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**Autor:** Kivland, Chelsey L.

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# THE SHIFTING CONTOURS OF THE OUTLAW IN URBAN HAITI

Chelsey L. Kivland

## Abstract

In what follows, I discuss some initial empirical findings and theoretical insights from my recent work on transnational resettlement of crime-based deportees from the US to Haiti. Haitian *baz*, or street organizations, are increasingly taking on the trappings of the urban gang to maintain relevance and control of their zones. Simultaneously, gangs are deploying the dressings of the *baz* to attain authority throughout neighborhoods in Haiti. The increasing presence of criminal deportees in Haiti has complicated the political landscape to blend local and foreign categorizations of the criminal, potentially foreshadowing the end of the Haitian *baz* as a coherent political formation. The impact of these dynamics is discussed in the context of recent work in post-human scholarship and criminal deportation.

**Keywords:** *Deportation, resettlement, gangs, Haiti*

*“The baz (base) turns into a gang and the gang wants to make a baz. It’s tèt anba (upside down)! All become bandi (bandits),”* expressed Kal, a participant in my ethnography of urban *baz* – informal groups of young men that claim control of their neighborhoods. It was July 18, 2019, a hot, rainy day in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and I found myself drinking a warm Coke outside Kal’s house. He is a leader of Baz Zap Zap, which oversees a section of Bel Air, an impoverished and volatile district in the heart of the city. He is my age, early forties, and has lived his entire life in Bel Air. He is the lead drummer for Baz Zap Zap’s historic yet still actively politicized Rara music group, a feature of most *baz* (McAlister 2002). He is also the Secretary General of the *baz*’s development organization, organizing and managing food distributions and soccer tournaments for the zone.

I have worked as an anthropologist in and of Bel Air since 2006, chronicling the successes and failures, hardship and redemptions, solidarities and divisions, that *baz* leaders, like Kal, have confronted as they strive to control political and economic activities in the zone. Today, one of the most serious threats to the workings of the *baz* is the *gang*, the current focus of my research. The terms “baz” and “gang” converge and diverge in crucial ways. Most generally, the Haitian *baz* refers to small groups of men (and on rare occasions, women), who have gained control of urban blocks, via violent and non-violent means, with a claim towards civil society. The gang, as figured in urban Haiti, seeks control of neighborhood zones via violence and criminality. Both are outlawed groups, with the crucial difference being that the *baz* seek state recognition and legitimacy, whereas the gang’s focus is profiteering and self-preservation.

In what follows, I will share some initial empirical findings and theoretical insights from my recent work on *baz* and gangs in urban Haiti. How is the gang shifting the contours of outlawed urban groups in ways that reconstitute the urban districts' leadership structures and leaders' relationships with neighbors and governmental and nongovernmental authorities? And what does this mean for the *baz* as both neighborhood leaders concerned with legitimacy and outlaws engaged in garnering wealth and notoriety? In important ways, gangs are deploying the dressings of the *baz* to attain authority throughout neighborhoods in Haiti. Conversely, the *baz* are increasingly taking on the trappings of the urban gang to maintain relevance and control of their zones.

As Kal and I talked, our attention fell on two young boys, both around ten years of age, playing dominoes in an alleyway. I could tell Kal was moved by the boys' play and had something to say about it. I asked him what he thought was the future for young people in Haiti. "Is it possible for the youth in the *geto* (using the urban American vernacular – ghetto) to make a life without making violence?" He replied, "Yes, ... no, I don't know" and was immediately followed by an older man Rodney who lived next door to Kal and was overhearing the conversation. As Rodney put it,

*The baz has not been totally good – you know that, right? But it gave us a chance. It helped us to do something, like give people electricity and pick up the garbage. Those boys won't have that...they will enter into the life of the gang. They say deportees make the gangs, but the youth of Haiti join (antre) them as well.*

"Will the boys be in a gang too?" I asked.

Kal replied, "Without doubt!" and was immediately seconded by Rodney. Shifting his glance between Kal and me, and pointing his finger at us to emphasize his points, Rodney affirmed:

*You can see the future of the country in those boys? They could make a new bandit. They can be in a gang that robs from people to get rich and then die young, leaving their kids to voye bay yo flè men pa konnen yo (give them flowers but without ever knowing them); or they could be, in another time, doctors or lawyers or part of a new kind of baz, like how it used to be, with Zap Zap, with one that helps people, like an advocate of the geto, like it was with the baz. Yes, they (baz members) could be bandits in other zones, but they helped our zone. They fè leta (made the state), doing projects, like collecting the garbage, that gave the youth some work and some money. Not like it is now with gangs, groups of nèg (black men) that just show the youth, like these boys in a few years, how to violate people so they can be rich and not have to live in misery. But they will have to die before being a gran moun (elder) like me. That is the pi gwo obstak nou genyen jodi a (biggest obstacle we have today)!*

The *baz* originated in the late 1980s as political resistance groups engaged in the struggle to end the Duvalier family dictatorship in Haiti and found a democracy, under the leadership of former priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide (Dupuy 2007). With much support from urban *baz* and their allies among the urban poor, Aristide was inaugurated as president in February 1991,

but unable to garner support from the elite sectors of society, he was ousted from office in a military-led coup d'état nine months later. With the aid of a U.S.-led military intervention, he was reinstated as president from 1994–1996 and then reelected president in 2000, only to be ousted in another coup in 2004 (Fatton 2002).

Since this period, the role of the *baz* has fluctuated between political activism, social service, and criminal activity. Under the rule of President René Préval, especially during his second term from 2006–2011, the *baz* remained relevant to the urban political scene, able to partner with politicians and claim a degree of control of their districts. They oversaw the public water fountains, administered trash collection, and controlled informal electrical connections. The *baz* strove to “make the state” where the State has been missing or ineffective. It is for this reason that *baz* members could be viewed as both “outlawed” and “leaders” (*lidè*) – “outlawed authorities,” if you will. They are outlawed in the sense that they have governed without state authority or an electoral mandate. Yet they have also been respected as local leaders when they have allied with state or nongovernmental organizations and overseen development projects for the neighborhood. Rather than elude or overpower the state, the *baz* leaders with whom I worked desired to be *patnè leta* (state partners), positioning their group not as outlaws or bandits but as leaders bringing the resources of those in power to the zone and, yes, to themselves.

On January 13, 2010, just a day after the devastating earthquake that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and decimated Port-au-Prince's infrastructure, I joined Kal on his porch. His house was relatively unharmed by the tremors, but he preferred to be outside. We were joined by a new person, and I asked Kal to introduce me. He mentioned my name and stated that I was an anthropologist, which, as he joked, “*se tankou yon jounalis ki pa janm ale*” (is like a journalist who never goes away). He then introduced Paul, his cousin, by simply calling him a *depòte*. The phrasing was curt, and Paul took offence. He responded, “*Mwen se maoun baz avan depòte!*” (I am a person of the *baz* before being a deportee). Paul asked how I could help him get back to the States and how he thought the disaster might help him seek aid. Although aware of the privations and suffering deportees face in Haiti (Bracken 2009), I did not have any answers at the time. I could only share with him the information of a grassroots organization, Koze Kreyol, that assisted deportee resettlement.

Frantzy, another member of Baz Zap Zap, expressed a different pathway for Paul in Haiti. He called on him to join Baz Zap Zap and ...

*turn it into something like the gangs in the United States... that can make bandi make a lot of money in the streets. The gangs are not good, not true (pa vre)? But they run things! Everything has changed. It's not the baz that runs (jire) the zone now, it's the gang that runs the baz that runs the zone... but not very well because we lost might (pouvwa).*

Kal and I were shocked by Frantzy's comments, not because the idea that *baz* were becoming gangs was farfetched, but rather because it highlighted how the gang and the bandi had become the foreseeable, if not desirable, end of the *baz*. The increasing presence of criminal deportees in Haiti, which has seen a consistent but steady increase since the mid-nineties, has changed the political landscape to blend local and foreign categorizations of the criminal.

The signifiers of US urban blackness, including the introduction and embodiment of terms such as black, ghetto, dread, and hip-hop, have entered Haiti's urban discourse – popularizing particular forms of criminality while simultaneously laying pathways for solidarity and political movements. In this sense, international processes seemed to be leading to a local radicalization of “the law of the outlaw.” The interaction planted the seed to build on my work with *baz* to study the resettlement experiences of deportees during this difficult time, marked by economic, political, and health crises.

In a call I had with Kal in December 2018, we shared our plans and hopes for the year ahead. I shared my idea for a new research project on criminal deportation. Kal liked the idea and told me that I needed to talk to Paul again and have him tell me his story (which I did!). Kal also gave me some advice that has fundamentally framed my project.

*You need to say something in the book about all of these depòte who are trying to make or take over baz and turn them into gang like they do lòt bò dlo (“over the water,” meaning in the U. S.). They just steal from houses and rob people, even people in the neighborhood. They do nothing for the Bel Air baz (here meaning the neighborhood).*

Such ideas are common in urban Haiti, reflecting a prejudice that criminal deportees are violent criminals who form *gang yo* (gangs) to gain wealth and power, but not, as the *baz* did, to aid the zone while also earning respect, authority, and some income. In many ways, this is a discourse to protect the reputation of the *baz* (which also engaged in criminal acts such as overcharging at the water kiosk). Yet it also reveals how urban street organizations are shifting in Haiti, moving away from the neighborhood-based and politically involved *baz* to the more independent, profiteering gang (Beckett 2019; Kivland 2017; Kovats-Bernat 2006).

At the same time, the rift between what people with deportation orders desire *of* Haiti (a new and renewed life!) and what they come to face *in* Haiti in terms of stigmatization and stereotyping made apparent the need to study the real-time process of resettlement to better understand the factors that impede or enable criminalized persons to remake their lives in the country (Charles 2010; Charles 2017). This need is even more urgent given recent changes in U. S. immigration policy – including the revocation of humanitarian protections for Haitians and the expansion of the category of “criminal alien” – which led to a rise in criminal deportations to Haiti in 2018 and 2019, with a decline after the COVID-19 outbreak. I am leading a research team engaged in chronicling the experiences of Haitian migrants in the US as they undergo removal proceedings and the first three years of resettlement in Haiti. The team includes six research assistants (RAs): one graduate student at Université d'État d'Haïti; one deportee and leader of DipsOrg, an organization supporting deportees; a professor and leader of social advocacy work in Haiti; and two undergraduate students at Dartmouth College interested in race and migration. Collaborating as a research team has made this project possible in a time of insecurity and pandemic, and we are exploring ways to author the publications as a collective, honoring the insights and labor the team that has made this work possible and enlightening.

Most studies on deportation have relied on interviews with deportees after they have settled in their countries of origin. This real-time ethnography moves beyond memories of

deportation to offer a more nuanced picture of the lived experience of removal and resettlement by chronicling deportees' immigration detention experiences, removal proceedings, arrivals in Haiti, and pathways to living in the country. The ethnographic research began with a two-month trip to Haiti in the summer of 2019. Working with the RAs, we enrolled twenty-two participants in the study and conducted a series of three interviews with each participant. These interviews focused on their lives in the U. S., their detention and deportation experiences, and their resettlement trajectories in Haiti to date. We are also interviewing lawyers and judges, social activists, and employers of deportees to gain their perspectives on the current deportation policy and workings.

I have not been able to return to Haiti due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions instated by my employer Dartmouth College and the federal government. Although I am unable to meet research participants in-person, I have maintained solid contact with deportees through daily texts and voice messages over WhatsApp. The Haiti-based RAs have conducted two follow-up interviews with two different deportees each month, observed the arrival and processing of deportees, and interviewed social workers and employers who work with deportees. We hold two meetings over WhatsApp each month (and many check-ins over the phone and chats) to go over the data collected, organize our findings into thematic areas (e. g., race/ racialization, class stratification, criminality, stigmatization, and redemption), and plan for upcoming research activities. The U. S.-based RAs conduct archival research, gathering media in Haiti, the U. S., and internationally reporting on deportation between the U. S. and Haiti, as well as other relevant sites such as Jamaica, the Bahamas, and the Dominican Republic, where many deportees resettle after arriving in Haiti, including one of our participants. The students are also assisting with interviews with attorneys and social workers engaged in assisting Haitian immigrants with removal proceedings and resettlement plans. The transnational and longitudinal nature of this ethnography offers a new and important perspective in deportation studies.

Tentatively titled *A Dream Deported: How Deportees Rebuild a Life in Transnational Haiti*, our research project unfolds amid ongoing protests of police killings in the U. S. and Haiti, a rising economic crisis in Haiti, and the global COVID-19 pandemic. As Juliette, a 54-year-old mother of four who was deported to Haiti in July of 2019, lamented, "*Lavi depòte yo se anyen nan deba imigrasyon*" (The life of the deported is nothing). She continued, "If I get sick with Corona, I die. That's it. I hear Black Lives Matter ... but the life of the deported Blacks is not in this. We're forgotten!"

"Why it is like that?" I asked.

"Because we have no place that is for us now, no country that will say we are here for you. I have a place I can call my *lakay* (home). It's like I am a *bèt* (animal) that lives without dignity."

This very much illustrates that detention and deportation are *pa pou moun*, or "not for humans," as I highlight in a recent blogpost, published on the online platform *Sapiens* (<https://www.sapiens.org/culture/haiti-covid/>), which features deportees' perspectives on deportations to Haiti during the coronavirus pandemic. This work intervenes in the recent wave of "post-human" scholarship that has argued for social theorists to foreground agency beyond the human (Akos 2015; Kohn 2013). My research leads me to contend that it is still necessary



for anthropology and the social sciences to identify the human as a political category and to configure dehumanization as an act that has often coincided with animalization (Feldman 1994). In contexts of persistent racial and class discrimination, *to be* human (and to be treated as such) cannot be assumed and must continually be defended. The stories of the deported will allow me to distill the contradictory consequences of deportation, and to theorize how these consequences are produced through the social constructs of racialization and criminality. In making this argument, however, I will not lose sight of the many ways deportees have found a place for themselves in Haiti, often building on their time and experiences in American cities – such as opening rap music studios and teaching graffiti classes. Deportees’ creativity, ingenuity, and grit push me to theorize how people remake their humanity in the face of intense public and institutional pressures to render them less than human.

At the same time, I want my new research to reflect the challenging situations faced by deportees as stigmatized outlaws and the strategies they are devising to overcome them – often deploying the *depòte* identity toward new ends. Inspired by the work of Deborah Boehm and others, I want to convey deportation as a “global order of injustice,” an order filled with struggle, loss, and suffering (Boehm 2016; Lonagan 2011). I also want to reveal the innovative work deportees are doing to organize and advocate for themselves and their community. One of the most interesting findings from my research is how *depòte* have found a place for themselves in Haiti not by denying their outlaw status but by valorizing it as a source of what Pierre Bourdieu would call “cultural capital” – expanding the rap and hip-hop music industries by not only founding music groups but also recording studios and concert venues.

The efforts of the deported in Haiti to *youn ede lòt* (one helps another) is at the heart of the Black Lives Matter movement, of which many in Haiti see themselves to be included – but also excluded. The extent to which the lives of the outlaw come to matter less than others has been instilled in deportees and has become the basis for some to join gangs in hopes of gaining wealth, status, and security. This is the case for two of the deportees I have been following. But many more have organized for a redemption or reinterpretation of their reputations as outlaws or violent criminals. They do so not by abounding their status as gang members but by seeking to reclaim and subvert this identity toward culturally viable pursuits – such as founding rap studios or hip-hop fashion lines. They seek not to join gangs but to use their affiliation with American gang culture to redeem the gang member as a reputable social status – something like an “outlawed authority” or “authorized outlaw.” They seek status not as a pure, peaceful *elit* (elites) but as *nèg* fighting for a better life on their own complicated terms.

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## Author

**Chelsey L. Kivland** is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Dartmouth College, USA. Her work focuses on how and why people find meaning in power and conflict. Her research on street politics and violence in Port-au-Prince uncovered the multiple and contradictory ways people compete for control in their neighborhood zone and for linkages with broader domains of power. She has published this research in several articles and in the book, *Street Sovereigns: Young Men and the Makeshift State in Urban Haiti* (Cornell University Press, 2020). Her current National Science Foundation funded research project, *A Dream Deported: Race, Crime, and Deportation in Transnational Haiti*, explores changing notions of citizenship, statehood, and the social contract through an ethnography of the global regulatory regime of criminal deportation, as manifested between the United States and Haiti.

*chelsey.l.kivland@dartmouth.edu*

*Dartmouth College, USA*