



Chelsey L. Kivland. *Street Sovereigns: Young Men and the Makeshift State in Urban Haiti*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. xxvii + 274 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5017-4699-4.

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Vincent Joos on Street Sovereigns: Young Men and the Makeshift State in Urban Haiti.

Set in Bel Air, a formerly bourgeois neighborhood of Port-au-Prince often vilified as a nest of gangs, Chelsey Kivland's *Street Sovereigns: Young Men and the Makeshift State in Urban Haiti* is a much-needed ethnography of urban life and street organizations in Port-au-Prince. Kivland sketches poignant portraits of so-called gang members and shows that rather than being engaged in mere violence, young men in Bel Air develop a rich array of political, economic, and cultural practices that are meant to bring governance to areas of Haiti's capital seemingly abandoned by the state. The book offers a strong rebuke to ahistorical and depoliticized narrations of street violence in Haiti that abound in US newspapers or in film documentaries such as *Ghosts of Cité Soleil* (2006), which depicts gang members as solely motivated by money and violence. Combining riveting life histories with a sophisticated theoretical approach rooted in Haitian understandings of political processes, the book shifts the narrative on Haitian street violence by offering a deep analysis of the *baz*, a unique form of organization by which people in marginalized neighborhoods create social and economic networks that enable them to

engage with the wider political world and to create work opportunities.

A *baz* is very different from a gang, the term of choice used by journalists and politicians who want to criminalize marginalized populations. Gang narratives have dire effects. After the 2004 coup that sent former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide into a second political exile, UN soldiers killed or imprisoned *baz* members and leaders while describing them as bandits. A *baz* can at times engage in street violence, but first and foremost, it has political intentions. A *baz* is a block-based ensemble of various grassroots organizations such as "music groups, defense brigades, and development organizations" (p. 213). They emerged after the end of the Duvalier dictatorship and formed a platform for supporting Aristide during his tenures as president but also during the coup periods. During the exiles of Aristide in 1991 and in 2004, the Haitian army and police, along with private militias and, later, UN soldiers targeted *baz* members in urban centers along with other political leaders and supporters in the countryside.[1] They also filled a political void created by waves of neoliberal reforms that have weakened the Haitian state. For instance, during

the 1994-99 period, the United States along with international financial institutions imposed the “Emergency Economic Recovery Program,” a program of structural adjustments that resulted in the drastic reduction of tariffs on food imports, the elimination of more than 50 percent of the state workforce, and a severe shrinking of state capacities. This program devastated the agro-pastoral economy of the country and furthered its vulnerability to global economic fluctuations. As NGOs and international institutions inefficiently took over the welfare functions of the state and weakened its visibility, the *baz* corrected “an absence of governance that had accompanied the shift from an authoritarian state to a neoliberal democracy marked by a weak government” (p. 6). By following *baz* leaders and members in their day-to-day activities, Kivland powerfully shows how young men palliate the absence of the state by “making the state” themselves.

The first chapter, “Defense,” explores how people think of and organize the sociality and security of their neighborhoods. Here, Kivland offers a focused and intimate approach to *ensekerite* (the past and current condition of insecurity and instability) and shows how *baz* members’ efforts to secure resources or advocacy work can also incite conflicts and rivalries. Far from romanticizing street life in Port-au-Prince, the book also engages with violent *baz* practices and teases out the contradictions between the democratic and pro-peace values of the *baz* and the reality of living in a deeply unstable and competitive environment. Chapter 2 is a rigorous and much-needed history of armed political groups in Haiti. Combined with ethnographic insights, this chapter describes paramilitary practices during the Duvalier era, the formation of political organizations in the 1990s, and their transformation during the period of terror that marked the first exile of Aristide (1991-94). Engaging with the philosophy of the poet Frankétienne—the most famous native of Bel Air—Kivland sketches a spiralist history to shed light on how the “*baz* both reproduced and altered

established historical scenarios, emerging as both the copy and the converse of what came before” (pp. 86-87). Chapter 3 focuses on *respè* (respect) as a key element of social relations and as an ambivalent political philosophy that points both to “egalitarian relations between citizens and reciprocal obligations between those in power and the people they serve” and “a perceived right to utilize militant street power in order to reclaim the respect they have long been denied” (p. 91). Chapter 4, “Identity,” extends Kivland’s exploration of *respè* by describing *baz* members’ entanglements with other parts of the city where they are mostly disrespected. Indeed, it is not only in the United States that young Haitian men are often depicted as criminals. Many Haitians have to cope with ordinary discrimination based on their area of residence. In this chapter, complex narratives unpack issues of self-perception and representation.

The last two chapters are set in the post-disaster period. Chapter 5 relates Kivland’s experience of the 2010 earthquake and takes readers into the streets of Port-au-Prince right after the tremors stopped. This intense and stirring narrative takes the book in yet again unexpected directions. As she returns to Port-au-Prince six months after the quake, Kivland details how people fared in a devastated city where international soldiers and NGOs poorly handled relief efforts and the “reconstruction” that followed. The descriptions of *baz* members as they engaged with the aid apparatus after the disaster show how competition, rivalries, insecurity, and pauperization are fueled by the wide array of NGOs operating in Port-au-Prince. Finally, chapter 6 offers a sophisticated take on gender and the sensory aspects of politics. Describing how masculinity and pleasure combine in embodiments of sovereign power, Kivland extends her previous work on hedonopolitics, or a demonstration of political force through masculine social pleasures, to show that, rather than death and violence, comradeship and playfulness open political possibilities.[2]

Throughout her book, Kivland engages in self-reflection and shows how she herself becomes engaged in the complex human relations that form the social infrastructure of the *baz*. Like *baz* members, Kivland is engaged in multiple tasks and roles that go far beyond her position as an ethnographer. Her reflexivity leads to a practice of radical empathy where her interlocutors are not mere informants but, like her, people who navigate social relations in unstable environments. For instance, her friend Yves, who could appear as a dismissive and inflexible *baz* member at first sight, reveals his own vulnerabilities and strengths as a Bel Air *baz* member and as a Bel Air man vilified as a hustler outside of his neighborhood. These detailed life histories unfold in a country harmed by neoliberal forces, sudden waves of *ensekerite*, and a wide array of organizations that exclude Haitian young men. The fine balance between structural analyses and ethnography provides readers with an intimate and poignant account of daily life in urban Haiti. The elegant writing of the book and Kivland's attention to nuances are a strong mark of respect for people that are too often misrepresented and marginalized. At the same time, Kivland makes major contributions to the fields of Haitian studies and political anthropology and philosophy writ large by showing how grassroots politics unfold in areas seemingly abandoned by the state. As such, this ethnography goes well beyond a detailed analysis of urban Haiti and offers new tools to analyze and change the narratives on urban Black youth and their political agency at a global level.

Notes

[1]. Jemima Pierre, "Haiti: An Archive of Occupation, 2004–," *Transforming Anthropology* 28, no. 1 (2020): 3-23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/traa.12174>.

[2]. Chelsey L. Kivland, "Becoming a Force in the Zone: Hedonopolitics, Masculinity, and the Quest for Respect on Haiti's Streets," *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 4 (2014): 672-98, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca29.4.05>.

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