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Dilemmas of anthropological activism, solidarity, and human rights: Lessons from Haiti

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Abstract

Building on a growing anthropological engagement with and interrogation of the multiple forms and meanings of activism, this article—based on over 20 years of activist engagement and ethnographic interviews spanning 11 years—offers ethnographically grounded understandings of solidarity activism. The rich and at times messy (auto)ethnographic data suggest that contradictions inherent to liberal humanism can increase hierarchies and social distance between groups across national boundaries. Further, new social media technologies notwithstanding, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) remain hegemonic vehicles for this transnational exchange. The experience in Haiti, dubbed the "Republic of NGOs," highlights contradictions within solidarity activism, generating a useful set of questions for other activist anthropologists and solidarity activists who work elsewhere. Moving beyond the discussion of what anthropology brings to activism, or the reverse, this article offers insights from ethnographic analyses of NGOs, or NGOgraphy, to critically understand and assess anthropological activism. Specifically, building off insights of "NGOing" as a verb, this article interrogates the (micro)politics, structures, and consequences of intervention. Further, international solidarity activism often operates on logics of projects and deliverables, and therefore NGOing can eclipse other "metrics," disrupting and dividing local communities. Like NGOs, anthropologists function within a hierarchical transnational political economy and division of labor. [activist anthropology, Haiti, NGOs, solidarity, autoethnography]

Resumen

Construyendo sobre un creciente compromiso antropológico e interrogación de las formas múltiples de activismo, este artículo –basado en más de 20 años de compromiso activista y entrevistas etnográficas durante un período de 11 años– ofrece entendimientos etnográficamente basados de activismo solidario. Los valiosos y a veces complicados datos (auto)etnográficos sugieren que las contradicciones inherentes al humanismo liberal pueden incrementar las jerarquías y la distancia social entre grupos a través de las fronteras nacionales. Adicionalmente, a pesar de las nuevas tecnologías de las redes sociales, las organizaciones no gubernamentales (ONGs) permanecen como vehículos hegemónicos para este intercambio transnacional. La experiencia en Haití, conocida como la "República de las ONGs", resalta

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las contradicciones dentro del activismo solidario, generando un set útil de preguntas para otros antropólogos activistas y activistas solidarios quienes trabajan en otros lugares. Avanzando más allá de la discusión sobre lo que la antropología proporciona al activismo, o lo inverso, este artículo ofrece entendimientos desde los análisis etnográficos de las ONGs, u ONGgrafía, para entender críticamente y evaluar el activismo antropológico. Específicamente, construyendo entendimientos de "ONGndo" como verbo, este artículo interroga la (micro) política, la estructura y las consecuencias de la intervención. Además, el activismo solidario internacional a menudo opera en lógicas de proyectos y entregables, y por lo tanto ONGndo puede eclipsar otras "medidas" interrumpiendo y dividiendo las comunidades locales. Como las ONGs, los antropólogos funcionan dentro de una economía política transnacional jerárquica y de una división del trabajo. [antropología activista, Haití, ONGs, solidaridad, autoetnografía]

Rezime

Atik sa baze sou plis pase 20 lane angajman militan epi entèvyou etnografik pou plis pase 11 lane. Li —kontribye nan yon konvèsasyon anndan antwopoloji anvè divès fòm ak sans 'militans,' epi l pote konpreyansyon etnografik anvè militans solidarite. Done ase rich, men kèk fwa dezòd, ki sòti etnografi epi oto-etnografi sigjere kontradiksyon ki nan nannan imanis liberal ka ogmante yerachi ak distans sosyal nan mitan gwoup yo ki travèse fwontyè nasyonal. Epitou, malgre nouvo teknoloji medya sosyal yo, ONG rete motè ejemonik pou echanj transnasyonal sa. Eksperyans ann Ayiti ke yo rele "Repiblik ONG" pote yon limyè pou wè klè kontradiksyon nan mitan militans solidarite, epi jenere yon seri kesyon pètinan pou lòt antwopològ ak militan solidarite kap travay lòt kote yo. Depase diskisyon sou kisa antwopoloji pote pou militans, oubyen kisa militans pote pou antwopoloji, atik sa pote yon refleksyon ki sòti analiz etnografik ONG, pou konprann epi evalye militans antwopolojik. Pi espesifik, atik sa sèvi ak analiz "fè ONG" kòm yon vèb, nan analize politik ak mikwopolitik, chapant, ak konsekans entèvansyon militans antwopolojik. Ale pi lwen, militans solidarite entènasyonal souvan mache avèk lojik 'pwoje' ak 'bagay ki pote,' kidonk fè ONG ka bloke lòt fason pou evalye jefò a epi moleste ak divize kominote lokal yo. Menm jan ak ONG yo, antwopològ yo travay anndan yon ekonomi politik entènasyonal ak divizyon mendèv yerarchik. [antwopoloji militan, Ayiti, ONG, solidarite, oto-etnografi]

Mark, how are you? You aren't planning to go to Haiti, are you? Stay away, you hear? Speaking for ourselves, we're not doing worse. We're struggling. You know I can't contact you because there's no gas. It was $30 per gallon. Did you hear? That's $30. US. Green dollars. As I know you follow the news, you know that the gangs have taken over the [petroleum] terminal. As you know, when there's no gas, there's also no electricity. That's why you haven't heard from me. I hear that this person who is supposedly our leader asked for UN troops to fight the gangs. Will the UN troops bring us drinking water? You know there's no water. I hear that cholera is coming back. Well, you remember the UN brought cholera last time. Will the UN make it safe for my kids to go to school? Will the UN ensure that I can buy food? Haiti is finished, you hear? I don't remember Haiti being this bad. I don't know what to do. What response? What response? God only knows …

I got this WhatsApp voice note in late October 2022 from a dear friend, Frisline,[1] whom I've known since 2003. It is like many others that trickle in when people have time to charge their cell phones.

As this article goes into production in November 2022, the *kriz konjonktirèl* (the "conjunctural" or intersectional current crisis) has surpassed any in recent memory. On October 14, the de facto government of Prime Minister Ariel Henry, having lost control of armed territorial groups, asked for a UN military operation. This was not received well in Haiti. The previous UN operation, known by the French acronym MINUSTAH, was responsible

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for an outbreak of cholera that killed almost 10,000 people, impunity covering hundreds of cases of sexual assault, and combat deaths that included "collateral damage" in low-income neighborhoods.

With petroleum products seized in the capital city port, the economic situation was even worse in the provinces, with dire shortages of food and drinking water. Given the sociocultural divides in Haiti, people *andeyò*—literally "outside" (Barthélémy, 1990; Smith, 2001)—have less access to power their cell phones, not to mention contacts with foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), solidarity activists, journalists, and anthropologists.

What response, indeed?

As Samuel, a professor at the State University of Haiti, explained, "We have a crisis of speech"—clear messages about Haiti's crisis aren't being articulated or circulated, and therefore neither are solutions.

While attention from journalists, activists, and policymakers around the world and definitely the United States were consumed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election and violent insurrection on January 6, 2021, the past two years in Haiti were marked by a series of urgent crises. The year 2021 began with the sitting president who ruled by decree without parliamentary oversight staying in office past his term,[2] bolstered by a federation of gangs called the G9 pledging support. The climate of insecurity deteriorated, including the high-profile murder of journalist Diego Charles and activist Antoinette Duclos, along with 15 others, on June 30, followed by the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse a week later, on July 7. On August 14, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake ripped through the southern peninsula, killing over 2,000 people and destroying over 137,000 buildings.[3] Barely a month later, on September 19, the Biden Administration began a massive expulsion of Haitian people at the US-Mexico border. A photo of ICE agents on horseback whipping an asylum seeker, Mirard Joseph, went viral, triggering what Joy DeGruy (2017) termed "post traumatic slave syndrome" in many. Within his first year in office, Biden deported over 20,000 people to Haiti, more than the previous three administrations combined over the past 20 years,[4] with the number of deportations rising to 26,000 as of August 2022.

Solidarity activists increased their efforts, including scores of public statements and petitions, a lawsuit in federal court, lobbying meetings in Washington, DC, press conferences, Zoom briefings, and even street protests in Washington, DC, and cities with a large Haitian presence like Miami and New York. As a solidarity activist who has been working in Haiti since 2001 and president of the Haitian Studies Association for two years during the pandemic, I was involved in many of these actions.

Unfortunately, these solidarity efforts failed to stop the deportations and convince the Biden Administration to change course and allow Haitian organizations to reclaim their sovereignty and implement their transition plan, nor did they address the violence and deteriorating living conditions for the majority of people living in Haiti.

Based on over 20 years of activist ethnographic work, this article reflects on the failures of these solidarity efforts, a sobering rejoinder to calls within anthropology to embrace activism. Building on a growing anthropological engagement with and interrogation of the multiple forms and meanings of activism, this article offers ethnographically grounded understandings of solidarity activism. The rich and at times messy (auto)ethnographic data suggest that contradictions inherent to liberal humanism can increase hierarchies and social distance between groups across national boundaries. Further, new social media technologies notwithstanding, NGOs remain hegemonic vehicles for this transnational exchange. The experience in Haiti, often called the "Republic of NGOs" (Klarreich and Polman, 2012; Kristoff and Panarelli, 2010), highlights contradictions within solidarity activism, generating a useful set of questions for other activist anthropologists and solidarity activists who work elsewhere.

Moving beyond the discussion of what anthropology brings to activism, and vice versa, this article offers insights from ethnographic analyses of NGOs, or NGOgraphy, to critically understand and assess anthropological activism. Specifically, building off insights of NGOs as a verb, or the act of "NGOing" (Hilhorst, 2003; Schuller, 2018; Sharma, 2014), this article interrogates the (micro)politics, structures, and consequences of intervention. Further, international solidarity activism often operates on logics of projects and deliverables, and as such, NGOing can eclipse other "metrics," disrupting and dividing local communities. Offering insights for anthropological activism, I draw on my engagement as a solidarity activist in Haiti and ethnographic interviews that span over a decade, the last of which were in January 2021. This article begins by identifying key unresolved questions within activist anthropology. The core of the article offers ethnographic analysis of solidarity activism on Haiti and activism within Haiti. This article ends with questions for other activist anthropologists to consider.

ACTIVIST ANTHROPOLOGY

Activist anthropology scholarship is usually written by scholars-as-activists, sometimes with activist coauthors (e.g., Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019; Heyman, Morales, and Núñez, 2009). This imbalance reproduces colonial/imperialist inequalities, distancing anthropologists from activist communities. Imposing a different set of metrics, autoethnography risks reifying anthropologists' good intentions as opposed to results, a point long since interrogated by ethnographies of NGOs. What roles do activist collectives ask of anthropologists, and what are we asked to *not* do? Failure to interrogate—let alone answer—these questions reproduces long-standing colonialist, racialized hierarchies.

I have been working in and on Haiti since 2001. It has been important for me to decolonize my praxis (Harrison, 1991), including by affiliating with Haiti's public university, merging activism with scholarship, and following the lead of activist collectives in collaboratively setting an activist

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research agenda. I have also tended relationships and made myself accountable to activist communities, presenting works in progress and translations for critique (Schuller, 2014). These efforts, however, do not erase my white, cisgender male privilege mapping onto my US passport and increasing resources as my career advances (Schuller, 2010). In between good intentions and effective outcomes that address people's real concerns are structural constraints.

Anthropological Activism

Anthropology of/as/and activism has blossomed into a full-fledged subfield of anthropology (Willow and Yotebieng, 2020). According to what is positioned as the mainstream narrative, US anthropology has a mostly unbroken legacy of activism since its formalization with Franz Boas.[5] The Cold War forced many activists into hiding—with a number of anthropologists targeted during the McCarthy witch hunts (González, 2004; Price, 2004). The Cold War also exposed anthropology's complicity in counterinsurgency, which some anthropologists denounced at great cost to their careers (González, 2009; Klugh, 2018; Price, 2014). What was perceived as a major rift widened between academic and applied anthropology while anthropology grappled with its colonial legacies (Asad, 1979; Deloria, [1969] 1988; Harrison, 1991). Anthropology's self-critique provided spaces for feminist and/or decolonizing interventions. Setha Low and Sally Engle Merry (2010) attempted to revive a "big tent" version of what they called "engaged anthropology" that includes anthropology as cultural critique, advocacy, and many forms of activism. Charles Hale (2006) rejected cultural critique for not engaging formal processes of power, and therefore failing to make meaningful material change.

A self-described *activist* anthropology has taken root since the 1990s. Scheper-Hughes's (1995) early manifesto was paired with d'Andrade's defense of objectivity and science within anthropology, assuming that these two are mutually distinct. This question of whether activist research could be objective and methodologically rigorous dominated a generation of scholarship. Many argued that activist engagement is the highest form of rigor and validity for social science research (e.g., Craven and Davis, 2013; Hale, 2008; Harrison, 2008; Johnston, 2010).

Activist anthropology takes many forms. Implicitly or explicitly, much anthropological activism follows a model formalized by Keck and Sikkink (1998). Their "boomerang" model involves a Southern NGO appealing to a Northern NGO to lobby their Northern government to apply pressure to the Southern government when oppression, fear, and/or violence prevent direct involvement. Human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch and School of Americas Watch, have employed similar models. This act of "witnessing" (Redfield, 2006) is a familiar role for anthropologists. The "boomerang" has received wide scholarly attention, with some authors offering a critique of its scope and reach (e.g., Nelson, 2002; Pallas and Bloodgood, 2022). Paul Farmer (2004) popularized the term "accompaniment," working alongside, not on behalf of, marginalized communities. Activist anthropology also includes participatory action research, wherein the researcher engages specific activist collectives or communities in co-designing the research (e.g., Heyman, 2011; Singer, 1994). Anthropologists have argued that we need to be full-fledged participants of protest movements, not simply scribes (e.g., Maskovsky, 2013). David Graeber (2005, 2013) was celebrated for his visible role in the antiglobalization movement and #Occupy. Critiquing the tendency to reproduce power imbalances and privilege, Checker, Davis, and Schuller (2014) centered the impacts of anthropological activism: Who evaluates activism, and to whom are activist anthropologists accountable?

The celebration of anthropological activism brings up familiar, if uncomfortable, legacies of the field. Who is imagined/celebrated as "activist"? This is a subset of the still-unresolved question of who is considered human. The Trump era represented, to paraphrase Malcolm X, "chickens coming home to roost" of latent white nationalism embedded in white settler society (Rosa and Bonilla, 2017). The notable uptick in white nationalist violence exposed the urgency of dismantling white liberal humanism (Carruthers, 2018) and the "white savior industrial complex" (Cole, 2012). Black, Indigenous, and people of color anthropologists renewed calls for decolonizing anthropology, including activism (e.g., Dhillon, 2018; Rosas, 2018). Calling for a "fugitive anthropology," University of Texas at Austin's activist anthropology graduates argued that their activist work must also center their own marginalized identities and protect their vulnerable bodies (Berry et al., 2017). A collective of undocumented activists engaged university researchers to decolonize ethnography (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019). And many Black anthropologists are organizers within Black Lives Matter collectives (e.g., Williams, 2015).

Building on these foundations, the following ethnographic discussion leverages insights from NGOgraphy to analyze real-world architectures of anthropological activism.

SOLIDARITY ACTIVISM IN TIMES OF CRISIS

In theory, solidarity activism involves working *alongside* instead of *on behalf of* a particular group, following the understanding articulated by Lilla Watson, Martin Luther King Jr., and BLM cofounder Alicia Garza, among others, that our liberation is bound up with others, an element of what can be called an anthropological imagination (Schuller, 2021). Activism on Haiti is far from monolithic, a loose federation of principled individuals and organizations coming together in moments of heightened Haiti visibility, such as the 1986 democratization effort, 1991–1994 coup d'état, 2010 earthquake, and the year 2021, which in Haiti saw an elected official overstay his term, spiraling violence that included the assassination of the president, a major earthquake, and the deportation of 20,000 people from the US-Mexico border. Haitian colleagues hail people from the

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United States as "citizens of Empire," "in the belly of the beast," and therefore we have a responsibility to train our efforts on our home country. US and European solidarity efforts reflect their political cultures and physical distance from Haiti (Edelman, 2005). While US activism (certainly those involved in the 1990s) tends to reproduce binary two-party analysis, dismissing diversity within Haiti's progressive circles, US-based groups are typically in more regular face-to-face contact.

US-based solidarity activism on Haiti intensified during the first months of 2021. At that time, this mobilization had two major streams: policy advocacy and social movement building. Framing human rights, the former appealed to the US government or the UN special rapporteur, whereas the latter aligned with movements like Black Lives Matter and challenged the exclusion of liberal humanism. The two streams coalesced in applying pressure to end US support for the Haitian regime that violated human rights. COVID's long shadow in the beginning of 2021, as the US death toll passed 500,000 and vaccines were rolling out at different paces, forced a similarity in tactics: online meetings. The target audience and the focus differed.

Two and a half weeks into the Biden presidency, key cabinet-level posts were still vacant when Moïse's term expired on February 7, 2021, 35 years after the end of the Duvalier dictatorship. Railing against "big government" and the "deep state," Trump had hollowed out several federal departments, including the State Department, while reinforcing others, such as Homeland Security. Absent a Congressionally approved secretary, functionaries in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) seized an opportunity to increase deportation actions to Black-majority countries, most visibly Haiti. During Biden's first month in office, ICE deported almost as many people to Haiti as during the entire year of 2020.[6] The "crisis" in Haiti was conflated with massive deportations in discussions within US Congress and major media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Miami Herald*.

People's "bandwidth" in the United States for international solidarity was very limited in the first months of 2021. In addition to COVID, the United States publicly contended with what the Association of Black Anthropologists termed a pandemic of anti-Black racism,[7] state violence, and increasingly active white supremacist groups aligning with law enforcement, reaching a crescendo on January 6, 2021. A white supremacist mob—which included several law/immigration enforcement officials—stormed the US Capitol to stop the certification of the election that Trump lost by over seven million popular votes and more electoral votes than he had won in 2016.

Forms of Knowledge

The two streams of activism leveraged two different forms of knowledge: the advocacy stream—comprising lawyers and policy specialists—deployed expert knowledge of human rights law. This group worked with members of Congress, particularly the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), to write an open letter to the State Department. The House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee, chaired by CBC member Gregory Meeks, who represents Queens, home to a large professional Haitian population, held a "closed-door" briefing with State Department officials on March 11, followed by a "public" meeting on March 12. At the public event, a former ambassador to Haiti joined two women from Haiti and one woman from the Haitian Diaspora.

The social movement stream leveraged "on-the-ground" reporting and protest. Groups that up until then had not had a visible presence in or on Haiti quickly mobilized citizen petitions and held webinars making linkages between imperialism, race and white supremacy, and the state. An ad-hoc coalition formed to coordinate actions in Haiti and in the United States on March 29, commemorating the publication of the 1987 constitution. Importantly, these were envisioned as on-the-street actions, not virtual. Most actions were centered on cities with large Haitian Diaspora populations, such as New York and Miami, targeting the Haitian consulate; however, an Atlanta action targeted the Coca-Cola headquarters for its complicity with the Haitian state violently uprooting peasants for a stevia plantation.

Solidarity Relationships

The two streams have different sources of legitimacy: the "advocacy" group has ties to Washington policymakers, and the "social movement" group connects with organized racial justice movements in the United States. Travel restrictions caused by COVID rendered being "on the ground" nearly impossible, and those who did travel were given an outsized audience. As solidarity groups, both streams drew their strength from "following the lead" of or "signal boosting" their Haitian partners. North-South relationships, from Haiti and the United States, in this case, strengthen the position of the other. A Haitian activist that gets quoted in the media or invited to Washington will have more power vis-à-vis their comrades "on the ground"—and the solidarity activist gains authenticity and authority to speak in the name of "the people."

Given the mosaic of widely diverging activist collectives in Haiti, and the shifting terrain as Moïse consolidated power despite massive mobilization and weeks of shutdowns, it's not clear which signal to boost. This was only magnified as the de facto regime maintained power for 17 months as this article went into production despite being implicated in Moïse's assassination and amid spiking inflation, gas shortages, and violence, also connected to the de facto regime. Factors such as English fluency or personal relationships solidify inequalities across national borders: some voices are not heard at all, while others are given the "Haiti slot" as spokesperson. Given that relationships with foreign NGOs or facility with

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foreign languages require middle-class access to education and social capital, they tend to reproduce class inequality, excluding the poor majority in whose name activists protest in the first place.

There's nothing inherently problematic about this process, but within a neoliberal capitalist logic, with the "NGO form" (Bernal and Grewal, 2014) being the primary and sometimes only vehicle for solidarity activism, the perils of "NGOing" threaten to take over the actions and at the very least complicate the goal, which is systemic change (see Alvarez [1999] and INCITE! [2007], among many other critiques of NGOization). Organizations—not only officially registered NGOs—are incentivized to maintain their visibility, funding, and membership base. The problem arises when these tactical organizational considerations eclipse the overarching purpose and trigger competition. In the leadup to and particularly following Moïse's assassination, a broad segment of Haitian organizations went to extraordinary lengths to present a unified front. The moment called for solidarity groups to do the same, or get out of the way. Tellingly, the collective calls itself the Commission to Search for a Haitian Solution.

ACTIVISM IN THE "REPUBLIC OF NGOS"

Following Haiti's 2010 earthquake that killed as many as 316,000 people and inspired $3 billion in private donations and $13 billion in pledged aid from foreign governments and multinationals, foreign agencies dubbed Haiti the "Republic of NGOs" (Kristoff and Panarelli, 2010). The central presence of NGOs—even "ghostly" (Prentice-Walz, forthcoming)—had a large impact on local organizing. Much has been written about the "fatal assistance" (Peck, 2013) or "humanitarian aftershocks" (Schuller, 2016). Most foreign commentators did not cite Haitian analysts, who were critical long before the earthquake (e.g., Étienne, 1997; Lwijis, 1993, 2009). Less tracked—perhaps because it hits too close to home—were the ways in which NGO aid trickled into Haitian activist collectives. NGO support to local activists was crucial to building momentum, creating new activist spaces, raising consciousness, and pushing the envelope.

Activists in Haiti embraced a radical critique of NGOs by Janil Lwijis (2009), murdered minutes before the earthquake. Following this, graffiti all over Port-au-Prince declared *Aba Tout ONG*, "down with *all* NGOs." Activists identified parallels between aid and advocacy NGOs, not in terms of their structure but in what they do. They weren't just critiquing the NGO form (Bernal and Grewal, 2014), or even the process of becoming an NGO, or "NGOization" (Choudry and Kapoor, 2013; Edelman, 2005; Heideman, 2017; INCITE!, 2007). They were critiquing NGOs as a *verb*: "NGOing"—even by groups that vehemently refused the label—promoting dependency on projects and photo ops, representing, and using local actors for their own capital or credibility (Schuller, 2018). Solidarity groups enforced Western-style accounting and promoted tactics such as petitions, not traditionally practiced in Haiti. NGO aid to some but not all activists reproduced the same problems that the billions in humanitarian aid did (see Schuller, 2016), creating new leaders and organizations, splitting up organizations and collectives, and disrupting solidarity between organizations. Divisions were stoked not just by funding but by invitations to Washington (or Brussels, Geneva, etc.) and media coverage.

Haitian activists also noted a mismatch in the habitus (Bourdieu, 1980) of Haitian and foreign solidarity partners: while the activists were on the streets, facing rubber bullets or tear gas, the daily activities of advocacy groups overseas included writing "white papers," fundraising appeals, participating in conference calls, and meeting Washington (or Brussels) staffers "behind the scenes" to set up official lobbying efforts. Some, like Pierre, a 60-something NGO professional and social-movement-network coordinator with decades of experience, said he "understand[s] that we play different roles. But we should be shouldering similar risks. Also, while we tell our international comrades everything we do, we still aren't very well informed about what they do and what happens in Washington." Knowing that I am from the United States, Pierre emphasized my own responsibility to translate and to offer analysis not just "upward" but "downward."

Humanitarian Occupation

Despite US and other solidarity actors' critiques of them, foreign entities maintained de facto control over the country. Some called it a "humanitarian occupation."[8] This in turn gave foreign solidarity activists more power vis-à-vis their Haitian comrades. While the UN Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti (MINUSTAH) occupied the country, UN clusters met in a military base speaking a foreign language with foreign actors making decisions implemented by foreign staff of foreign NGOs. Wadner, a 30-something city dweller with a master's degree and years of experience working in international NGOs, decried expats' treatment of Haitian professionals: "They think the rubble fell on our intelligence as well." Dozens of people, from internally displaced persons to staff of international NGOs, decried foreign dehumanization, using almost the same phrases: "We're not human to them" and "They treat us like animals!"[9]

While the situation in Haiti still made foreign news, foreign NGOs funded activist groups who organized mass mobilizations and worked across political divisions. Eventually, funding ran out for humanitarian aid, and even for solidarity activism, as Haiti stopped making front-page headlines. As funds dried up, old divisions resurfaced. As a solidarity activist accompanying a range of Haitian activist collectives, I began hearing about a generational gap the first several years after the 2010 earthquake between the '86 generation, who led the popular uprising against the Duvalier dictatorship (which ended in 1986), and younger people. At least in Port-au-Prince, some '86 generation activists displayed a certain hesitation regarding, if not open hostility to, the younger generation, whom they felt had allowed themselves to be infiltrated by capitalist media and values.

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The ‘86 generation grew up under a dictatorship and learned skills about organizing either in exile or within the *ti legliz* of the liberation theology of the Catholic Church clandestinely. The Haiti they grew up in was predominantly rural, with a strong central state. Older social movement leaders today extoll the collectivist values of the Haitian peasantry, *andeyò* (literally meaning, outsiders; cf. Barthélémy, 1990; Smith, 2001). Neoliberal economic policies triggered a rural exodus (Deshommes, 2006; DeWind and Kinley III, 1988), quadrupling the population of Port-au-Prince in two decades (Dupuy, 2005). To established activists, the new generation, born in Port-au-Prince shantytowns or other “popular” (low-income) neighborhoods, had little attachment to the land, and therefore to national production, and showed little respect for the discipline and functioning of long-standing organizations, taking their gains for granted. To many in the ‘86 generation, younger activists were often too impatient, coming off as arrogant to people in Haiti’s urban-poor majority, not to mention the peasantry.

In return, many younger activists criticized the ‘86 generation for not letting go and for allowing themselves to become tools of the capitalist system via their dependency on NGO aid. Haiti’s transition to democracy was largely a failure, and the misery of the population seemed to deepen every year. To youth activists, the ‘86 generation and their nostalgia were out of touch with the people and their contemporary realities. Thirty years after Haiti’s historic transition to democracy, many organizations were headed by the same people, what younger activists termed “fiefdoms.” In addition, the state and NGO sectors were beset by infighting and division between a growing number of political parties: for example, the 2015 presidential contest had 56 on the ballot.[10] To many in the newer generation, it was time for the elders to let go. The movement had long since lost its vitality, and the institutionalism and bureaucracy of NGOs made social change sluggish: many tactics that worked 30 years ago don’t work today.

But these generational critiques were rarely discussed openly (Dubuisson, 2020). Foreign advocacy NGOs tended to support the ‘86 generation, who had official positions, media profiles, and networks. These individuals represent Haiti in international conferences, often with Northern NGO financing. While it is important to acknowledge proven track records and relationships built on trust and dialogue, Northern NGOs’ absence and bureaucratic distance reproduce the status quo, favoring the ‘86 generation.

Some Northern NGOs like American Jewish World Service and Mennonite Central Committee made conscious efforts to collaborate with younger activists and newer organizations. The initiative to open up spaces came from Haitian activists themselves. By 2015, five years after the 2010 earthquake, with limited foreign funding, new activist collectives formed, such as the Mining Justice Collective (KJM), the Mega-Projects Consortium, and the Popular Democratic Patriotic Movement (MPDP). LGBT activism also gained visibility. For the first time, these movements included younger leaders. They found common cause opposing the disaster capitalism of President Michel Martelly, a bawdy carnival singer put in office in 2011 by the Clintons and propped up by donors and UN troops (Katz, 2013; Peck, 2013; Seitenfus, 2015). These collectives had notable victories, stopping exploitative mining contracts and massive expropriation to facilitate luxury tourism. They also stopped Martelly’s party from stealing the next election, which foreign agencies certified as “nearly normal.”[11] Proof of fraud kept mounting; faced with growing pressure from within Haiti, the foreign-supported Haitian regime was forced to back down, and eventually so were foreign governments, and thus new elections were planned. A last-minute negotiation named an interim president on February 7, 2016, when President Martelly’s term expired. Interim president Jocelerme Privert was determined to hold another round of elections without foreign financing. That October, Hurricane Matthew, which leveled 80 percent of the buildings within three of Haiti’s ten departments, provided an opportunity for foreign agencies to reassert control of the electoral process and emergency aid, which were directly linked (Hsu and Schuller, 2020). Six-and-a-half weeks after the category 4 storm, these reversals—and fissioning of the opposition—led to the election of Martelly’s heir, Jovenel Moïse, with the lowest voter turnout in Haiti’s history.

PetroCaribe

Generations aren’t the only divisions within Haitian activism. When Moïse’s term began in 2017, activists focused on local issues and growing the movement through consciousness-raising and institution-building. On July 6, 2018, when the government announced an IMF-demanded gas hike immediately and all over the country, the people shut the country down, blocking roads and taking to the streets. The two-day *peyi lòk* (general strike) forced the state to back down. Moïse’s prime minister resigned. A month later, younger performing artists launched the hashtag #KòtKòbPetwoKaribeA? (Where are the funds from PetroCaribe?). This agreement with oil-rich Venezuela offered low-cost petroleum products and development loans. The movement gained traction because PetroCaribe was a model of South-South solidarity, challenging US hegemony in the region (Darbouze, 2021; Dougé-Prosper, 2021).

This movement to demand justice, accountability, and reparations included four major branches (Kolektif Anakawona, 2019): most quoted in media is the so-called political class, sometimes called the *sektè demokratik*, the “democratic sector,” composed of elected officials and other political party leaders. The second major branch, certainly with the largest presence in the streets, were more “traditional” social movement organizations, like Konbit or MOLEGHAF. Added to these more long-standing collectives were two others: most tweeted and followed in the Diaspora are the PetroChallengers, led by younger, Diaspora-inspired, media-savvy, middle-class professionals. The smallest in number were also traditionally the most powerful: individuals within Haiti’s wealthiest families.

Given the widely divergent sets of actors and interests, the opposition to PHTK is fragile. In addition, since all have a major source of power, not one has become hegemonic, causing a stalemate. During the summer of 2019, I had conversations with two dozen individuals within the organized social movement sector as a solidarity partner—in many cases, for over 15 years. Some, particularly those near the center of negotiations, were

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optimistic. Pierre, who has decades of experience tracking back and forth between the NGO and social movement sectors, qualified the strategic alliance with Haiti's mercantile elite as "historic."[12] Pierre is not unaware of the risks of this alliance. But he argued that without elites on their side in mobilization, they will be enemies and capture for themselves all the spoils of an imminent toppling of the government and ruling party. Pierre's optimism seemed to be borne out, at least initially, following the void caused by Moïse's assassination, as the Commission in Search of a Haitian Solution, comprising over 200 civil society organizations, gained legitimacy and voice within national and international circles. This was to become the Montana Accord, ratified on August 30, 2021, signed by over 600 organizations by the end of the year. But as of the final revisions to this article in late November 2022, 17 months have passed since the assassination, and the situation has only deteriorated, with the Biden Administration solidly backing the PHTK and the unelected prime minister implicated in the assassination.

Being an anthropologist actively engaged with Pierre and other activist groups obliges me to be transparent, unyieldingly self-critical, and at times uncomfortable. At what point is my activism "signal boosting," and which signals should I boost? Do I reproduce the boomerang and strengthen my privilege as a US citizen? Where is my place at a protest? Should I even be going?

The "People"

Missing from these actors described above are *pèp la*, "the people," Haiti's impoverished majority. Urban and rural masses are typically silenced in reporting—not just by media that includes so-called alternative outlets but also among solidarity organizations. However, to people within Haiti's impoverished majority, particularly urban shantytown residents and even more so those from the remote countryside, competition over control of the state is next to meaningless. Moïse was elected with a voter turnout of 21 percent. The stalemate most directly impacts low-income urban and rural communities, shuttering schools and markets (Blanc and Pierre, 2021).

Tactics have not changed much over the past two decades, as long as I have been doing research in Haiti's sprawling capital. For example, marches typically begin at 10:00 a.m. This allows for radio journalists to arrive on the scene at the height of chanting, offering a few man-on-the-street interviews (the mic is almost always handed to a male protestor, except during women's marches). It also allows for a radio interview before the march. This gives business leaders time to arrive at their offices early and stay protected by the armed guards, with workers also shuttered inside factories. NGO and government professionals are advised to stay at home when large protests are announced. The Champs de Mars (akin to the National Mall in Washington, DC), which houses the National Palace and most government ministry offices—before the 2010 earthquake destroyed most of them—was the typical destination of large marches. Smaller demonstrations known as the English "sit-in" target a particular office with focused demands.

The capital's changing geography necessitates changing tactics. The 2010 earthquake's damage to downtown infrastructure accelerated the ongoing process of suburbanization of central offices. Decades ago, banks moved their offices up the mountain to suburban Pétion-Ville. In 2008, the US embassy pulled out of its office on Boulevard Harry Truman and consolidated the embassy, consulate, and USAID in an area people still call *Laplèn*—the "plain"—in Tabarre. This bleeding of the traditional urban core and symbolic center of power presents a strategic challenge to the movement:[13] tens and even hundreds of thousands of people can fill the streets of Port-au-Prince without shutting down the central bank, private banks, or diplomatic missions like the United States. The elite's spatial retreat of the urban core therefore renders large-scale protest less effective. A lesson for solidarity and/or anthropological activism generally is to adapt our tactics to be effective.

This strategic weakness is magnified because the largest protests in the nation's sprawling capital typically occur on Sundays. Activists count these Sunday marches in their analysis of their strength. Bus drivers, street merchants, and other individuals whose livelihoods depend on circulation also plan their travel accordingly. On the one hand, Sunday protests attract the largest number of people, as a growing portion of the population is Pentecostal, holding their services on Saturdays. On the other hand, none of the country's decision-makers in the private, public, and NGO sectors are in their offices, raising the questions: Who is the target, and what is the goal?

In addition to efficacy, younger activists called into question inequalities within the movement. Ricardo, a university student and activist I've known for over 15 years, rattled off five names of '86 generation NGO activists, all of whom I've known since the mid-aughts, 15 years at that point.

> What is the basis of their power? Do they have the most people on the street? When we march, are they even there? Sometimes not. Certainly not when there's a threat of violence. But you turn the radio on, [and] so-and-so is speaking on behalf of the movement. I have less of a problem with that than other people you and I both know. What bothers me more is that their discourse hasn't changed [despite the changing times].

Ricardo's comrade Wilson also denounced class contradictions. Around 150–250 people began a 10 km march to the US embassy on July 28, 2019, the anniversary of the US occupation. Notably absent were college students and other middle-class people, including PetroChallengers. When I asked why, Wilson laughed and said that people were afraid that if they were seen protesting the US embassy, they could forget any hopes of receiving a visa. Imperialist domination over Haiti is thus maintained through the very real class divide within activist circles.

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These contradictions within the opposition were easily exploited by pro-government journalists, officials, and talking heads. On June 9, 2019, following the appeals court report detailing government corruption, tens of thousands (some estimate over a hundred thousand) people took to the capital's streets in protest. Many individuals marched with identical T-shirts, which someone paid for. In one case, it was clear: a millionaire supermarket-chain owner created what he called a *Twazyèm Vwa*, "Third Way." Traditional activist groups were threatened by the younger newcomers, who didn't depend on NGOs or the government to pay for loudspeakers or T-shirts. However, the more PetroChallengers pressed on, the more their question boomeranged back to them: Where did you get the money for all this?

Pierre, co-coordinator in the popular-movement sector, was well aware of this:

> It's their Achilles' heel, that's for sure. It's hypocrisy, point blank. We engage with them because despite their lack of experience, they have been able to change the conversation. True, *pèp la* [the impoverished majority] doesn't have the same access to social media. It's an important weapon in the struggle. And engaging them we hope to inspire and lead by example. Many of them don't see the fundamental nature of class struggle. Just like they're moving the public conversation, we too are moving them a little bit.

Popular-organization leader Georges had a similar analysis: "Tactically speaking, we need to join their marches, to weaken the government's position. But we need to be putting the demands of *pèp la* [the people] front and center, on the radio. We need to be carrying our own banners and picket signs." However, building on Ricardo's critique, particularly of the "comprador" class, Georges said, *olye yon lit de klas, se yon lit de plas*. "Rather than a class struggle, it's a struggle of position" of who gets to be in charge. Gesturing toward Gramsci's (1971) "war of position" ironically, Georges questioned the sincerity of the political class, who are decidedly not revolutionaries.

The difference between some PetroChallenger tactics that included circling a government office blowing horns like Joshua at the battle of Jericho with 30 people and marches that include Georges's and Pierre's organizations with several thousand is the active participation of *pèp la*, which Georges defined as "the exploited masses who aren't organized." He continues, "The masses could see that the 'avant garde' isn't good, not working in their interests." Georges provided an example:

> Take a look at the "democratic sector." … Last October 4 [2019], they marched to Log Base and asked the UN to help remove Jovenel [Moïse]. They didn't say a single word about the people's demands for justice. They essentially asked the imperialist powers, particularly US imperialists, to remain in control, to let them choose the next people in power in Haiti. Let's be clear: a popular struggle can never make deals or alliances with imperialist powers.

This passage outlines Georges's opposition to Keck and Sikkink's "boomerang" model.

An example of political elites reaping the benefits of collective mobilization—what Pierre feared—was the "Marriott Accord," a meeting held November 8–9, 2019, among traditional political party leaders to hammer out a deal with President Moïse to stop the nine-week general strike. None of the organizations with PetroChallengers' social media presence or popular organizations' street presence were invited. Haiti's impoverished majority—"the people"—were decidedly unwelcome; they were prevented entry by armed guards. Predictably, none of the major demands were raised; it was *separe gato*, "cutting the cake"—a power-sharing arrangement.

For Georges, Pierre, and Ricardo, traditional political party leaders betrayed the poor majority who got them to the negotiating table. None were surprised by the betrayal, as the same situation occurred in 2004, with student and feminist organizations swelling protest numbers, only to be elbowed out by the elite, foreign-funded opposition during negotiations. The inability to shift tactics and the premium for representation in formal meetings, on airwaves, in tweets, or in communication from Northern NGO partners was, in Ricardo's words, "a logical and predictable outcome of neoliberal NGOs." To these and many other Haitian activists, the currency most valuable to Northern NGO advocacy partners appears to be visibility: photos, number of times on the radio, number of "likes." Advocacy NGOs' attachment to deliverables or "metrics" (Adams, 2016) resembles development or humanitarian NGOs in a project logic (Beck, 2017; Krause, 2014; Lwijis, 1993) within an audit culture (Strathern, 2000).

As these ethnographic details and organic intellectual analyses from Haiti highlight, activism is a complex, multinational "assemblage" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) with many actors and contradictory demands. In addition to interrogating which signal to boost, Haitian activists like Ricardo and Georges taught me to identify similarities between aid and activist NGOs (even those who do not identify as NGOs), particularly structural constraints. Understanding how these sets of actors are brought together is necessary for determining appropriate solidarity roles.

LIBERAL HUMANISM'S LIMITATIONS

Far from portraying Haiti as "exceptional" (Benedicty-Kokken et al., 2016; Clitandre, 2011; Trouillot, 1990), the ethnographic examples shared here highlight unresolved contradictions within liberal humanism. As Fassin (2010), Agier (2010), and others have argued (e.g., Bornstein and Redfield, 2011; Goodale, 2006), liberal humanism—and its contemporary forms of humanitarianism, NGOs, human rights, and anthropology—have roots in the Enlightenment, particularly the French Revolution. The 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* valorized liberty and property. A

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significant portion of this "property" claimed by the revolutionary French bourgeoisie was enslaved African people in what was then called Saint-Domingue. As Haitian anthropologist/historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) and others argued (Fick, 1990; James, [1938] 1989), news of French Revolution ideals spread to the "pearl of the Antilles." Bonaparte's brutal attempt to reenslave the population and specific forms of torture his general Rochambeau inflicted, repeated in Nazi concentration camps (Peck, 2021), expose France's hypocrisy. This hypocrisy regarding slavery defines liberal humanism and founding ideologies of settler-colonial states, reproducing persistent ontological crises, calling into question the definition of human (Burton, 2015; Rosa and Díaz, 2020; Wilderson III, 2020; Wynter, 2003). Even granting enslaved Africans the status of "human," Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020) argues that being defined as human cannot protect a body from violence or enslavement. Movements across the African diaspora are confronting the embodiment of these contradictions: anti-Black state violence (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre, 2020).

Haiti provides an alternative, inclusive African humanism (Daut, 2017). The Haitian Revolution was the most radical vision of human rights, asserting that African people are fully human. Haiti's first constitution in 1801 abolished slavery, and the first postindependence 1805 constitution promised citizenship for enslaved persons anywhere seeking freedom. Contemporary movements within Haiti continue this challenge to exclusions built into liberal humanism, asserting that *tout moun se moun*, everyone is a human. Accepting the challenge offered by on-the-ground Haitian activist collectives requires rethinking the ways in which racial capitalism simultaneously binds Black bodies within a carceral state while binding Black *lives* and liberation to each other—and, indeed, to all of humanity (Dougé-Prosper, 2021).

Working in solidarity with contemporary Haitian activists also requires a critical examination of liberal humanism's hegemonic vehicle for solidarity praxis: NGOs. Founded during the so-called Age of Enlightenment, the first NGOs called themselves "humanitarian" and were international abolitionist advocacy networks (Charnovitz, 1997; Davies, 2014). Once considered a "magic bullet" (Edwards and Hulme, 1996), NGOs did not live up to astronomically high expectations. Consequently, scholarship, particularly in the Global South, became more critical: NGOs are products of, and even tools to promulgate and perpetuate, neoliberalism (Petras, 1997; Wallace, 2003). As products of the neoliberal capitalist system, NGOs represent structural barriers to radical change (INCITE!, 2007; Nagar and Sangtin Writers, 2006), recalling Audre Lorde's warning about the master's tools.

CONCLUSION

Despite the plethora of tweets, petitions, statements, protests, lawsuits, and meetings in Washington, solidarity activism has failed to improve the lives of Haitian people like Pierre, Ricardo, or Frisline, failed to reclaim Haiti's sovereignty, and failed to change US foreign policy. This article offers an ethnographic critique and explanation of this failure. Solidarity activism on Haiti is, at least in the United States, dominated by NGOs, not social movements. Being NGOs, the metrics that began this paragraph—countable out*puts*—risk eclipsing the out*comes* Haitian actors seek. In addition to this attachment to measurable outputs and the photo op, NGOs are products of the neoliberal capitalist world order, disciplined by state regulation (Alvaré, 2010, INCITE!, 2007). Gradual, moderated, incrementalism did not stem the social upheavals and evisceration of human rights and the social safety net within the "belly of the beast." A limited advocacy approach does not alter the structure of power or dismantle the racism embedded in the carceral state. Indeed, it risks reinforcing the state (Cullors, 2022; Dougé-Prosper, 2021). As "brokers and translators" (Lewis and Mosse, 2006), advocacy NGOs are not accountable to Haitian activist groups or organized groups within the Haitian Diaspora. In fact, tensions often arise regarding authenticity and legitimacy within this role of brokering and translating, with relatively fewer Haitian Creole speakers in professional circles than Spanish speakers, for example. A notable exception is the Haitian Bridge Alliance, which partners with social movement actors such as the UndocuBlack Network, building solidarity between groups and issues often seen as disparate.

While admittedly a particular context, Haiti's complex current situation offers several lessons for solidarity. To be effective, solidarity activism must simultaneously follow the lead of a diverse and wide array of groups "on the ground" and work to dismantle oppressive structures, building a "mass" for a movement inside empire. This involves walking a tightrope of navigating and valuing local complexity and translating and parsing it for policymakers and inviting mass appeal. These pressures to build the mass and leverage power in the imperialist center often encourage the solidarity partner to move far ahead of their on-the-ground activist partners.

To activists like Pierre and Georges, continuing the same tactics long past their effectiveness underscores the failure of the NGO model upheld by the '86 generation. NGOing limits the imagination and cuts off alternative strategies. Activists like Ricardo and Wilson also argue that NGOs—products of the neoliberal world order—represent structural barriers to radical change. First is the reproduction of a small clique of older activists that have not democratized their "fiefdoms." Even principled solidarity activism reproduces hierarchies of whose voices we lift up, who can speak for or represent Haiti. Second, the neoliberal model of the deliverable or photo op embedded in the project displaces the focus on long-term structural change and diverts energy from more long-term radical action (INCITE!, 2007; Lwijis, 2009).

Moving beyond a simple, wholesale critique of the NGO form, this article explores possibilities of understanding NGOs as a verb and offers insights from ethnographic analyses of NGOs, or NGOgraphy, to more critically understand and assess anthropological activism. People who write the history of activist anthropology are disproportionately tenure-track (actually, tenured) professors, and so even published self-critiques contribute to processes of extraction and accrue value in the prestige economy, which is often directly linked with the real economy via cash awards, promotion, and tenure. Within academic conversations, with the professor submitting their work for peer review by other scholars, their intentions

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and efforts risk eclipsing outcomes. Meanwhile, the people with the most at stake regarding the outcomes are not structurally in a position to evaluate the activism. The "metrics" used by both groups differ; activists are concerned with tangible results and shifting relationships of power.

Finally, reflexivity and standpoint—critical insights from feminist anthropology, particularly Black feminist anthropology (Behar, 1992; Harrison, 2008; McClaurin, 2001; Mullings, 1997)—require interrogation of appropriate roles within activism. What is being asked of activist anthropologists, and what is *not* being asked of us? Liberating humanity—including our own, as it is indivisible—is at the core of solidarity. NGOs as "glue" for contemporary neoliberal globalization (Schuller, 2009) reinforce transnational divisions of labor wherein "voices" from the Global South are extracted for "experts" in the Global North. NGOs that have funding all must engage in a political economy of doing good to some extent, projects being rendered commodities (Freeman and Schuller, 2020; James, 2010). Functioning in parallel ways to international NGOs, anthropologists are also positioned within a transnational political economy based on hierarchies of value and division of labor; James Ferguson (2005) called development anthropology's "evil twin."

Turning back to Frisline, her conclusion might be useful advice for other solidarity activists, anthropologists included: "Well, we have no choice but to continue struggling."

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ENDNOTES

[1] Following disciplinary convention, names of people are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity, particularly important during moments of crisis.
[2] This was the most widely held interpretation of the Constitution; Moïse's term began five years prior, but the election was stalled because the ruling PHTK party manipulated the results in several ways, to his benefit.
[3] See https://reliefweb.int/report/haiti/haiti-earthquake-situation-report-no-3-31-august-2021.
[4] See https://quixote.org/biden-has-deported-nearly-as-many-haitians-in-his-first-year-as-the-last-three-presidents-combined.
[5] Boas's legacy is complicated. While W. E. B. DuBois acknowledged that Boas educated him about African civilizations prior to European contact, Boas also invisibilized scholars of color, including Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin and his research assistant Lakota anthropologist Ella DeLoria.
[6] Granting Temporary Protected Status in May, the Biden ICE deported even more in September, following two earthquakes as powerful as 2010.
[7] See https://aba.americananthro.org/aba-statement-against-police-violence-and-anti-black-racism-3/.
[8] See https://nacla.org/news/2015/07/28/humanitarian-occupation-haiti.
[9] See also Beckett (2017).
[10] Initially 70 candidates registered.
[11] http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article37895091.html.
[12] Pierre, Ricardo, and others push back at an essentialist "bourgeoisie," which they argue is not appropriate in the Haitian context, but instead "comprador" class.
[13] In conversations with activists and foreign NGOs, it is still referred to in the singular, *mouvman sosyal la*.

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