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## There is no state: Authoritarian returns on Haiti's high Central Plateau

Sophie Sapp Moore

### Abstract

*Political and economic shocks have destabilized agrarian livelihoods in Haiti since the country won its independence from France in 1804. Yet the current conjuncture demonstrates a new convergence of ecological, economic, and political pressures in postcolonial rural spaces like Haiti's central hinterland. Ethnographic research conducted with rural dwellers organized in the Mouvman Peyizan Papay (MPP, or Peasants' Movement of Papaye) on Haiti's high Central Plateau since 2013 reveals that, despite their commitment to a liberatory Marxist politics, many peasants yearn for a return to the ecological and social order that was enforced under the authoritarian Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986). While recent developments in Haitian national politics point to a resurgence in Duvalierist militarism and authoritarianism, MPP militants have typically not joined the anti-government mobilization that began in 2015, perceiving it as corrupted by the populism of ex-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Moreover, the political arm of the movement has increasingly been compelled to play gwo nèg ("big man") politics in its effort to represent rural interests at the national scale. Peasants like those organized with MPP are thus caught between a regressive national politics and an urban-focused populist resistance that has historically sought to neutralize rural social movements. This working paper reveals how MPP militants are developing agroecology — the science of sustainable food systems — as an adaptive response to multivalent rural precarity. The political implications of an "agroecological transition" across the global South are only beginning to be examined (see de Molina, 2013). The emancipatory political project emergent from MPP's turn to agroecology, I argue, mobilizes agrarian knowledge production in the movement's praxis of food sovereignty. Whereas prevailing development paradigms highlight food sovereignty as one key objective in building rural resiliency, the material and political conditions that produce rural inequality in the first place often go unquestioned. Ultimately, Towards a Political Agroecology challenges prevailing resiliency frameworks by arguing for agroecological praxis as a means of disrupting the normative reproduction of authoritarian futures in the countryside. As such, a political agroecology affords peasants a means not only to understand and intervene in changing agro-ecosystems, but also to challenge the cooptation of movement politics by authoritarian actors.*

## 1. Introduction

In January 2016, Michel Martelly, then the President of Haiti, released a song called “Ba’l bannan nan,” just in time for the year’s Carnival celebration. The song, whose title translates literally to “give him/her the banana,” makes ample use of the raunchy wordplay for which “Sweet Micky,” as he is known to fans of his *kompa* music, is famous. The song directs a pointed barb at Liliane Pierre-Paul, a well-known Haitian radio journalist and human rights activist who has been one of Martelly’s most outspoken critics since his election in 2011. Although delivered in an unorthodox medium, Martelly’s attack on Pierre-Paul continues an authoritarian tradition that reached its peak under the Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986), during which Pierre-Paul was tortured for her activism. The contiguity between Martelly’s presidency and that of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier has not gone unremarked by his opponents, nor was it hidden by Martelly himself, who has publicly acknowledged his voluntary affiliation with Duvalierists both before and after Baby Doc’s fall in 1986. “Ba’l bannan nan” is not just a diss track, however; it is also a piece of political propaganda in support of Martelly’s hand-picked successor, Jovenel Moïse, who assumed the presidency in January 2017 after several rounds of contested elections. Moïse is known by the nickname *Nèg bannan nan*, or the “banana man” because of his creation of Haiti’s first agricultural free trade zone: a banana plantation in the North-East Department.

In 2016, Moïse’s centrist platform showed no obvious signs of the Duvalierist tendencies that had begun to re-emerge under Martelly. Yet rural dwellers in the North-East and adjacent Center Departments well understood how the “banana man” might extend Martelly’s incipient authoritarian project into the hinterland. One clue came in the form of reports of voter intimidation and political violence that circulated around election time, in which the alleged perpetrators were identified by their pink shirts, the color of Martelly’s PHTK party. While life in Port-au-Prince ground to a halt during the near-daily street protests both for and against PHTK that proliferated during the 2015 to 2016 elections, there was little evidence of protest in provincial streets. The opposition came primarily from urban supporters of Aristide’s reincarnated party, Fanmi Lavalas, which staged frequent demonstrations under the banner of an incipient movement called *Nou Pap Obeyi*: we do not obey.<sup>1</sup> In the countryside, however, street protests were few and small, and pink-garbed PHTK supporters were many. Even the Mouvman Peyizan Papay (the Peasants’ Movement of Papaye, or MPP), one of Haiti’s longest standing peasant organizations, did not put on any public displays of opposition to Martelly, his successor Moïse, or the various old-guard Duvalierists galvanized by PHTK’s law and order platform. This is not to say, however, that there was no rural opposition to PHTK and the regressive authoritarianism that Martelly had set in motion.

This working paper examines how rural dwellers organized in MPP have understood and responded to historical and resurgent forms of authoritarian populism in Haiti’s hinterland since the 1970s. In rural areas like Haiti’s high Central Plateau, a region in the island’s interior bordering the Dominican Republic, authoritarian leaders on both the right and the left have consolidated and reproduced their power through a set of repressive and extractive practices, of which I highlight in particular surveillance, intimidation and violence, and rent-seeking. The historical focus of this paper reveals the evolution of these practices beginning under François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, who came to power in 1957, and traces their continuance through the neoliberal reforms that followed the end of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986. The *dechoukaj*, or uprooting, that followed 1986 sought to purge Haiti of the dictatorship and its legacy. Although the left populist wave that would sweep Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power in 1990 seemed to mark the ebb of Haiti’s authoritarian era, I argue that after 1990, both right and left populisms contended with authoritarian returns in the hinterland. Empirically, this paper draws primarily from ethnographic fieldwork conducted with MPP between 2015 and 2016 to reveal how militants in the movement have both legitimated and contested such authoritarian returns. I

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<sup>1</sup> Aristide’s party, Lavalas, dissolved after the coup of 2004. While Aristide himself was excluded from future candidacy as a condition of his return, he remains widely recognized as the leader of his reconstituted party, Fanmi Lavalas (FL), which maintains significant urban popular support. Despite its lack of connection to many rural dwellers, FL consistently bills itself as Haiti’s most popular political party, and has been periodically excluded from elections since 2009.

ultimately contend that MPP's turn to agroecology signals a means of resisting — and even undoing — the reproduction of authoritarian power in the hinterland. I develop this proposition in the five sections that follow.

In the first, I trace the genealogy of authoritarian populism in the hinterland through the Duvalier dictatorship, showing how Papa Doc established a precedent for “going to the countryside” as a means to legitimate and consolidate political power. I then examine the development and persistence of authoritarian mechanisms of extraction and repression in the hinterland under Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, and show how MPP grew into a movement in the early 1970s against the constraints of Baby Doc's regime. In the paper's second section, I highlight the shift towards demagogic forms of left populism after 1986, and demonstrate how Jean-Bertrand Aristide rode this wave to — and from — power in the 1990s. In the paper's third section, I theorize how the historical conditions that embed authoritarianism in the hinterland have shaped rural dwellers' understanding of and engagement with the state in the present. In the fourth, I contend that MPP's increasing focus on food sovereignty since 1986 reflects a broader emancipatory and anti-state agrarian politics, while the paper's fifth and final section examines how new forms of authoritarian populism emergent since 2010 have reshaped the exercise and contestation of agrarian politics in the countryside.

## 2. Going to the Countryside

In 1964, the seventh year of his presidency, François “Papa Doc” Duvalier had Haiti's national flag remade, following the model of the Revolutionary leaders. His design replaced the previous flag's horizontal red and blue stripes with vertical black and red ones, signaling his *noiriste*<sup>2</sup> politics. That same year, Duvalier declared himself Haiti's President for Life, rewriting the constitution to affirm his newly claimed status. Papa Doc also had a neon sign installed in front of the national palace in Port-au-Prince, which flashed the message “I am the Haitian flag, One and Indivisible,” with his signature in lights at the bottom (Dubois, 2012: 334). This move marked an important transition in Papa Doc's exercise of authoritarian power. While those in the deep countryside would likely never see Papa Doc's neon monument in the capital, its message of an omnipresent state, whose power emanated directly from the person of the President himself, reached even the most remote areas of the hinterland.

The *tonton makout*, one branch of Duvalier's secret police, and the rural section chiefs who administered provincial affairs conveyed the state's power to rural dwellers, honing the set of repressive and extractive tactics that would come to typify authoritarian discipline in rural Haiti. Although the brutality of his regime would eventually turn the masses against him, François Duvalier had been elected in 1957 with immense popular support. Exploiting affinities of class and color established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the doctor consolidated his power in the countryside with a *noiriste* policy that ensured the public face of political power would be dark-skinned, overturning the mulatto elite's traditional hold on the political sphere. The currents of class and color that had shaped Haiti's political history since 1804 were reactivated and reworked to support Duvalier's rise to power, aiding the consolidation of a brutal regime that combined demagogic and authoritarian forms of populism. Demagogic, in the sense of the concentration of power in a single charismatic figure, and authoritarian in the maintenance and reproduction of that power through the use of repressive and extractive strategies.

Papa Doc's combination of charismatic leadership and strict discipline has precedent in Haiti's history. The authoritarian mechanisms of rural social control central to Duvalier's agrarian politics had their roots in the administrative structure set up Jean-Pierre Boyer, who served as President of the Republic of Haiti from 1818 to 1843. Boyer's nationalist vision cast Haiti as an essentially agrarian society, in which rural dwellers are obligated to sustain a modernizing state. As such, Boyer's administration augmented the state's extractive and repressive functions, establishing a system of *chefs de section*

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<sup>2</sup> François Duvalier's *noiriste* strategy sought to divert political power from the traditional mulatto elite to a Black bourgeoisie with nativist rather than European commitments.

(rural section chiefs) to handle provincial affairs.<sup>3</sup> In the countryside, the primary function of the section chiefs was to extract value from rural dwellers through the collection of taxes and fees, and the appropriation of agricultural products. Whether rents were paid in cash or in kind, Boyer's system bound the hinterland to national production, and set up a decentralized administrative structure to enforce compliance. Boyer's 1826 reforms thus established rent-seeking as a central principle and practice of national development in the hinterland.

The extraction of rents from a population with limited access to cash was one way that Boyer filled the young state's coffers, depleted by the debts of the Revolution. The indemnity that France had demanded from its former colony drove much of Boyer's domestic and foreign policy, leading to the occupation of Spanish Santo Domingo from 1822 to 1844. Boyer's 1826 Code Rural sought to discipline a newly acquired hinterland, legally binding cultivators to the land, re-instituting forced labor and imposing strict regulations on punishment, work schedules, and productivity. Dayan describes some of the 202 articles of Boyer's Code Rural: "Article 3, for example, prescribes cultivation for those who 'cannot justify their means of existence.' It being the duty of every citizen to aid in sustaining the State, either by his active services, or by his industry, those who are not employed in the civil service, or called upon for military service; those who do not exercise a licensed profession; those who are not working artisans, or employed as servants; those who are not employed in felling timber for exportation; in [sum], those who cannot justify their means of existence, shall cultivate the soil" (1998: 14). The obligation to cultivate the soil thus creates a forced peasantry, formalizing the relationship between agricultural productivity and national belonging. This obligation was in turn reinforced by the *chefs de section*, who President Boyer rewarded with military rank and its associated benefits of status and property.

Boyer's Code Rural remained in effect, with minor modifications in 1864 and 1957, until it was replaced by Duvalier's revision of 1962 (Castor & Garafola, 1974). Duvalier's Code Rural kept intact the administrative structure put in place by Boyer, maintaining the state's rent-seeking function in the hinterland. The dual disavowal of the hinterland as backward and the extraction of value from its population has been a fundamental dialectic within Haiti's national development since Boyer, and remained crucial to Duvalier's regime. Under Duvalier, section chiefs' primary duties remained the collection of fees, which were imposed not only as rents, but also for the produce, sale, transport, and butchering of animals, the cutting of trees, and the transport and sale of agricultural products. By the early 1960s, such extractive practices served to uphold and to reproduce an increasingly authoritarian state. With the Code Rural, Papa Doc had at his disposal a well-established system of rural discipline and surveillance, which he had honed to a vicious edge by 1964. The secret police, which included *tonton makout*, *makout lou*, and *cagouards*,<sup>4</sup> used intimidation and violence to reinforce the rural section chiefs' mandate, making it clear that Duvalier and the state were one and the same, pervading all corners of the nation.

The indivisibility of the territorial, disciplinary, and demagogic aspects of Papa Doc's reign inverts Hall's distinction of the transition from authoritarian statism to authoritarian populism, in which "populist discontents" form the basis of authoritarian politics (1985: 118; see also Scoones et al., 2018). The rapport that Papa Doc had built as a country doctor working with rural dwellers beginning in the 1930s allowed him to obtain rural populations' consent for an authoritarian project that was transactional, rewarding loyalty with a measure of access to state power. Nicholls (1985) and others emphasize the widespread popular support for Duvalier in his earlier years. In 1958, one year after his inauguration, Duvalier explicitly pledged his support to peasants, the "great unacknowledged of the

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<sup>3</sup> Boyer's Code divided the nation into five "Departments," or provinces; today Haiti has ten Departments. Under Boyer, Departments were further divided into communal sections, each of which was administered by a rural section chief, or *chef de seksyon*.

<sup>4</sup> *Tonton makout*, whose name translates to "Uncle Knapsack," were Duvalier's secret police force, their name drawn from a rural bogeyman who carries away naughty children in his woven straw bag. *Lou* or "heavy" *makout* were those officers charged with special disciplinary duties, while *cagouards* were a specialized, masked police force.

Haitian community.” National development plans of 1958 and 1960 proposed significant agricultural, infrastructural, and social development of rural areas, although these plans were never implemented (Lundahl, 1979/2015: 308-309). Sylvain writes that peasants embraced Papa Doc as a father figure, easing the infiltration of Duvalier’s disciplinary network into the deep countryside, where he rewarded loyalty and ideological conformity: "the patriarchal state embodied in Duvalier was reproduced within each *macoute* in order to maintain or acquire support" (2013: 70-73).

This is not to say that Duvalier’s populism was entirely transactional. Although political power remained concentrated in Port-au-Prince under Duvalier, his populist appeal was deeply rooted in his reputation as a country doctor who cared for those sufferers in the most remote reaches of the hinterland. The young Duvalier had laid that foundation long before assuming the presidency, both building rural support and identifying potential opponents. Within a few years of his election, Papa Doc had assured the continuity of his regime through a dual strategy of obtaining consent by repressive and transactional means. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Central Plateau had been a bastion for Haiti’s two most powerful institutions, the Church and the army. The consolidation of Papa Doc’s power depended upon the dual presentation of the hinterland as backward — and thus in need of development — and the integration of its long-standing institutions of power with an increasingly authoritarian state. Quinn and Sutton write of how Papa Doc “had also previously astutely removed, silenced, or later reached an accommodation with his many enemies. These included army officers, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the US embassy, the business elite, intellectuals, and the trade union leadership. [...] As early as 1966 [Duvalier had begun] to seek an accommodation with some of these groups such that they had concluded they could 'live with Duvalierism and that attempts to improve their position within the parameters of the system were preferable to the confusion which might result from revolution’” (2013: 8). Those rural dwellers who were without institutional power, however, were systematically excluded from reaching such accommodations by the repressive apparatus of Duvalier’s state, whose authoritarian tactics ranged from quotidian surveillance and intimidation to structural exclusion.

A tradition of subversive social practice in the made the hinterland a site for both rural self-organization and intensifying capitalist production in the 1970s. Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier came to power in 1971 at his father’s death. The teenage president had as little interest in the countryside as he had in governing, but made ready use of the extractive mechanisms already put in place by his father. Whereas Papa Doc had pushed forward an authoritarian nationalist project that consolidated and centralized state power in Port-au-Prince, his son’s tastes ran more to extravagant cosmopolitan luxuries. Baby Doc’s economic policy highlighted light industry and tourism, seeking to lure business to Haiti with a plentiful supply of cheap labor recently migrated to urban centers from the provinces. This labor force was made up largely of peasants compelled to leave their land by the increasing cost of living in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Lundahl notes steady declines in three key indicators between 1960 and 1970: real per capita income, national economic growth, and food production (2015/1979: 98-99).

Six years after Jean-Claude came to power, the number of US firms in Haiti had nearly doubled; cost of living and food prices had increased dramatically, the food index doubling between 1972 and 1973 as it rode an inflationary wave. The profits of Jean-Claude’s economic revolution tended to exit the country at a rapid rate (Trouillot, 1990: 201, 241, 216; 1994: 130), with *makout* and section chiefs ensuring the steady flow of capital from the countryside, whether into pockets or foreign bank accounts. It was against the rampant extractivism of Jean-Claudisme that MPP began to mobilize in the 1970s. Under Baby Doc, MPP counts such victories as the elimination of fees for market sellers, and the bringing to justice of some of the most corrupt rural section chiefs. The emergence of MPP in 1973 thus challenged both the extractive and repressive practices fundamental to the Duvalierist authoritarian state.

In the 1970s, MPP’s capacity to name the violence, corruption, and impunity of Baby Doc’s regime was necessarily limited. Yet from the movement’s archive, in its protest songs and from the memories of old women and men with bodies broken by torture, emerges the utopian vision central to MPP’s

ideology. Influenced by the radical doctrine of liberation theology, MPP militants in the 1970s began to imagine a socialist and sovereign “peasant state” whose politics remained unspeakable under the dictatorship. Yet militants sowed the seeds of another future even in these darkest hours. Despite the increasing insecurity that the economic data suggest, MPP’s elders remember the time before 1986 as one of relative abundance. They remember a “blessed” time, not only for the “decadent” elite, the primary beneficiaries of the so-called economic revolution, but also for those who worked the land.

You could get what you needed for the money you had, my friend Paolo explains. Even with just 50 *goudes*, you could feed your family. Paolo suggests two possibilities: that food needs could be met mostly on-farm, and that rural dwellers had adequate access to cash for the remainder. Both imply that one could make a living by cultivating the soil in the 1970s; a claim that does not hold true today. But in the 1970s — *Adje! Peyi a te beni!* The land was blessed! — Paolo recalls. His neighbor gestures to the grey-pebbled gully that runs below the hillside on which we sit. Rice used to grow here! I struggle to imagine tender pale green stalks spearing the air in this gold-and-grey savannah landscape. Now even hardy “3 month” maize does not grow on these rocky slopes. *Desolation*, as Paolo’s neighbor calls the landscape. But we sit beneath a sizable mango tree, and I can see the tops of banana and coconut palms in the valley below our shaded spot, where we had spent the morning in a neighbor’s garden, a profusion of row and tree crops planted on a steep slope. Although the mountaintops that ring us are bare and grey, their limestone skeletons exposed and crumbling, water still seeps from crevices in the rock.

The slashes of green that mark the landscape, even in this dry season, hold a memory of rains past. Not just last season’s rains, but for many seasons before. The collective memory of abundance, and its physical traces in the landscape (a flash of green, a trickle of water from cool rock, the memory of the taste of cornmeal cooked with pork fat), is a necessary anchor for the millenarian vision that sustains militants like Paolo and his neighbors in the struggle. On a hot afternoon, I meet one of the oldest men I know in the area. His eyes grey and cloudy, he leans his head back over the top of his stiff cane chair, his neck as thin as an acacia branch. I ask him what this place was like when he was young. He rests a hand on his close-cropped white hair, and closes his eyes, his gold-rimmed teeth pressing against each other as he smiles in memory: “we used to drink milk every single morning. There was so much, my father would bathe us kids in the first milk. After that, he’d dig up a manioc root and boil it in the second milk. We’d all get a nice big piece.” My friend nods, smiles, remembering: *Adje! peyi a te beni!* The land was blessed!

### 3. Prophets in Exile

After 1986, however, things were different. The extractive relationship that had long obtained between Port-au-Prince and the hinterland shifted increasingly to an international scale, with the countryside becoming more a site for the unloading of surplus rather than its production. Foreign aid increased dramatically, following a global trend tying development assistance to the achievement of democratization benchmarks. Between 1980 and 1990, average wages fell about 50%, while the value of US agricultural exports to Haiti tripled, augmenting the declines in real income and food production that had begun in the late 1950s under Papa Doc (Hallward, 2004; Lundahl, 2015/1979). Rural pro-democracy activists advanced a previously unthinkable platform of rural sovereignty through such actions as the denunciation of corruption in development, the burning of food aid warehouses, and open defiance of the section chiefs and *makout*. The uprisings that would take down Jean-Claude had begun as food riots in the coastal city of Gonaïves. In the months before Baby Doc’s departure, rural dwellers all over the country demonstrated against alleged corruption in the distribution of food aid. MPP played a key role in this trajectory, while nonetheless working in partnership with a carefully chosen set of long-term NGO partners. *Dechoukaj*<sup>5</sup> disrupted the steady flow of capital from the countryside to the pockets of the political elite that had been the norm under Baby Doc. That is not to

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<sup>5</sup> *Dechoukaj*, or uprooting, was a broad-based effort to eradicate Duvalierists and the legacy of the dictatorship after 1986. *Makout* and other supporters of the regime who could not flee the country or hide out within its borders were often discovered, publicly identified, and punished or killed (see Nicholls, 1986; Dash, 2013).



say, however, that the authoritarian mechanisms by which Duvalier's state had traditionally extracted value from the hinterland disappeared.

Between the fall of the dictatorship in 1986 and the election of Aristide in 1990, Haiti was governed by four separate administrations. Unhitched from the dictatorship, military men like General Henri Namphy, who would serve twice as President between 1986 and 1990, saw an opportunity to reprise the agreements they had reached with the Duvaliers. Namphy and his hard-liner associates instituted a form of "Duvalierism without Duvalier" that transferred rural social control largely back to the Forces Armées d'Haiti (FAd'H) (see Trouillot, 1990; Hallward, 2004). The Duvalierist alliances that Namphy forged between disgruntled political elites and a restive army signaled the authoritarian retentions embedded in the populism that drove democratization between 1986 and 1990.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the "little priest" known for his fiery rhetoric of class struggle and his ministry to the poor, reflected its demagogic variant, which initially brought together diverse factions on the left. MPP had supported Aristide's rise to power in 1990, and MPP's leader, Chavannes Jean-Baptiste,<sup>6</sup> had enjoyed a close relationship with Aristide before his removal by a military coup in 1991. Both men had worked in the Catholic Church, training in Latin American liberation theology, and their followers were drawn from those same "great unacknowledged" ranks that Papa Doc had hailed in 1958. Both men would come to be viewed as prophets and saviors by their devoted followers, driving a broad swing from right to left forms of populism between 1986 and 1991. The remaining Duvalierists, silenced by the *dechoukaj* that began this swing in 1986, bided their time. Meanwhile, Aristide's followers turned to a demagogic form of populism that elevated men like the Aristide and Chavannes to messianic status.<sup>7</sup>

Military generals like Namphy and Raoul Cédras, who would lead the 1991 coup, saw men like Aristide and Chavannes as a profound threat to Haiti's traditional centers of power. Their concerns were justified; after his election in 1990, for example, Aristide abolished the hated rural section chiefs — an order that Cédras's junta immediately reversed after the 1991 coup. The extent to which rural dwellers could be compelled to at least tolerate an authoritarian rule of law was often tested between 1986 and 1994, when the United States finally intervened to end the military junta with Operation Uphold Democracy. MPP militants remember hiding in the forest after the coup of 1991 and after, when Duvalierists exacted their revenge upon Aristide's supporters in the hinterland. Paolo runs his fingers over the stony ground as he remembers those blood-soaked years when the movement was *nan mawon*, that is, fugitive, or in exile.<sup>8</sup> Agrarian life on the high Central Plateau would be transformed in the decade after 1986, a year that many MPP members identify as the advent of hard times, when *lavi a vin che*, life became expensive. Following the 1991 coup, life became expensive in political terms as well, with MPP's ranks gravely depleted by Duvalierists' retribution. The coup provoked deep transformation in MPP's strategy and its membership, although its central objective of rural self-sufficiency remained unchanged.

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<sup>6</sup> While all other names used in this work are pseudonyms, I refer to MPP's founder by his real name. He is a well-known public figure, identified in public and in private as "Chavannes," the name I use here, or in Haitian Creole, Chavan. Chavannes, as everyone calls him, is the celebrated son of a peasant family long-settled in the hills above Bassin Zim. Although he officially stepped down as MPP's director in 2016, he remains at the ideological and political center of the movement. He likewise remains MPP's public face, and is recognized internationally for his work. He was a recipient of the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2005, and frequently travels internationally, including as a delegate to global peasants' movement La Via Campesina.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hallward (2004: 34) for a discussion of Aristide's "demagogic populism" and the general reticence to criticize him in debates around Haiti's democratic transition.

<sup>8</sup> The practice of *mawonaj* (marronage, or escape from slavery) dates back to colonial Saint-Domingue. The enslaved practiced *grand* or *petit marronage* in escaping the plantation, sometimes joining with other bands of maroons who dwelt in the forest, sometimes conducting raids into planters' territory (Price, 1996).

When Aristide was restored to power in 1994, MPP began to split from him and his party, Lavalas<sup>9</sup>, officially denouncing Aristide in 2002. The international community had imposed strict conditions for Aristide's restoration, including acceptance of the terms of the IMF's structural adjustment package (SAP) (Hallward, 2004: 30). The conditions of the SAP, amongst other pressures, transformed the Lavalasian state into what Fatton calls a "predatory democracy" (2002: 87), one driver of the dramatic increase in economic and food insecurity in rural areas after 1986. The military coup of 1991 remobilized an authoritarian faction of Duvalierists, whose rural base of support had not been completely uprooted in 1986 after all. After Aristide's restoration in 1994, MPP's public split from Lavalas likewise made militants the target of Aristide's own brand of rural discipline. Peasants' movements like MPP had joined with Aristide's urban base to bring him to power, but their split from Aristide reactivated authoritarian mechanisms of political violence that had remained latent in the countryside.

Rural dwellers, and in particular those who are openly affiliated with MPP, recount increasing encounters with *chimè*, hired political muscle, since 2000. While *chimé* had emerged within Aristide's urban base around 1990, the fragmentation of Lavalas after 1994 dispersed their allegiances. Especially during the electoral season, militants remark, young men dressed in the urban street wear that MPP associates with social and moral disorder buzz polling places, intimidate voters, and harass political opponents. It is harder today for rural dwellers to define the codes and targets of political violence than it was under the dictatorship. Despite Haiti's increasing urbanization and rates of rural-to-urban migration, and despite the lessening of direct forms of extraction and exploitation, the hinterland remains a site for the extraction of political power and economic wealth. Playing on its characterization as "weak" or "fragile," the state maintains discipline in the countryside by reproducing agrarian insecurity, a necessary condition for the provision of aid. The authoritarian mechanisms of predation and extraction that characterize urban-rural relations in Haiti obtain as much today as they did under the dictatorship, and in some ways, more so (Maingot, 1986). There are no more section chiefs to enforce the obligation to cultivate the soil. Rather, the obligation is to the market, where American rice and chicken and flour, in bags woven with the stars and stripes, are always the cheapest offering.

Peasants' perception of betrayal by a neoliberal elite was central to increasing engagement with food sovereignty after 1994. When Aristide agreed to the IMF's elimination of import tariffs as a condition for his restoration, the ensuing fluctuation in the markets had a near-immediate effect on rural dwellers. The undercutting of local production would increase from the 1990s on, even as leaders like Aristide and his successor René Préal paid lip service to agrarian reform. Hallward writes of the late 1990s, "with the tariff on rice cut from 50 per cent to the IMF decreed 3 per cent, Haiti — previously self-sufficient in the crop — was flooded with subsidized American grain, and rice imports rose from just 7,000 tonnes in 1985 to 220,000 tonnes in 2002." Hallward also notes the creole pig eradication project, and the collapse of the poultry sector in 1982. He concludes, "as a result of these and related economic 'reforms,' agricultural production fell from around 50 per cent of GDP in the late 1970s to just 25 per cent in the late 1990s" (2004: 31). In the years since their hope in Aristide waned, MPP's militants and general membership have increasingly come to feel *pa gen leta* — there is no state.

#### 4. There is no State

When Papa Doc rose to power, he transformed the remaining sugarcane, banana, and cotton plantations established during the US Occupation into state monopolies. On the Central Plateau, the environment is better suited to diversified, small-scale agriculture and the raising of cattle. Duvalier's state accrued to itself both the land and the labor force necessary to extract agrarian value from the

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<sup>9</sup> There is a lack of clarity around the precise reasons for the split between MPP and Lavalas. While Chavannes attributes the split to MPP's rejection of Aristide's perceived corruption by neoliberal interests, others attribute it to Chavannes's personal affront at not being chosen for an official post in Aristide's cabinet. See Hallward (2010) and Deibert (2011) for more on MPP's role in the democratic transition.

hinterland. The regime grazed large herds in the hills of the borderlands, managing forest and collecting rents on the remaining lands. Since the end of the Occupation in 1934, the Church and the state have been the two largest landholders in the region. Despite the near-total absence of any visible agents of the state, today squatters and sharecroppers still work *te leta*, which remains “the state’s land” no matter how many times they have turned over the soil. The trees that grow and the animals that graze on state land are “for the state,” even if no one ever comes to claim them.

François Duvalier’s consolidation of power through state structures of agrarian extraction and discipline echoes a familiar Kreyol proverb: *apre bondye se leta* (after God, there’s the state). In this expression, speakers point to the omnipresence of the state, highlighting its capacity to determine life and death. *Aprè bondye se leta* seems to contradict another common phrase: *pa gen leta*, there is no state, a dismissive criticism that points out the state’s failure to work as it should. Expressions like *pa gen leta* and *apre bondye se leta* mark a loose understanding of *leta*, the state, as a shifting coalition of the powerful, omnipresent but epiphenomenal to the government itself. For those whose labor does not ensure their own security, *leta* is a metonym for power embedded in the structures of racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983). Officially, *leta* reproduces the structure of the plantation in legal discourse, while enforcing ideological conformity with the state’s instruments of surveillance, discipline, and extraction. Such relations obtain even in the central hinterland, which was never under plantation cultivation.

By the time Baby Doc took power in 1971, *leta* effectively encompassed international as well as national actors. Baby Doc’s economic revolution launched a period of foreign-led liberalization that many Haitians on the left refer to as the “American Plan” — a continuation of the US Occupation that officially ended in 1934. Peasants in Haiti’s hinterland saw little economic benefit from the agroindustrial transformations of the 1970s. Nonetheless, the period was a fruitful one for agrarian social movements like MPP. Burron writes, “the implementation of neoliberal reforms by Jean-Claude Duvalier in the late 1970s and 1980s helped trigger the formation of a popular civil society opposed to the dictatorship.” MPP was one such civil society association working to counter the undercutting of agrarian livelihoods under Baby Doc. The structural transformations that MPP began to speak out against in the 1980s fell under the broad rubric of the so-called American Plan, including import substitution and dumping.

*Dechoukaj* opened new opportunities for the formalization of peasants’ status, but also destabilized the social and political order that allowed rural dwellers to recognize their enemies. In 1986, the interim government led by Namphy amended Duvalier’s Code Rural. The 1986 amendment at least nominally granted rural dwellers the same rights as those long enjoyed by urbanites, regularizing their status as citizens of an incipient democracy. Those born in the provinces no longer had their birth certificates marked with the appellation “peasant,” for example, and the fall of the dictatorship in 1986 did indeed loosen the grip of the section chiefs on the course of daily life in the countryside. Yet *dechoukaj* also disrupted how rural dwellers understood the social and economic order of their lives. For them, the state did not withdraw in 1986, but rather its authoritarian tendencies remained latent in such institutions as the army and the police, key players in the anti-democratic opposition that remained entrenched on the Central Plateau. At least with Jean-Claude, a friend tells me, we had *lòd ak disiplin*, order and discipline. What the claim *pa gen leta* suggests, in this context, is not the state’s absence, but rather that it is all too present, only in the usual way. That is to say, it imposes order only inasmuch as it is necessary to extract value from those who are obligated to cultivate the soil. *Aprè bondye se leta* posits an omnipresent, if capricious, state, one that at once captures and disavows the peasantry in its agrarian politics.

This double movement of disavowal and extraction remained the central term of relation between the state and a restive peasantry after 1986. But *dechoukaj* also brought with it the demands of foreign aid, tying the political transformations of democratization to the economic interests of Haiti’s creditors. In return for \$200 million in American assistance, General Namphy agreed to implement agrarian market reforms during the interim period (Hallward, 2004: 27). The army was one tool that Namphy used to push through a form of “liberalization by decree” (Silvia, 2009). As such, the constitutive practices of

Haiti's democratic transition — the implementation of market reforms, the redistribution of property, and the suppression of anti-democratic practices and ideologies — at the same time preserved space for authoritarian returns in the hinterland. Duvalierist loyalists in the countryside were remobilized to ensure compliance with a new political and economic agenda, but one in which peasants were no less beholden to the interests of the state and its creditors. Democratization thus shifted — but did not eradicate — authoritarian tendencies within Haiti's national agrarian politics. The simultaneous characterization of the hinterland as a backwater and the exploitation of its markets continued apace.

At the uncertain juncture of political and economic transformations after 1986, MPP's training praxis and decentralized organizational structure proved useful in sowing another vision of what democracy would look like in the hinterland. This vision of what MPP militants call "another kind of state" depends upon a utopian ideology of collective self-determination. In the sharing of agricultural knowledge and in collective agrarian labor, MPP's praxis demonstrates, militants cultivate space in which a sovereign peasantry can survive within a predatory state. Under the Duvaliers, militants in the borderlands were known as *kamoken*, a term which would come to describe anti-Duvalierists more generally. With the breakdown of the dictatorship, *kamoken* worked across MPP's decentralized network to bring *dechoukaj* to the deep countryside. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, MPP-trained agronomists and agricultural technicians walked country roads to organize peasants for what would come next. As the governance of the hinterland was increasingly outsourced to international organizations by an unstable state after 1986, the expression *pa gen leta* took on another significance. A friend in the hills near Mibalè snorts dismissively: "No, the state doesn't do anything. There is no state! No, we don't even know what the Department of Agriculture does. We don't know!" He laughs, shaking his head, eyebrows and palms upraised to the dusty mango leaves that shade our heads.

He goes on, leaning his chair back against the trunk of the mango tree: "and they don't know we're here, either. They've never made it out here. They don't know if us peasants, if we are even here or not!" He laughs again, and a few other join him with scornful snorts. "They're sitting down below the Artibonite [River] doing politics. They don't take charge of anything. When they need you, at election time, sometimes someone shows up. You can hear, you hear someone passing in a car, calling for you. They call you during the election, then you're their man, their man until the election is finished, that is. Then you go asking for them and they don't even know you!" (Interview 2/7/2016). This speaker is identifying the underlying conditions that support the claim that "there is no state:" the state needs peasants only inasmuch as they are citizens who cast votes, who pay rents, fees, and taxes. His experience suggests the endurance of authoritarian mechanisms of extraction and repression into the present, conditions under which food sovereignty becomes a matter of great political significance (Patel, 2009). MPP's agronomists and organizers understand peasants' role as fundamental to national production — the feeding of the nation. Yet in practice, the peasantry feeds the state, but not with food. And for the people, there is an endless supply of the imported USAID-subsidized rice known as "Miami rice." MPP's vision of socio-ecological transformation seeks to separate out a space of sovereignty within a state predicated on such a hungry peasantry.

## 5. Agroecology is Our Politics

If food sovereignty is a right, under what conditions is that right meaningful (Patel, 2009: 668)? This question was posed at the national scale during Haiti's democratization after 1986. Although MPP could finally organize openly, rural dwellers' claims to food sovereignty increasingly conflicted with the re-framing of the hinterland as a place to dump food surplus, rather than to produce it. The strictures of liberalizing markets combined with inflation to introduce a condition peasants call *lavi a che*: expensive life. Under Baby Doc and after his fall, development was increasingly outsourced to international and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which proliferated rapidly after 1986 (Schuller, 2009, 2012; Maguire & Freeman, 2017). The economic transformations that accompanied Baby Doc's program of liberalization in the 1970s had attached the provision of food aid to the import substitution program that Haiti's creditors leveraged against its mounting international debt. Even if rice would still grow in this rocky ground, there would be no market for it. Today Haiti imports more than 60% of its food, while in the 1960s and 1970s, local production satisfied 80% of the nation's food

needs. Imported commodities — rice, wheat flour, and cooking oil, for example, subsidized surplus from the U.S., and increasingly, Asia — are the cheapest purchases to be found at the market.

In the late 1990s, MPP trainers began to emphasize the economic and health benefits of growing and eating *manje natif natal*: local or native food, food from here. Instead of “Miami rice,” we eat cassava, maize meal, and yams, trainers counsel. Instead of waxy spoonfuls of vegetable oil shortening, we use pork fat; instead of the ubiquitous cubes of Maggi bouillon, we use real *epis*, bunches of green onion, garlic, and thyme, they tell the peasants who gather for training. These days, however, *lavi a che*, life is expensive, and ever more so. “Pork fat!” my friend Paolo exclaims, closing his eyes as a smile flickers across his face. “We used to eat meat, yes, back before Jean-Claude left. But ever since they came to take our pigs — it’s margarine for us!” Paolo is referring to the 1982 slaughter of Haiti’s Creole pigs, a multilateral endeavor ostensibly intended to curb the transmission of African Swine Fever. Effectively, however, the eradication of the creole pig made pig-raising into a bourgeois affair, an effort to transform peasants into potential consumers of pork rather than pig farmers (see Trouillot, 1990; Moore, 2018). MPP’s focus on both consuming and cultivating *manje natif natal* beginning in the 1990s signaled that the struggle for food sovereignty was becoming a crucial tactic of resistance to a new conjuncture of neoliberal agrarian transformations.

Today, the heart of MPP’s food sovereignty work is Sant Lakay (literally, “home center”), a compound in the hills near Chavannes’s birthplace. There is only one road that leads to Papaye, its intersection marked with a faded billboard pointing to the “Sant Nasyonal Fomasyon Kad Peyizan,” the National Center for the Training of Peasant Cadres. About halfway down that road, a green slogan printed on a red banner commemorates the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of MPP, marking a right turn up a small hill. This turn leads to a set of red iron gates, behind which visitors are greeted by a landscape marked out in red and green. Tree trunks striped with these colors line the paths that wind through the campus, and MPP’s logo of a hoe and a goatskin drum beneath a palm tree is stenciled in red and green on the concrete buildings. A tin sign offers a multilingual welcome in letters painted red and green. Political slogans spray-painted in red and green mark the walls. Although MPP’s offices are back up the road, towards town, Sant Lakay is the heart of the movement, the place where its politics is rooted.

In the open-air classroom at the center of Sant Lakay’s campus, agronomists and organizers lead training sessions in topics as diverse as seed selection, gender-based violence, and political economy. Murals and banners painted for MPP’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration decorate the walls of the classroom, depicting bucolic scenes of rural life. MPP’s Executive Committee (the *Gran Ekip*, or big team), meets in the same classroom, and Chavannes has a house on the campus. Completed in 1998, Sant Lakay now houses MPP’s radio station and numerous demonstration gardens. A wide variety of mature trees, including feathery pines, broad-leafed Indian almond, and coppiced Moringa shade the campus. In the thick air of the summer rainy season, bees and butterflies buzz around the fruits of the noni trees, and hummingbirds sip from passionfruit blossoms in the gardens that surround Chavannes’ home. A permanent staff tends to security, the radio, the gardens, the kitchens, and to Chavannes himself, when he is home from his frequent travels. The pervasive red and green iconography that marks MPP’s territory would have been an inconceivably bold display when the movement was founded, in 1973.

In the early years, Chavannes recalls, the movement was truly *nan mawon* — fugitive. Before 1986, MPP’s first members met in secret, in moonlit fields or high in the hills. After 1986, when MPP could operate in the open, the habit of decentralized organizing remained key to movement work. While MPP’s public face has increasingly turned to the kind of tidy rural development projects favored by its NGO funding partners, the movement’s organizing has transformed the social and material landscape of the high Central Plateau in more covert ways. The shocking green of Sant Lakay’s campus, hidden away behind the tall red gates, offers a reminder of the radical nature of this place. In a landscape of rolling grasslands, golden in the dry season and veiled with green in the rainy season, the concentrated verdancy of Sant Lakay’s campus stands out. MPP’s red and green pervades not only the visual culture of the movement, but also its ecological culture. Walking the paths of the high Central Plateau reveals evidence of MPP’s work all around. The tire gardens and contour walls that define this space

as agrarian are the product of generations of agronomists and agricultural technicians walking these same hills. Under the dictatorship, the transformative work of the movement was constrained to the ecological sphere. In the small plots chained across the hillsides are inscribed decades of resistance.

In 1973, Chavannes, then a young worker in the lay church from the hills around Papaye, invited a group of local men to form a *gwoupman agrikol*, or agricultural work group. They would help each other in their fields, exchange technical knowledge, and begin to save money for a collective endeavor. In those wary years, farmers met in their fields or behind the high walls of the Centre Emmais, the center of the lay church in Papaye, run by a Belgian priest. With Chavannes' guidance, MPP's first members gathered without putting a name to what they were doing. These work groups explicitly avoided becoming a "movement" — Duvalier would not have tolerated it, Chavannes tells me. Yet the men whispered to each other about who had been arrested in the middle of the night that week, about the section chief who had stolen a neighbor's land, about the news from Port-au-Prince coming in by radio or by *teledjol*.<sup>10</sup> In describing MPP's early political work, Chavannes implicates Baby Doc in the suppression of political organizing.

MPP's first members came together in response to the political and economic effects produced by the repressive social relations of the 1970s. The authoritarian discipline of the dictatorship constrained small producers' capacity to engage in liberalizing markets, ultimately both encouraging autonomous small production and limiting economic growth and political mobilization. It is from this nexus that MPP emerged. Chavannes recalls observing that social discord and weak solidarity were the primary barriers to peasant organizing in those years. A rugged geography that agronomists had to navigate on foot to offer technical assistance compounded these barriers. Thus under the guise of technical training, the first *gwoupman* established a means of working through social problems in community. *Fomasyon* — training, or more generally the sharing of knowledge, gave occasion to form the first two *gwoupman* — *Gwoupman Chavannes Jean-Baptiste* and *Gwoupman 1973*, the remaining members of which still meet once or twice a month. The base unit of MPP is the base (*baz* or *gwoupman baz*), a collective of 10-20 members affiliated by location and meeting weekly. A *gwoupman* is formed only after members undertake a process of *fomasyon*, after which the organizer decides whether the group will continue. These groupings have a formal structure, with a president, treasurer, and secretary, and employ consensus based decision making and democratic governance practices.

Small sets of *baz* are grouped into the larger local and zone committees (*koodinasyon lokal*, each three of which forms a *koodinasyon zon*) meeting monthly and every 3 months, respectively. While each *baz* and *lokal* group operates independently of each other, they are linked through the central committee (*koodinasyon santral*) — the only body that knows what all elements of the "chain of solidarity" are doing (MPP, 1998: 55-58). Decentralization was one of the strategies that protected the movement in its early years, its network of ecological knowledge subtending an ongoing political project. At a micro-political scale, MPP's work established this corner of the high Central Plateau as a living laboratory for agroecological politics, an emancipatory vision of rural self-sufficiency kept alive in tree nurseries, contour walls, and work cooperatives. Before 1986, MPP's project was grounded in imagining and cultivating an agrarian future that defied the erosion of peasant livelihoods under Jean-Claudisme. After Baby Doc's fall, that claim found greater political purchase through burgeoning transnational debates around food sovereignty, emergent within a larger anti-globalization movement.

After 1986, NGO participation in democratization increased MPP's funding stream. As food imports increased rapidly, MPP's food sovereignty-oriented projects also proliferated, including the stockpiling and community processing of maize and sugarcane, advocacy around the return of the Creole pig, and the production and transformation of agricultural products for sale in local markets. MPP's ongoing experiment in sovereignty became increasingly legible internationally. The exile of many militants, including Chavannes, who spent several years in the United States, forged a crucial link between MPP and emerging networks that would coalesce into global peasants' movement La Via

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<sup>10</sup> *Teledjol* — literally, "telejaws" — are informal communication networks in which information, disinformation, and gossip are spread quickly from person to person.

Campešina (LVC) in 1993 (see Desmarais, 2008; Edelman & Borras, 2016). Those militants who made it through to 1994 survived in internal or external exile, sheltered by the forest of the hinterland or in the diaspora. After the 1994 against Aristide, those Lavalas supporters in MPP who could afford it pursued studies in Mexico, Cuba, and Venezuela, while those who could not leave hid in the hills, or lost themselves in the anonymous crush of Port-au-Prince.<sup>11</sup> The worst years following the coup coincided with MPP's co-founding of LVC, when Chavannes was living in the United States. During his exile, Chavannes found opportunity to increase the visibility of MPP's interests on an international scale. When the movement began to regenerate on the high Central Plateau after 1994, its work would increasingly center food sovereignty, as would that of LVC more broadly.<sup>12</sup>

MPP gained significant visibility in national and transnational political fields not only for its environmental work, but also through association with Aristide. In *This Other Haiti*, a documentary about MPP filmed in the early 1990s, I recognize some of MPP's *ansyen militan* (veterans) as young men. In the film, they are straight-backed and clear-eyed as they describe peasants' struggle and its current conjuncture with the impending democratic transition. The climax of the film depicts Chavannes and an MPP delegation entering the national palace alongside Aristide, their red shirts and straw hats in marked contrast to the dark suits favored by the political class. Before MPP's split from Aristide and Lavalas, it seemed that peasants might finally gain representation at the national level. The wave of support that lifted charismatic leaders like Chavannes and Aristide in the early 1990s reflected a national shift towards demagogic forms of populism that was, at least initially, emancipatory in its "pro-poor" commitments. The structural transformations of agrarian life that accompanied democratization likewise followed the outlines of a "pro-poor" development paradigm, while nonetheless reproducing the usual patterns of accumulation to an increasingly global elite.

Resentment of what peasants saw as Aristide's neoliberal betrayal was a key factor in MPP's mobilization after 1994. MPP's opposition separated out an emancipatory agrarian populism from Aristide's broader project, which MPP condemned as corrupted by foreign interests. While critics have labeled the fragmentation of Lavalas as a failure of democratization, the liberatory politics that MPP had cultivated survived in the countryside. According to Robert Fatton, although MPP put up one of the few instances of sustained opposition to Lavalas, "it simply lacked the means to generate any form of 'people's power' with which to challenge seriously the Lavalas regime. The opposition's credibility was sustained more by its ability to influence foreign opinion and policy than to activate widespread internal defiance. It lacked a clear program that would appeal to the majority and on which it could run the country" (2002: 149). MPP had lost many followers in the 1991 and 1994 coups, and the political instability of the era further limited MPP's capacity to build a base of popular support. In terms of policy, Fatton's claim of the incoherence of MPP's political platform holds true even for the most recent 2015-2016 election cycle, in which MPP ran numerous unsuccessful candidates, including Chavannes for president, and into which it poured immense resources of time and money. Chavannes' adopt of the demagogic form of populism that brought Aristide to power likewise did little to clarify the kind of government the movement's political leaders had in mind. MPP's persistent failure to win seats at the regional and national levels confirms Fatton's claim in its narrow sense. Only inasmuch, however, as politics is circumscribed by the frame of representation in governance, at best an unstable analytic in Haiti.

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<sup>11</sup> See Hallward (2004) for a discussion of the 1991 coup and its aftermath. In 1991, the army turned on Aristide, and General Raoul Cédras led a coup that forced him into exile. The violence following the coup lasted for three years, with an estimated 4-5,000 Lavalas supporters killed, and another 300,000 people forced into exile. During these three years, James (2010: 66-68) notes three agents of violence: the de facto state, which legitimated its power through the army; neo-Duvalierist paramilitaries, including the infamous "death squad," FRAPH (the French acronym for the Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti); and the *zenglendo* gangs, mercenaries who James calls "mobile sovereigns." Although often assembled under a new acronym, many of the actors involved in these three categories of political violence survived past Aristide's restoration in 1994.

<sup>12</sup> MPP was a founding member of LVC, and maintains a close relationship with other Latin American member organizations, most notably with Brazil's MST. Chavannes was a recipient of the international Goldman Environmental Prize in 1995, and regularly attends global activist meetings like the World Social Forum and the La Via Campesina Congress.

The same militants who insist that MPP must win seats, however unlikely, in local and regional governance also practice another kind of politics. LVC provided one global venue for the articulation of the movement's agrarian populist platform, drawing international support for national food sovereignty struggles from a broader anti-globalization movement. At the local level, too, however, the struggle for food sovereignty played out on a micro scale. "What is a seed?" Agronomist Mackenson asks, his voice soft and his wiry body small inside his baggy clothing, but his gaze sharp as he looks around the room. The students' eyes follow him as he paces, his hands clasped behind his back. *Pa fe esklav definisyon an*, he reminds the students, don't be a slave to the definition. "How do we know a seed is a seed?" he asks, again smiling a little mischievously. The students offer tentative answers as Mackenson paces the center of the circle, nodding his head and motioning to keep the answers coming. "Because it has life in it!" he finally exclaims, raising his hoarse voice and flinging his arms up to the ceiling, "that's the answer!" He holds his hands out to the circle, palms up: "which life do we choose, then? When my comrade doesn't use insecticide because he doesn't believe in it, and the bugs eat his garden, well that's a choice, right? That's his politics. Agroecology is a choice, too, and a political one. Our politics is called *agroecology*."

Mackenson's lesson on seed selection brings agroecological politics down to earth, emphasizing its integration with the practices of everyday life. It is important to remain cautious of what Li calls the "village myth" (2010: 85).<sup>13</sup> Yet MPP's struggle for food sovereignty nonetheless entails the cultivation of a radically egalitarian form of agrarian life that exceeds the boundaries set forth by the state and its creditors. Most of those who cultivate the land on the high Central Plateau remain food insecure today. Miami rice remains peasants' chief staple, ever the cheapest buy at the market, while mangoes rot in heaps under tall trees in the spring, with nowhere to sell them. Yet what MPP's training reinforces is that food sovereignty is a practice and not an endpoint. As a praxis, agroecology offers one means of collectively imagining a more liberatory future. Mackenson's assertion of the vital politics of a seed is central to understanding the political future that MPP imagines. Politics is a choice, he explains to the class. The concept of free choice is central to MPP's liberatory politics. In this sense, the agrarian landscapes of the high Central Plateau are an ongoing experimental site for a practice of radical democracy, in which those who work the land do so not out of obligation, but because the land holds their histories and their futures.

Later in the same lesson, Mackenson adds, his voice tight with indignation, his placid smile sharpened with a touch of acid, "we have nothing to do with people who prepare their soil with herbicide! That's *their* politics. That's *their* choice, and we don't believe in it! It's not in heaven that we work, but here on earth!" Mackenson goes on, "Most of us peasants don't get to go to school, but that doesn't mean we're not doing research. We have experience, we have knowledge. Ask for information all around you, collect it, take time to observe and sample, to analyze what our traditional methods tell us. *Cheche istwa semans la, chak semans gen yon istwa*: "Look for the history of the seeds, every seed has its own history." *Gade pou we*: "look and see." Mackenson cracks a wide smile: "if you kill a rat who's been eating your peas, and leave his body in the garden, well," he shrugs his shoulders and raises his arms, palms up, "the other one, he'll say I understand what's going on - a brother has died here! Then," he smiles broadly, and enunciates clearly: "no more rats!"

## 6. Authoritarian Returns

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<sup>13</sup> Li (2010) explains the "village myth" and how it works against the right to food: "an important rationale offered by ruling regimes in Indonesia for *not* providing protection for the rural poor is the notion that villagers have their own mechanisms to support their weaker members. Although many scholars have worked hard to rupture assumptions about the harmonious, moral and caring character of village life in general, and Indonesian villages in particular, the village myth is stubborn. Even Mike Davis falls under its spell, when he contrasts the vicious competition among the poor in urban slums to what he calls, far too optimistically, "the subsistence solidarities of the countryside" (2006:201). Clifford Geertz (1963) bears some responsibility" (Li, 2010:85).



“No more rats!” Mackenson knows well the multiple valences of his pronouncement. In the 1980s, the young Mackenson served as a lookout for MPP’s earliest meetings, and later as a courier who relayed messages and organized meetings between *groupan*, MPP’s leadership, and militants in exile. As a lookout, Mackenson recounts, he saw enemies everywhere, those who would betray MPP to the *makout* or the Hinche section chief. Mackenson remembers participating in his first political protest at age 18, in 1986, when he joined a march calling for Baby Doc’s removal. But even after *dechoukaj*, he recalls, militants still faced persecution, in particular by military men and *ex-makout*. Nonetheless, Mackenson believed fervently in Aristide, and was profoundly shaken by the coup in 1991. When Mackenson returned to Haiti from his years of agronomy study abroad, in 2003, “MPP had denounced Aristide. In 2003 the situation was really bad. There were a lot of *chime*, and they attacked MPP members. Some shot at Chavannes at a party at a nightclub in Hinche. They burned our motorcycles, destroyed our cars, all over the Center Department. From December 2003 to January 2004, it was even worse, because *chimé* were beating MPP members, we couldn’t go down to join the demonstrations in Hinche. They burned the radio station, when it was down below. That’s why we put it up the hill [after we rebuilt], for security.” The repression that Mackenson describes shows how Lavalas supporters activated authoritarian returns in the decade following the 1994 coup.

After 1986, MPP’s enemies had become more difficult to identify, no longer clad in the denim suits and dark glasses of the *makout* or the black hoods of the *cagouards*. Some of them would arrive in the ubiquitous white SUVs of the aid worker or the government functionary. Such development *arrivistes* only heightened rural dwellers sense that “there is no state,” the transformations they effected posing little challenge to the outsourcing of agrarian moral economies to the international community. By the end of the dictatorship, Haiti’s national development had become deeply intertwined with an international aid apparatus that included rapidly proliferating NGOs, in addition to the usual international finance and global governance institutions. In 1986, MPP’s militants had in sight a political horizon, what Scott calls “a moral universe, a shared notion of what is just” (1977: 167). MPP militants entered the palace alongside Aristide, and the movement gained international support. But by 1994, neoliberal transformations were creating an ever-greater gap between the vision forged in 1986 and centers of state power that were retracing old authoritarian lines.

The devastating earthquake of 2010 was instrumental in Martelly’s rise to power. Once elected, Martelly proclaimed Haiti “open for business” and development organizations surged in, energized and well-funded by the urgency to “build back better.” Although the Central Plateau was minimally physically affected by the earthquake, the development interventions implemented within the framework of recovery nonetheless reached into the hinterland. What is a seed? Mackenson asks the class on that humid afternoon, the air thick with rain that would not fall in these months of drought. He tells the story of an MPP action that gained international attention in 2010. One component of the biotechnology giant Monsanto’s contribution to the recovery effort had been the distribution of a quantity of genetically-modified maize seed to provincial farmers’ groups. An MPP faction marched to Hinche and burned a wheelbarrow full of the seed in symbolic protest in front of the Department of Agriculture building. The action gained international exposure (see Bell, 2010), rekindling some donors’ interest in supporting MPP’s food sovereignty work. Again, however, the action reverberated more deeply outside of Haiti than within its borders. Miami rice was still the cheapest staple at the market, and in coming years, an extended drought would prevent many farmers from planting the native maize seed they had been saving.

In 2015, I start hearing more and more often about how *lavi a che*: life is expensive. Prices have more than doubled at the market, and many parents have to keep their children out of school this October, because they cannot afford the fees, my friend Paolo tells me. It is also election season; always a tense time, but this year even more so, as voting has been postponed several times since 2011. One of the reasons for the delay was the strident opposition of Fanmi Lavalas to what they saw as electoral exclusion, as well as the remobilization of the Duvalierist paramilitaries who had supported the 2004 coup. Right and left forms of populism thus came into conflict in the streets more and more often after the earthquake. Although Martelly’s Duvalierist affinities, though well-documented (see Burron, 2013: 162, 175), were not much discussed at first, the parallels between his “open for business” model

and Jean-Claude Duvalier's "economic revolution" were apparent. Martelly's policy likewise took the neoliberal compromises that Aristide had negotiated further towards an official regime of state accumulation. In the urban context at least, many former Lavalas supporters turned to PHTK, and the opposition became coeval with Lavalas loyalists. In this sense, resurgent forms of authoritarian populism reproduce long-standing patterns of extractive accumulation, while also finding new ways to legitimate such patterns through populist appeals that persistently excluded the militant agrarian left.

Supported by an army of Duvalierist specters, both real and imagined, Martelly's populism looks both right and left, pushing frontiers of accumulation while calling upon a nostalgic collective history, and borrowing social policy from the left (Burron, 2013: 162). MPP leaders called the first round of voting in August 2015 an "electoral coup." The results, which were later nullified, as well as the conditions of their production, made the deep roots of Martelly's Duvalierism clear to militants who well remembered the terrors of the coup years in the 1990s. One young man, born after the fall of the dictatorship, speaks scornfully of PHTK's rise: "Martelly, who's an army guy, an old cadet, he has *makout* blood in his veins. Plus, he's a guy who's got money. Well, *misye*<sup>14</sup> just grabs the country, and then he acts all arrogant. But nonetheless, he can't even manage an election. You know, they're supposed to be every 4 to 5 years around here, there has to be an election to shake up the personnel, right? *Misyè* held off on elections this whole time, [he] is testing the population, testing us. People say *misye* isn't a politician, but all the same he's working all the while, down below. That's how he's managed to spend so much money, to get a bunch of *gwo nèg* [big men] as advisors. And that's how *misye* showed people he is a politician. So it's not true what people say, *misye* has done 5 years, I'd have to say he's succeeded" (Interview 2/7/2016). This speaker points to the neoliberal turn in Haiti's tradition of authoritarian populism, its increasing and increasingly bold financialization: he's got *makout* blood, plus he's got money.

Building on Papa Doc's nationalist vision of rural development, Martelly's agrarian politics reanimated authoritarian power through emerging circuits of global financial capital. Both Papa Doc and Michel Martelly rose to power with broad popular support, running on a platform of modernization and development. Yet while Duvalier obtained rural support in exchange for a measure of the state's disciplinary and extractive power, Martelly could draw upon these ready-made agrarian loyalties to erase rural opposition. PHTK's alleged reanimation of *chimé* and widespread use of political violence in the countryside, however, troubles the assumption that rural consent was easily won. The very name of Martelly's original party — *Repons Peyizan*, or Peasant Response — points to an agrarian base whose presence, at least in Papaye, is little observable. Burron argues that Martelly's authoritarian populism both retrenches and restructures the status quo, shifting who is offered inclusion in "the people," but keeping the state's hands officially clean in the maintenance of deep-rooted distributions of wealth and power.

## Conclusion

Haiti's authoritarian returns lie, as ever, in the double movement of disavowal and extraction that allows the state to keep its hands clean while draining the blood of the hinterland. Jason Moore calls agriculture "*the* decisive battleground in neoliberal globalization" (2008: 54; emphasis in original). In Haiti's hinterland, that battle is waged not only through the material transformation of agrarian life, but also in political struggle surrounding such transformations. From this juncture emerges what some are calling a "political agroecology" (de Molina, 2013). As La Via Campesina puts it in their 2014 Declaration, a political agroecology "challenge[s] and transform[s] structures of power in society" (LVC, 2014, cited in Rosset & Altieri, 2017: 4). The Haitian state has typically taken rural dwellers' pursuit of self-determination in the hinterland as a threat, hence the continuous surveillance and control of the provinces. The political, economic, and environmental shocks that hit Haiti between

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<sup>14</sup> *Misyè* is an honorific title equivalent to the French *monsieur* or the English *sir*. In this context, the title marks a status differential. The speaker remarks Martelly's higher social class, amplifying his accusation of the President's arrogance.

1994 and 2010<sup>15</sup> intensified the historical contiguity between agrarian extractivism and a regressive authoritarian politics.

Martelly and his successor, Moïse, are responding to this conjuncture with new forms of agrarian populism. In pink-shirted PHTK *chime*, MPP militants see the ghosts of *makout* that democratization did not lay to rest. In the “build back better” slogan that plastered billboards of Martelly’s face after the earthquake, peasants on the high Central Plateau saw the potential erasure of the way of life that the movement had allowed them in some measure to cultivate. In the name of Martelly’s original party, *Repons Peyizan*, or Peasant Response, rural dwellers saw the kind of shiny technocratic promises that made them scoff *pa gen leta*, there is no state. MPP’s militants imagine another kind of state in the experimental space of the high Central Plateau. “What is a seed?” Mackenson asks the class on that humid afternoon in MPP’s classroom. In that question is embedded the vital politics of MPP’s project.

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<sup>15</sup> Including the coup of 1991 and the restoration of Aristide in 1994, the coup of 2004 and the subsequent installation of MINUSTAH (the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, which began its withdrawal in 2017), and the earthquake of 2010.

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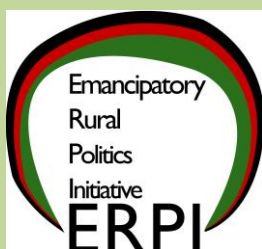
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**Sophie Sapp Moore** is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies Graduate Group at the University of California, Davis, with a Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory. Informed primarily by anthropology and geography, Sophie's interdisciplinary work develops a decolonial political ecology perspective on agrarian life in rural Haiti, both theorizing Afro-Caribbean decolonization, and exploring collaborative opportunities for the realization of such a project. Theoretically, it is indebted to a critical humanist tradition in Caribbean studies, which centers the intellectual and material histories of Afro-descendants in Latin America and the Caribbean. Critical knowledge formation and exchange has been both a subject of inquiry and a critical practice in Sophie's fieldwork, which likewise inflects her teaching. In the classroom, Sophie is committed to holding students accountable for the histories they bring to their studies, challenging them to consider when and why their own theories and practices of power go unmarked.



**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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