if cultural wounds lead to ongoing cycles of social instability and violence. [2004: 59-60]

How are we to write legitimate ethnographies of social and cultural milieus so profoundly distorted by violence? Can and should it be done at all? The ethical implications of these questions are hardly negligible. After all, how representative of the facts can any ethnography of violence be if it is carried out in a field fraught with the ambiguities intrinsic to a warzone? The answer surely does not lie in a structural analysis that posits violence as a momentary, inexplicable lapse in the organic solidarity of the social whole. Indeed, our studies of the impact of war and conflict on cultural worlds reveals anything but enduring, static social structures that revert to internal harmony in the aftermath of the fighting. What is needed is a recognition that when war comes home, it is not simply an interruption of local norms and behavior that return to themselves when the fighting ends, but a dynamic modifier of community identity that, incredibly and so often, endures in the midst and aftermath of violent conflict by way of creative adaptation.

In warzones like Port-au-Prince, the ethnographic task is thus twofold: first to identify and record the sites, acts, agents, and artifacts of the violence itself (the embodiments and fetishes of conflict), and then to contextualize those elements in relation to the conflict as a whole with the goal of extracting some degree of cultural meaning from the community torn apart and reconstituting itself throughout and after the crisis. This is no easy task. It requires that we not only work under hostile research conditions of danger and terror, but that we follow the antecedents to and the ripple effects of the war beyond the frontlines, the slums, and the killing fields and into the homes, the markets, the neighborhoods, the families, and the communities that are torn apart and reconstituted for years after the fighting has ended. That means that that our task is as much an ethnographic and historical one as it is anthropological.

Like any set of events in a dynamic system, violence cannot be understood except in its specific contexts. War is flux, not static; it defies theoretical reduction to discrete, isolated events and embodiments. It exists as a set of complex, ever-transforming social relations. Like most if not all other categories of anthropological inquiry, violence is only understandable in its situational relationship to histories of power, extant material conditions, and ideological superstructures that give anchorage to the cultural meanings of individual acts of violence, and offer empirical benchmarks for cross-cultural study. Put another way, every act of violence is embedded in a complex material, structural, and cultural reality that must be elucidated by way of thorough ethnographies written from the level of combatants and sufferers, not policy makers and strategists. The meanings of violence are expressed in social action, and cannot be effectively extracted for ethnographic study after the fighting is over any more than the social fact of kinship can be extracted for study outside the bounds of family relations, or economics outside the bounds of the market. As a social contaminant, violence acts to transform customary relations and community norms, and its pervasion of social life in the context of war means that it cannot be filtered out of

human experience to access some fictive cultural “real” believed to lie beneath. To be studied as anthropological phenomena, violence, warfare, and conflict must be experienced and recorded firsthand in the same manner that we study other aspects of social and cultural life – in context – because it is so inseparable from human experience. The consequences of locating violence in this way, in situ and at the theoretical and methodological center of study, are ones that bear directly on the mission of the discipline. If we are unable or unwilling to orient anthropology to the study of violence where it is in process (as we have done for virtually all other objects/subjects of our studies), then perhaps we have reached the end of the ethnographic project. Though I don’t believe that we have.

### **Conflict as Dialectic: Studying Violence as a Contextualized Social Process**

In her critical development of an ethnography of war that seeks to track patterns and networks of interest, profit, and power “across cultural landscapes, sovereign borders, and theoretical domains,” Nordstrom (2004: 3) offers a model for the study of violence as a radiating *process*, rather than as an event occurring in a particular circumscribed locale.<sup>4</sup> Such a model invites the researcher to consider the larger causes and consequences of war and the diverse interests of its multivariate protagonists, all of which transcend the immediate experience of the acts of violence themselves. Nordstrom’s approach challenges the Hobbesian perspective that war is a wholly destructive, innately human enterprise that can be confined to a particular time and place and limited to the actions of stereotyped, binary-opposed warring factions. Her model casts violence as part of a dialectical movement that also stimulates creativity in rebuilding devastated social worlds, albeit under the least desirable circumstances. That perspective resonates with my own field experiences of war in Haiti. Patterns of innovative thought and behavior are spontaneously created by communities living with the specter of social violence. The generation of tacit cultural meaning

systems – oblique innuendoes, rumors, symbolic gesture sets, strategic silences – these form a small part of the adaptive sensorium that members of communities innovate and deploy in surviving war.

While working in the plazas of Port-au-Prince, I could speak freely with street children one moment, and perhaps even take notes. But the next moment, suddenly under the scrutiny of paramilitary agents, we would have to *pa dan nou* – “shut our mouths,” hide the notes, and let the anxious, sweaty silence that now prevailed bespeak the volumes of data that hours of testimony could never provide. Because “silence can operate as a survival strategy” (Green 1995: 118), it is not simply a symptom of fear but is an aspect of cultural reality, and as such can be a valuable piece of datum. Silence, like rumor, constitutes a form of unique cultural adaptation that ethnography is well-poised to access and interpret. Neighborhood rumors of an act of political rape contribute to a social discourse of violence not unlike other forms of testimony that ethnographers routinely gather in the field in cobbling together community narratives of market life, kinship, or religion. Rumors say something *meaningful* about violence by presenting embellished or censored or otherwise reconfigured versions of fact as seen from the perspective of individual social agents. Rumors are a creative means of “remaking a world” (Das, et al. 2001) devastated by conflict.

Nordstrom’s model generates a sophisticated approach to war ethnography by recognizing that an entire host of actors are directly and indirectly implicated in cultures of conflict: foreign journalists, humanitarian aid workers, civilian collaborators, extrajudicial death squads, informers, profiteers, military advisors, arms dealers, health workers, tactical strategists, looters, bandits, opportunistic assassins, ethnographers. And these before we consider the street children, market women, laborers, teachers, students, peasants, merchants, priestesses, healers and other civilian noncombatants who bear witness to, mediate, negotiate, survive, or are collateral victims of the crisis. Seen in this way, violence is “essentially polysemic; it speaks with and through myriad and often contradictory voices” (1997: 45), often producing a cacophony of competing discourses about

the conflict at hand and how it should best be interpreted. The meanings and relevance to be taken from violent conflict are easily obscured by a complicated web of agendas, motivations, intentions, goals, incentives, justifications, political perspectives, emotional states, comportment to structures of power, and social vantages that the diverse array of actors have on the conflict. Thus the profound ambiguity (though not inaccessibility) of the cultural data gathered in fields of violence, and the need for a multi-layered, hermeneutic approach to ethnographic analysis that draws on local, even individual, experiences of violence in piecing together a meaningful and relevant ethnographic account of war. In so doing, the focus of study shifts away from the particular agents, spaces, and times of fighting (the embodiments of war) and toward the actions, reactions, and symbolic meanings brought to them by the broader civil society affected by it.

While it is true that violence has an empirical reality in its observable effects, it is equally true that as the fundamental units of violent causality and experience the bodies of persons are as socially effective as cultural subjects (contemplative, innovative, and malleable selves and persons) as they are as objective embodiments of agency (targets, antagonists, protagonists, agents, soldiers, children) moving about in space. This fact introduces the problem of locating the role of shifting individual compartments and multivariate perspectives on acts of violence. As Setha Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga point out, “[t]he space occupied by the body, and the perception and experience of that space, contracts and expands in relationship to a person’s emotions and state of mind, sense of self, social relations, and cultural predispositions” (2003: 16). Put another way, identity, context, and culture inform the meanings of bodies in violent relation to one another, mandating a need for detailed accounts of both the sociocultural and the spatial contexts within which particular conflicts occur and are experienced. Insofar as “humans are historical and culture-bearing social beings engaged in relations of meaning-creation and symbolism” (Abbink 2000: xiii), there is an ongoing need in the discipline for well-developed, sophisticated approaches to violence

that take into account the multiplicity of critical identities that individuals acquire as members of society in conflict: the objective person, the subjective self, and the political body in culturally-structured space. These categories of identity are similar to the divisions of the person identified by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987) as the “individual body,” the “social body,” and the “body politic.”

Insofar as this is the case, I suggest that any sophisticated anthropological analysis of conflict should include a description of the political history, a social analysis of material conditions, and an elaboration of the cultural context of any given violent act. *Political history* locates the conflict within a temporal field conducive to its examination as a phase in a dialectical movement toward creative community adaptations and relational innovations that are responsive to a suddenly transformed and disordered social world. By *social analysis of material conditions* I mean an examination of the empirical facts of the conflict (who did what to whom, when, and how?), as well as the material, institutional, relational, and economic conditions amid which it is being carried out. This includes a definition of what has been called the *landscape* of social action, which develops from a tension between idealized or imagined spatial settings against which the real, everyday life of the “foreground” of social life is actually cast (Hirsch 1995: 4). I refer to this aspect of the social context as the *architecture of space and utility*, implying not just the arrangement of bodies and things in relation to one another, but also individual perceptions and engagements of those bodies in that space. Finally, an elaboration of the *cultural context* of violent acts situates individual and community narratives of violence (testimonials, stories, folklore, mythology, rumors, “official” and journalistic reports of events, accusations, confessions, rituals) within a larger symbolic worldview, and permits comparative categories of violence to emerge from interpretive descriptions.

Ethnographic analyses of violence that derive from this tri-faceted approach allow a responsible kind of meaning to emerge from conflict, one forged from a complex analysis of empirical facts,

social contexts, and local interpretations. This is not to simply reduce culture to text (Das et. al. 2001: 9), nor is it to give anthropology over to a radical cultural relativism (Abbink 2000: xiii) that alienates the meaning of violence by utterly localizing its significance. Conversely, it is to recognize that all conflicts have a universal quality to them, insofar as they all entail symbolic exchanges that take place within particular sociocultural contexts, necessitating the need for a thorough accounting of violence that engages both the subjective and objective dimensions of social life at the epicenters of conflicts.

This article employs this processual-contextual model in providing an anthropological assessment of the current violence in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince that began as a rebel uprising in the northern town of Gonaïves in February 2004. While Nordstrom's ethnological approach to the study of violence as a transcendent process rather than as a phenomenon that occurs in a circumscribed locale is essential to the broader anthropological project of theorizing violence cross-culturally, there remains first a need for ethnographic detail on particular conflicts. Drawing on a decade of political historiography and ethnographic fieldwork that I have conducted in Haiti since 1994, this article diverges from Nordstrom's broader model in that it is grounded in a specific set of locales – the streets of urban Haiti, especially Port-au-Prince. The capital is at present the center of the conflict and the nexus of confrontation, what Vodouisaints call *lakafou danjere*: a dangerous ontological crossroads, a vital liminal space where bodies and their related identities are in dire jeopardy and in the midst of adaptive transformation. It is in Port-au-Prince that the violence is at its worst right now, and so it is here also that the labor of reconstructing devastated social worlds is most difficult and most imperative.

Given limitations of space, my purpose is not to present a comprehensive theoretical explanation for the pervasion of violence in Haitian political relations, but rather to describe the unique set of historical, social, and cultural circumstances that have led to the current crisis.

Specifically, my intention here is to 1) elaborate on the sophisticated political developments that have led to the war raging on the ground in Port-au-Prince today, 2) integrate that history with an ethnographically informed social analysis of the immediate embodiments of the violence that has resulted, and 3) demonstrate how the war extends beyond the immediacy of the fighting and into the everyday lives of Haitians suffering at its peripheries and reconstituting their cultural worlds. The larger project of extracting grander meanings from the conflict will surely be an ongoing one as the Haitian civil society continues to remake itself from the shattered pieces of its failed democracy. What the war *means* in a full anthropological sense is as much dependent upon what Haiti creates in the midst and in the aftermath of the fighting as it is upon the historical circumstances that led to the outbreak of violence in the first place.

### **Spaces of Conflict and the Specter of Human Suffering in Port-au-Prince: Some Social and Cultural Considerations**

Over one-and-a-half million people live in Port-au-Prince, and it can be reasonably said that virtually all have been affected by this war. The bullet fired, the machete swung, the rock thrown, the tire ignited, the order to kill given, the deathblow received are all discrete, localized examples of violence; but they are also tidal forces that generate expanding currents of secondary violence that resonate from the epicenters of conflict to the cultural (if not geographic) peripheries of the conflict. These secondary currents follow pre-established social networks of kin and community that diminish in import the farther one is removed (intimately and culturally) from the site of the bloodletting. A Haitian shot dead, a U.S. Marine wounded, an adolescent girl raped to death; these are more than just attacks on social or political categories of citizen, soldier, and child. The gunman, the target, the minor, and the rapist are variously mothers, sisters, fathers, brothers, daughters, sons, friends, lovers, wives, husbands, mentors, enemies, neighbors, rivals, and more. Witnesses to and victims and perpetrators of violence are enmeshed in overlapping webs of social relations that make

every act a “culturally deep” act, with effects that radiate outward, fraying the social fabric at its edges. As the center burns, the periphery is singed. This is why war is far more complicated than just a dispute between opposed political factions. This is also why our method for understanding it must be as meticulously interpretive as it is exhaustively contextualized.

Robert Fatton (2003) has suggested that the violence in Haiti today is the product of an “authoritarian habitus” of Haitian cultural life, whereby the paradigm of political life is wholly prefigured and determined by the despotism under which Haitians have lived since the post-independence dictatorships of Dessalines, Christophe, and Boyer throughout the early 1800s. Fatton envisions the current crisis as an aspect of Haiti’s second revolution, an ongoing conflict of transition from serial absolutist regimes to a still-distant democratic one. In the meantime, Haitian politics are dictated by the priorities of a “predatory state” informed by the two-hundred-year-old adage of creole totalitarianism: social control is most effectively maintained through the terrorization of society into prima facie conformity (Kovats-Bernat 1999).

While the violence on the street in Haiti today may have come to be politically normalized through a habitus of history and state, its underlying causes are more infrastructural than ideational. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with close to three-quarters of the population living in abject poverty. The rate of infant mortality (79:1000) is among the highest in the world, and life expectancy (around 45 years) and gross national income (US\$440) are among the lowest. Right now, the Haitian gourde is worth a little more than US\$.02, the lowest exchange rate in over fifteen years. As a report by the Catholic Institute for International Relations has pointed out, “[d]emocracy cannot thrive in such misery; sustainable and equitable economic development is a prerequisite” (1996: 3-4).

Writing in the wake of the 1995 U.S. intervention in Haiti, Irwin Stotzky noted that “[i]n order to foster real stability...the root causes of poverty in Haiti must be addressed” (1997: 111).

Stotzky, a professor of law and former attorney for the first Aristide government, recommended an expanded involvement of the civil society, especially the poor, in the national dialogue concerning poverty-reduction as a means of more effectively addressing the immediate economic needs of the deeply impoverished seventy percent of Haitians who stand the most to win or lose in policy shifts. Despite his promises to do so, neither Aristide administration (1990-1995, 2000-2004) showed much effort in actually doing so. The establishment of the Aristide Foundation for Democracy (*Aristid Foundasyon pou Demokrasi*, AFD) in 1995, a Fanmi Lavalas union of peasants, workers, and supporters of the liberation church in Haiti, did appear to be an overture to consider the interests of the poor and it did in fact encourage a civic dialogue on economic matters of popular concern. I worked extensively with street children at Lafanmi Selavi, an orphanage founded by Aristide, and was encouraged by him and the orphanage staff to observe a number of AFD meetings from 1995 to 1999. My earlier work (Kovats-Bernat 2001) has demonstrated that the AFD served as little more than a political machine for the Aristide regime, one which had done little if anything in the way of concrete poverty-reduction. Besides providing a handful of low-interest loans to farmers, the AFD was quite ineffective in addressing the core problems of rural decline, sanitation, hunger, health care, and universal access to clean water. Most of Aristide's programs for the poor ended up with little effect on the ground, notably the Lafanmi Selavi orphanage. Founded by Aristide in 1986 to provide food, shelter, and literacy to a handful of Port-au-Prince street boys, the population of children served by Lafanmi Selavi steadily rose to over four hundred by 1998. The facility was shuttered after a 1999 uprising by thirty street boys who blamed Aristide personally for the filthy and scarce conditions at the orphanage that I myself had been documenting over the course of my six years working there. After firing tear gas into the orphanage compound, troopers from CIMO (a tactical intervention unit of the National Police) stormed the gates and dispersed the children. After its closure and the return of its four hundred children to Port-au-Prince streetlife, Aristide converted

the facility into the Fanmi Lavalas radio and television station. This incident helps to explain why the main AFD facility and Lafanmi Selavi were both sacked and looted during the February-March 2004 uprising. Besides their symbolic identification with the deposed president, both institutions came to be widely regarded as political and economic juggernauts of the Aristide regime, with little efficacy in relieving the country's poverty woes.

Haiti's profound economic crisis is ultimately linked to the collapse of the agricultural sector which began in earnest in the 1980s, and has since resulted in a continuous mass exodus of rural peasants into the capital. With virtually no bureaucratic authority regulating urban settlement, Port-au-Prince has,

...acquired the physiognomy of a slum. Instead of adapting to the city, rural-to-urban migrants now appropriate it, assault it, and transform it, in accordance with their needs and vision. This inversion of the classical logic of migrant acculturation and adaptation has profound repercussions for the relationship between the social classes in the urban setting. Entire neighborhoods are constructed in the course of a month, as the pace of family-organized construction of makeshift dwellings accelerates. In no time at all, spaces where before construction was prohibited, or that were scarcely populated, are covered by networks of houses completely lacking in basic services...The marginalized people hurl themselves at the task of conquering any chink of available terrain. The city is the contested terrain of this struggle. [Manigat 1990: 90]

Subsequent urban overpopulation has in turn led to a critical impact on people's access to basic needs for survival. It has also led to a very particular construction of urban space amid social instability in the Port-au-Prince. The capital's chaotic terrain contributes significantly to the civil

perception of the city and its streets as lawless which by their very nature and utility form spaces of contest and inform customs of conflict among those who use and live on them.

If the cityscape of Port-au-Prince is one dominated by the problems that so often attend urban overpopulation – poor sanitation, high unemployment, low wages, unstable market economies, rampant crime, blight, unplanned settlement – and if the city’s increasing population is the result of a dramatic rise in rural-to-urban migration, then the formation of both the capital’s urban architecture and its culture of violence ultimately find their origins in the countryside. The devastating, long-term effects of the colonial plantation agricultural system that dominated Haitian agriculture for over two hundred years – land clearance, soil depletion, monocropping, unsustainable cultivation techniques – began under French rule in the late seventeenth-century and continue to have a woeful impact on Haitian agro-production today. Additionally, intensified deforestation has stripped the canopy from the countryside (Haiti is 95% deforested), removing the arbor root support system that is essential to protecting the integrity of the topsoil stratum from loss to erosion. The wanton destruction of life and livelihood in the flash floods of Hurricane Jeanne provides apt illustration of the scope of Haiti’s erosion problems. The combined effects of aggressive agriculture and deforestation have undermined the fertility and arability of Haitian farmland, lowering annual yields and contributing to an increased national dependence on imported foodstuffs. This too has aggravated the problems of the rural economy, as local markets are flooded with foreign crops priced below those produced locally.

With the Haitian state conspicuously absent in urban planning, management, security, and settlement patterns, the capital sprawled into a squatter metropolis and slipped into almost total destitution. The rapid expansion of the slums has had a critical impact on people’s access to public utilities and basic needs for survival. Electric service is patchy at best, and access to clean water and sanitation is limited to less than half of the population. This too has contributed to a dramatic

transformation of how the street is perceived by the state and its citizens. Foreign visitors to Port-au-Prince are immediately struck with the harsh realities of an urban landscape wholly given over to spatial mayhem. An absence of sidewalks and traffic regulation, poor street maintenance, open sewer inlets and sanitation ditches, piles of garbage, and other obstacles render the landscape into something to be negotiated rather than simply traversed. Vendors, market women, tradesmen, trucks, cars, insects, rats, stray dogs, street children, pedestrians and more all compete with one another for a personal claim to sparse public terrain.

What results is a city in which all public space is contested space, the streets of the capital less transitory channels and more extensions of the household or place of work. This too – the idea that the private domain extends well into the public – has its roots in the countryside. Rural peasants live in clusters of extended family units, arranging their modest houses in a loose orientation around a common hearth, forming the *lakou*. Here, limited residential space is supplemented by co-opting the common space outside of the home. In the city, where living space is even more constrained, the household is extended beyond the residential threshold and into the street immediately surrounding the dwelling itself, much as the rural home subsumes the courtyard of the *lakou* as an extension of the residence. In Port-au-Prince, the house is where one sleeps, but the street is where one lives. Under ordinary circumstances, it is a safe and acceptable place to prepare meals, gossip, wash clothes, sell things, eat, socialize, play, and if need be, sleep. The street is, in the words of one of my street child informants, *salon pèp* – “the people’s living-room.” For street kids and other truly abject persons, this *salon pèp* is itself home, a house without walls or roof. With so many using the street for so much in Port-au-Prince at any given time of day or night, the city’s public spaces are predisposed sites for political conflict. Like all urban environments, the streets constitute an architecture characterized by “complex structures and differentiated social entities that collude and compete for control over material and symbolic resources” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). Now

that the war has come to the capital, the streets remain *salon pèp*, just as they remain public spaces that out of necessity must be aggressively claimed for private or commercial use; but now they have been given over to open violence, brutality, and confrontation that eclipses all other contests of daily life. As one street child put it to me,

I want to work, but I am afraid because the police have left. I even sleep near my enemies now because we are all afraid of what will happen to Haiti. We sleep near this place because there are soldiers here [he gestures to a French peacekeeper positioned in one of the guardhouses of the National Palace]. We are very afraid. We cannot live.

Fear, insecurity, and uncertainty are the immediate social effects of the architecture of space and utility in Port-au-Prince. The capital is a cityscape built not on rational infrastructural planning, but in conformity with human necessity and improvised survival. The result is an urban environment predisposed to war, in that it is already halfway destroyed.

The profound level of poverty, the scarcity of potable water, the insidious pervasion of exposed sewage in residential areas, the shortage of food nationwide, and the lack of a sustainable reforestation and subsistence agricultural program – all of which have been aggravated by the recent fighting – have long been everyday fixtures of daily life in Haiti. All of the nation's internal conflicts throughout two hundred years of history are rooted in the decline of the land and in the consequential sufferings of the country's majority poor who have lived against the overwhelming statistical odds that under such conditions they ought not. Worse, whereas the war began with a public frustration with the abject conditions of life, so now the war is aggravating the abject conditions of life. The war is now reproducing itself, and time is running out. In March 2004, the Pan-American Health Organization reported that,

[t]he intensifying socio-political crisis in Haiti is having a negative impact on the health of the Haitian population. Haiti has the highest infant and maternal mortality, the worst malnutrition and the worst AIDS situation in the Americas. The general mortality rate was 1057 per 100,000 population during the 1995-2000 period, also the highest in the Americas. A quarter of the children suffer from chronic malnutrition, 3 to 6% of acute malnutrition. About 15% of newborns have a low birth weight. Acute respiratory infections and diarrheas cause half of the deaths in children under 5 years of age. There are complications in a quarter of the deliveries. The coverage of services is very low: 40% of the population has no real access to basic health care, 76% of deliveries are made by non-qualified personnel, more than half of the population has no access to drugs, and only half of the children are vaccinated. [PAHO 2004: 1]

Aid workers are portending mass famine throughout the country (*Christian Science Monitor* 26 February 2004). The onset of mass starvation has already begun as food relief has been stalled by the loss of most of the country's grain stores to looters during the initial stages of the uprising and in the wake of Hurricane Jeanne. UNICEF (2004) has reported that the distribution of its food, health, and sanitation aid to critical parts of the country is difficult, and has required them to negotiate with rebel groups over access to these desperate regions. Clean water for drinking and cooking is perilously limited and worsened still by the pollution of previously clean streams and wells by raw sewage flushed into these sources by the hurricane's floodwaters. Traditional recommendations for the purification of contaminated water, such as boiling and chlorinating, are practically impossible or prohibitively expensive so as to preclude their consideration by most of the fifty-five percent of Haitians who lack access to clean water supplies. This scarcity of resources has prompted desperate faith in the widespread folk belief that the addition of juice from the *citron*

fruit to the water will decrease its pathogenicity. The upshot has been the aggressive reemergence of the doppelganger of child death in Haiti: diarrhea. Over one million Haitian children were already considered at risk because of dehydration associated with intestinal disorders before the civil war began, and that number is generally believed to have increased since February 2004 when the fighting interrupted the flow of clean water and left almost three-quarters of the population in the north of the country cut off from access to it. Drinking water in Haiti regularly carries the risk of parasites invisible to the eye. When I asked how she tests her families' drinking water for potability, Clè-Ann, a mother of two in Port-au-Prince replied, "We drink it. If it is bad water, we get sick. First the children, then myself."

The political situation in Port-au-Prince today has worsened human suffering in the city precipitously. With the interruption of food and medical aid to the capital during the February-March 2004 rebel uprising, starvation among the urban poor has also intensified. In the days of anarchy and police flight that followed the departure of Aristide, many took to looting World Food Program warehouses. Human and social services, already among the least developed in the Hemisphere, have further atrophied. The war has not so much made new casualties of the citizenry as it has simply increased the number of those citizens already dying of a general deprivation caused by a lack of arable land, trees, food, water, medicine, jobs, and space. As a Haitian friend once put it, "it is easy enough for anyone to die in a place like Port-au-Prince." Long before the rebels arrived in the capital to unseat Aristide, the citizens of Port-au-Prince were suffering and dying at wartime rates. These are the hundreds of thousands of war victims that have been "erased," "deleted," "edited out," and "made invisible" in official accounts of the Haitian civil war.

### **Prelude to War: A Political History of Factionalism and Terror in Port-au-Prince**

The abrupt halt of the rebel assault on Port-au-Prince that left over one hundred and thirty dead by the end of February 2004 has since given way to guerilla warfare, looting, chaos, and

anarchy on the streets of the capital, some of which is now driven not by political motivation but by personal opportunism and basic economic need. More than two hundred more Haitians have been killed in Port-au-Prince street violence since the departure of Aristide, with over fifty dying in a three-week period of partisan clashes in October 2004 alone. A Brazilian-led multinational force has arrived in the country to try to establish order and stability, an interim government has been chosen, and food aid is again flowing into the country. These events appear to mark the beginnings of a potential reaggregation of Haitian society back into itself, with an albeit fragile space being carved out within which people can begin to recreate new social lives. But few Haitians are optimistic and the immediate future appears grim. The 3,000 multinational peacekeepers on the ground now represent only a fraction of the 6,700 troops and 1,622 police promised in the original U.N. mandate, disarmament of warring factions remains stalled, the International Monetary Fund has postponed its talks on financial aid to Haiti that it had scheduled for November 2004, CARICOM member states continue to be skeptical of the legitimacy of the provisional government, and the distribution of food aid and disaster relief in the wake of the hurricane has been hampered by the general state of insecurity that prevails throughout the country.

Haiti has been building to this moment for some time. Long the poorest and most volatile country in the Western Hemisphere, the 1990 election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide (a Roman Catholic priest from Haiti's destitute La Saline slum) to the Haitian presidency was seen by most as a victory for Haiti's social justice movement, Lavalas.<sup>5</sup> Aristide was overwhelmingly elected in internationally-monitored polling by over sixty-seven percent of the popular vote out of a field of ten candidates. Running on a charismatic platform deeply influenced by the Latin American Church's liberation theology movement, Aristide almost immediately made enemies in virtually all of the traditional centers of power in the country. By his participation in democratic politics, Aristide was chastised and alienated by conservative Catholic authorities in the country and from

the Vatican. His acerbic homilies against the military junta ruling the country at that time, and the fabulously wealthy elites who backed them, invited the ire of the customary power brokers of coup d'état in the country. His intention to double the Haitian minimum wage to US\$4.00/day troubled foreign business interests. When he forced the retirement of high-ranking members of the Haitian army, he instigated military agitation against his government which would ultimately lead to his first tenure in exile. After only eight weeks in office, Aristide was overthrown in a bloody army coup in 1991 that would claim the lives of over 5,000 Haitians in the over three years of violence that ensued. Aristide was restored to power by a U.S.-led military intervention 23,000 troops strong following his signing of the Governor's Island Accord in 1994. Though that agreement paved the way for his return, the terms of the accord stipulated that he forfeit his three-and-a-half years as president spent in exile as a requirement of his reinstatement.

Throughout September-October 1994, American soldiers staged several security operations throughout Haiti, breaking up heavy weapons, raiding the headquarters of pro-army militias, providing protection and assistance to democracy activists, and eventually seizing control of the National Palace in Port-au-Prince on 11 October, paving the way for Aristide's return to power four days later. Upon his reinstatement, Aristide disbanded the Haitian army (FADH) and suspended their pensions. He then formed with international assistance the Haitian National Police (PNH), a civilian force established to provide law and order in the army's stead. U.S. forces in Haiti declined to assist the Haitian government in the disarmament of the former soldiers and their civilian proxies, and large caches of military-grade weapons disappeared into the shadows of the civil society. A 1995 report of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights suggested an interrelationship among these stolen firearms, the failure of U.N. forces to locate and confiscate them, and the dramatic post-invasion rise in both criminal and political street violence that is ongoing (U.N. Commission on Human Rights 1995). That same year, the local police chief of the sprawling slum of Cité Soleil

estimated the membership of the Red Army (*Lamè Rouj*), a pro-army gang in that area, to number over two hundred individuals all armed with FADH weapons. Residents of Cité Soleil today have suggested that the large majority of armed civilians in their neighborhoods, including some from the Red Army, are former secret police and paramilitary agents who have seized upon the civil distrust of the PNH – the force has been scandalized since its founding with civil and human rights violations – as an opportunity to stir up trouble and to blacken further the already tarnished image of the police, widely believed to have been politicized to Lavalas loyalty since its establishment.

In 1995, disgruntled former soldiers launched an insurgency campaign against the Aristide government and individuals and institutions closely associated with the reinstated president. A wave of violence attributed to army agitators throughout November 1995 claimed the lives of three Haitian civilians and a member of Parliament. Prohibited by constitutional term limits from succeeding himself, and despite Lavalas demands that he be permitted to remain in office until 1998 (thereby granting him the years of his term lost to exile), Aristide agreed to arrange a presidential election, to be held in December of 1995.

The 1995 elections were marked by low voter turnout. Many Lavalas supporters boycotted the polling over what they viewed as an unjust limitation on their incumbent candidate's term in office. Although election day was mostly free from violence, the days leading up to the vote were not. Days before the balloting, the home of candidate Leon Jeune, the opposition front runner, was sprayed with bullets, the first real evidence of Lavalas supporters in acts of political violence since Aristide's restoration. René Preval, a Lavalas candidate and a close associate of Aristide, succeeded in winning the election out of a field of fourteen candidates. Preval's term was marred by intensifying political violence, much of which was variously attributed to or admitted to have been carried out by former officers of the disbanded army. In August 1996, twenty former soldiers attacked the police headquarters in Port-au-Prince killing a civilian and wounding several others.

Later that year, it was confirmed that a plot to undermine the government hatched by the Committee of Soldiers' Demands (a group representing former army officers), was thwarted by the PNH.

Political infighting within the Lavalas party over the choice of a prime minister paralyzed the Preval government from 1997 to 1999. Breaking ranks with his fractioned party, Aristide began to prepare for a run in the 2000 presidential elections by forming a new political party, Fanmi Lavalas, that would represent his own platform as distinct from that of other interests spawned within the ranks of the Lavalas movement. On 11 January of that year, parliamentary terms expired and President Preval announced that he would bypass the legislature and appoint a new government by decree, which he did two months later. Port-au-Prince exploded in a flash of street violence carried out by partisans opposed to the new government. The day after Preval's announcement, gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire on a vehicle carrying the sister of the president, seriously wounded her and killing her driver. More political deaths would follow. A month after presidential elections were scuttled because of a disorganized voter registration campaign in March 2000, a street war in Port-au-Prince between pro-Aristide and anti-Aristide gangs erupted. Street shootings, firebombings, rock-throwing, and arson emerged as the hallmarks of political factionalism. Scores of nonpartisans were killed in the violence including dozens of children and adolescents caught in the crossfire. Suspect parliamentary and presidential elections, boycotted by the opposition parties and virtually ignored by most of the population, eventually took place between May and November 2000. Fanmi Lavalas candidates swept a majority of the seats in the Senate and House of Deputies, and Aristide himself won the presidency, claiming 92% of a vote criticized as fraudulent by the international community.

Immediately following the elections, violence in the capital flared once again, as "clans" (by then a Haitian euphemism for political street gangs) loyal to Aristide waged a campaign of intimidation against the political opposition. In January 2001, Father Paul Raymond (a priest of the

fiercely pro-Aristide liberation theology movement) read a public statement in the capital that openly threatened death to over eighty politicians, journalists, and religious leaders who had previously voiced dissent against the Aristide government. Offices of parties opposed to the electoral results were firebombed, street assassinations of anti-Aristide dissidents continued, and Port-au-Prince descended further into political and economic despair. Unemployment skyrocketed and the value of the gourde had declined in value by half since 1998. By this time, a political resistance opposed to Fanmi Lavalas was formed, a coalition of fifteen opposition parties united under the name Democratic Convergence.

The country's devastating political violence and crushing poverty slowly eroded the already shaky confidence of the civil society in the Aristide government. A plummeting gross national product, ballooning inflation, the budget deficit (which amounted to nearly 2.2 billion gourdes in 2001), the depreciation of the gourde, and rampant unemployment made life for most about as difficult as it had been in Haiti since the international embargo of the Cedras coup regime of 1991-1993 (radio interview with Haiti Prime Minister Jean-Marie Charestal, Radio Vision 2000, 15 January 2002). Anti-Aristide graffiti was scrawled throughout the capital, accusing him and his Fanmi Lavalas party of corruption, incompetence, heavy-handedness, and drug profiteering.<sup>6</sup> Strikes and demonstrations against the government began in earnest, some turning violent as the National Police engaged the dissidents with tear gas, rubber bullets, and live gunfire.

Economic paralysis and anti-government unrest prompted a resurgence of army violence as well. On 17 December 2001 thirty-three gunmen, all former soldiers of FADH, attacked the penitentiary at Fort National in Port-au-Prince. The assailants were staved off by prison security, and moved on to the National Palace where they were repelled by the PNH. At least eight were killed in the Palace assault. Suspecting that political rivals were responsible, pro-Aristide factions in the street attacked opposition party buildings. While the government referred to the attack as a

failed coup attempt, opposition party members countered that the attack was staged by Fanmi Lavalas in order to create a pretext for crushing political dissent. A former soldier who was arrested in the imbroglio later said that the attack was indeed a coup attempt and that the conspirators included a former FADH colonel and two former military police chiefs (National Coalition for Haitian Rights 2001). One of those named was Guy Phillippe, who would take command of New Army forces in the February 2004 uprising against Aristide.

By January 2002, the tentative stability of the Aristide government began to crumble. Prime minister Jean-Marie Cherestal resigned at the start of the year over mounting criticism of his government's failure to alleviate the country's economic and political woes. Cherestal had also been dogged by opposition doubts of his legitimacy since questions arose about the suspect nature of the government that Preval had named by unilateral decree. In the north of the country, Aristide's popular base had eroded significantly. In Gonaïves, strongman Amiot Métayer, the local chief of a fiercely pro-Aristide street clan called the Cannibal Army (*Lamè Kanibal*), was arrested by the National Police in July 2002 in a crackdown on street violence. Métayer's men had been firebombing several buildings in town associated with a rival clan rumored to be supported by former FADH officers. His shocking arrest was intended to rebut opposition accusations that Aristide was using unruly street gangs and hired thugs to affirm his control of the country. Métayer's detention would not last long. A month after his arrest, members of the Cannibal Army used a tractor to break through the wall of the Gonaïves prison freeing Métayer along with 158 of the 221 violent inmates interred there with him.

The political situation was steadily growing out of the government's control. In Gonaïves, by then a stronghold of anti-Aristide insurgency, dissidents clashed with whip-wielding pro-Aristide gangs in a messy confrontation that left dozens injured. Sporadic violence throughout the north reached frenzied proportions in 2003 when Métayer's bullet-riddled, hacked, and mutilated corpse

was found on an isolated road twenty-five miles south of Gonaïves. He had been shot at point blank range in both eyes, and his chest was hacked down the midsection. The graphic political overtones of the killing enraged members of the Cannibal Army, who accused Aristide of ordering Méyater's assassination because of the incriminating leverage he could bring against the Fanmi Lavalas government that imprisoned him the year before. Dozens were killed and wounded in angry riots that raged for days after the discovery of Méyater's body. Amiot Méyater's brother Butteur assumed control of the Cannibal Army, rechristened it the Artibonite Resistance Front (*Front de Résistance de l'Artibonite*, FRA), and turned it aggressively against the Aristide government. Civil war was now imminent, and would begin with an FRA uprising against the PNH in Gonaïves, less than five months after the discovery of Amiot Méyater's mutilated corpse.

### **Shapeshifters in the Margins: Zenglendinaj and the Ever-Changing Face of Urban Disorder**

Despite the pervasion of political rhetoric that has infused Port-au-Prince street violence since the 1990s, there has always been a great deal of ambiguity surrounding the specific motivations for the perpetration of acts of urban terror. This ambiguity has been maintained by the tendency of Haitian paramilitary groups and civil gangs to rapidly shift their loyalties and methods in response to changing economic and political terrains. No complete understanding of the war in Haiti can be achieved without an examination of this phenomenon, given that much of the violence today is carried out by individuals, groups, clans, and institutions that have been in a nearly constant state of flux over the past ten years. Their allegiances, loyalties, tactics, support, methods of operation, sources of weapons, and popular support are ever-shifting, occasionally multiple, sometimes contradictory, and more than frequently leased out to the highest bidder.

Clearly many of the street clans and civilian militia groups are well-organized. Some, like the Cannibal Army in Gonaïves, and the Red Army and the Army of the Motherless (*Lamè San Manman*) in Port-au-Prince are backed by political factions; they often publicly claim responsibility

for violent attacks on political adversaries. Others, especially in Port-au-Prince, work as independent contractors or as triggermen for smaller, neighborhood clans. A few of these hired guns have achieved individual notoriety in the press for their brash acts of brutal violence and are known nationwide simply by their *nom de rue*: Ti Loulou. Pouchon. Patatou. Labanyè. Colibri. Amiot Métayer, also known by his street alias “Cubain,” was one of these. The fluid loyalties of these men and their loose relationships to political parties and issues is considered of secondary concern to most Haitians who regard the careless violence that they perpetrate, whether as gangsters or privateers, and whether motivated by profit or politics, as a menace to society. A frustrated and frightened citizenry is disinterested in knowing the cabalistic motivations for most street violence, a fact made evident by the ambiguously folkloric and decidedly apolitical term that is used to describe the perpetrators be they political or criminal: *zenglendo*. While the word was originally used to describe the extrajudicial crimes of soldiers of the Haitian army, it has since expanded in meaning to include any form of excessive street violence, criminal or otherwise. This lexical transformation blurs the lines that differentiate among the political, the criminal, and the cultural. *Zenglenda* is rooted in the public imagination as a social fact allegorized to a folkloric menace.

The term “*zenglendo*” is a compound of “*zenglen*” (shards of broken glass) and “*do*” (back) and was originally used in an old yarn told to children about the *djab*, a demon of Vodou folklore. In the story, the *djab* is described as a malicious trickster, charged with the torment of children. Always seeking ways to lure the young into despair, the *djab* takes the form of an elder who appeals to a hapless young boy to massage the tired muscles of his back. When the child obliges and begins to rub the back of the elder, the demon transforms itself into *zenglendo*: the muscles of the creature’s back ripple into a twisted mess of broken glass, horribly cutting the hands of the boy. The moral of the tale is clear – sometimes those that we trust can turn on us with malice.

Though the term “*zenglendiraj*” is used today as a general signifier for any number of different forms of street violence prevalent throughout Haiti today (arson, banditry, street execution, carjacking, disappearance), the origins of *zenglendiraj* can be traced directly to the former Haitian army. In 1988, after a succession of brief coups following the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier’s dictatorship, a military junta assumed the power of government. Large blocks of international aid monies to Haiti were suspended, leaving the Haitian army with little capital to pay the soldiers of the rank and file. In response to this crisis, soldiers turned their weapons against the citizenry for profit, staging armed bank robberies and home invasions. The military government did little to bring the soldiers under control, seeing the situation as an effective means of quelling what might otherwise have become a mutinous situation within the unpaid ranks. By the end of the decade the problem had worsened, with the army now the main obstacle to law and order. In 1989 a popular radio host in Port-au-Prince coined the folkloric term “*zenglendir*” to describe the soldiers, implying that with their involvement in armed crimes at a time when the Haitian people needed to trust state authority the most, the army had transgressed the public confidence (to say nothing of its constitutional mandate) and had turned on the populace in new and treacherous fashion. The army had become a “glass-back,” and was mangling the Haitian people.

During the Cedras regime, *zenglendir* often functioned in loosely organized gangs who received special protections from the military while carrying out civil crimes. Many were off-duty soldiers of the FADH. They were at times actively encouraged in their crime sprees by the army in order to assist in the destabilization of pro-democratic neighborhoods. Occasionally *zenglendir* worked in complicity with neighborhood gangs and strong-arm vigilance brigades (*brigad vigilanz*) to sink whole communities and towns into a state of looting, rape, murder, and plunder. Some *zenglendir* were directly armed by the FADH and carried out intimidations and extrajudicial killings

on the army's behalf, earning them the title of *attaché*, proxy gunmen "attached to" the Haitian army.

By 2000, animosities between Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party and the Democratic Convergence were being hashed out in neighborhood firefights throughout the urban slums, and *zenglendo* operatives and militant clans like the Cannibal Army became the parties' foot soldiers. Fanmi Lavalas has a well-known history of farming out the intimidation and execution of opposition party members to fiercely pro-Aristide *zenglendo* calling themselves *chimere*, after the fire-breathing demon of Haitian folklore. In December 2001 Brignol Lindor, the news director for Radio Eco 2000, was stoned and hacked to death by a gang of *chimere* near the town of Petit-Goave. Lindor had received death threats the week before his assassination, after he invited members of the Democratic Convergence to speak on his radio show. *Chimere* have since used gunfire and barricades to shut down the capital a half-dozen times in the past three years in displays of pro-government loyalty, and they remain agitators of the violence on the streets of Port-au-Prince today. Since Aristide's resignation and exile from Haiti in February 2004, *chimere* have been responsible for a number of shootings and firebombings against his detractors, and together form the insurgency movement battling the PNH and U.N. forces on the ground in Port-au-Prince today.

*Zenglendo* gangs supported by the rebel forces who helped to oust Aristide in 2004 have responded to *chimere* violence in kind. In May 2003, five Fanmi Lavalas supporters were shot and killed in Cité Soleil and Fort-Liberté by members of the Army of the Motherless, a *zenglendo* clan that claims to have ties to the Democratic Convergence. That same month, twenty individuals were killed in street battles between competing *zenglendo* gangs fighting for political control of the Boston and Bois-Neuf neighborhoods of Cité Soleil.

While a great deal of *zenglendo* killings are carried out for criminal profit and without political motivation – by far most *zenglendo* gun down citizens not over politics but simply to

facilitate banditry – it is widely believed that some of them are working under the protection or tacit consent of certain precincts of the PNH, and that their criminal activities may also be intended to intimidate those localities most opposed to police authority. I first heard such rumors on the street in 1995 shortly after the U.N. Commission for Human Rights issued a report suggesting the complicity of Haitian police officers in crimes attributed to former members of the FADH. The suspected police officers were allegedly operating out of uniform and using their service weapons in criminal attacks. The report goes on to point out that this violence was:

aimed, in some cases at least, at intimidating sections of the democratic opposition and goes hand in hand with the upsurge in arbitrary executions for political reasons. In the working-class districts, *zenglendo* are creating a climate of general fear, for their victims are not necessarily political militants or sympathizers... The [U.N. International Civilian] Mission has further reported that their investigations into [*zenglendist*] human rights violations have indicated that they were armed with automatic weapons (Uzis and M16s) and operated in red and white [PNH] pick-up vehicles, sometimes with government plates. In several cases there was information regarding a direct link between the perpetrators and the Haitian Armed Forces (FADH) and the impunity and logistical support of their operation is strongly indicative of FADH involvement. [1994: 6]

This suspicion is not without basis. Between 19 May and 21 May 1999, *zenglendo* in the Poste Marchand district of Port-au-Prince went on a violent crime spree, indiscriminately robbing stores, houses, pedestrians, and motorists. Six days later, eighteen armed men sealed off two streets in this same neighborhood for several hours, and while working systematically in two groups robbed over twenty homes, frisked residents and passersby for money, stole over US\$300 from a small boutique, raped a woman, and shot a man in the foot. Many of the *zenglendo* involved were

known to area residents, who identified the weapons used in the attacks – 9mm semiautomatic handguns and .38 caliber revolvers – as identical to those the PNH issues to its officers. Some residents of the neighborhood named several of the *zenglendo* as former or current police officers. A month later, seven *zenglendo* returned to occupy Poste Marchand, this time firing their weapons in the air, robbing street merchants, and stealing rice, beans, and plantains from market women. It was four hours before the police arrived to quell the violence, by which time the perpetrators had fled the area. When I arrived in the neighborhood shortly after the attacks, a rumor was circulating that the *zenglendo* involved were police officers from the very precinct responsible for security in Poste-Marchand. Street children swore to a modified version of the rumor: the *zenglendo* involved were gang members from the neighborhood angered at merchant resistance to “clan protection.”

### **Choking Off *Zenglendingaj*: The Paramilitary Solution**

Civil pressure on the government to eliminate the violence from the streets has prompted a violent, martial crackdown on street crime. In June 2001, during a public visit with the Inspector General of the PNH, Aristide reiterated his “zero tolerance” policy toward street violence – first announced in his February 2000 inauguration address – in a speech to the National Police that appeared to endorse the summary executions of *zenglendo*:

If it's a *zenglendo*, zero tolerance. If a *zenglendo* stops a car in the street, puts his hand on the key to make the driver get out so he can take the car, he is guilty, because the car is not his. You do not need to lead him to the court to have him judged because the car is not his... he is guilty. If a criminal grabs someone in the street by the collar and puts him on the ground to beat him or shoot him, [the police] do not need to wait to go to court with him to prevent him from doing that.

[Address to the Haitian National Police, 20 June 2001]

In the aftermath of his remarks, Haitian and international human rights organizations condemned Aristide for what they saw as an explicit presidential sanction of police extremism, brutality, arbitrary arrest, and vigilantism. Less than three months after Aristide made his “zero tolerance” speech to the PNH, Ronal Francois, a member of the Movement Demanding Haitian Development and Democracy (*Mouvman Revandikatif Ayisyen pou Developman ak Demokrasi*, MOPRADD) was ruthlessly beaten by PNH officer Jean-Marie Dominique. A witness reported that officers of the Port-au-Prince district of the PNH delivered a suspected *zenglendo* into the hands of an angry mob. Within eyesight and earshot of the National Palace and the Port-au-Prince headquarters of the PNH, the suspect was stoned by the crowd, pushed to the ground and killed with a bullet to his head.

Aristide’s zero tolerance policy for dealing with suspected *zenglendo* and the heavy-handed policing with which it has come remains the law enforcement protocol of the street. Amnesty International’s 2003 Annual Report cited numerous cases of deadly officer recklessness, intimidations, extrajudicial killings, and disappearances of suspects in PNH custody. In one case, a PNH officer fired his weapon indiscriminately into a crowd as he was pursuing a *zenglendo* through a crowded market in Port-au-Prince. One woman was killed and a pregnant woman and a child were wounded in the shooting. In another instance, Fleury Lysias of Haiti’s Justice and Peace Commission was arrested without a warrant by police officers who were accompanied by three other armed men in civilian clothes. Lysias was taken to the Bon Repos police station where he was systematically kicked and beaten with clubs (breaking one of his arms) and struck repeatedly on the ears (damaging his eardrums). Lysias was released without charges the following day.

In the most scandalous case of police excess and corruption, three brothers – Andy Philippe, Angélo Philippe, and Vladimir Sanon – were taken from their home in the Carrefour section of Port-au-Prince by PNH officers in December 2002. Their bodies were discovered in the city morgue

the next day with bullets lodged in their foreheads. After the parents of the boys filed a formal complaint with the public prosecutor, an internal investigation was conducted, resulting in the firing of the police commissioner and three PNH officers. One officer implicated in the incident went into hiding during the investigation to avoid arrest. A potential witness to the assassinations was killed by hooded men days later in Carrefour (Amnesty International 2003).

Given historical precedents, the current excessive nature of police violence in Haiti is unsurprising, having long been pervasive throughout the ranks of the specialized paramilitary units that both preceded and are contemporary with the PNH. Haiti's Anti-Gang Service (*Service Anti-Gang*, SAG) offers a good example. SAG is technically a sub-unit of the National Police infrastructure, but it has always operated with a certain degree of autonomy from them. SAG in fact precedes the National Police in origin by at least seven decades. It is a descendant of the Bureau of Criminal Intelligence and Identification (*Bureau de Recherche et d'Identification des Criminel*, BRIC), formed in 1921 in order to institutionalize the state's domestic intelligence efforts (Corvington 1984). As a military police unit and therefore under the direction of the Haitian army, BRIC nonetheless operated almost completely outside the bounds of the army hierarchy, answering directly to the highest echelons of government. Under the Duvalier dictatorship, the unit's name was formally changed to the Anti-Gang Investigation and Intelligence Service (*Service d'Investigation et de Recherche Anti-Gang*). In 1986, Anti-Gang was divested of some of its intelligence responsibilities when the Ministry of the Interior created the National Intelligence Service (*Service d'Intelligence Nationale*) in order to take jurisdiction over domestic intelligence efforts, which mostly amounted to surveillance and harassment of anti-Duvalierist elements. Anti-Gang continued to be housed in the headquarters of the military police until the army's dissolution in 1995, when the unit became a demobilized state paramilitary force, its offices and detention center relocated to its present headquarters in the Port-au-Prince central police precinct.

In November 1994, Parliament passed a law creating the PNH in anticipation of the dissolution of FADH. In early 1995, along with the establishment of a Code of Conduct and an Office of Inspector-General, an Interim Public Security Force (IPSF) was formed and composed largely of former soldiers and refugees from rapid-training camps at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. Its mission was to quickly establish and maintain civil security and order as the country demobilized the army and until the first contingent of regular PNH officers could be trained and deployed. As police officers successively graduated the four-month training course at the National Police Academy (*Académie Nationale de Police*) in Petionville, individual IPSF officers were steadily deactivated from service until the PNH's ranks were sufficiently filled for the complete dissolution of the interim force by presidential decree in December 1995. Over the course of their demobilization, IPSF officers were absorbed into a range of newly-created, specialized security units, among them the Palace Guard (*Unité de Sécurité Générale du Palais Nationale*) – which together with the Presidential Guard was originally composed of over 450 former soldiers – and the Ministerial Security Corps (*Corps de Sécurité Ministérielle*) whose commanding officers until fairly recently were all former military personnel. The remaining 1,598 IPSF officers were incorporated into the PNH, over 600 of whom were former FADH soldiers (OAS 1997).

From its inception, the PNH has been fraught with civil and human rights violations, a tendency from which it has never been truly divorced. Since its activation, the force has been indicted annually by international human rights groups (including the U.N. High Commission on Human Rights) for a broad spectrum of abuses ranging from the beating, torturing, and killing of suspects to the blind discharging of weapons into peaceful crowds (U.N. Commission on Human Rights 1996; Drummond 1997; U.S. Department of State 1999; Amnesty International 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004; OAS 2002; Human Rights Watch 2003).

Since 1994, some paramilitary subunits of the PNH have incrementally divested themselves of control by government authority and today operate as almost completely autonomous agencies that are answerable directly to executive authority. Among these are the *Compagnie d'Intervention et de Maintien de l'Ordre* or CIMO (a tactical riot control unit), the *Groupe d'Intervention de la Police Nationale d'Haïti* or GIPNH (a rapid-response intervention group, similar to American SWAT units) and the *Bureau de Lutte contre le Trafic des Stupéfiants* or BLTS (the counter-narcotics unit). These recent descendants of the PNH (some seeded with former FADH officers), along with the various domestic intelligence agencies with clear FADH pedigrees like SAG, display the strongest paramilitary tendencies and repressive proclivities of the many other state and civil groups wielding arms in the current civil war.

Up until their recent orders to defend the Haitian government against the rebel insurgency, Haiti's police paramilitaries have functioned primarily as the principal state weapon against the *zenglendo* gangs perpetrating a diverse array of civil and political crimes from banditry and bank robbery to neighborhood occupations and street assassinations. Few of the operations executed by the units have had much of an impact, perhaps because individual *zenglendo* are much more fragmented in their political alliances with one another than is generally believed. Most arrests are of solitary armed bandits who are picked up on neighborhood sweeps for *zenglendo* gangs. Specifically targeting the hyperviolent slum areas of the capital, the paramilitaries employ rapid intervention operations to comb the neighborhoods for gangs. Given the civil sector's collective fear of the carelessness of *zenglendo* violence and their frustration with the craven lawlessness of the public domain, swift and aggressive paramilitary action has been sanctioned by many of the city's residents, especially merchants, market women, vendors, and tradesmen whose livelihoods have been most crippled by Port-au-Prince's disorderly streets. By the time the rebel uprising began in

February 2004, the various tactical units of the PNH had assumed a distinctly militant posture toward the civil society, one reminiscent of the army police units under Cedras.

### **Confrontation: The Civil War Begins**

In early February 2004, four bystanders were killed and twenty wounded when the FRA, armed with an assortment of handguns and old (some rusty) bolt-action M14s left over from last century's army overran the PNH barracks in Haiti's third largest city of Gonaïves. The attack touched off an already-brewing war between supporters of then-sitting President Aristide and his opponents who contend, along with most of the international community, that the elections that won him the National Palace and his Fanmi Lavalas partisans thirteen of the available fifteen seats in Parliament, were rigged.

In its vehement turn against the Aristide government, the FRA orchestrated a series of terrorist attacks and violent demonstrations throughout the towns and cities in the country's north which have left scores dead and hundreds wounded since September 2003. The FRA easily overtook Gonaïves after the poorly armed and utterly overwhelmed police fled their posts under the onslaught. FRA rebels cut cellular and landline communications in the area and erected barricades of rubble, tires, and flaming vehicles around the city limits, intermittently blocking roads and bridges leading from the capital – a defense intended to slow government response.

From his base camp in Gonaïves, Butteur Metayer broadcasted a call over the radio to anti-Aristide factions throughout the country to take up arms against the Fanmi Lavalas government and the National Police, now widely seen as an institution loyal to the president. Out of hiding and exile came a host of rebel groups, including the New Army made up primarily of members of the FADH. One of their leaders is former army sergeant Louis Jodel Chamblain, whom Haiti's Truth and Justice Commission had suspected of engineering the 1987 massacre of over thirty voters who lined up to cast their ballots in a civilian-run election. In 1993, Chamblain helped to found the viciously

anti-Lavalas Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti (*Front pour l'Avancement et de le Progres d'Haïti*, FRAPH), a Port-au-Prince terrorist organization with Duvalierist and FADH support held responsible for the killing of hundreds of Aristide loyalists during the Cedras coup. In 1994, Chamblain fled to the neighboring Dominican Republic after it became clear that he was to be held accountable for the 1987 voter massacre. He returned to Haiti with his former military colleagues to take the northern city of Cap Haïtien on 23 February 2004.

Chamblain drank rum and danced in the streets that day with Guy Philippe, a former FADH soldier who fled Haiti for Ecuador after the Cedras coup government was ousted from power by U.S. forces. Upon his return to Haiti in 1995, Philippe was integrated into the fledgling police corps, and served as the police chief of Delmas and later Cap Haïtien. He fled to the Dominican Republic after a warrant for his arrest was issued for his role in plotting a failed coup attempt against Preval in 2001. Philippe re-entered Haiti in February 2004 to merge his own crew of rebels with New Army forces. After the seizure of Cap Haïtien, Philippe took command of the now-confederated New Army,<sup>7</sup> christened them the Front for the Liberation of Haiti (*Front de Libération d'Haïti*), and began plotting an assault on the National Palace to arrest Aristide on charges of corruption. After this, the plan was explicit: to reinstitute the Haitian army, which the Front claimed had been illegally dissolved by Aristide in violation of the standing constitution of the Republic.<sup>8</sup>

As the north burned, the sprawling capital of Port-au-Prince was put under a state of siege. Government forces presided over all auspices of social life in the public domain, preparing for a showdown on the streets of the capital. Clad in the dichromatic drab of Haiti's paramilitaries (all gunmetal-black and khaki) the troopers are the very spectacle of creole colony, a fusion of indigenous authoritarian police labor equipped with hypermodern hardware imported from the United States. Unlike the postcolonial army of the past, Haiti's paramilitaries are well-outfitted with state-of-the-art materiel that ten years of foreign military aid (ostensibly intended to support a

stronger civilian police force) can buy. Sporting riot helmets, face shields, gas masks, Kevlar vesting, composite plastic knee and elbow pads, combat shotguns, machine pistols, hand grenades, and steel-spring batons, tactical units of SAG, CIMO, GIPINH, and the PNH braced themselves against the walls of the government district as fiercely pro-Aristide *chimere* (rumored to have been issued their weapons by Fanmi Lavalas partisan bosses) littered the streets of Port-au-Prince with *bwokay* – barricades of many types, most of them set aflame. The noxious smell of burning tires fed to the *bwokay* settled into the very fabric of street life in the capital, gagging the city with black soot that mixed with the choking smog of auto exhaust and charcoal smoke that has long been typical of the city's ecological woes. As I made my way around Bel Air on the eve of an apparent rebel assault on the neighborhood, a street boy named Mathias who I had known from years before ran up to me and gleefully waved a fistful of gourde notes. “Kwis! Kwis!” he called to me,

If my eyes did not tell me so, I would believe you were not really here. It is a bad time here, man. You will not be able to work here now. Its crazy. The army is back, Kwis. The police are frightened. The people have no security, nothing.

I asked him about the money he held in his hand. “Are you working while this is going on?” He had always made a decent living on the street washing cars.

Oh yes, man. There is much money for us street kids to have now. These men came to me, they are with Titid [Aristide], see. And they find me and Jimmi and Ti Frè – they are kids that you know, Kwis. We were wiping cars in Delmas and they say to us, ‘come with us to [Rue] Capois [the large boulevard near the National Palace] and you will make a lot of money.’ Now they pay us to work the *bwokay*. We throw tires on the flames, we keep them burning. Look at my money – I make a lot of gourdes now!

We talked some more and he wished me good courage before running back to work the blockades. As I watched Mathias take up his dangerous post with other boys beside the fires, I thought about how few cars there were on the street, and how few motorists in this time of war would stop to get their car wiped down by a street boy. Mathias had adapted well to the war economy.

Since January 2004, a fragmentary coalition of students, political dissidents, merchants, civic and church groups, and businessmen known as the Group of 184 (*Groupe de 184*) had been agitating for Aristide's resignation and have clashed with armed *chimere* in several skirmishes and demonstrations-cum-riots in which people have been killed and wounded in the ensuing exchanges of gunfire. The PNH and the paramilitaries have fired ambivalently into the crowds, often panicking and fleeing as the crowds have turned ugly and against them. Despite the arrival of international peacekeeping forces, violent confrontations among *chimere*, rebel clans and their sympathizers, the PNH, paramilitary troopers, student demonstrators, and partisan street clans have continued, and have been added to the matrix of Haitian social violence already woven with the crimes of the *zenglendo*, FRAPH terrorists, FADH loyalists, drug gangs, and vigilance brigades. This before we consider the sporadic attacks of homicidal vengeance and sexual brutality (long a social concern in Haiti) that now may opportunistically pose as political, rather than pathological, violence. And this before we also consider the loss of civil rights, human dignities, and life suffered by the legion of civilian casualties of the sum of Haiti's economic woes.

As the rebels moved from village to town during the early days of the uprising, they sacked and torched police precincts and private homes, freed hundreds of violent prisoners from criminal detention,<sup>9</sup> and seized stores of automatic weapons, uniforms, and helmets from the provincial arsenals of the PNH. Markets and schools throughout sixty percent of the country, some in regions that remain rebel-held territory outside of government control, are still shuttered because many

farmers, vendors, teachers, and students are unable or unwilling to travel dangerous roads to return from their places of internal exile in the Haiti's west and south.

A full-scale New Army assault and a certain civilian massacre in the capital was only averted when Aristide, under strong pressure from the U.S. and France, resigned his duties as president and quit Haiti for the Central African Republic on 29 February 2004, later to take up exile in South Africa where he resides in exile today. An advance contingency of U.S. troops arrived in the country the day following his departure, in support of American forces already defending the Embassy in downtown Port-au-Prince. They were later joined by Canadian, French, Venezuelan, and Argentine peacekeepers, and were eventually replaced by a Brazilian contingent that arrived in mid-2004 to assume control of U.N. forces. Peacekeepers have begun the long and treacherous task of disarming a civilian population with tens of thousands of illegal sidearms, semi-automatic rifles, and machineguns. The job will be all the more difficult now that vast stores of police hardware and uniforms are now in the possession of rebel insurgents. In some villages in the north, rebels have completely replaced the National Police and are dressed in the full uniform of the PNH – badges, weapons, and all. They have since begun to assume a semi-official role in security operations, their activities condoned, though not overtly supported by, the provisional government which has come close to a full paralysis under the onslaught of pro-Aristide violence and police and paramilitary retaliations. Days after U.S. troops arrived in March, a fierce gun battle erupted in the seaside Port-au-Prince slum of La Saline as rebel soldiers attempted to disarm a gang of *chimere*. Several civilians were wounded in the exchange of gunfire. Neither the PNH nor the peacekeepers were anywhere in sight. Since September 2004, two U.N. peacekeepers have been wounded in clashes with the *chimere*, and during the second week of October 2004, five beheaded bodies were discovered on the streets of the capital. They remain unidentified: erased, deleted, edited out, made invisible.

It is difficult to tell if there can now or ever be a public trust in the Haitian police, regardless of who is wearing the uniform. The colored history of the PNH and its disparate and fragmented paramilitary units has caused nationwide uneasiness over their tactical similarities to the old FADH. Their tenuous grip on authority and control in the country has been severely compromised by rebel victories, and this has led to the restoration of what is essentially martial law in the capital where the struggle to regain state control is presently at its fiercest. The New Army is energized and mobilized, empowered by the failure of anyone to disarm or contain their return to the political arena. The upshot is that Port-au-Prince has acquired the now-hallmark characteristics of large cities in post-industrial, post-occupation, democratizing nation-states in the developing world: an utterly militarized public domain, irreconcilable political polarization, upstart neighborhood warlords, criminal opportunists, incipient opposition parties, authoritarian governance, a profound scarcity of basic resources, and legions of poor, disaffected, unseen citizens who are every day reconstituting their broken worlds – social, cultural, familial, moral worlds – that have been left bleeding and fragmented on the pavement in the wake of political terror.

### **Ethnography and the Anthropology of Violence**

In her important study of the symbolic representations and exchanges that mediate the social relations between occupying Israeli and Egyptian armies and their Bedouin subjects in the Sinai, Smadar Lavie argued that everyday life was so transformed by omnipresent occupation that it “had permeated...discourses as delicate and intimate as those between husbands and wives” (1990: 6). It is amid such transformations, re-creations of cultural relations, that the meanings of violence are to be found. Any anthropology of violence must therefore pay as much attention to the poetics of lives lived in war as to the structural and infrastructural realities that produce them, insofar as violence is far more than embodied acts of physical aggression. War itself must be seen first as a larger macro-dialectical move through factional political histories marked by ever-shifting alliances and social

relations that culminate, rather than erupt, in spontaneous acts of brutality and aggression. But war is more than this. It is also a micro-dialectical move through the liminal shattered worlds of citizens forced to suffer, labor, survive, and adapt on their way to reconstituted ones. Seen in this way, the aftermath of war is all at once the end of fighting and the beginning, if not the continuation, of social, cultural, emotional, and moral recovery. For anthropology to be effective in its explications of violent conflict, it must be prepared to engage an exhaustive analysis of the historical, economic, and political realities which give rise to conflict in the first place, catalyzing transformations of individual and collective selves.

Throughout this article I have attempted to apply this strategy of analysis to the war that is raging on the streets of Port-au-Prince today. Rather than draw broad anthropological conclusions about the conflict from specific, decontextualized, and isolated acts of aggression that I have documented over the course of my work in Haiti, I have opted to pull back the ethnographic lens and take a more sophisticated approach; one that does not limit the analysis to sweeping claims of an abstract Haitian “authoritarian habitus,” and one that avoids oversimplifications of the war as a momentary crisis of social structure. By linking the state of rural decline in the Haitian countryside to the abject poverty, spatial mayhem, and human misery that obtains on the streets of the capital, the underlying causes of popular frustration and desperation are brought into stark relief as the persistent catalyst of national instability. The exhaustive history of crime and factional partisanship, and the state’s paramilitary responses to it, illustrates the complexities and shifting nature of violence as a dialectical political process in Haiti, giving lie to the notion that the war in Port-au-Prince is being fought by neatly compartmentalized fighting units: the “pro-Aristide gangs” and “government forces.” Finally, the narrative accounts of those who live the war, who work the war, who leap the puddles of blood on their way to school and market, who traipse around the burned out cars with grimacing skeletons inside as they look for an open pharmacy, who are beheaded in

rioting, who lose everything to the looting, who are shot in the foot by *zengendo* as they sell mangoes on the street, who are raped and then strangled with their own underwear, who are making a living now by throwing tires onto flaming barricades, who are struggling to worship, to eat, to sleep, to work, to breastfeed, to marry, to mourn, to buy, to sell, to love, in a word to *survive*; it is these stories that serve anthropologies of war by reminding us that as our ethnographic gaze is seduced by the movement of soldiers and materiel, by the gunplay and its victims, there are hundreds of thousands more who are equally touched by the conflict and who are simply struggling to live. In the midst of the war and in its aftermath, it is these citizens who are and who will carry on the work of reagggregating society back into itself.

Ethnography remains the database for this anthropology, providing the raw material from which broad ethnological generalizations may be made. More detailed ethnographies of the social and political contexts of “ethnographic states of emergency” (Feldman 1995) must be made in the interest of developing not a set of general principles about the causes of violence, but a better understanding of the particular contexts out of which it emerges. Ethnographies written from the *epicenters* of war and conflict (Nordstrom 1997), wherein lie the seeds of cultural creativity, will be the most beneficial to our ongoing attempts to elicit cross-cultural meanings from localized violent acts. Such ethnographies should be firmly grounded in a theoretical understanding of the complex and interrelated dynamic that imparts violence with nascent cultural creativity.

If ethnographies conducted in the midst of conflict are the foundation of the anthropology of violence, then a place like Haiti can provide many bricks in support of that foundation. Though Haiti has seen more than its share of violent episodes throughout its history, it would be irresponsible and sweeping to argue that the causes and consequences of each are repetitive or that they are tied to a particular class conflict or cultural habitus. While each of Haiti’s past and present crises appear to be of the same type as the last, we are pressed to recall that each conflict, like each

brick in a wall, is atypical with a unique history of formation and context that the apparent uniformity of the present whole belies. As we continue to develop meaningful (ethnographic, dialectical, narrative, interpretive, historicized, contextualized) understandings of the processes of destruction and re-formation that have produced the entire phylogeny of unrest in Haitian politics, so will we be able to formulate ever clearer perspectives on our comparative study of particular violent events across space and time. Only from a growing base of descriptive and interpretive data on human conflict in specific spaces will broad ethnological understandings of the mortar that binds all wars together as one processual system emerge, making a realistic and meaningful anthropology of violence all the more viable.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A folkloric, two-headed, fire-spitting monstrosity, part lion, part goat and with a serpent for a tail.

<sup>2</sup> Residents in the volatile Bel Air slum of the capital, an Aristide stronghold, claim to have witnessed the summary killing of 13 people by PNH officers in October 2004. That same month, one Brazilian and one Argentine U.N. peacekeeper were shot in disarmament operations in Port-au-Prince.

<sup>3</sup> Lowest-cost public transportation in Haiti, and therefore the transit of the masses. *Tap-taps* are colorfully painted minibuses and pick-up trucks, often blaring loud Haitian pop music, that each day carry multitudes throughout the country for a few gourdes each.

<sup>4</sup> Sidney Mintz (1985) adopted a similar approach in his seminal examination of the role played by global commercial interests and colonial power struggles that have guided and resulted from the production and consumption of sugar throughout the sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth centuries.

<sup>5</sup> Lavalas means “a cleansing flood,” and here refers to the tremendous flow of people power behind Aristide’s political rise.

<sup>6</sup> Haiti serves as a major transshipment port for Columbian cocaine entering the U.S. Profit-taking from the very lucrative drug-trafficking trade has long been a perquisite of political office in the country. Much of the graffiti covering the walls of downtown Port-au-Prince during the 2004 rebel uprising condemned Aristide as a “*sal diye dwòg*” – a filthy drug dealer.

<sup>7</sup> On 2 March 2004, with U.S., Canadian and French Forces entering the capital, Philippe proclaimed himself “chief” of the military clans united under the umbrella of the New Army.

<sup>8</sup> Title XI of Haiti’s current constitution (1987) does provide for a Haitian Army. In a strange and perhaps intentional oversight, Aristide did not pursue a constitutional dissolution of the army when he disbanded it by presidential decree in 1995. Rebel soldiers continue to enlist new members in Haiti today, in preparation for a full reconstitution of the Haitian army. They are growing in boldness. Following the disaster of Hurricane Jeanne in 2004, U.N. forces had to raise their weapons to disperse uniformed New Army soldiers and prevent them from seizing food aid from a World Food Program warehouse, which they said they intended to distribute to those suffering in Gonaïves. One rebel soldier who I met in Port-au-Prince in March 2004 cited Title XI, Article 266 of the constitution in forcefully declaring the obligation of “his army” – the rebel insurgency – to “defend the country in the event of war” (subsection a) and to “lend assistance to the police when [they] are unable to handle a situation” (subsection d).

<sup>9</sup> In a report issued during the uprising, Amnesty International warned that among those freed in rebel jailbreaks were high-ranking members of FADH incarcerated for massacres and atrocities committed during the Cedras coup d’etat. Jean-Claude Duperval, Hérbert Valmond, Carl Dorelien, and Castera Cénafils were sentenced to forced labor for life for their involvement in the 1994 Raboteau (in Gonaïves) massacre in which twenty to fifty Haitian civilians were killed by the Haitian army. Jackson Joanis was sentenced to forced labor for life for his role in the assassinations of Antoine Izméry and Father Jean-Marie Vincent, both fervent Aristide supporters. Prosper Avril was leader of the 1988 coup d’etat and indicted in the investigation of a 1990 assault on the village of Piatre by proxy strongmen hired by local landlords and FADH soldiers. Eleven were killed in the massacre that ensued, almost four hundred homes were razed, livestock were slaughtered and defiled in the fields, and crops were uprooted. The conflict originated with a disputed land tenure

claim between poor farmers in the village and two absentee landholding families suspected of having bankrolled the attack (Amnesty International 2004; National Coalition for Haitian Rights 2004).

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